



CLEOPATRA
and
FRANKENSTEIN
COCO MELLORS

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Coco Mellors

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Dedication

For my mother, who believed

Epigraph

*Halve me like a walnut
Pry the part of me that is hollow
From the part that yields fruit.*

—OMOTARA JAMES

*Let's be hungry a little while longer.
Let's not hurt each other if we can.*

—MAYA C. POPA

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CHAPTER ONE

December

She was already inside the elevator when he entered. He nodded at her and turned to pull the iron gate shut with a clang. They were in a converted factory building in Tribeca, the kind still serviced, unusually, by freight elevators. It was just the two of them, side by side, facing forward as the mechanism groaned into motion. Beyond the metal crisscross of the gate, they watched the cement walls of the building slide by.

“What are you getting?” He addressed this to the air in front of him, without turning toward her.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ve been sent for ice,” he said. “What do you need?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m off home.”

“At ten thirty on New Year’s Eve? That is either the saddest or the wisest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Let’s indulge me and say wisest,” she said.

He laughed generously, though she didn’t feel she’d been particularly witty. “British?” he asked.

“London.”

“Your voice sounds like how biting into a Granny Smith apple feels.”

Now she laughed, with less abandon. “How does that feel?”

“In a word? Crisp.”

“As opposed to biting into a Pink Lady or a Golden Delicious?”

“You know your apples.” He gave her a respectful nod. “But it’s insanity to suggest you sound anything like a Golden Delicious. That’s a midwestern accent.”

They reached the ground floor with a soft thud. He cranked the door open for her to pass.

“You are an odd man,” she said over her shoulder.

“Undeniably.” He ran ahead to open the building door. “Accompany this odd man to the deli? I just need to hear you say a few more words.”

“Mm, like what?”

“Like aluminum.”

“You mean aluminium?”

“Ah, there it is!” He cupped his ears in pleasure. “That extra syllable. A-luh-mi-nee-uhm. It undoes me.”

She tried to look skeptical, but she was amused, he could tell.

“You’re easily undone,” she said.

He surprised her by stopping to consider this with genuine earnestness.

“No,” he said eventually. “I’m not.”

They were on the street. Across from them a store selling neon signs bathed the sidewalk in splashes of yellow, pink, and blue. MILLER LITE. LIVE NUDES. WE WILL DYE FOR YOU.

"Where is it?" she asked. "I could use some more cigarettes."

"About two blocks that way." He pointed east. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four. Old enough to smoke, if you were thinking of telling me not to."

"You are the perfect age to smoke," he said. "Time stored up to solve and satisfy. Is that how the Larkin poem goes?"

"Oh, don't quote poetry. You might accidentally undo *me*."

"I sing the body electric!" he cried. "'The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them!'"

"Sha-la-la! I shan't listen to you!"

She pressed her palms to her ears and sprinted ahead of him up the street. A car blasting a jubilant pop song shot by. He caught up with her at the light, and tentatively, she released her hands from her head. She was wearing pink leather kid gloves. Her cheeks were pink, too.

"Don't worry, that's all I remember," he said. "You're safe."

"I'm impressed you remember any at all."

"I'm older than you. My generation had to memorize these things in school."

"How old?"

"Older. What's your name?"

"Cleo," said Cleo.

He nodded.

"Appropriate."

"How so?"

"Cleopatra, the original undoer of men."

"But I'm just Cleo. What's your name?"

"Frank," said Frank.

"Short for?"

"Short for nothing. What on earth would Frank be short for?"

"I don't know." Cleo smiled. "Frankfurter, frankincense, Frankenstein ..."

"Frankenstein sounds about right. Creator of monsters."

"You make monsters?"

"Sort of," said Frank. "I make ads."

"I was sure you were a writer," she said.

"Why?"

"Crisp," said Cleo, raising an eyebrow.

"I started an agency," said Frank. "We're where the people who don't make it as writers go."

They walked until they found the twenty-four-hour bodega glowing on the corner, flanked by buckets of heavy-headed roses and frothy carnations. Frank pulled the door open for her with a jingle. In the bright fluorescence of the shop's interior they looked at each other openly for the first time.

