

Chapter 31

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There is a certain freedom in marrying a man when you aren't hiding anything. Celia was gone. I wasn't really at a place in my life where I could fall in love with anyone, and Rex wasn't the type of man who seemed capable of falling in love at all. Maybe, if we'd met at different times in our lives, we might have hit it off. But with things as they were, Rex and I had a relationship built entirely on box office.

It was tacky and fake and manipulative.

But it was the beginning of my millions.

It was also how I got Celia to come back to me.

And it was one of the most honest deals I've ever made with anybody.

I think I will always love Rex North a little bit because of all that.

"So you're never going to sleep with me?" Rex said.

He was sitting in my living room with one leg casually crossed over the other, drinking a manhattan. He was wearing a black suit with a thin tie. His blond hair was slicked back. It made his blue eyes look even brighter, with nothing in their way.

Rex was the kind of guy who was so beautiful it was nearly boring. And then he smiled, and you watched every girl in the room faint. Perfect teeth, two shallow dimples, a slight arch of the eyebrow, and everybody was done for.

Like me, he'd been made by the studios. Born Karl Olvirsson in Iceland, he hightailed it to Hollywood, changed his name, perfected his accent, and slept with everybody he needed to sleep with to get what he wanted. He was a matinee idol with a chip on his shoulder about proving he could act. But he actually could act. He felt underestimated because he was underestimated. Anna Karenina was his chance to be taken seriously. He needed it to be a big hit just as much as I did. Which was why he was willing to do

exactly what I was willing to do. A marriage stunt.

Rex was pragmatic and never precious. He saw ten steps ahead but never let on what he was thinking. We were kindred spirits in that regard.

I sat down next to him on my living room sofa, my arm resting behind him. "I can't say for sure I'd never sleep with you," I said. It was the truth. "You're handsome. I could see myself falling for your shtick once or twice."

Rex laughed. He always had a detached sense about him, like you could do whatever you wanted and you wouldn't get under his skin. He was untouchable in that way.

"I mean, can you say for certain that you'd never fall in love with me?" I asked. "What if you end up wanting to make this a real marriage? That would be uncomfortable for everyone."

"You know, if any woman could do it, it would make sense that it was Evelyn Hugo. I suppose there's always a chance."

"That's how I feel about sleeping with you," I said. "There's always a chance." I grabbed my gibson off the coffee table and drank a sip.

Rex laughed. "Tell me, then, where will we live?"

"Good question."

"My house is in the Bird Streets, with floor-to-ceiling windows. It's a pain in the ass to get out of the driveway. But you can see the whole canyon from my pool."

"That's fine," I said. "I don't mind moving to your place for a little while. I'm shooting another movie in a month or so over at Columbia, so your place will be closer anyway. The only thing I insist on is that I can bring Luisa."

After Celia left, I could hire help again. After all, there was no longer anyone hiding in my bedroom. Luisa was from El Salvador, just a few years younger than I was. The first day she came to work for me, she was talking to her mother on the phone during her lunch break. She was speaking in Spanish, right in front of me. "La señora es tan bonita, pero loca." ("This lady is beautiful but crazy.")

I turned and looked at her, and I said, "Disculpe? Yo te puedo entender." ("Excuse me?

I can understand you.”)

Luisa’s eyes went wide, and she hung up the phone on her mother and said to me, “Lo siento. No sabía que usted hablaba Español.” (“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.”)

I switched to English, not wanting to speak Spanish anymore, not liking how strange it sounded coming out of my own mouth. “I’m Cuban,” I said to her. “I’ve spoken Spanish my entire life.” That wasn’t true, though. I hadn’t spoken it in years.

She looked at me as if I were a painting she was interpreting, and then she said, apologetically, “You do not look Cuban.”

“Pues, lo soy,” I said haughtily. (“Well, I am.”)

Luisa nodded and packed up her lunch, moving on to change the bed linens. I sat at that table for at least a half hour, reeling. I kept thinking, How dare she try to take my own identity away from me? But as I looked around my house, seeing no pictures of my family, not a single Latin-American book, stray blond hairs in my hairbrush, not even a jar of cumin in my spice rack, I realized Luisa hadn’t done that to me. I had done it to me. I’d made the choice to be different from my true self.

Fidel Castro had control of Cuba. Eisenhower had already put the economic embargo in place by that point. The Bay of Pigs had been a disaster. Being a Cuban-American was complicated. And instead of trying to make my way in the world as a Cuban woman, I simply forsook where I came from. In some ways, this helped me release any remaining ties connecting me to my father. But it also pulled me further away from my mother. My mother, whom this had all been for at some point.

That was all me. All the results of my own choices. None of that was Luisa’s fault. So I realized I had no right to sit at my own kitchen table blaming her.

When she left that night, I could tell she still felt uncomfortable around me. So I made sure to smile sincerely and tell her I was excited to see her the next day.

From that day forward, I never spoke Spanish to her. I was too embarrassed, too insecure of my disloyalty. But she spoke it from time to time, and I smiled when she made jokes to her mother within earshot. I let her know I understood her. And I quickly grew to care for her very much. I envied how secure she was in her own skin. How

unafraid she was to be her true self. She was proud to be Luisa Jimenez. She was the first employee I ever had whom I cherished. I was not going to move house without her.

"I'm sure she's great," Rex said. "Bring her. Now, practically speaking, do we sleep in the same bed?"

"I doubt it's necessary. Luisa will be discreet. I've learned that lesson before. And we'll just throw parties a few times a year and make it look like we live in the same room."

"And I can still . . . do what I do?"

"You can still sleep with every woman on the planet, yes."

"Every woman except my wife," Rex said, smiling and taking another sip of his drink.

"You just can't get caught."

Rex waved me off, as if my worry wasn't a concern.

"I'm serious, Rex. Cheating on me is a big story. I can't have that."

"You don't have to worry," Rex said. He was more sincere about that than anything else I'd asked of him, maybe more than any scene in Anna Karenina. "I would never do anything to make you look foolish. We're in this together."

"Thank you," I said. "That means a lot. That goes for me, too. What I do won't be your problem. I promise you."

Rex put out his hand, and I shook it.

"Well, I should be going," he said, checking his watch. "I have a date with a particularly eager young lady, and I'd hate to keep her waiting." He buttoned his coat as I stood up. "When should we tie the knot?" he asked.

"I think we should probably be seen around town a few times this coming week. And keep it going for a little while. Maybe put a ring on my finger around November. Harry suggested the big day could be about two weeks before the film hits theaters."