

One



TONGVA PARK WAS NOT exactly a Norman Rockwell painting. After dusk, it was more like something from Francisco De Goya's black period. It was not the safest path, but it was the quickest—and there was something exhilarating about the element of danger—the chance that I might not make it to the other side. A chilly breeze whistled through the rusty fig trees as I made my way through Main Street in downtown Santa Monica. The bars and restaurants were humming with chatter—the bar-hopping locals getting started for the evening. As I closed in on the park entrance, I felt my heart pulsating as I whipped my way towards Ocean Avenue. I shivered, my stilettos clacking against the cement with a compulsive rhythm.

The playful laughter of children echoed in the distance, almost drowning out the din of their parents, who were arguing close by. I glanced over my shoulder, spotting a homeless man sleeping soundly on one of the benches, and I inhaled the omnipresent scent of weed lingering in the air.

The urgent sound of moaning and groaning emanated from nearby public bathrooms. Despite my attempt

to avoid looking in the direction of the noises, I spied the darkened silhouette of a man and woman engaged in vigorous sex, thudding against the wall near the door to the ladies' room. My heart thumped as I sped up. It was too late; a woman's voice screamed breathlessly, "Hey perve—next time take a picture."

I lowered my head and emerged onto the brightly-lit Ocean Avenue, giggling triumphantly as the last vestiges of a spectacular sunset shimmered before me. I stopped walking long enough to absorb the orange-pink rays stabbing through fluffy cloud formations hovering at the base of the restless ocean. The sunset was my promise of hope—of love, romance and all its trappings. I wished sunsets were never-ending, so I could immerse myself for hours—just to feel the residual sense of peace.

I was headed to Herringbone Seafood Restaurant after a day of client meetings and an exhaustive post-mortem with my boss Warren. I had been Vice President of Accounts at the advertising agency, Warren Mitchell & Partners, for two years. Although I knew I was good at my job, our fearless leader could not resist the temptation to micro-manage. Jeffrey had left the final meeting of the day in a huff, declaring that although he was a partner, he still felt like the creative director—only with better pay.

I entered the restaurant and heard my cell phone ring. I fished it out of my handbag and saw the name *Derek* lighting up my phone screen. "Hello, darling," I said, smiling into the phone. I put my hand over my other ear so I could hear him clearly. "Did you change your mind and decide to come meet us for dinner?"

"I wish," he replied. "I was just calling to let you know I'll be late again tonight. These rehearsals are running long."

"Do you miss me?" I asked, scanning the restaurant for my best friend and confidante, Marisa. As usual, she was late.

“Always,” he responded. “I should be home no later than 9 p.m.”

“Do you want me to bring anything home for you? I’m at Herringbone.”

“Nah ... there’s craft service ... I’ll be fine. See you later. Tell Marisa ‘hi’ for me.”

I approached the hostess and asked for a table for two.

“You have a reservation?” she asked, flipping her brunette bob, and casting a skeptical glance my way. She had a pudgy face and her bangs were too long.

I read her nametag. “I don’t—do you think you could squeeze me in, *Claire*?” She reminded me of someone I went to Cal State Long Beach with many years ago.

Claire managed to find me a four-top, and after settling in, I neurotically pulled out my phone and began going through emails. I really wished Derek didn’t have such a rigorous schedule; ever since he had joined the Los Angeles Philharmonic as first chair violinist, he worked far more hours. It was a fifty-two-week a year job, unlike his previous gig at Orange County Symphony, where he could teach music on the side at USC. The L.A. Phil was gearing up for a string of shows at the Walt Disney Concert Hall and rehearsals ran late every night. Between my job and his, we were basically crossing paths in the night, sharing some occasional snuggling, but little quality time.

While I waited for Marisa, the waitress approached me with a glass of ice water. As soon as she set it down, she said to me, “Um ... there’s a gentleman who wants to buy you a drink. He’s on the other side of the restaurant. Good-looking guy.” She winked and smiled at me, like she was in on a joke.

I studied her, now puzzled. “Really? Well, I’m actually waiting for my girlfriend and I can’t accept a drink from a stranger.”

