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AMERICAN BEAUTY (...AND THE HOLLYWOOD BEASTS)

Mena Suvari was one of the biggest movie stars of the 1990s.
Now she reveals how sexual abuse and drug addiction drove her to the edge



**“I couldn’t be myself.
I couldn’t say I’m being
severely abused”**

A star at the age of 19, the *American Beauty* actress Mena Suvari appeared to be living the Hollywood dream. But behind the scenes sexual abuse and drug addiction had pushed her to the very edge. She tells *Helena de Bertodano* how she survived

PORTRAIT BY AUSTIN HARGRAVE



FINDING PEACE Far left: with her third husband, Mike Hope, a set director. Left at home in LA with their baby, Christopher

She isn't getting much sleep with Christopher. "We're co-sleeping, so last night was a little tough. I think I've been up since 3am," she explains.

It doesn't show. She looks fresh-faced and relaxed and coos devotedly over her son — although she says his birth was very difficult. "It was so completely opposite to what I thought it would be. I wanted a water birth. I bought a kaftan and votives. And then I ended up with an emergency caesarean. I almost chuckled. It's, like, of course [the universe] would throw that at me."

She talks just as openly about her decision to write her book. Three years ago she was going through her belongings in the garage when she found the suicide note that she had written in her late teens. "Take care," read the note, adorned with an angel sticker. "I'll see you again someday." It triggered a flood of memories.

"It took me 20 years to find that letter," she says. "But that was the day I saw myself again and began this process of healing." By that point the #MeToo movement was also in full swing. "That was extremely inspiring and very empowering," she says. "It made me feel like I was allowed to say something was [amiss]. And I didn't feel like that before."

Suvari's father, an Estonian psychiatrist, was in his early sixties when she was born and 30 years older than her mother. Suvari spent her first years in a gothic mansion called Hilltop in Newport, Rhode Island, later moving to Charleston, South Carolina, where she went to a private girls' school. The early years of her childhood — with three older brothers — were extremely happy. "Everything felt magical. We lived on four acres and it was just full of possibility... [I was at] one with the land, those memories of being in the woods with my brothers and picking blackberries. I was so sure of myself — and opinionated. Then insecurities crept in and I slowly just shut myself down."

She was 12 when her world was turned on its head. One of her brother's 16-year-old

"I had been living such a sick and twisted life that I thought sex was the only way to show any form of affection"



NO BED OF ROSES Top: the iconic image of Suvari in *American Beauty*. Left, as Heather in *American Pie*, with Chris Klein

AUSTIN HARRIS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. HAIR: CASTILLO AT OPUS BEAUTY. LA MAKE-UP: ROBERT BRYAN AT EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS. STYLING: NOLA SINGER. DRESS BY ZIMMERMANN ESTELLE. SPLICED.MOI. DRESS: EARRINGS AND RING BY STELLA AND BOW. © MICHAEL HOPE/INSTAGRAM. © MENA SUVARI/INSTAGRAM. LANDMARK MEDIA. SHUTTERSTOCK

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ena Suvari is sitting in a rocking chair breastfeeding her baby son, Christopher, aged nearly three months. Her husband, Mike, pokes his head round the door to tell her he is going out. "I love you," he says, blowing her a kiss. "I love you too," she says, smiling happily.

It is a regular scene of domestic bliss, but so alien to Suvari that it feels as if she has landed on another planet. "I never in a million years thought I would have a family," she says, close to tears. "I didn't think I was valuable enough for it."

It seems an odd statement from the woman who made her name as the ultimate American sweetheart. She was only 19 when she was cast in two huge box-office hits: the high-school sexcapade *American Pie* and the Oscar-winning satire *American Beauty*, both released in 1999. The former rebooted the teen movie genre with gross-out humour and dumb pranks. The latter was a cultural watershed; a brutal and viciously witty takedown of the American dream and male midlife crisis, directed by Sam Mendes. Suvari played the angelic-looking cheerleader whose rose petal-strewn body, used in movie posters around the world, became one of the most iconic film images of all time.

For the next two decades she played the role of the girl with the gilded lifestyle in

her public persona too. If I had met her in previous years, she says, that's what I would have seen. "That was absolutely painful, to be in an interview and I couldn't be myself," she explains. "I constantly had to think of what somebody might want to hear, because that's what I was trained to do. 'What was *American Pie* like, it must have been so great?' I couldn't say, 'I'm being severely, severely abused.'"

