

THE GIRL, THE JACUZZI, THE GARDENING SHEARS

BY JIM FUSILLI

They won the state championship in their division and everyone wanted to celebrate. On the rowdy bus ride back from Sacramento, Coach Holly promised a blowout when spring arrived. The members of the basketball team wouldn't let go of it and neither would the cheerleaders and they hounded him whenever he walked past their lockers or on his way to the teachers' parking lot. "Coach Holly, when's that blowout?" "Coach, I'm counting the days to the party. Hey Coach..."

Then, just before spring break, invitations arrived at students' homes. On the front was an embossed replica of the championship trophy. Inside, the date, time and place - a mansion that had once belonged to an erratic dot.com multimillionaire who had since fled the country, having been accused of a variety of ugly, violent crimes. Overlooking the Pacific, the Tudor mansion was now available for weddings and corporate events. From the private, oak-lined road, it appeared to be a palace surrounded by gray stone atop 17 acres of pristine land. No one associated with the team had ever passed beyond the front gate or the electrified fence hidden by thick hedgerows. Except Maria Santos, whose father was the property's gardener.

Shy, studious, neither popular nor unpopular - one of those students who is just sort of *there* - Maria served on the decorations committee for the home games, putting up streamers and banners in the gym and throughout the school. Since it drew attention to others, it suited her; in truth, if her advisor didn't insist she needed extracurricular activities for her college apps, she wouldn't have done it. She had a job after school at the town library, which suited her too.

Everybody acknowledged that the committee helped pump up the student body for the games - long before it was clear the team, led by J. O. Anthony, would have a shot at the state title. For its dedication to the champs, the entire decorations committee was invited to the party.

Though she didn't want to, Maria had to attend. Her father was delighted. He told his friends his daughter was progressing in society - this is the American dream: I labor, she's a guest and is accepted. He put together a few extra dollars for her to buy a dress. He took photos before she left the house.

As soon as she passed through the Charlotte Mansion's tall wrought-iron gates, Maria felt out of place. Everyone else seemed at ease - like they had been at parties at other mansions. Most of the players and cheerleaders were in the swimming pool. Others gathered on the terrace near a long table of food and an ice sculpture of the championship trophy as a DJ fine-tuned his equipment. The sun gave the Saturday afternoon a summer-like glow.

No one noticed as Maria crept toward the festivities where Coach Holly beamed with satisfaction. Maria said hello to him and the coach responded but he failed to introduce Maria to his wife: Though she was an honors student, AP in two subjects, he didn't know her name. "I'm Maria Santos," she said as she

shook Mrs. Holly's hand. Mrs. Holly smiled just so, but never really took her gaze from the Jacuzzi where J.O., his girlfriend Alicia and two other couples relaxed.

Maria lingered at the edge of the celebration. She was sort of friends with one of the boys up on the portico and tried to catch his eye, but he was talking to the JV cheerleaders. Two of the guys on the team were in her homeroom, but neither of them ever spoke to her. She looked at them now as they returned from the buffet and gave a little halfhearted wave. They nodded and kept on toward the lounge chairs that surrounded J.O. and the party in the Jacuzzi.

Feeling obvious and invisible at the same time, Maria retreated to the side of the house and walked down a shady path toward the gardener's shed. Soon, she was hidden inside, at home in the cool shade. Her father's tools were arranged carefully throughout the hut.

She heard screaming and sickening cries. Squinting into the sun, she saw a crowd huddled around the Jacuzzi, everyone pointing wildly. Two kicking feet rose desperately out of the steaming water, and she heard someone cry, "Her hair is caught! Her *hair* is caught!" Stunned, confused, J.O. couldn't move. Alicia Martinez, his girlfriend, was trapped, her long hair stuck in a drain. She was drowning.

Coach Holly jumped in fully clothed, struggled to the bottom and came up empty, a look of terror on his face as he burst out of the water.

