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grace gealey
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Style & Grace

By Megan Portorreal

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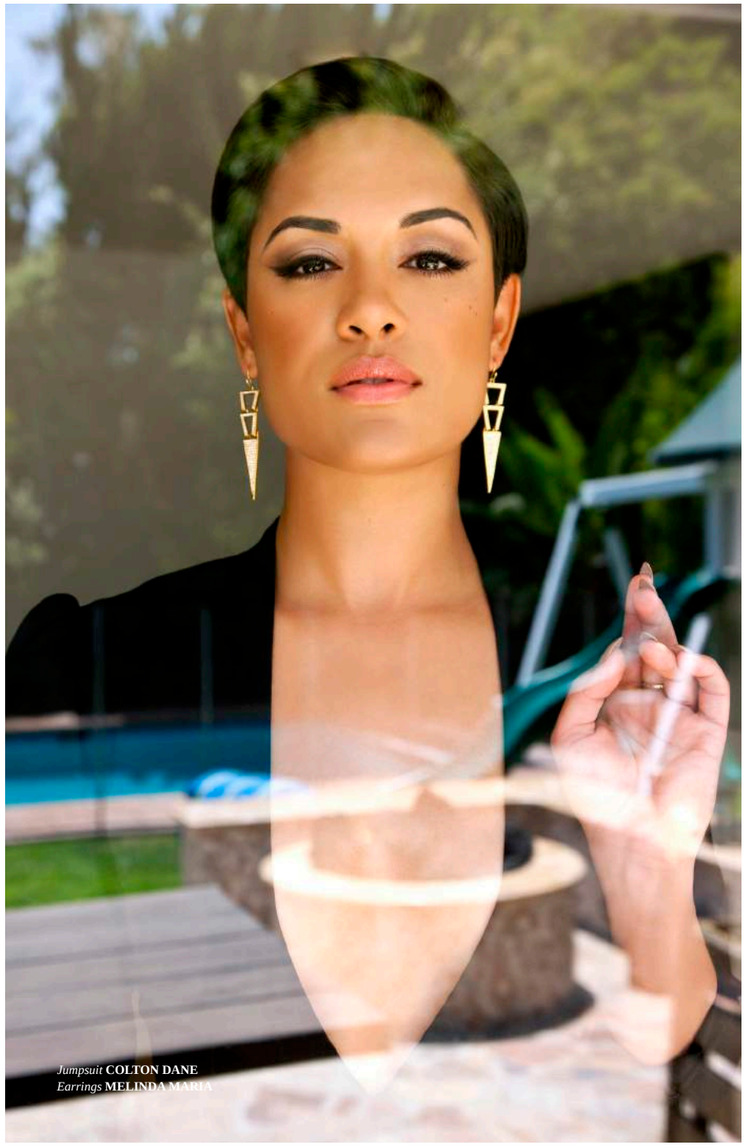
Hair: **MICHAEL KANYON** for Celestine Agency

Outfit **BARIANO**
Jewelry **MELINDA MARIA**

Way before the record-breaking



Jumpsuit **COLTON DANE**
Earrings **MELINDA MARIA**

television drama *Empire* was even thought of, actress Grace Gealey could have been found in the Cayman Islands, where her family was ingraining something in her that she would carry throughout the rest of her life: a drive for education.

"Education was instilled in me at a young age by my grandparents, Harry and Theoline McCoy," Gealey says. "My grandfather's aunt, Flora Robinson, was the first female teacher in the Cayman Islands, and my grandmother, Theoline, became a well-renowned educator who made such an impact on the country, people called her 'Teacher' until the day she passed."

To say Gealey had incredible role models is clearly an understatement, and growing up, her family made sure she would be bright. She remembers spending summers with her cousins at her grandparents' house where they would want to watch cartoons all day, and says, "Gramma would allow us the luxury of a few cartoon shows, but shortly after, we were required to do something that stimulated our minds."

These stimulating activities included anything from building a clubhouse (and then playing in it) to learning entrepreneurial basics, like selling fruit on the streets to passing cars. "Or Gramma's favorite: doing mathematical problems or English essays on how to save the coral reefs around the island," Gealey says. "We held education in a high regard."

So it was no surprise when Gealey would then move to America years later to pursue higher education and obtain her MFA in acting from University of California, Irvine. Even when growing up, Gealey knew she wanted to create art, and she found herself gravitating towards the performing arts at a very young age. "Whether it was acting, dancing, singing, or playing the piano," she says, "the desire to continuously express myself in an artistic fashion was overwhelming."

At first, Gealey didn't think she would become an actress. According to her, acting wasn't a widely pursued profession

Dress **STELLO BY STEPHANIE COSTELLO AND MICHAEL COSTELLO**

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—GRACE GEALEY

in the Cayman Islands, so she initially went to college to become a drama professor. It wasn't until her academic career that she was encouraged by guest director Tamara Harvey to seriously pursue acting full-time. That's when it all began.