Now, at the age of 42, she has written a memoir that reveals the reality behind the glamorous façade. In unflinching detail it describes how she was raped by an older boy at the age of 12, tried to self-medicate with drugs and even wrote a suicide note. Later she endured exploitative relationships as her film career developed and plumbed the depths of loneliness and despair. It is a story we have become all too familiar with over the past few years.

Today she lives in a quiet street in Los Angeles. Acutely concerned about privacy, she asks me not to mention the exact neighbourhood. The interior is pristine and monochrome: cream and beige with an elegant brick fireplace and an abundance of potted plants. We talk downstairs in Christopher's bedroom, next to his cot with its stuffed penguin and dog. Behind her is a framed copy of an EE Cummings poem, *i carry your heart with me (i carry it in)*. A nanny looks after Christopher upstairs, bringing him down for occasional feeds. "It's, like, 'Hi, nice to meet you, here are my tits,'" she says, laughing at herself. "I don't care any more. I want to be me and I want to be real."

A strict vegan, Suvari is eating a bowl of rice and vegetables and drinking green tea. She is barefoot, her hair hanging loose over a long dress that appears to be made of hemp. She comes across as the embodiment of the LA celebrity earth-conscious hippy, but is self-aware enough to acknowledge some people perceive her as "too woo-woo". Woo-woo? "Too mystical and weird."

friends started to take an interest in her, then blitzed her with love letters and attention. He wanted to have sex with her, but she told him she wasn't ready. At first he listened but then, alone in a guest bedroom at his parents' house, he tried again. "I felt trapped, suffocated, unsure of what to do, and scared, very scared," she writes in her book. She saw him put on a condom. "No matter how many times I said, 'No, I don't want to do that,' and implored him not to do it, he didn't hear me."

She developed a bladder infection and went to the doctor, who treated her and put her on birth-control pills. "Medicate the physical problem, ignore the emotional scars," she writes bitterly. "I can't imagine the difference it would have made in my life if someone had asked me how I was doing and what was going on... Did something happen? Did you have sex?"

To make matters worse the boy then started spreading the word that she was a "whore". "Was he trying to rationalise away the guilt of raping me?" she writes.

She didn't feel she could talk to her parents. Her father seemed more able to relate to his psychiatric patients than to his children. While her mother, a homemaker, was physically present, she often comes across as emotionally detached from her daughter in the book.

Suvari started modelling at the age of 12, following a visit to her school by a modelling agency. Her headshots were so captivating that they signed her up and sent her to compete in a nationwide modelling contest. "By the end of the event I'd won nearly every category I had entered," she writes. The only factor not working in her favour was her height, 5ft 2in at the time (her height as an adult is 5ft 4in).

Soon she was booked for an Oscar de la Renta swimsuit advert and moved to New York with her parents for the summer. "It was all very chaotic and hectic," Suvari says. "I had just had my virginity stolen from me."

After that the agency suggested she spend the next summer in LA, where she had been booked for a national TV advert (for Rice-A-Roni — a premixed rice dish in a box) and her parents decided to move

there full time. Suvari doesn't recall having much say in these decisions. At school, "I had selected medical research as a path that interested me, not modelling or acting", she writes. But she went with the flow. Then, at the age of 17, she landed her first movie, *Nowhere* with Heather Graham.

By then her family had lost their financial footing. Her father was in his seventies and working less, so Suvari stepped up to help support them. "I'm working to survive, feeling like I need to save our family. We're shopping at the 99-cent store," she recalls.

As she landed more and more roles, her career seemed charmed, but looking back she can see how her naivety was open to exploitation by those in the industry. In her book she describes how, at the age of 15, she felt she should undress for a photographer commissioned to take headshots. "I still wonder where those naked pictures of young me went," she writes.

A year later she found herself in a sexual relationship with her manager, who was in his mid-thirties. "How was I now with my manager in his apartment, alone at 16 years old, getting high, with him f***ing me afterward, but yet also saying, 'Don't forget

to brush your hair," and asking, "Do you know your lines?" Was this what Hollywood was? Was this my life?"

She had begun experimenting with drugs at school. Marijuana and alcohol at first. She recalls returning home from class one day smashed on tequila. Her father settled her stomach with some broth but made no comment. "It would have been nice to talk," Suvari says today. "I would want to have those conversations with my son."

Initially her parents were a united presence, renting a piano for her to practise on in their Burbank apartment, her mother driving her to auditions and photoshoots. But in her late teens the marriage deteriorated and her mother moved out, leaving Suvari at home alone with her ageing father, who became increasingly infirm following a stroke. Her brothers had already left for college.