“He said you two know each other ... your name’s Jane, right?” the waitress offered as proof. Her long, light blonde hair was drawn into a side ponytail and she had guileless blue eyes. She seemed reluctant to give up, so I assumed she must have been tipped generously.

“Okay, fine. I’ll take a glass of chardonnay,” I relented, skimming the crowded, dimly lit restaurant, past the many hanging trellises spattered with Tivoli lights and faux greenery. The attempt at fairytale charm seemed to compete with the ceiling’s cold white open-piped industrial facade. I turned in every direction to see if I recognized this ‘stranger’ who had just bought me a drink. There seemed to be no one there I knew, but with so many people, I just could not be sure.

“Right away,” the waitress answered, smiling, and galloping away to get my wine.

When she delivered the drink, I sipped it slowly and continued answering emails and texting back and forth with Marisa, who was held up in traffic. I met Marisa when she was a tabloid reporter, long before she became a highly sought-after news anchor. She had recently been promoted by the network and given top billing on a nationally syndicated nightly entertainment show—*The Real Marisa Silva*.

“Excuse me.” A deep, silky male voice intruded on my thoughts. I looked up and had a hard time hiding my astonishment. It was Craig Keller, the most notorious playboy in town, and managing partner of Keller Whitman Group, one of Warren’s fiercest competitors. He was someone I tried like hell to bury in my mind long ago, but who still frequently haunted my dreams.

“May I join you?” he asked, sliding into the chair across from me.

I stared at him blankly and said nothing. After all, I had carefully avoided him for two full years. When I saw him at events, I made sure I knew where he was

the whole time, so we would not cross paths. This drove Derek nuts. He already had an inferiority complex about Craig and, although I had never revealed the nature of our relationship because it happened before Derek and I got together, it was clear Craig made him feel small and insecure. Derek would always question me as to why, if I didn't still have a thing for Craig, I avoided him at every pass. I continually had to reassure Derek that I was no longer interested in Craig, which was mostly the truth. I had moved on. Derek and I had been living together for more than a year and nothing could come between us ... not even Craig Keller.

I cleared my throat and set my phone on the table. "I'm meeting someone."

"Whoever it is doesn't understand what a rare and beautiful creature you are," he responded, giving me a lazy smile with those perfect white teeth, "or they would have been on time."

I didn't want to tell him I was waiting on a girlfriend. I wished Derek were on his way to meet me ... to protect me from this predator who had made my life miserable just two years earlier. The only thing I hated more than seeing Craig was the fact that, at that very moment, I was thinking about my outfit and wondering whether it was stellar enough for an impromptu encounter with the man himself. I was relieved to be wearing Chanel ... a sleek hunter green sleeveless shift dress with a matching boucle puffy-sleeved bolero jacket thrown casually over my shoulders. My long auburn hair hung in loose curls. I felt satisfied that the effect had to be, at the very least, chic.

"Thanks for the drink," I said curtly. "But, if I'd known it was from you, I ..."

"Oh, come on, Ms. Mercer, lighten up," he interrupted. "Don't tell me you never think about me."

I took a good look at him. I had not seen him up close for what seemed like ages and he looked even

better than I remembered. *Yes, Craig Keller, I see your glorious face in my dreams, so I guess that constitutes thinking about you. I wish I could stop thinking about you and concentrate on my live-in boyfriend, who loves and cares for me, unlike you, who sleeps with every woman you meet, and leaves a path of emotional destruction in your wake. I really hate you ... when I don't think about being with you.* "What do you want me to say?" I asked, taking another sip of wine, and searching his light jade eyes thoughtfully.

"I obviously want you to say 'yes'," he responded, leaning toward me. "And in case you were wondering, I think about you all the time."

I laughed. "You must have amnesia ... that happens when you get old." I was unable to resist the crack. Craig was ten years older than me with a birthday in September, so I knew he had recently turned thirty-eight. And, given what I knew about his ego, approaching the big 4-0 had to be tough for him.