Maria grabbed her father's garden shears and raced along the path, rushing toward the Jacuzzi.

Without thinking, she shouldered through the horrified crowd, jumped into the bubbling water and fought her way to the bottom. Avoiding Alicia's flailing arms, she measured the length of hair that was sucked into the drain and snipped it with the shears. Suddenly free, Alicia sprang to the surface, gasped for air, slapped at the water, clutched at everyone. She stumbled toward J.O. and the coach. Blood dribbled along the side of her head where her scalp had been torn before Maria arrived.

J.O. and Coach Holly hurried her toward a lounge chair, her feet dragging along the manicured grass. By now, security had arrived – Joe Leto was the guard's name. He made three quick calls: 911, the local Fox News affiliate and Benny Santos, the gardener.

Fifteen minutes later, TV stations throughout southern California carried a live feed from the Charlotte Mansion. In a shocking incident here, Fox reported, Congresswoman Muriel Martinez's daughter Alicia has been rescued from certain death... There, alone on the corner of the screen well behind the reporter, standing near the Jacuzzi, was Maria Santos, her new dress saturated, her black hair stringy and damp, the dripping shears hanging in her hand. Though Leto had draped a towel around her shoulders, she shivered, her lips blue.

On the terrace, the worried crowd watched as EMS personnel tended to Alicia. Bloody gauze lay on the grass, the red stains vivid in the late-afternoon sun.

Dazed, Maria disappeared toward the gardener's shed.

That's where her father found her. When he saw his daughter quaking in the hut's shade, he burst into tears. "My Maria," he moaned as he ran to her and took her in his bony embrace. He swayed as he held her. He'd had a troubled childhood: arrested and sent to a juvenile facility for rehabilitation; he was barely 17 when Maria was born. She meant everything to him.

Shocked and, for some reason, embarrassed by what had happened at the Jacuzzi, Maria asked to go home. His arm slung around her tiny waist, her father brought her to his car, its engine running as it waited in the servants' lot.

Reporters were already camped on their patch of lawn when Maria and her father arrived home. Photos were taken as they hurried inside. Maria was mortified. "I can't speak to them," she said, "I won't." When she came out of the shower, she found Congress-woman Martinez seated on their sofa, a glass of iced tea on the coffee table.

She spoke in Spanish. "Maria, I can't begin to thank you."

"It's OK," Maria replied in English. She wore an ancient bathrobe and had a towel wrapped around her head. "How's Alicia?"

Her father watched nervously. Never could he have conceived that a member of Congress would come to his home. This is a remarkable country.

"Alicia's fine," Congresswoman Martinez replied. "Not even a stitch. Her father took her home. It's a miracle, Maria. You, the gardening shears..." She shuddered. "If you hadn't been so quick to think, my God."

Maria felt her cheeks reddened. "It's OK," she uttered again, "Really."

Congresswoman Martinez stood. "Why don't you put your clothes on and we'll speak to these reporters?"

"Oh, I don't—"

"Maria, you don't let an opportunity like this go by. People have to know there are young people like you in our district."

Benny Santos rocked on his heels with pride. Maria looked at him and sighed.

She returned 10 minutes later in her jeans and a cotton blouse, her hair as neat as she could manage. Congresswoman Martinez and her father were conferring, speaking in rapid-fire Spanish. She had her hand on his arm; he nodded as she spoke.

Martinez turned. "Ah, here you are."

Maria approached tentatively.

"It's probably best if I introduce you and tell the reporters what happened, Maria," the congresswoman said. "I'm accustomed to them. If they have any questions you don't want to answer, I'll jump in."

"Maria...?" Benny Santos said.

"Fine."

“Fine,” Congresswoman Martinez repeated. She walked to the mirror above the television and began to apply her lipstick.

The press conference began a few minutes later.

