

Chapter 22

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"How did you remain so confident? So steadfast in your resolve?" I ask Evelyn.

"When Don left me? Or when my career went down the tubes?"

"Both, I guess," I say. "I mean, you had Celia, so it's a little different, but still."

Evelyn cocks her head slightly. "Different from what?"

"Hm?" I say, lost in my own thoughts.

"You said I had Celia, so it was a little different," Evelyn clarifies. "Different from what?"

"Sorry," I say. "I was... in my own head." I have momentarily let my own relationship problems seep into what should be a one-way conversation.

Evelyn shakes her head. "No need to be sorry. Just tell me different from what."

I look at her and realize that I've opened a door that can't really be shut. "From my own impending divorce."

Evelyn smiles, almost like the Cheshire Cat. "Now things are getting interesting," she says.

It bothers me, her cavalier attitude toward my own vulnerability. It's my fault for bringing it up. I know that. But she could treat it with more kindness. I've exposed myself. I've exposed a wound.

"Have you signed the papers?" Evelyn asks. "Perhaps with a tiny heart above the i in Monique? That's what I would do."

"I guess I don't take divorce as lightly as you," I say. It comes out flatly. I consider softening, but... I don't.

"No, of course not," Evelyn says kindly. "If you did, at your age, you'd be a cynic."

"But at your age?" I ask.

"With my experience? A realist."

“That, in and of itself, is awfully cynical, don’t you think? Divorce is loss.”

Evelyn shakes her head. “Heartbreak is loss. Divorce is a piece of paper.”

I look down to see that I have been doodling a cube over and over with my blue pen. It is starting to tear through the page. I neither pick up my pen nor push harder. I merely keep running the ink over the lines of the cube.

“If you are heartbroken right now, then I feel for you deeply,” Evelyn says. “That I have the utmost respect for. That’s the sort of thing that can split a person in two. But I wasn’t heartbroken when Don left me. I simply felt like my marriage had failed. And those are very different things.”

When Evelyn says this, I stop my pen in place. I look up at her. And I wonder why I needed Evelyn to tell me that.

I wonder why that sort of distinction has never crossed my mind before.

ON MY WALK to the subway this evening, I see that Frankie has called me for the second time today.

I wait until I’ve ridden all the way to Brooklyn and I’m heading down the street toward my apartment to respond. It’s almost nine o’clock, so I decide to text her: Just getting out of Evelyn’s now. Sorry it’s so late. Want to talk tomorrow?

I have my key in my front door when I get Frankie’s response:

Tonight is fine. Call as soon as you can.

I roll my eyes. I should never bluff Frankie.

I put my bag down. I pace around the apartment. What am I going to tell her? The way I see it, I have two choices.

I can lie and tell her everything’s going fine, that we’re on track for the June issue and that I’m getting Evelyn to talk about more concrete things.

Or I can tell the truth and potentially get fired.

At this point, I’m starting to see that getting fired might not be so bad. I’ll have a book to publish in the future, one for which I’d most likely make millions of dollars. That could, in turn, get me other celebrity biography opportunities. And then, eventually, I could start finding my own topics, writing about anything I want with the confidence

that any publisher would buy it.

But I don't know when this book will be sold. And if my real goal is to set myself up to be able to grab whatever story I want, then credibility matters. Getting fired from Vivant because I stole their major headline would not bode well for my reputation.

Before I can decide what, exactly, my plan is, my phone is ringing in my hand.

Frankie Troupe.

"Hello?"

"Monique," Frankie says, her voice somehow both solicitous and irritated. "What's going on with Evelyn? Tell me everything."

I keep searching for ways in which Frankie, Evelyn, and I all leave this situation getting what we want. But I realize suddenly that the only thing I can control is that I get what I want.

And why shouldn't I?

Really.

Why shouldn't it be me who comes out on top?

"Frankie, hi, I'm sorry I haven't been more available."

"That's fine, that's fine," Frankie says. "As long as you're getting good material."

"I am, but unfortunately, Evelyn is no longer interested in sharing the piece with Vivant."

The silence on Frankie's end of the phone is deafening. And then it is punctuated with a flat, dead "What?"

"I've been trying to convince her for days. That's why I've been unable to get back to you. I've been explaining to her that she has to do this piece for Vivant."

"If she wasn't interested, why did she call us?"

"She wanted me," I say. I do not follow this up with any sort of qualification. I do not say She wanted me and here is why or She wanted me and I'm so sorry about all this.

"She used us to get to you?" Frankie says, as if it's the most insulting thing she can think of. But the thing is, Frankie used me to get to Evelyn, so...

"Yes," I say. "I think she did. She's interested in a full biography. Written by me. I've gone along with it in the hopes of changing her mind."

"A biography? You're taking our story and turning it into a book instead?"

"It's what Evelyn wants. I've been trying to convince her otherwise."

"And have you?" Frankie asks. "Convinced her?"

"No," I say. "Not yet. But I think I might be able to."

"OK," Frankie says. "Then do that."

This is my moment.

"I think I can deliver you a massive, headline-making Evelyn Hugo story," I say. "But if I do, I want to be promoted."

I can hear skepticism enter Frankie's voice. "What kind of promotion?"

"Editor at large. I come and go as I please. I choose the stories I want to tell."

"No."

"Then I have no incentive to get Evelyn to allow the piece to be in Vivant."

I can practically hear Frankie weighing her options. She is quiet, but there is no tension. It is as if she does not expect me to speak until she has decided what she will say. "If you get us a cover story," she says finally, "and she agrees to sit for a photo shoot, I'll make you a writer at large."

I consider the offer, and Frankie jumps in as I'm thinking. "We only have one editor at large. Bumping Gayle out of the spot she has earned doesn't feel right to me. I'd think you could understand that. Writer at large is what I have to give. I won't exert too much control over what you can write about. And if you prove yourself quickly there, you'll move up as everyone else does. It's fair, Monique."

I think about it for a moment further. Writer at large seems reasonable. Writer at large sounds great. "OK," I say. And then I push.