

Chapter 20

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Ruby left me there, next to the dryer, with an empty cocktail glass in my hand.

I needed to go back to the party. But I stood there, frozen, thinking, Get out of here. I just couldn't turn the doorknob. And then the door opened on its own. Celia. The raucous, bright-lit party behind her.

"Evelyn, what are you doing?"

"How did you find me?"

"I ran into Ruby, and she said I could find you drinking in the laundry room. I thought it was a euphemism."

"It wasn't."

"I can see that."

"Do you sleep with women?" I asked.

Celia, shocked, shut the door behind her. "What are you talking about?"

"Ruby says you're a lesbian."

Celia looked over my shoulder. "Who cares what Ruby says?"

"Are you?"

"Are you going to stop being friends with me now? Is that what this is about?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Of course not. I would... never do that. I would never."

"What, then?"

"I just want to know is all."

"Why?"

"Don't you think I have the right to know?"

"Depends."

"So you are?" I asked.

Celia put her hand on the doorknob and prepared to leave.

Instinctively, I leaned forward and grabbed her wrist.

“What are you doing?” she said.

I liked the feel of her wrist in my hand. I liked the way her perfume permeated the whole tiny room. I leaned forward and kissed her.

I did not know what I was doing. And by that I mean that I was not fully in control of my movement and that I was physically unaware of how to kiss her. Should it be the way I kissed men, or should it be different somehow? I also did not understand the emotional scope of my actions. I did not truly understand their significance or risk. I was a famous woman kissing a famous woman in the house of the biggest studio head in Hollywood, surrounded by producers and stars and probably a good dozen people who ratted to *Sub Rosa* magazine.

But all I cared about in that moment was that her lips were soft. Her skin was without any roughness whatsoever. All I cared about was that she kissed me back, that she took her hand off the doorknob and, instead, put it on my waist.

She smelled floral, like lilac powder, and her lips felt humid. Her breath was sweet, spiked with the taste of cigarettes and crème de menthe.

When she pushed herself against me, when our chests touched and her pelvis grazed mine, all I could think was that it wasn't so different and yet it was different entirely. She swelled in all the places Don went flat. She was flat in the places Don swelled. And yet that sense that you can feel your heart in your chest, that your body tells you it wants more, that you lose yourself in the scent, taste, and feel of another person—it was all the same.

Celia broke away first. “We can't stay in here,” she said. She wiped her lips on the back of her hand. She took her thumb and rubbed it against the bottom of mine.

“Wait, Celia,” I said, trying to stop her.

But she left the room, shutting the door behind her.

I closed my eyes, unsure how to get a handle on myself, how to quiet my brain.

I breathed in. I opened the door and walked right up the steps, taking them two at a time.

I opened every single door on the second floor until I found who I was looking for.

Don was getting dressed, shoving the tail of his shirt into his suit pants, as a woman in

a beaded gold dress put her shoes on.

I ran out. And Don followed me.

"Let's talk about this at home," he said, grabbing my elbow.

I yanked it away, searching for Celia. There was no sign of her.

Harry came in through the front door, fresh-faced and looking sober. I ran up to him, leaving Don on the staircase, cornered by a tipsy producer wanting to talk to him about a melodrama.

"Where have you been all night?" I asked Harry.

He smiled. "I'm going to keep that to myself."

"Can you take me home?"

Harry looked at me and then at Don still on the stairs. "You're not going home with your husband?"

I shook my head.

"Does he know that?"

"If he doesn't, he's a moron."

"OK," Harry said, nodding with confidence and submission.

Whatever I wanted was what he would do.

I got into the front seat of Harry's Chevy, and he started backing out just as Don came out of the house. He ran to my side of the car. I did not roll down the window.

"Evelyn!" he yelled.

I liked how the glass between us took the edge off his voice, how it muffled it enough to make him sound far away. I liked the control of being able to decide whether I listened to him at full volume.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It isn't what you think."

I stared straight ahead. "Let's go."

I was putting Harry in a tough spot, making him take sides. But to Harry's credit, he didn't bat an eyelash.

"Cameron, don't you dare take my wife away from me!"

"Don, let's discuss it in the morning," Harry called through the window, and then he plowed out, into the roads of the canyon.

When we got to Sunset Boulevard and my pulse had slowed, I turned to Harry and started talking. When I told him that Don had been upstairs with a woman, he nodded as if he'd expected no less.

"Why don't you seem surprised?" I asked as we sped through the intersection of Doheny and Sunset, the very spot where the beauty of Beverly Hills started to show. The streets widened and became lined with trees, and the lawns were immaculately manicured, the sidewalks clean.