There she was on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. Maria Santos, hero, Honor Student. ABC News named her Person of the Week. *Seventeen* asked for an essay on bravery. The library where she worked hung a banner and patrons who had ignored her eagerly shook her hand. Hollywood agents called – she had a look: modest, resolute; a quiet strength. Beautiful ethnic eyes. Lawyers sent letters of introduction, suggesting she should be compensated for her efforts: The Charlotte Mansion had put her life at risk. Someone offered to represent her to speak to various civic groups. “You’ll be paid,” he said. “Easy money.” IMs arrived by the minute. On Facebook page, she fielded hundreds of friend requests per day.

Congresswoman Martinez invited her to dinner.

“Dad...”

“Maria, do you know how fortunate you are?” He wore his lone suit, which was pale gray and polyester. The collar of his shirt was too big, his necktie well out of fashion. He glowed with pride. His friends respected his achievement: His daughter had crossed over. She belonged.

A limousine arrived.

“Welcome,” said Victor Martinez, as he came down the path in front of the family home.

Maria was surprised. A congresswoman and her husband, who was said to be a very successful realtor. Maria expected something more, perhaps a version of the Charlotte Mansion. Then she thought, What is wrong with me? This is a very beautiful home, everything the color of sand and sky. If I could give my children a home as beautiful as this...

“Alicia,” Congresswoman Martinez said, “why don’t you show your friend around?”

They went upstairs: a master bedroom, a guest room, Alicia’s room – all furnished to perfection.

“I suppose I should say ‘thank you.’”

“Please,” Maria replied. “You don’t have to.” She wore the same dress she had to the party.

“I thought I was going to die. I really did. It was horrible.”

Brimming with photos and memorabilia of the team, school events and J.O., Alicia’s room was nearly as large as the Santos house. But Maria felt trapped. She and Alicia were not friends. Since freshman year, they hadn’t exchanged as many words as they had today.

“Freaked out my parents...” Alicia said.

Maria nodded. At school, Alicia was unapproachable. Now she was almost as uncomfortable as Maria, who thought maybe she should comment about Alicia’s hair. Though it had been sucked into a drain and crudely assaulted by gardening shears, it looked as perfect as ever. “Well...”

Their reflection in the flat-screen TV seemed so unnatural.

“So. Thank you.” Alicia laughed uncomfortably.

She gave Maria a quick hug.

Downstairs, Maria's father was staring at a photo of Congresswoman Martinez in the Oval Office with the president.

On the drive home, lost in the limousine's back seat, he reported that Mr. Martinez said his job as the gardener at the Charlotte Mansion must be "fascinating. All that nature..." Dipping into the suit-jacket pocket, Benny Santos removed Mr. Martinez's business card. "Maria, he said if we ever need anything..."

Maria nodded.

With Spring break ending on Monday, she was studying in her bedroom when her phone buzzed. It was J.O. Anthony. He said they needed to get together.

They met at the mall. Seated on the lip of the water fountain, he sipped a blue sports drink, his long legs extended, new sneakers untied. *Sports Illustrated* named him among the 10 best high school basketball players in the nation; calling him the next Kobe Bryant - the highest praise in Southern California - they dubbed him Jellybean Jr.

She came straight from work. She was tired. All of this was too, too much. She wanted silence and solitude. She wanted time to read and reflect.

J.O. stood, his lanky frame unfolding.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she said.

He went straight to it. "Listen, girl, we need to work this out."

He started to stroll. She was expected to follow.

But she waited. She didn't care. Really. She'd had enough.

He looked at her in disbelief.

"I was going to save her," he said as he returned. "You didn't have to do it."

She shrugged.

"It was no big thing. I was there."

"All right..."

"You know, I bet you're loving all this," he said. "Somebody like you."

"Like me?" J.O. was at least a foot taller than she was. She had to shield her eyes against the setting sun when she looked up.

"Yeah. Like you. One of everybody."

"I'm not one of everybody," she said. "I'm me."

"And I'm *me*. Another minute and I would've done it."

"Another minute..."

J.O. drew up proud. "Believe it, girl."