Craig's eyes lowered to his suit jacket lapel and he brushed something off it. "Very funny, Ms. Mercer. I never forgot that snarky wit of yours. It's one of the things that drove me crazy in the first place."

"Of course, as opposed to the willingness to do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it," I retorted, pulling the bolero jacket tighter around my shoulders.

"Jane ... come on ... can't we be friends?" His eyes sparkled wickedly, as they always did with those long lashes. "I'd like to think I could call you for a drink every now and then ... you know, just like old times."

At that moment, Marisa waltzed in, on her cell phone, fumbling with something in her handbag. When she approached the table, she took one look at Craig and said loudly into her phone, "I'll call you back."

"Well, well, well," she began, looking Craig up and down. "I see what happens when I'm a few minutes late." Marisa looked like a stunning celebrity. She was

in a black Yves Saint Laurent pantsuit with a white silk blouse underneath. Her brunette hair was slicked back and pulled into a high ponytail. She wore dark red lipstick that shimmered under the restaurant lights.

"I've been keeping your friend company," Craig announced, not missing a beat. "You don't object, do you?" Even though he was speaking to Marisa, his eyes did not stray from mine.

"That all depends," Marisa replied, eyeing me with suspicion.

"It's fine, Marisa," I said quickly. "We were just catching up ... it's been a while. Now if you'll excuse us," I turned to Craig, whose expression had become one of amusement.

"Of course, my dear ... don't be a stranger." He swiftly pulled his chair out and rose to his feet to make room for Marisa. Although he gestured for her to sit down in the empty chair, Marisa ignored him and took the chair to my right. Craig gently pushed in the chair, gave me a little smile, turned, and disappeared into the crowd.

She plopped down hard and glared at me. It was clear she was not at all pleased to see Craig Keller. I understood why she viewed him as pure poison. As soon as she was sure he was out of earshot, she leaned in, set her elbows on the table, and cradled her chin in her hands.

"Um ... was I seeing things just now?" she queried. "Because there's no way my friend would knowingly sit and talk to a man like that after everything he did to hurt her."

"Oh Marisa, it's not what you think," I protested, chuckling at her severe demeanor. "He sent me an anonymous drink while I was sitting here waiting for you. Trust me, if I'd known he was even here in the first place, I wouldn't have come in."

The waitress cut in to ask Marisa for her drink order.

"I'll take a vodka and soda with lime, please," she

requested, snapping up the menu and skimming the dinner specials. She must be on a diet, I thought. No calories except for the vodka. As soon as the waitress had gone, Marisa continued her grilling. "I wondered whether he would resurface again, now that he's about to be single."

"Single?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Oh, please ... don't tell me you didn't hear. It's been all over the tabloids."

"Hear what?" I asked her.

"He's going through a nasty divorce," she revealed with a cat-like gleam in her golden-brown eyes. "His wife must have finally gotten fed up with all his philandering. Rumor is she's getting the house and joint custody of their two children."

"No shit," I blurted. "I had no clue." I looked around the restaurant again to see whether Craig was still there, almost as though I needed to observe him again—this time as a divorced man.

"So ... you can imagine why I freaked out when I saw him sitting here," she explained. "I know how hard it was for you to resist him in the past." She shot me a look, eyebrows raised, and chin lowered like she was talking to a young child.

"The past is just that, Marisa," I said, thinking that for someone who was going through a divorce and custody battle, Craig did not appear to have a care in the world. But that's just how he was—his house could be burning down around him, and he would smile and offer you a cocktail—make you feel like it wasn't really happening.

"I saw how you were looking at him. Please promise me that if he goes after you again, you'll talk to me before you do anything." Marisa's dark red lips were pursed as though she were seriously worried about me.

The waitress cut in to deliver Marisa's drink and get our dinner order. As soon as she had gone, I turned to

Marisa. “*Oh my God*, could you please give me an ounce of credit here? I mean, the man broke my heart and nearly destroyed my career. I hate him ... no, I *despise* him.”

Marisa studied my face for a moment. “You should be careful with using the word ‘hate,’ Jane,” she cautioned. “You know what they say ... there’s a fine line.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Marisa,” I insisted, tapping my fingers against the table impatiently. She was starting to get on my nerves. “And anyway, I’m living with the man I want to be with, so there’s no way anything could happen. Now, please, can we just change the subject? How’s Ewan?”

