

Chapter 27

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"I'm going out on a date with Mick Riva."

"Like hell you are."

When Celia was angry, her chest and her cheeks flushed. This time, they'd grown red faster than I'd ever seen.

We were in the outdoor kitchen of her weekend home in Palm Springs. She was grilling us burgers for dinner.

Ever since the article came out, I'd refused to be seen with her in Los Angeles. The rags didn't yet know about her place in Palm Springs. So we would spend weekends there together and our weeks in L.A. apart.

Celia went along with the plan like a put-upon spouse, agreeing to whatever I wanted because it was easier than fighting with me. But now, with the suggestion of going on a date, I'd gone too far.

I knew I'd gone too far. That was the point, sort of.

"You need to listen to me," I said.

"You need to listen to me." She slammed the lid of the grill shut and gestured to me with a pair of silver tongs. "I'll go along with any of your little tricks that you want. But I'm not getting on board with either of us dating."

"We don't have a choice."

"We have plenty of choices."

"Not if you want to keep your job. Not if you want to keep this house. Not if you want to keep any of our friends. Not to mention that the police could come after us."

"You are being paranoid."

"I'm not, Celia. And that's what's scary. But I'm telling you, they know."

"One article in one tiny paper thinks they know. That's not the same thing."

"You're right. This is still early enough that we can stop it."

"Or it will go away on its own."

"Celia, you have two movies coming out next year, and my movie is all anyone is talking about around town."

"Exactly. Like Harry always says, that means we can do whatever we want."

"No, that means we have a lot to lose."

Celia, angry, picked up my pack of cigarettes and lit one. "So that's what you want to do? You want to spend every second of our lives trying to hide what we really do? Who we really are?"

"It's what everyone in town is doing every day."

"Well, I don't want to."

"Well, then you shouldn't have become famous."

Celia stared at me as she puffed away at her cigarette. The pink of her lipstick stained the filter. "You're a pessimist, Evelyn. To your very core."

"What would you like to do, Celia? Maybe I should call over to *Sub Rosa* myself? Call the FBI directly? I can give them a quote. 'Yep, Celia St. James and I are deviants!' "

"We aren't deviants."

"I know that, Celia. And you know that. But no one else knows that."

"But maybe they would. If they tried."

"They aren't going to try. Do you get that? No one wants to understand people like us."

"But they should."

"There are lots of things we all should do, sweetheart. But it doesn't work that way."

"I hate this conversation. You're making me feel awful."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But the fact that it's awful doesn't mean it's not true. If you want to keep your job, you cannot allow people to believe that you and I are more than friends."

"And if I don't want to keep my job?"

"You do want to."

"No, you want to. And you're pinning it on me."

"Of course I want to."

"I'd give it all up, you know. All of it. The money and the jobs and the fame. I'd give it all up just to be with you, just to be normal with you."

"You have no idea what you're saying, Celia. I'm sorry, but you don't."

"What's really going on here is that you're not willing to give it up for me."

"No, what's going on here is that you're a dilettante who thinks if this acting thing doesn't work out, you can go back to Savannah and live off your parents."

"Who are you to talk to me about money? You've got bags of it."

"Yeah, I do. Because I worked my ass off and was married to an asshole who knocked me around. And I did that so I could be famous. So I could live the life we're living. And if you think I'm not going to protect that, you've lost your mind."

"At least you're admitting this is about you."

I shook my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Celia, listen to me. Do you love that Oscar? The very thing you keep on your nightstand and touch before you go to sleep?"

"Don't—"

"People are saying, given how early you won it, you're the kind of actress who could win multiple times. I want that for you. Don't you want that?"

"Of course I do."

"And you're gonna let them take that away just because you met me?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Listen to me, Celia. I love you. And I can't let you throw away everything you have built—and all your incredible talent—by taking a stand when no one will stand with us."

"But if we don't try . . ."

"No one is going to back us, Celia. I know how it feels to be shut out of this town. I'm just finally making my way back in. I know you're probably picturing some world where we go up against Goliath and win. But that's not gonna happen. We'd tell the truth about our lives, and they'd bury us. We could end up in prison or in a mental hospital. Do you get that? We could be committed. It's not that far-fetched. It happens.

Certainly, you can count on the fact that no one would return our calls. Not even

Harry.”

“Of course Harry would. Harry’s . . . one of us.”

“Which is precisely why he could never be caught talking to us again. Don’t you get it? The danger is even higher for him. There are actually men out there who would want to kill him if they knew. That’s the world we live in. Anyone who touched us would be examined. Harry wouldn’t be able to withstand it. I could never put him in that position. To lose everything he’s worked for? To quite literally risk his life? No. No, we’d be alone. Two pariahs.”

“But we’d have each other. And that’s enough for me.”

She was crying now, the tears streaking down her face and carrying her mascara with them. I put my arms around her and wiped her cheek with my thumb. “I love you so much, sweetheart. So, so much. And it’s in part because of things like that. You’re an idealist and a romantic, and you have a beautiful soul. And I wish the world was ready to be the way you see it. I wish that the rest of the people on earth with us were capable of living up to your expectations. But they aren’t. The world is ugly, and no one wants to give anyone the benefit of the doubt about anything. When we lose our work and our reputations, when we lose our friends and, eventually, what money we have, we will be destitute. I’ve lived that life before. And I cannot let it happen to you. I will do whatever I can to prevent you from living that way. Do you hear me? I love you too much to let you live only for me.”

She heaved into my body, her tears growing inside her. For a moment, I thought she might flood the backyard.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” I whispered into her ear. “I love you more than anything else in the entire world.”

“It’s not wrong,” Celia said. “It shouldn’t be wrong, to love you. How can it be wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, sweetheart. It’s not,” I said. “They’re wrong.”

She nodded into my shoulder and held me tighter. I rubbed her back. I smelled her hair.

“It’s just that there’s not much we can do about it,” I said.

When she calmed down, she pulled away from me and opened the grill again. She did not look at me as she flipped the burgers. "So what is your plan?" she said.

"I'm going to get Mick Riva to elope with me."

Her eyes, which already looked sore from crying, started to bloom again. She wiped a tear away, keeping her eyes on the grill. "What does that mean for us?" she said.

I stood behind her and put my arms around her. "It doesn't mean what you think it means. I'm going to see if I can get him to elope with me, and then I'm going to have it annulled."

"And you think that means they'll stop watching you?"

"No, I know it means they will only watch me more. But they will be looking for other things. They will call me a tart or a fool. They will say I have terrible taste in men. They will say I'm a bad wife, I am too impulsive. But if they want to do any of that, they'll have to stop saying I'm with you. It won't fit their story anymore."

"I get it," she said, grabbing a plate and taking the burgers off the grill.

"OK, good," I said.

"You'll do whatever you have to do. But this is the last I want to hear about it. And I want it to be over and done with as soon as possible."

"OK."

"And when it's over, I want us to move in together."

"Celia, we can't do that."

"You said this would be so effective that no one would ever mention us."

The thing is, I wanted us to move in together, too. I wanted it very much. "OK," I said.

"When it's over, we'll talk about moving in together."

"OK," she said. "Then we have a deal."

I put my hand out to shake hers, but she waved it away. She didn't want to shake on something that sad, that vulgar.

"And if it doesn't work with Mick Riva?" she asked.

"It's gonna work."