Frank was, she estimated, in his late thirties or early forties. Kind eyes, was her first thought. They crinkled automatically as they met hers. Long, feathery lashes that brushed against his spectacle lenses, lending his angular face a surprising softness. Curly dark hair, spry as lamb's wool, thinning a little on the top. Now, sensing her eyes on this, he ran a hand through his hair self-consciously. The skin on the back of his hand and face was freckled, still tanned despite the winter. It matched his tan cashmere scarf, tucked into a well-tailored topcoat. He had the slight,

energetic build of a retired dancer, a body that suggested economy and intelligence. Cleo smiled approvingly.

He smiled back. Like most people, he noticed her hair first. It hung over her shoulder in two golden curtains, sweeping open to reveal that much-anticipated first act: her face. And it was a performance, her face. He felt instinctively that he could watch it for hours. She'd drawn thick black wings over her eyelids, 1960s style, finishing each flick with a tiny gold star. Her cheeks were dusted with something shimmering and gold too; it sparkled like champagne in the light. A heavy sheepskin coat encased her, paired with the pink kid gloves he'd noticed earlier and a white woolen beret. On her feet were embroidered cream cowboy boots. Everything about her was deliberate. Frank, who had spent much of his life surrounded by beautiful people, had never met anyone who looked like her.

Embarrassed by the directness of his stare, Cleo turned to examine a shelf filled, inopportunistically, with cans of cat food. She was wearing too much makeup, she worried, and looked clownish in the light.

"My brother," said Frank to the man behind the counter. "Happy New Year."

The man looked up from his newspaper, where he was reading about more government-sanctioned tortures in his country. He wondered what made this white man think they were brothers, then smiled.

"And to you," he said.

"Where's the ice?"

"No ice." He shrugged.

"What kind of deli doesn't sell ice?"

"This one," said the man.

Frank lifted his hands in surrender.

"Okay, no ice." He turned to Cleo. "You want your smokes?"

Cleo had been scanning the cigarette prices on the shelf. She pulled out her wallet, which, Frank noted, was not really a wallet at all but a velvet pouch stuffed with papers and wrappers. Her long fingers haltingly picked through its contents.

"You know what?" she said. "I have a few rolling papers in here. I'll just get a bag of tobacco. A small one. How much is that?"

Frank watched the man's whole posture relax forward as she addressed him. It was like watching the front of an ice glacier dissolve into the sea; he melted.

"Beautiful girl," he murmured. "How much you want to pay?"

A red blush was rising up her neck to her chin.

"Let me get this," said Frank, slapping down his credit card. "And—" He picked up a bar of milk chocolate. "This too. In case you get hungry."

Cleo gave him a grateful look, but she did not hesitate.

"Pack of Capris please," she said. "The magenta ones."

Back outside, Cleo scanned up and down the street.

"You'll never get a cab tonight," Frank said. "Where do you live?"

"East Village," she said. "Near Tompkins Square Park. But I'll just walk, it's not too far."

"I'll walk with you," he said.

"No, you mustn't," she protested. "It's too far."

"I thought it wasn't far?"

"You'll miss the countdown."

"Fuck the countdown," said Frank.

“And the ice?”

“You’re right. The ice is important.”

Cleo’s face fell. Frank laughed. He began marching north, so she had no choice but to follow him. He looked over to find her trotting along beside him and slowed down.

“Are you warm enough?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Are you? Would you like my chapeau?”

“Your what?”

“My hat. He’s a beret, so I usually speak to him in French.”

“You speak French?”

“Only a little. I can say, like, ‘Chocolat chaud avec chantilly’ and ‘C’est cool mais c’est fou.’”

“What does that mean?”

“‘Hot chocolate with whipped cream’ and ‘It’s cool but it’s crazy.’ Both surprisingly useful phrases. So, do you want him?”

“I don’t think I was built to pull off a beret.”

“Nonsense,” said Cleo. “The world is your chapeau.”

“You know what?” Frank plucked the hat from Cleo’s head and pulled it gamely over his own. “You’re right.”

“Magnifique,” she said. “Allez!”

They walked east toward Chinatown. A group of women all wearing silver top hats and novelty 2007 sunglasses wobbled past them. One blew a party horn by Frank’s head, and the group exploded into whoops of delight. He pulled the beret back off his head.

“Would it be un-festive of me to say I hate New Year’s?” he asked.

Cleo shrugged. “I usually only celebrate Lunar New Year.”

Frank waited, but she didn’t elaborate.

“So, what was the best part of last year for you?” he asked.

“Just one thing?”

“It can be anything.”