“Amazing as ever,” she answered, suddenly flushed with excitement. “I think this could be serious ... he could be the one.”

I knew Marisa would gladly turn the conversation to her English rock star boyfriend, Ewan Blade, whom she met at a press event for his band, Brave Harlots, who happened to be a client of mine. Ewan was the lead guitarist and they were having a whirlwind romance. It was the first time I had seen Marisa so excited to date someone. She was finally dating a bigger celebrity than herself.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she continued, stirring her drink with a paper straw before taking a sip. “But this time, it’s different. Can you believe we’ve been dating for six months already?”

She was right. I was thinking it was a little too good to be true, especially given Marisa’s previous relationship disasters. From what I knew of Ewan, he was a decent guy, very unlike most rock stars who ran around with groupies and did copious amounts of drugs. He was sort of introverted ... more like a true artist than anything else. I was happy for Marisa if he was, in fact, *the one*.



MARISA GAVE ME A ride to my car and, while driving home, I could not help but obsess over my Craig Keller encounter. I wondered whether I really did hate him or if Marisa's concerns were warranted. I had to admit, he looked totally delicious sitting across from me in his navy three-piece suit with a skinny yellow and blue tie. No man I knew dared to wear a three-piece suit, but Craig pulled it off—he had always been a snappy dresser—always looked camera ready, as Marisa often described. Even though he was close to forty, there was not a wrinkle on his face or a single grey to be seen in his glossy dark brown hair. In fact, he hadn't changed one bit from the man with whom I had once been intimately involved. I, however, had changed. I was nothing like the insecure, unstable person I was two years ago. And that was a good thing. I never wanted to be that girl again.

With the memory of Craig Keller came the terrible zigzagging of emotions, the obsession, secrecy, rage, and desire. He was the sorcerer of all things romantic until he turned vicious and brutal. He gave and withdrew affection as it suited him, quickly whipping me into a pile of emotional debris—one I had to unearth to find myself again. What I told Marisa was true. I hated him. But in a strange and awful way, I loved him too.

After my torrid affair with Craig, Derek and I got together, and life had settled into something wonderfully calm and full of happy moments. There was no way I wanted to mess that up. Still, there was that familiar side of me that was a little restless ... a side that craved a bit of wanderlust and, although I hated to admit this, a slight hint of drama.

I stopped to pick up cat food on the way home and happened to be at the cash register when I spotted it. It was *LA Insider Magazine*—one of the more prominent industry rags—and there, in vivid color, was a photo of Craig and his wife. The editor had made it look like

someone tore the photo in half and placed the two pieces next to each other. “Battle Royale,” the headline read. I could not resist the urge to pick up the magazine and flip it to the page where the story was. Marisa was right. Craig and Alessandra Keller were embroiled in an ugly, high-profile court battle over alimony and child support, as well as custody of their children. As though on autopilot, I handed the magazine to the cashier so she could ring it up.

The cashier, who looked like she had not slept in weeks, eyed the magazine cover and gave me a little grin. “That guy’s cute—everyone’s buying this issue,” she commented before swiping it and handing it to me over the counter, assuming I wanted to read it so badly, it should be kept separate from the cat food. I accepted it. “Enjoy,” she said as I grabbed my bags with the magazine under my arm.

At home in our apartment that night, I took a hot shower and put on my white fuzzy robe, anticipating the contents of the magazine as though I would a slice of chocolate cake—something delectable. I would relax and pore over the tabloid while I waited for Derek to get home—voraciously gleaning details about Craig’s private life.

I looked around our small apartment, thinking of all the things that had happened over the past two years. True, it was the same two-bedroom apartment I had before Derek moved in, but it had morphed into a warm nest for us as a young couple. Before we got together, it was simply a place to store my rather large and luxurious clothing collection—one that, at the time, I could barely afford. It was also where I crashed after running all over the city attending work and social events.

