

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Ari dropped me from any productions within Sunset and started offering to loan me out to Columbia. After being forced to do two forgettable romantic comedies—both of them so bad that it was a foregone conclusion they would fail spectacularly—the other studios didn't want much of me, either.

Don was on the cover of *Life*, gracefully coming out of the ocean onto the shore, smiling as if it was the best day of his life.

When the 1960 Academy Awards came around, I was officially persona non grata.

"You know that I would take you," Harry said when he called that afternoon to check in on me. "You just say the word, and I'll come pick you up. I'm sure you have a stunning dress you can slip on, and I'll be the envy of everybody with you on my arm."

I was at Celia's apartment, getting ready to leave before her hair and makeup people came over. She was in the kitchen, drinking lemon water, avoiding eating anything so she could fit into her dress.

"I know you would," I said into the phone. "But you and I both know it would only hurt your reputation to be aligned with me right now."

"I do mean it, though," Harry said.

"I know you do," I said. "But you also know I'm too smart to take you up on it."

Harry laughed.

"Do my eyes look puffy?" Celia asked when I got off the phone with Harry. She opened them bigger and stared at me, as if this would help me answer the question.

I saw barely anything out of the ordinary. "They look gorgeous. And anyway, you know Gwen will make you look fabulous. What are you worried about?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Evelyn," Celia said, teasing me. "I think we all know what I'm worried about."

I took her by the waist. She was wearing a thin satin slip, edged in lace. I was wearing a short-sleeved sweater and shorts. Her hair was wet. When Celia's hair was wet, she didn't smell like shampoo. She smelled like clay.

"You're going to win," I said, pulling her toward me. "It isn't even a contest."

"I might not. They might give it to Joy or to Ellen Mattson."

"They would no sooner give it to Ellen Mattson than throw it in the L.A. River. And Joy, bless her heart, is no you."

Celia blushed, put her head in her hands briefly, and then looked back at me. "Am I intolerable?" she said. "Obsessing over this? Making you talk to me about it? When you're . . ."

"On the skids?"

"I was going to say blackballed."

"If you are intolerable, let me be the one to tolerate you," I said, and then I kissed her and tasted the lemon juice on her lips.

I checked my watch, knowing that hair and makeup would be there any moment, and grabbed my keys.

She and I had been taking great pains not to be seen together. It was one thing when we really were just friends, but now that we had something to hide, we had to start hiding it.

"I love you," I said. "I believe in you. Break a leg."

When my hand turned the doorknob, she called to me. "If I don't win," she said, her wet hair dripping onto the spaghetti straps of her slip, "will you still love me?"

I thought she was joking until I looked directly into her eyes.

"You could be a nobody living in a cardboard box, and I'd still love you," I said. I'd never said that before. I'd never meant it before.

Celia smiled wide. "Me too. The cardboard box and all of it."

Hours later, back at the home I used to share with Don but now could say was entirely my own, I made myself a Cape Codder, sat on the couch, and tuned the TV to NBC, watching all my friends and the woman I loved walk the red carpet at the

Pantages Theatre.

It all seems much more glamorous on-screen. I hate to break it to you, but in person, the theater is smaller, the people are paler, and the stage is less imposing.

It's all curated to make the audience at home feel like outsiders, to make you feel like a fly on the wall of a club you aren't good enough to get into. And I was surprised by how effective it was on me, how easy it was to fall for, even for a person who had just recently been at the very center of it.

I was two cocktails in and drowning in self-pity by the time they announced Best Supporting Actress. But the minute the camera panned to Celia, I swear I sobered up and clasped my hands together as tightly as possible for her, as if the harder I pressed them together, the higher her chances of winning.

"And the award goes to . . . Celia St. James for *Little Women*."

I jumped up out of my seat and shouted for her. And then my eyes got teary as she walked up to the stage.

As she stood there, behind the microphone, holding the statuette, I was mesmerized by her. By her fabulous boatneck dress, her sparkling diamond and sapphire earrings, and that absolutely flawless face of hers.

"Thank you to Ari Sullivan and Harry Cameron. Thank you to my agent, Roger Colton. To my family. And to the amazing cast of women that I felt so lucky to be a part of, to Joy and Ruby. And to Evelyn Hugo. Thank you."

When she said my name, I swelled with pride and joy and love. I was so goddamn happy for her. And then I did something mortifyingly inane. I kissed the television set. I kissed her right on her grayscale face.

The clink I heard registered before the pain. And as Celia waved to the crowd and then stepped away from the podium, I realized I'd chipped my tooth.

But I didn't care. I was too happy. Too excited to congratulate her and tell her how proud I was.

I made another cocktail and forced myself to watch the rest of the spectacle. They announced Best Picture, and as the credits rolled, I turned off the TV.

I knew that Harry and Celia would be out all night. So I shut off the lights and went

upstairs to bed. I took off my makeup. I put on cold cream. I turned down the covers. I was lonely, living all alone.

Celia and I had discussed it and come to the conclusion that we could not move in together. She was less convinced of this than I was, but I was steadfast in my resolve. Even though my career was in the gutter, hers was thriving. I couldn't let her risk it. Not for me.

My head was on the pillow, but my eyes were wide open when I heard someone pull into the driveway. I looked out the window to see Celia slipping out of a car and waving good night to her driver. She had an Oscar in her hand.

"You look comfortable," Celia said, once she'd made her way to me in the bedroom. "Come here," I said to her.

She'd had a glass or three. I loved her drunk. She was herself but happier, so bubbly I sometimes worried she'd float away.

She took a running start and hopped into the bed. I kissed her.

"I'm so proud of you, darling."

"I missed you all night," she said. The Oscar was still in her hand, and I could tell it was heavy; she kept allowing it to tip over onto the mattress. The space for her name was blank.

"I don't know if I was supposed to take this one," she said, smiling. "But I didn't want to give it back."

"Why aren't you out celebrating? You should be at the Sunset party."

"I only wanted to celebrate with you."

I pulled her closer to me. She kicked off her shoes.

"Nothing means anything without you," she said. "Everything that isn't you is a pile of dog shit."

I tossed my head back and laughed.

"What happened to your tooth?" Celia asked.

"Is it that noticeable?"