Suvari's drug-taking escalated, graduating to methamphetamine, which she recalls snorting in the laboratories during school breaktime. Nobody else realised what she was up to. "I still did everything asked of me. Schoolwork. Auditions. Sex. Only I had to know how f***ed up I was getting every day," she writes. She tried therapy but couldn't commit for long. "I didn't want to be there." She was too busy "self-medicating", she chuckles drily. ➤





Left: an intimate scene with Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*. Below: Suvari had a happy childhood in Rhode Island, but was hooked on methamphetamine in LA by the age of 16

One lonely night she penned the suicide note she would later find in her garage. “I just felt like I had no connection to anyone,” she tells me. “I felt so unseen and unheard and undervalued — but I was undervaluing myself at the same time. I just felt so used and abused.”

In the book she recalls what saved her: “As I thought back to what was happening then and why I hadn’t taken my life, I remembered the way I would find the tiniest glimmer of hope that my life could get even slightly better, and believe it. I clung to that belief with all my might.”

But she was not yet out of the woods.

Another toxic relationship followed, this time with a man who persuaded her into threesomes, used painful sex toys, slept around and gave her herpes.

Then came the script for *American Pie*. “I was up for the role of Heather, a sweet, innocent, virginal choirgirl,” she writes, acknowledging the irony. Today she laughs at the contrast between her life and the one she portrayed on screen. “Heather wore sweater sets and sang in the choir. And I was drinking tequila in the bathroom.” On set, however, she excelled. “I knew what was required of me,” she says. “I cared very, very much about doing my job as professionally as possible. So I could be as perfect as possible.”

Behind the scenes she was desperately unhappy. On her next film she slept with three people during the two-week shoot. “I had been living such a sick and twisted life that I thought sex was the only way to show any form of affection,” she writes.

American Beauty came as a revelation. When she first read the script she “shuddered with a chilling recognition”. Her character, Angela Hayes, is “strikingly beautiful, with perfect, even features, blonde hair and a nubile young body. She’s the archetypal American dream girl.” Yet later in the story it transpires that “her sexy

On Kevin Spacey caressing her off screen: “Was it manipulative? I don’t know. I was just so young and vulnerable and impressionable”

façade is a front for inexperience and insecurity. She is the last one who thinks of herself as desirable.”

“I completely understood Angela,” Suvari writes. “I felt this girl in my soul... I could take every single moment of trauma in my life that I worked to conceal and bring it to the character, letting it rise to just below the surface, where I scared myself that someone might see.”

In the film Kevin Spacey plays Angela’s best friend’s father, who becomes obsessed with her. There is an intimate scene between their characters. On the day of filming Suvari recalls “an odd thing” happening.

“Between set-ups, Kevin took me into a small room with a bed and we laid next to each other, me facing towards him while he held me lightly,” she writes. “I wondered if he had discussed this with Sam [Mendes] or if it was something he premeditated as a way to prepare both of us for the intimacy we needed to share or if it was a spur-of-the-moment idea. Whatever it was, it worked. Lying there with Kevin was strange and eerie but also calm and peaceful, and as for his gentle caresses, I was so used to being open and eager for affection that it felt good to just be touched. Good and warm.”

“I wasn’t sure if Kevin was interested in me or not. My head immediately went to that place, and I didn’t know how far he was going to take it or how I was going to react if he did go there. But he didn’t. We just lay there, getting close and comfortable, and it was such a genius move on his part.”

It was the late 1990s, long before Spacey had come out as gay and before allegations of sexual harassment against him began to surface. In 2017 the actor Anthony Rapp accused him of making sexual advances towards him when he was 14. Other men have since come forward to say they were sexually harassed by Spacey, who “absolutely denies” all allegations.

I ask Suvari about the incident on the bed: did she think what he was doing was acceptable at the time? She hesitates, before describing it as “mystifying”. “I don’t know what that choice was on his part. Was it manipulative? I don’t know. It got the outcome...” — she breaks off — “I was just so young and vulnerable and impressionable. Like a deer in headlights.”

“There wasn’t a conversation either,” she continues. “It just happened. It was just a moment. It was a lunch break. And it was peaceful and quiet. And it was the care and consideration that Angela — and Mena — really needed.”

What was Spacey like the rest of the time on set? “Cool. Professional. Easy. ‘Hi, how are you?’ But that day turned into something different. And I could only assume that maybe because of his age and expertise that he made decisions for himself and the project in order to get that result that we needed.”

In the context of her book the experience seems relatively benign. Perhaps it is ➤➤➤



With former husbands Robert Brinkmann, left, 2005, and Simone Sestito, 2010

not surprising that she later found refuge in marriage to an older man: the German-born cinematographer Robert Brinkmann, 16 years her senior, whom she wed when she was “barely 21... stoned, on a cliffside in Big Sur”. For a few years she felt happy and stable, but they drifted apart and she divorced at 25. Next came marriage to an Italian-Canadian concert promoter, Simone Sestito, though they divorced in 2012.