I sank into our well-worn Eames era grey twill sofa, which was a lot more stylish than it was comfortable, and eagerly thumbed through the tabloid. My heart raced as

I explored numerous photos of Craig splashed all over the publication, mostly posing with different women at parties. I shook my head. *What a mess.* For a moment, I caught myself feeling a little sorry for Craig. He had to hate all the intrusive, negative publicity.

I heard the door unlock, and Derek entered, carrying his violin case and some books, looking beleaguered. I dropped the magazine on the glass-topped boomerang table and stood to greet him.

"Hi sweetie ... is everything okay?" I asked, approaching him.

"Yeah ... just a long day," he answered, setting his violin case and books down and putting his arms around me. He kissed me on the neck. "Mmm ... you smell good," he commented.

"So, do you," I replied, pulling away slightly so I could see his face. He looked boyishly handsome as always, with his sandy-colored hair, naturally flecked with golden highlights. I rested my chin on his shoulder. "I missed you today."

"Just today?" I heard the smile in his voice.

"Every day. Maybe we should go on vacation," I murmured, burying my face in between his jacket lapels. "You know, somewhere exotic ... where we can have drinks with little umbrellas."

"That would be heaven," he responded, stroking my hair softly. "But it's going to be a long time before I can get off work. Probably not until summer."

We stood there, rocking each other silently in our tiny living room, until Derek abruptly pushed me away and beelined for the coffee table. "What's that?" he questioned, pointing at the magazine on the table with Craig Keller's picture on the cover.

"What's what?" I responded innocently, wracking my brain for an excuse.

He picked up the magazine and flipped through the

pages quickly, throwing it down again and turning to face me. His expression was serious. "What's it doing here?" he demanded.

"I—um, I just bought it. I have to read those magazines for work, you know, to keep up with what competitors are doing." *What a lame excuse but what was I supposed to say?*

"Don't tell me you didn't notice," he accused, studying my face—searching for some sign that I was lying.

"Notice what, Derek?" I asked, now feeling defensive and knowing Derek was not about to buy my innocent act. I untied and retied the belt on my robe.

"Your man is on the cover ... he's all over that rag and he's getting a divorce. Don't tell me you didn't notice that." Derek was acting uncharacteristically edgy at the mere sight of Craig Keller. And I didn't know what to say to him. I knew he was sensitive about Craig, but not to this extent.

"He's *not* 'my man', Derek. *You* are. Look—I'll throw the magazine away if it makes you feel better." I snatched up the magazine in question and went into the kitchen to throw it in the garbage. It had caused enough trouble for one night. I returned to the living room, but Derek was already in the bedroom. I followed and found him undressing.

I just sat on the bed and watched him in silence, trying to think of something to say that would not make matters worse. Something like, 'Well, funny you should mention Craig because I saw him at dinner ... he bought me a drink and told me not to be a stranger.' *No, there was no way I would tell him that.* I sighed.

We remained silent for the rest of the evening until the lights were off and we were in bed. I was the first to speak. "Okay, Derek, I'll admit I did buy the magazine because I saw him on the cover. Marisa told me about the divorce while we were at dinner. I was just

curious—about him.” I couldn’t bring myself to call *him* Craig ... I didn’t even want to say his name out loud ... especially while we were in bed.

“Did you sleep with him, Jane?” he asked, with pain in his voice, like he had wanted to ask me this forever. “Did you sleep with a *married* man?”

“So, that’s what’s bothering you?” I returned, sitting up and flicking on my nightstand lamp. “Why the hell did you choose now to ask me about this?” I felt my cheeks getting hot.

Derek squinted at me in the glare of the yellow lamp light, and he propped himself up on his pillow. “You never told me what happened, and I never asked. I just thought it was something you wanted to keep to yourself. Now I get why you hid it from me. You’re ashamed.”

“Derek, what happened before we were together shouldn’t matter. I don’t ask you about *your* past relationships. We are *us* ... and I frankly don’t understand why you’re so upset. It’s not like I see or talk to him anymore.”