Another minute and Alicia Martinez would've been dead.

"So don't be telling everybody you're all that. 'Cause you ain't."

Maria said, “Is that it? Is that what you wanted to say?”

“Don’t you tell me you ain’t enjoying the attention.”

“I don’t need attention, J.O.”

“Then leave it to me.”

She turned and walked toward the escalators.

J.O. caught up, grabbed her elbow and tugged her. She didn’t resist. Everything was already pushing and pulling her where she didn’t want to go.

A group of elementary school aged boys floated up the stairs toward them.

“Hey kid,” J.O. said to one. “Who am I?”

“J.O. Anthony,” he replied.

“Jellybean Junior,” said another.

“What’s up, J.O.?” said a third. He thrust out his fist for J.O. to bump.

“See,” J.O. said to Maria. “You can’t take it from me. Ain’t nobody here be needing you.”

“Fine by me,” she said as she stepped on the stairs going down.

When Maria arrived at home, she found her father wearing the huge, oversized Dodgers jersey the team sent over, the one with the name “Santos” on back.

“Maria, where have you been?” he said urgently, coming toward the sidewalk where she parked her rusty old car. “We were supposed to go to the game.”

Both the Dodgers and Angels sent tickets. They asked Maria if she would throw out the first ball at one of their games.

She apologized. But as she walked toward the front door, she said, “Go with Hermie or Tony. I’m tired.”

Benny Santos didn’t want to go to Chavez Ravine with Hermie or Tony or any of his neighborhood friends. He wanted to be with his daughter, the American hero.

“Maria, what happened?” He followed her into the house.

“Dad, please. I need some time.”

He saw pain in her eyes. “Did somebody say something, Maria? Did someone hurt you?”

“Please, Dad. I just want to... I need to be by myself.”

“Who was it, Maria?” He was angry.

“Dad...”

She knew she couldn’t explain. Everything that happened meant so much to him. He read every story, watched every TV news clip, made a little chart that included the names of everyone who called and sent e-mails, letters and packages. For Benny Santos, it was like Christmas in summertime, yes, but also a kind of validation. In his heart, he always knew his Maria would succeed in America – a slow, gradual climb toward success through dedicated studies, hard work and achievement. But then it came all at once and he felt profound satisfaction. It was like his life changed with the snap of a finger on the hand of God.

And yet there she was in the kitchen, pouring a glass of juice. She was lifeless, her gentle spark all but gone.

He was going to find out what happened.

Classes wouldn't begin for about an hour, but Maria was waiting outside Mrs. Chu's office when her advisor arrived, briefcase overflowing, a cup of coffee in her hand.

With unexpected urgency, Maria said, "I need you to ask Doctor Newcombe to cancel any ceremonies or festivities or anything she has planned."

Mrs. Chu had yet to unlocked her door. "I don't know that has anything planned, Maria."

"She does." Maria was beginning to understand how celebrity worked. Some people needed to share the light. Mrs. Chu was all right, but Vice Principle Newcombe would call the media to the school for an awards presentation of some kind. She'd invite the superintendent of schools and the mayor, and Congresswoman Martinez, of course. And she'd be sure to wriggle into every photo.

They stepped into the office. Mrs. Chu snapped on her desk lamp. "What's on your mind, Maria?"

"I won't participate," she said.

"Maria, what you did made us all proud. I think you would want—"

"I don't want."

"Maria. I've never seen you so agitated."

"Please. I don't mean to be rude. I'm happy Alicia is fine. She's been great. Everything else..."

"You earned it, Maria."

"Mrs. Chu, please. I want to be left alone."

The rest of the day was uncomfortable - students gawking at her in the hallways, new "friends" insisting she sit with them in the cafeteria, little comments from teachers when each class began, Dr. Martinez imploring her to reconsider her request. Alicia said hello and, thank goodness, she rolled her eyes, letting Maria know she saw it was too, too crazy. The other cheerleaders seemed confused: Maria did something special, sure, but she was still quiet and distant, and she didn't share their interests, didn't dress like them, didn't try to look like anybody on TV. Though Coach Holly came over to her locker to shake her hand, reluctantly it seemed to her, J.O.'s clique - the members of the basketball team and the scruffs who hung around him - had their priorities: They had no room for another hero. She moved on.