“Gosh, let me think. Well, I switched to an antidepressant that actually allows me to achieve orgasm again. That felt like a win.”

“Wow. Okay. I was not expecting that. That’s great news.”

“Both clitoral and penetrative.” Cleo gave him two thumbs. “What about you? What was your favorite thing that happened last year?”

“God, nothing that can compare to that.”

“It doesn’t have to be that personal! Sorry, mine was weird. I’m embarrassed.”

“Yours was great! That’s a big deal. I just treat my misery the old-fashioned way, with large doses of alcohol and repression.”

“How’s that working for you?”

Frank mimicked her two thumbs up and kept walking.

“Anyway, I think it’s really impressive that you’re taking care of yourself,” he said.

Another group of revelers had broken between them, drowning out this last statement. He clambered around them to return to her side, repeating himself.

“That’s a kind thing to say. I just have a lot of ...” She waved vaguely toward a pile of trash spilling onto the sidewalk next to them. “Stuff in my family. I have to be careful.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway. Tell me about your year.”

“Best moment from last year? Probably just work things. I won an award for an ad I directed. That felt really good.”

“How wonderful! Which award?”

“It’s called a Cannes Lion. They’re kind of a big deal in my industry. It’s stupid, really.”

“No, it’s not. I’d love to win an award for something.”

“You will,” he said confidently.

They passed two men, ostensibly strangers, peeing against a wall in comfortable silence. Frank offered Cleo his hand as she hopped over the twin streams of urine. She shook her head.

“Men!”

Her hand lingered in his, and then she pulled it away to rummage in her bag.

“So,” he said. “Do you have someone in particular you’re, um, having these orgasms with?”

Frank was straining for the tone of “curious friend,” but worried he’d ended up more “concerned sexual health clinic counselor.”

“Both clitoral *and* vaginal?” Cleo teased.

Frank cleared his throat.

“Yes ... those.”

Cleo gave him a sly, sidelong glance.

“Just myself right now.”

His face cracked involuntarily into a grin. She laughed.

“Oh, you like that thought, do you? What about you? Isn’t everyone your age supposed to be married?”

“No, they changed that law,” said Frank. “It’s optional now.”

“Thank god,” said Cleo and lit a cigarette.

They wound their way north to Broome Street, past storefronts selling houseplants and psychic readings, chandeliers and industrial-size kitchen mixers. They talked about New Year’s resolutions and what’s in an old-fashioned and who they’d known at the party (Cleo: one person; Frank: everyone). They talked about the host of the party, a celebrated Peruvian chef named Santiago, who Frank had known for twenty years. Cleo’s roommate was a hostess at Santiago’s restaurant, which was how she’d been invited, though that roommate had absconded with an Icelandic performance artist soon after she arrived. They talked about Pina Bausch and Kara Walker and Paul Arden and Stevie Nicks and James Baldwin.

“There’s this collection of essays I love by the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist,” said Cleo. “It’s called *Sharp Tongues, Loose Lips, Open Eyes* ... I can’t remember the rest.”

“A man of few words.”

“Oh, have you read him?”

“No, it’s just, that title is—never mind. I keep meaning to read more,” he conceded.

Cleo shrugged. “Just buy a book and read it.”

“Right. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Anyway, in one of the essays he talks about being able to tell how giving a person is as a lover by how curious they are. You’re meant to actually *count* in your head how many questions they ask you in a minute. If they ask four or more, then they like to please.”

“And if they ask none?”

“Then you can pretty much assume they don’t eat pussy. Or, you know, dick, if that’s your bag.”

“Pussy,” said Frank quickly. “Is my bag.”

She gave him another of her amused looks.

“I sort of figured.”

“And you?”

“My bag? Dick.” She laughed, then tilted her head to consider this further. “Maybe with a side bag of pussy. But just a small one. Like one of those little clutches you wear to the opera.”

Frank nodded. “An evening purse of pussy.”

“Exactly. As opposed to, like, a duffel bag of dick.”

“A portmanteau of penis.”

“A carry-all of cock.”

“A backpack of boners.”

Cleo’s face lit up with laughter, and then she burrowed it into her hands as though snuffing out a match.

“God, I sound carnivorous. Let’s change the subject, please.”

“So ...” Frank took a deep breath. “What do you do? Where are you from? When did you move to New York? Do you have brothers and sisters? When’s your birthday? What’s your horoscope? Birthstone? Shoe size?”