“Then why did you bother *buying* that magazine?” He insisted, now bolting upright like he was ready for battle. “And then lying to me about it?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Derek. Let’s just give it a rest ... please?” I had no idea how to make this better and it scared me. *Was Derek going to punish me for having an affair with a married man?* I know it was reprehensible, but what could I say? I could not get into a time machine and go back and do things differently.

I turned the light off and shifted in bed so that my back was now to Derek, who had no problem falling asleep within ten minutes. *Why is it that guys can sleep no matter what?* I was the one who tossed and turned for the rest of the night, worrying about being a brazen slut in Derek’s eyes ... a woman so heinous, she would commit the unspeakable and sleep with a married man.

There had to be worse things I could have done. I mean, you couldn't go to jail for what I did.



THE NEXT MORNING, I awakened to an empty bed. Derek, who had the endearing habit of gently waking me each day and placing a hot cup of coffee on my nightstand, was nowhere to be found. I got up and made my way through the apartment, only to find Weezer, my fat silver tabby, lying on his back under the coffee table. Derek must have risen early, showered, and left for the day.

While I searched for a coffee cup, my thoughts were tainted by the fight with Derek. *Was it really a fight? Where would we go from here? Should I be straight with him about what happened with Craig or ignore it and hope it goes away?* Something told me Derek was not going to let it go. I supposed he had a right to know but there was a side of me that felt the opposite. It was my past and it was bad enough I had to deal with it.

On my way to the office, I called my friend Katherine Blakely, who was also heading to work. Kat, as her friends called her, divorced two years earlier and had recently been recruited by a headhunter to be CEO of a Fortune five hundred company. She had sold her own software company more than a year ago.

"Hi, Jane," she said. "How's my favorite ad executive?"

"I'm good," I answered. "At least I think I'm good."

"Talk to me," she coaxed.

"Well ... I need your opinion about something," I started cautiously, pumping my brakes in the rush hour traffic. This was not a topic I liked to bring up with Kat because it involved the man we had both slept with, but it had ruined her marriage and was getting in the way of my relationship, so I really needed her advice.

"Shoot," she said brightly. I overheard honking and

knew she was stuck in traffic, too, so she had a bit of time on her hands.

"It's about Derek," I explained slowly. "He's a little ... sensitive about my past ... about a particular element of my past." I wasn't sure why it was so difficult to spit this out.

As usual, Kat was two steps ahead of me. "You mean Craig? But that was so long ago ... is it because he's finally getting a divorce?"

"Listen, Kat, I never told Derek I slept with him." I was sitting at a red light and someone was blasting their horn loudly behind me.

"What did he think you were doing with him, playing Chinese checkers?" she quipped.

"I mean, he suspected it, but he only just found out Craig was married because of the dirt on the cover of every magazine in town. I think he's more upset that I slept with a married man. That's how I took it, anyway. I don't know what to do. He's mad at me. We had a fight last night. I don't want to lose him over someone like Craig."

Kat sighed. "I swear that man has a way of getting under everyone's skin. I don't want you to end up like me, either. My advice is that you don't tell him anything. Or better yet, lie to him. Tell him you didn't sleep with Craig, but you only considered it. Tell him what he wants to hear. That's the only way he'll let it go."

"I can't believe you're telling me to lie to my boyfriend," I responded, thinking that would be a lot easier than telling the truth.

"Believe me, if there's one thing in life I've learned about men, it's to know when to hold your tongue and when to outright lie. And this, my friend, is your time. You want this to go away? Then lie to him. He'll never know the difference and he'll be much happier. You will, too. I promise."

I suddenly laughed out loud at the absurdity of the situation. “I don’t know, Kat ... it’s pretty risky.” Something made me lean over in the seat so I could slip off my black suede pump—I hated the way the car mats scuffed the shoe on my driving foot.

“Trust me on this one, Jane,” she said before hanging up.

I thought about what Kat said and just could not shake my conscience. If I lied to Derek about what happened with Craig, he might find out later. He would never trust me again and that would be a bigger problem than me just looking like an immoral guttersnipe. No, the right thing to do would be to come clean with Derek. *But would he be able to accept it?* My stomach churned at the thought that he might not.