"There are two components to theater that are hard to replicate in other mediums," says Gealey of her passion for theater in particular. "1) The presence of the unassuming, beautifully vulnerable audience, and 2) the gift of moving all the way through your consecutive crafting."

While Gealey admits she now loves both mediums of television and theater because they offer different challenges, she was "addictively drawn to the excitement, cacophony, and risky-in-the-moment nature of the theater," and that is something she can never be rid of.

"The most important thing I learned at university was to accept, embrace, and celebrate my individuality," she continues. "Your uniqueness is your key. Much of the time we find ourselves ensnared in the trap of trying to shed the things that stand out and comprise our originality. In actuality, we should be commemorating these things in ourselves and others."

It was this way of thinking that helped her land several different roles off-Broadway ("Let's be real," she laughs, "it was more like OFF-off-Broadway"), commercials and short films, before she even found herself auditioning for the role of Anika Calhoun on *Empire*.

"I auditioned on tape on a Monday," Gealey recalls of the process. "Then I was told on Tuesday that I had a screen test with Lee [Daniels] on Wednesday, waited patiently on Thursday, and got the call on Friday. My life turned into a completely different direction in the matter of a week and I have God to thank for that."

And what a whirlwind the show became. With millions of weekly viewers, Fox reported that *Empire* became the only primetime scripted series to grow in total viewers over each of its first five telecasts in over 20 years—and that's only because statistics like this weren't properly calculated earlier than that. Who knows how far back of a record it *really* beat. Regardless, it's safe to say this rise in fanfare was due to the enormous amount of talent and gasp-worthy drama the show offered—starting with the lead characters Lucious Lyon (played by Terrance Howard) and Gealey's rival on the show, Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson).

Leather jacket **MASON**
Pants and top **OLIMA**
Earrings **MELINDA MARIA**

"It's always wonderful to be around

seasoned artists and glean what you can in each moment," Gealey says of working with Howard and Henson, and most importantly, learning from them. "I was reminded to take risks. Since this was a new medium for me, I was still negotiating the presence of the camera as I simultaneously created my character's arc."

It's no secret that Gealey's character, Anika, has caused much buzz and controversy on the show. As Lucious' love interest from episode 1, she is a very polished, even-tempered businesswoman—quite the opposite from Cookie's outspoken, passionate, and fearless character traits. Despite their differences, it's their similarities that make them butt heads: they are both equally independent, protective, and strong.

When I tell Gealey that Anika is actually my favorite character on the show, she beams. "Is she really? I love that! If fans celebrate her, I celebrate with them," Gealey says. "If they love to hate her, I also celebrate in that because it shows they are so wrapped up and invested in the show, that they actually believe it. It's a win/win."

And fans certainly *do* love to hate Anika. When Anika and Cookie finally came to blows in the season finale—an event that was certainly going to happen sooner or later—Twitter erupted with passionate trending topics, mostly followed with #catfight, mostly on the side of Cookie.

"It's something the audience had been waiting to see from the very first episode and to finally give that to them was great," Gealey says of the long-awaited brawl. "We had a blast shooting the scene and I was psyched to even do some of the stunts, like reacting to Cookie's punch and flipping onto the pool table!"

With such strong-willed and driven women on the show, I wondered if Gealey felt a personal connection with her character. "I identify with being an independent, educated, ambitious woman of color. I identify with being betrayed. I identify with being hurt," Gealey says. "I identify with doing things out of emotional eruption that I wasn't always proud of. She's human. So yes, I identify with her humanity. And I suspect I'm not the only one."

She certainly isn't. While there are a fair share of fans who are #TeamCookie, Gealey received a flood of encouraging tweets regularly each week during airtime, mostly those embracing Anika's individuality and even her relatable flaws. "Her largest weakness also happens to be her greatest strength: her ability to love," Gealey says thoughtfully. "And in this case, to love Lucious."

Apart from her super-composed attitude, Anika is also admired for having one killer wardrobe. From sporting glittery frocks, peach bustier dresses, and sexy cleavage-baring jumpsuits, Anika has truly been every fashion editor's dream.

"I grew up a tomboy, but as I've transitioned into adulthood, I've embraced my femininity," Gealey says of her own style. "It's not extremely girly, but definitely soft and feminine. So because of that, I enjoyed the fashion and style on the show. I loved the navy blue, laced jumpsuit Anika wore, in particular." (As do we!)

Now with season 2 set to premiere on September 23, we asked Gealey what's in store. "Expect lots of jaw-dropping moments, revelations, shifting dynamics, and more," says Gealey—which sounds just about right. "You can't prepare yourself for what you will be privy to."

"And what about Cookie and Anika?" I ask. "Do you think they could ever be friends, or has that ship sailed?"

"It's TV," Gealey says. "Gosh, anything could happen, really!"

BY MEGAN PORTORREAL

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Shoes **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**

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