Cleo exhaled another peal of laughter. Frank grinned.

“Go on then,” he said. “Where are you from?”

“You really want to know all that about me?”

“I want to know everything about you,” he said, and was surprised to find he meant it.

Cleo told him that she’d moved around a lot growing up, but her family eventually settled in South London. Her parents split up when she was a teenager, and her father, an affable but distant engineer, quickly remarried and adopted his new wife’s son. Her mother died in Cleo’s last year of university at Central Saint Martins. She still had not found a way to talk about it. She had no close family back home, which left her feeling untethered but also, she added quickly, completely free.

With nothing tying her to London and a small inheritance from her mother that could cover a flight and two years of cheap rent, she’d applied for a scholarship to study painting at a graduate program in New York. She arrived when she was twenty-one. For her, that MFA meant two years in a smooth orbit from her bed, to a canvas, to bars, to other people’s beds, and back to a canvas. She’d graduated the previous spring and had been freelancing as a textile designer for a fashion brand ever since. The pay wasn’t great, and they didn’t provide benefits, but it gave her enough money and free time to rent a sizable room in the East Village, which she also used as her painting studio. Her biggest fear now was that her student visa was up at the beginning of the summer, and she had no plan for what to do next.

“Do you paint every day?” asked Frank.

“Everyone always asks that. I try to. But it’s hard.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes the process is like ... Okay, you know when you’re tidying up a cupboard—”

“Is that a closet?”

“Yes, you American, a closet. First, you have to pull everything out of it, and there’s this moment when you’re looking around and it’s a total mess. And you feel like, *Shit*, why did I even start this? It’s worse than before I began. And then slowly, piece by piece, you put it all away. But before you can create order, you have to make a mess.”

“I’m following.”

“That’s what painting is like for me. Inevitably, there’s a moment when I’ve pulled everything out of me, and it’s just ... it’s chaos on canvas. I feel like I should never have started. But then I keep going, and somehow things find their order. I know when I’ve finished because I feel ... I feel this *click* that means everything’s in its place. It’s all where it should be. Total peace.”

“How long does that last?”

“Maybe seven-point-five seconds. And then I start thinking about the next piece.”

“Sounds exhausting,” said Frank.

“But those seven-point-five seconds are ...”

She looked up at the sky dramatically. Frank waited.

“As you would say, they undo me,” she said.

They passed a man wearing a tuxedo and a green feather boa, retching over a fire hydrant.

“I think feather boas should make a comeback,” said Cleo.

“I think you are an exceptional person,” said Frank.

“You don’t know me well enough to say that,” said Cleo, clearly delighted.

“I’m a good judge of these things.”

“Then I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

They were in Little Italy, where the streets were lined with seemingly identical Italian restaurants with red-checkered tablecloths and plastic bowls of pasta stuck in the windows. Above their heads, strings of red, white, and green bulbs dropped lozenges of light onto the street below. In a third-floor apartment window, a group of people stood smoking out a window, their bodies silhouetted against the yellow light of the room behind them. “Happy New Year!” they shouted to no one in particular. Cleo and Frank passed a quiet pizza spot on the corner, where a lone man was stacking up plastic chairs for the night.

“You want to get a slice?” asked Frank.

Cleo fingered the tassels on her bag. “I don’t have any cash.”

“I’ll buy you something,” he said.

“Drop the *something*,” she said lightly. “And you have the truth of the matter.”

“You think I’m trying to buy *you*?”

“Aren’t all men trying to buy women, deep down?”

“You really believe that?”

“I don’t *not* believe it.”

“That’s incredibly unfair.”

“Okay, tell me why I’m wrong.”

He turned to face her and exhaled slowly. He really had just wanted to get a slice.

“I think men are taught to buy things for women, yes. Not because we want to own you or control you, but because it’s a way to show we’re interested or we care that doesn’t require much, I don’t know, vulnerability. We’re not taught to communicate the way you are. We’re given these very limited, primitive tools to express ourselves, and, yes, buying a fucking meal is one of them. But women also *expect* that from us—”

Cleo was hopping up and down in excitement to interrupt him, but he raised his hand, determined to finish. “It goes both ways. You say I’m trying to buy you, but you’d be offended if I didn’t offer to pay.”

“I would not!” she exploded. “And the only reason I’m going to *let* you pay is because I happen to be triple extra-broke right now.”