"Don has always had a penchant for women he's just met," Harry says. "I wasn't sure if you knew. Or if you cared."

"I didn't know. And I do care."

"Well, then, I'm sorry," he said, looking at me briefly before putting his eyes back on the road. "In that case, I should have told you."

"I suppose there are lots of things we don't tell each other," I said, looking out the window. There was a man walking his dog down the street.

I needed someone.

Right then, I needed a friend. Someone to tell my truths to, someone to accept me, someone to say that I was going to be OK.

"What if we really did it?" I said.

"Told each other the truth?"

"Told each other everything."

Harry looked at me. "I'd say that's a burden I don't want to put on you."

"It might be a burden for you, too," I said. "I have skeletons."

"You're Cuban, and you're a power-hungry, calculating bitch," Harry said, smiling at me. "Those secrets aren't so bad."

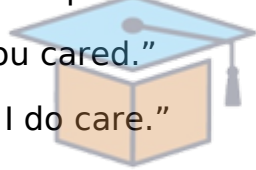
I threw my head back and laughed.

"And you know what I am," he said.

"I do."

"But right now, you have plausible deniability. You don't have to hear about it or see it."

Harry turned left, into the flats instead of the hills. He was taking me to his house



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instead of my own. He was scared of what Don would do to me. I sort of was, too.

"Maybe I'm ready for that. To be a real friend. True blue," I said.

"I'm not sure that's a secret I want you to have to keep, love. It's a sticky one."

"I think that secret's much more common than either of us is pretending," I said. "I think maybe all of us have at least a little bit of that secret within us. I think I just might have that secret in me, too."

Harry took a right and pulled into his driveway. He put the car in park and turned to me. "You're not like me, Evelyn."

"I might be a little," I said. "I might be, and Celia might be, too."

Harry turned back to the wheel, thinking. "Yes," he said finally. "Celia might be, too."

"You knew?"

"I suspected," he said. "And I suspected she might have... feelings for you."

I felt like I was the last person on earth to know what was right in front of me.

"I'm leaving Don," I said.

Harry nodded, unsurprised. "I'm happy to hear it," he said. "But I hope you know the full extent of what it means."

"I know what I'm doing, Harry." I was wrong. I didn't know what I was doing.

"Don's not going to take it sitting down," Harry said. "That's all I mean."

"So I should continue this charade? Allow him to sleep around and hit me when he feels like it?"

"Absolutely not. You know I would never say that."

"Then what?"

"I want you to be prepared for what you're going to do."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," I said.

"That's fine," Harry said. He opened his car door and got out. He came around to my side and opened my door.

"Come, Ev," he said kindly. He put his hand out. "It's been a long night. You need some rest."

I suddenly felt very tired, as if once he pointed it out, I realized it had been there all along. I followed Harry to his front door.

His living room was sparse but handsome, furnished with wood and leather. The alcoves and doorways were all arched, the walls stark white. Only a single piece of art hung on the wall, a red and blue Rothko above the sofa. It occurred to me then that Harry wasn't a Hollywood producer for the paycheck. Sure, his house was nice. But there wasn't anything ostentatious about it, nothing performative. It was merely a place to sleep for him.

Harry was like me. Harry was in it for the glory. He was in it because it kept him busy, kept him important, kept him sharp.

Harry, like me, had gotten into it for the ego.

And we were both fortunate that we'd found our humanity in it, even though it appeared to be somewhat by accident.

The two of us walked up the curved stairs, and Harry set me up in his guest room. The bed had a thin mattress with a heavy wool blanket. I used a bar of soap to wash my makeup off, and Harry gently unzipped the back of my dress for me and gave me a pair of his pajamas to wear.

"I'll be just next door if you need anything," he said.

"Thank you. For everything."

Harry nodded. He turned away and then turned back to me as I was folding down the blanket. "Our interests aren't aligned, Evelyn," he said. "Yours and mine. You see that, right?"

I looked at him, trying to determine if I did see it.

"My job is to make the studio money. And if you are doing what the studio wants, then my job is to make you happy. But more than anything, Ari wants to—"

"Make Don happy."

Harry looked me in the eye. I got the point.

"OK," I said. "I see it."

Harry smiled shyly and closed the door behind him.

You'd think I'd have tossed and turned all night, worried about the future, worried about what it meant that I had kissed a woman, worried about whether I should really leave Don.

But that's what denial is for.

The next morning, Harry drove me back to my house. I was bracing myself for a fight. But when I got there, Don was nowhere to be seen.

I knew that very moment that our marriage was over and that the decision—the one I thought was mine to make—had been made for me.



Summaryer