Although she never worked with Harvey Weinstein, she says she has encountered several directors who crossed professional lines. She doesn’t name names but says that another woman recently filed a harassment suit against one of them. “I remembered what my experience with that person was, and how it was so obvious then. But I just excused it, because to me it was, like, he’s just one of those guys. You learn how as a woman...” She laughs a deliberately high-pitched fake laugh, as if dealing with that sort of person. “...you laugh it off.”

What sort of behaviour? “Just, like, really...” She struggles for the right word. Sleazy? “Yeah. Like someone’s married and has kids but you never meet them and they want to take you out to lunch. Or they’re touching you. It’s crossing the line. Clearly. But I just was used to that. I had other directors like that. Horrible. There was one who was very embarrassing on set. He would pick me up and spin me around and tell me how much he loved me in front of the whole crew. And I was just embarrassed. It was, like, ‘Be professional’. But I never did anything. I just thought, ‘He’s just that kind of guy.’”

These days she says she tries to protect young actors if she ever witnesses dodgy behaviour. “I have [intervened],” she says “If the environment isn’t safe, I will express it.” Naturally she welcomes the recent changes in the industry. “If my career had started 20 or 30 years later I would have said, ‘This makes me feel uncomfortable. Please don’t do that.’ I never said that to anyone.”

After *American Beauty* Suvari felt typecast. “I was always trying to find a really challenging, interesting role,” she says. “People wanted me to be Angela and to play that card over and over again. I just didn’t want to do any of that.”

She describes how she identified with Britney Spears in 2007 when she shaved her head. “Although our circumstances were vastly different, I understood what she was trying to accomplish.”

She had just shaved her head too — for a film role — and was shocked at the reaction. “I was going through immigration. I gave my passport to the officer and it was a photo from years before where I looked like I did in *American Beauty*, with very blonde, very long hair. He looked at me



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and he goes, ‘Oh, too bad, you’re such a pretty girl! I was taken aback. It felt like a social experiment. Women were coming up to me and saying how much they admired it and how they wished they could do something like that. Other people thought I had lost my mind.’”

She doesn’t know Spears but has been following her recent troubles. “I do feel very connected to her,” she says.

Suvari continued to work steadily and picked up roles in independent dramas, but no film ever matched her early success. In 2012 she returned to the *American Pie* franchise, reprising her role as Heather in *American Reunion*.

After so many failed relationships she had given up on forming emotional connections with men, determined to stay mentally detached. “I had gotten to this place where I was just hard,” she says. “I could only care to a certain extent. And I’d break your heart if I needed to. I was going to be just as dismissive as every guy I’d been with. So you can be just as disposable to me as I’ve been to you.”

Finally, in 2012, her faith in men was restored by a tattoo artist called Sal. “He was such an old-school gentleman,” she writes. “I had never been treated this way and it was wonderful to be out with

someone who wanted to make sure I was cared for and felt happy.” They remain friends and she credits him with helping to rebuild her during their few years together.

She met Christopher’s father, Mike Hope, a set director and prop master, on the set of a 2016 Hallmark movie, *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*. They married two years later in 2018. “My love for you flows endlessly like the rivers of this earth,” he posted recently on social media alongside a picture of them together. Below, Suvari has commented: “Simply, you saved my life.”

She continues to act and has three films out this year, including *Grace and Grit*, the true story of a woman (played by Suvari) dying of cancer.

Her own father died in 2012 and she doesn’t seem especially close to the rest of her family. “It’s a little tricky,” she says of her relationship with her mother. “Motherhood has definitely given me a different perspective on that relationship. It’s giving me the opportunity to understand my mom a lot more.”

She is nervous about the publication of her book. “It’s so weird, like, ‘Eugh, God, what did I do?’ But at the same time... I love just being open. It probably sounds totally kooky, but I want to pass through this world knowing that I’ve lived and I’ve shared and it’s OK.”

If she could talk to her teenage self now, what would she say? “Be yourself,” she says without hesitation. “I spent so much time trying to figure out every specific thing that each person wanted from me that I lost myself. Or I never found myself because of it.”

She hopes her book might offer solace to others. “If I could shave off a summer of suffering for someone, that’s what I want to do. I just want to help somebody in the way that no one helped me.” ■

The Great Peace: A Memoir by Mena Suvari is published by Hachette on August 12 at £20