“So now I *am* paying? See, that’s where I call bullshit. You want it both ways. You want to be so principled and above it all, but as soon as that becomes inconvenient for you, you’re fine with a man picking up the bill.”

“Are you *kidding* me? Maybe I’m broke because of, I don’t know, the gender pay gap, or years of systemic sexism limiting my job opportunities, or the fact I had to quit my last job as a nanny because the dad wouldn’t stop hitting on me, or—”

Now it was Frank's turn to hop.

"That's not why you're broke! You're broke because you're twenty-four and an artist who works part-time! You can't blame all your problems on being a woman!"

Cleo put her face close to Frank's and spoke so quietly her words were just above a breath. He had the insane hope she was about to kiss him.

"Yes, I can," she said.

Frank turned and walked into the pizza shop. "You're cool," he said over his shoulder. "But you're crazy."

"Sounds better in French!" she shouted back.

Cleo lit another cigarette and stamped her feet against the sidewalk like a restless racehorse. She thought about leaving just to spite him, but she knew she would regret it instantly. There was nothing to do but stand and smoke. Frank ordered two slices of pizza, anxiously checking over his shoulder to make sure she was still outside. He'd already decided that if she left, he'd run after her and apologize. But the back of her blond head was still in view, surrounded now by a cloud of smoke.

Back outside, he handed her a slice. An amber stream of oil ran across the flimsy paper plate.

"Here," he said. "To make up for the years of systemic sexism."

"Wanker," said Cleo and took a bite.

"You're in America now," Frank said. "Here, I'm just an asshole."

They walked with their slices up Elizabeth Street. Ahead of them a couple stood outside a bar in a pool of lamplight, performing a timeless two-person drama. The woman was clutching her heels to her chest and crying in long, high wails while her boyfriend shook her shoulders, repeating, "Tiffany listen, listen Tiffany, Tiffany listen ..."

"I hate to say this," whispered Frank as they passed. "But I don't think Tiffany's listening."

Cleo turned back to look at them. "You think they're all right?"

"They'll be fine. New Year's Eve is prime fighting night for couples. It's like fireworks and fights. The two staples of a good New Year's."

"Did we just have our first fight?" Cleo asked.

Frank handed her a napkin. "I don't know," he said. "You did keep your shoes on."

Cleo chuckled. "Would take a lot more than that to get me out of my cowboy boots." She screwed up her napkin and flicked it expertly into a trash can on the corner. "Fighting can be a good thing, anyway. Look at Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. They got divorced, got back together, split up again ..."

"But did you ever think that they created their art in spite of the fighting, not because of it?"

"Who cares?" said Cleo between mouthfuls of dough. "Point is, they made it."

Frank nodded vaguely. He took her paper plate from her and folded it into a neat square with his own. He hoped they'd pass a place to recycle soon.

"I'm dying to go to their house in Mexico City," said Cleo.

"It's packed with lines of tourists," said Frank. "And Do Not Touch signs on every surface."

"Bummer." Cleo looked disheartened.

"But it's still worth seeing," added Frank quickly. "There's this framed collection of butterflies hanging above Kahlo's bed that Patti Smith wrote a poem about when she visited it. And all her clothes, of course. She had amazing style, kind of like you."

Cleo smiled happily at the compliment. "Those, I would love to see."

"Let's go next week," said Frank. "The whole city's full of art. It's the perfect place for you."

"Next week? Just like that?"

“Sure. Why not? I closed the office, and I’ve got thousands of air miles I need to use.”

“Okay.” She laughed. “I’m in.” She shook out her hair. “Mexico fucking City!”

Frank, who had been planning to work all next week in the empty office, had never been much of a spontaneous traveler—but he liked the idea that he could be. He had the means, just not the incentive. And here was Cleo with the opposite. They both turned to each other at the same time. He hesitated, then pulled her in for a hug. Her hair smelled like soap and almonds and cigarettes. His chest smelled of damp wool and an expensive cologne she recognized, tobacco sweetened with vanilla.

“And I’m not trying to buy you,” he added, releasing her. “I’d just like to see it with you.”

“I know,” she said. “I’d like to see it with you too.”

They crossed the Bowery and wandered through the East Village, where the merriment on the street took on a subtle edge of aggression. People shouted outside bars and fell in and out of doorways. More couples fought on more street corners. At the entrance of the park, a group of crust punks, dressed in shabby military gear and studded leather jackets, gently waved sparklers above their matted heads. A pit bull wearing a neckerchief with the anarchy symbol drawn on it glanced up from the pillow of his paws to watch the sparks fall in mute wonder.