By Thursday, it was just about all gone. A few people who had ignored her in the past were kind of friendly, but clearly her star had descended. She was allowed to be alone, and she liked it fine. She'd begun to have the sense that her life would be her own once again. She was happy. Good, she thought. The end.

At lunchtime, Joe Leto walked to the gardener's shed. Benny Santos was covered in shade, but the security guard could see he still simmered. Someone had harmed his Maria. Someone had stolen her contentment, her quiet joy.

"OK Benny," Leto said, "what is it?"

Santos waved his hand. On his workbench sat a sandwich Maria made for him. He hadn't touched it.

"Benny..."

"Nothing."

"Let me guess. You heard J.O. Anthony jumped all over Maria."

"What?"

"My kid saw them at the mall," Leto said, eyeing Santos' sandwich. "Jellybean Junior was all up her in her face."

Santos felt a shock from his head to his heels. "The big basketball guy? 'In her face'? To do what?"

"I don't know, Benny. I mean, kids..."

"He hurt her, didn't he?"

"Benny. Calm down."

"Now she's ashamed."

As Santos's fury boiled, he eyed Leto's gun. Then he looked at the shears Maria had used to clip the hair of the congresswoman's daughter. That evening, when it was time to drive home, he put them in the trunk of his car.

It took Benny Santos three nights to figure out where he was going to kill J.O. Anthony. Santos had known the street life, so he thought he'd get away with the crime, forgetting he asked his friends to tell him everything about the basketball star and how he drove past Anthony's house, followed him to the Martinez home and watched as he took Alicia to the movies where he was treated like a celebrity.

Soon they would find Anthony with his throat slashed, his long, lanky body in a pool of his own blood.

Benny Santos saw murder as his duty. He was responsible for Maria. He had to restore her to the status she had achieved. He had to get her that rare thing - a second chance. He had to restore her pride in the glory of her achievement that put her in the center of American life. The way to do so was to eliminate the young man who had threatened her and drove her from the pulse of her new status.

Santos had fallen so thoroughly into the pit of his own anger that he failed to see Maria had returned to her own reserved and happy self.

“Dad, why are you upset,” she said, gripping his hand at the dinner table. “I’m fine. Everything is the way it was before all the craziness...”

He couldn’t hear. Now Benny Santos believed his daughter had been used. He reviewed the events, and in every case, everyone and everything – lawyers, agents, Congresswoman Martinez, the Dodgers, the Angels – tried to profit from Maria. When they had gotten all they could, they dropped her. And now all the attention had returned to J.O. Anthony.

If there were no J.O. Anthony...

After Maria went to her room and her music began to play, Benny Santos walked to the tiny tool shed he kept in their backyard and sharpened the shears until they would easily slice through skin and sinew.

Maria went to see Joe Leto. He worked a second job stacking shelves at Ralph’s.

“I think he’s upset about something,” she said.

“Don’t I know it,” replied Leto, who wore an orange apron at the grocery store. “Ever since I told him that you and J.O. Anthony had an argument—”

“What argument?”

“At the mall.”

She told him they hadn’t argued.

“I heard you were shouting at each other.”

“It was nothing.”

“Maria, are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” She was growing more agitated. “Do you know where my father is? He didn’t come home for dinner. He didn’t call...”

Leto said, “Maria, don’t jump to any conclusions.” But he knew her father had been angrier and angrier as the days passed. Leto regretted saying anything – especially now, knowing he’d been wrong.

“Maybe he’s at the mansion. I’ll go...”

The guard at the gate let Maria in.

She hurried to the gardener’s shed. Her father wasn’t there.