They arrived at a crumbling walk-up on St. Mark’s. The smoked glass of the front door was scrawled with incomprehensible graffiti. Frank wondered, not for the first time, what mark these anonymous scribblers thought they were making. Cleo turned to him, shy again.

“Do you want to sit in my lobby with me?”

“Why your lobby?”

Cleo hid her face in her hands.

“It’s nicer than my flat?” she said from between her fingers.

She slid her keys into the door and beckoned him in. Frank didn’t feel it was polite to point out that her lobby was just a stairwell. Cleo sat on the scuffed linoleum steps and lit a cigarette.

“You smoke in here?”

She shrugged.

“Everyone does.”

He watched her exhale twin streams of smoke from her nostrils. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice you at Santiago’s,” he said.

“I came late. I ... It’s stupid, but I couldn’t decide what to wear. It’s a kind of social anxiety, I think. If I’m nervous about going to something, I change like a hundred times. It gets later and later, which of course only makes me more anxious. Usually, I end up hyperventilating over a pile of clothes on my floor. It sounds silly, but it’s actually quite terrible.”

Frank nodded sympathetically. “So what did you end up wearing?”

“Tonight? Oh, just this thing I made.”

“Can I see?”

Cleo raised an eyebrow. She pressed the cigarette between her lips and stood to unbutton the wooden toggles of her sheepskin. What she was wearing was not so much a dress as a net made of shimmering gold threads. It was woven just loosely enough to give a suggestion of the body within. He could see, very faintly beneath the shining lattice, the outline of her nipples and belly button. She was like a smooth, lithe fish caught in a glistening net.

“Let me come upstairs,” he said.

“No,” she said, sitting back down. “My roommates might be home. And”—she exhaled smoke seriously—“we’ll have sex.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

"I'm leaving in a few months."

"I think we can finish before then."

Cleo suppressed a smile. "I just don't want to attach," she said.

She looked down between her knees. Frank crouched in front of her. "I'm afraid it might be too late for that."

"You think?"

"I attached the moment I heard you say aluminum."

Cleo looked up at him from beneath her winged eyelids.

"Al-um-in-ium," she said softly.

Frank clutched his heart. "See? I'm screwed."

"No, *I'm* screwed," she said. "I'm the one who has to leave."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I heard Bali's cool."

She did not feel as casual about this as she sounded.

"Not back home to England?"

"England's not my home."

Cleo ground her cigarette out on the metal stair tread. He sensed there was more to the story there, but he didn't pry. She checked her watch to avoid further questioning.

"It's past midnight!"

"This isn't right," said Frank.

"Seriously," she said. "We've been talking for like—"

"No, I mean, *this*. New Year's Eve isn't meant to be this good."

"It's meant to be bad?"

"It's meant to be fine. You know? Just *fine*. It has never, not once in my life, exceeded my expectations."

"You know, in Denmark they jump off a chair to signify jumping into the new year."

"Are you Scandinavian?"

"Why? Because I'm blond?" Cleo rolled her eyes. "No, Frank. I just know some things."

"That you do." Frank stood up and dusted off his pant legs theatrically. "Okay, let's do it."

"Jump? But we don't have a chair."

"A stair is as good as a chair."

Cleo looked up at the stairwell behind them.

"But let's go all the way from the top," she said. "Start the year with a bang."

They climbed to the first landing. They had to clear roughly ten steps to land on the ground floor below. It was the kind of game children played, daring themselves to climb higher and higher. He took her hand. She squeezed it back. They both jumped.

CHAPTER TWO

June

Cleo didn't want to wear white, but she had hoped for a wedding cake. She could have ordered it herself from one of the Italian bakeries on the Lower East Side, the kind of place where every surface was covered in either powdered sugar or dust, but she'd left the planning of the meal to Santiago, who was known for his ecstatic and orgiastic dinner parties. Santiago thought they should forgo a traditional cake, and since nothing else about her marriage to Frank was proving to be traditional, she did not insist otherwise.