And, she saw, neither were the shears she used to cut Alicia’s hair.

She shivered as a chill ran up her spine.

On the desperate drive across town, Maria wondered if she knew her father. She loved him, of course, but he had changed in the days following the incident in the Jacuzzi. He seemed to lose faith in her. He accepted her instant recognition as the only way she could succeed. And yet millions and millions of people succeeded in America without fame, and many celebrities had miserable lives – divorce, drinking and drugging, unhappy and broken children they refused to care for, friends they

could not trust, gruesome surgeries to try to look young and like someone else. In her brief moment in the spotlight, Maria saw that the desire for celebrity was some form of desperation, and how people famous for nothing or for one incident that occurred in the blink of an eye might spend every private moment obsessing on how to remain famous rather than just living a good life. It all seemed so meaningless.

Her father was been twisted by the temptation of quick and easy success. He had lost his way. He did not accept what she had told him – “Dad, I was happy before. I *like* my life.” She knew he had been in trouble with the law when he was a boy. She feared that all that had happened had knocked him back in time.

She drove to school, thinking there was an event she’d forgotten about. But, now after midnight, the building was quiet. She tried to remember where J.O and Alicia hung out with friends, but nothing came to mind. Shaking with worry, she considered calling the police – or even Congresswoman Martinez. Instead, she drove toward J.O. Anthony’s neighborhood. She didn’t know his address, but maybe someone would.

As she raced past a small park tucked off the street, she slammed her brakes. There, in a light from a lone lamp, was J.O.

He was on the court by himself, dribbling a ball, stopping and throwing up jump shots.

Maria edged the car toward the curb.

On the court, J.O. repeated the move, every step identical to how he did it the last time. Working hard, he was bathed in sweat.

She stepped out and, closing the driver’s side door as quietly as she could, walked toward the court.

Her father was on a bench in the shadows under a leafy tree. He sat up on the back rail, the shears between his legs, his uniform dusty and stained.

J.O. dribbled, stopped and shot. Then he trotted to retrieve the ball.

“Dad...” Maria whispered.

Benny Santos turned slowly, his expression blank, his eyes wide and empty.

“Dad.”

“He has been doing that for an hour,” he whispered. “The same thing.”

“Practicing. Working,” she said. “Dad, he helped me.”

“No. He took something from you.”

“It don’t want what he took,” she said. “Dad, do you hear me?”

There was a sudden silence. No bouncing ball, no sneakers squeaking on the court, no whoosh as the ball passed cleanly through the net.

“Maria,” J.O. said as he approached. “That you?”

She turned.

J.O. ran his forearm across his brow to wipe away the sweat.

Benny Santos stood. He changed his grip on the shears.

Maria felt her father’s hot breath as he bumped into her from behind.

“Hey,” she said, trembling.

“That your Pops?” J.O. asked. He’d tucked the ball under his arm.

Maria turned again and looked at her father. Slowly, carefully, she reached for the shears.

Benny Santos released them.

“My Pops,” she said.

J.O. wiped his hand on his shorts and then thrust it toward Maria’s father. “Jellybean Jr.,” he said.

As if dazed, Benny Santos shook his hand.

“Star struck,” J.O. said, glancing at Maria. “He’s been watching me for, like, two hours.”

“You’re showing him how it done,” she said, as she hooked her arm under her father’s. “Work for it.”

“I guess I must be.” He began to retreat. “Hey, Maria, don’t be letting Alicia know you been trying to hook up with me...”

“No, I won’t,” she said, hiding her amusement.

“Later,” J.O. said as he trotted back toward the court. Seconds later, he was repeating the move he’d been working on all night.

“Come on, Dad,” Maria said. “Everything we need is back home.”

It didn’t sink in with Benny Santos until days later as he was trimming the bushes at the Charlotte Mansion, the April sun beating down on his straw hat. As sweat dribbling along his cheeks, he understood that Maria was right. Everything they needed was back at their home.