In fact, Cleo didn't insist on anything about the wedding. She did buy a dress for the occasion, but the one she picked was blue. It was late June, too hot for anything elaborate, and the idea of wearing white had always seemed ridiculous to her. She hadn't been a virgin since she was fourteen. She'd let Frank slip his hands inside her underwear in her stairwell the first night they met. It had felt like he was tracing the alphabet on her clit. *L, M, N, O ... POW!* No, there was no reason at all to wear white.

She found the dress she did wear buried at the back of an overpriced vintage store on Perry Street, a liquid silk slip so much cheaper than everything else, she worried afterward that it might actually be a nightgown. When she slid it over her head, she felt as if she had taken a knife to the surface of the sky, skimmed a little off the bottom, and worn the peel.

Frank still managed to outdo her, however, by showing up to City Hall in a three-piece ivory tuxedo. Cleo had been waiting on the steps, eating a hot dog from the street cart nearby—she'd never had one before, she reasoned, and today was a day of firsts—when she saw his white top hat bobbing above the gray street. She put down the half-eaten hot dog and threw her head back in delight.

"Well?" Frank heel-turned so she could take him in. Behind him, a family of tourists took his photograph.

"You are an incorrigible show-off."

"See, when you say it," said Frank, "that still sounds like a compliment."

He ran his hand down the silken slope of her back and cupped her behind.

"Do we look like we're going to two different weddings?" she asked.

"You look fantastic," said Frank. "Like a little lake."

"You look ..." Cleo paused to fully take him in. "Like yourself."

It was true. Equal parts mad hatter and aging glam rock star, Frank looked surprisingly natural in the tux.

"Do I smell of mothballs?" Frank stretched his throat for her to smell, and she tucked her nose into the suntanned skin above his collar.

"Nope. Soap and ..." She snapped her head back. "Gin?"

"Had a little one before I left. Had to! It's my wedding day! Come on, let's go in."

“Our wedding day, darling,” said Cleo.

“Ours, yours, mine, theirs ...” Frank launched into a singsong. He grabbed her hand, and they ran up the steps two at a time.

What is a wedding, Cleo wondered, if not a private dream made public, a fantasy suspended between two worlds like a cat’s cradle? But Cleo had never dreamed about getting married. What she fantasized about was her first solo show as an artist, a day dedicated solely to her. What scared her was that recently it was easier to imagine the opening than the actual paintings. She worried that she was one of those artists who care more about being an artist than they do about making art. It was a fear so base, so desperately ordinary, that she never mentioned it to anyone, not even Frank.

Since they had not thought to invite a witness, Frank ran back outside and asked the hot dog vendor to join them. He surprised them both by quietly weeping through the entire ceremony, which lasted less than five minutes. Expelled back into the sunshine, Cleo embraced him while Frank insisted on crunching a \$100 bill into his palm before saying goodbye. The couple wandered north to Canal Street, then stopped and smiled shyly at each other, unsure how to proceed. Frank lifted his hand, still clutching hers, to check his watch.

“Got a few hours till dinner. Want to get a drink?”

Cleo shook her head. They had invited thirty guests to the wedding dinner, but inevitably more would show up. The whole thing had been presented as a caprice, a giddy impersonation of adulthood. This wasn’t unreasonable for Cleo, who had just turned twenty-five, but Frank was in his mid-forties. Too old, she thought, to consider himself too young to be married. She glanced around. Across the street, a storefront advertised \$10 aura readings.

“What about that?”

Frank looked skeptical. “You think they’ll make me a drink in there?”

They relinquished the sunshine of the street and stepped through a beaded curtain into the quiet, dark shop. It smelled of incense and takeout food. The high, needling sound of harp music replaced the discord of Canal Street outside. Behind a counter displaying an assortment of crystals and beaded jewelry, a middle-aged Chinese woman smiled at them.

“You married today?” she asked, pointing to Frank’s tux. “It’s good you come here.”

She beckoned for Cleo to sit in a high-backed chair in front of an old-fashioned camera on a tripod and showed her where to place her palms either side, on two metal discs.

“So pretty,” she said, looking at her. “Now, don’t move.”

She disappeared underneath a piece of black cloth attached to the back of the camera, pressed a button, which released a soft *poof*, then reappeared. Cleo had not expected to feel anything profound when the picture was taken, but she had hoped for a little more than the kind of brusque efficiency one might find at the DMV. Frank took her place, and she watched as he adjusted his bow tie. She saw a flash of his younger self, the anxious middle-schooler getting his yearbook picture taken. He looked up at the camera lens from beneath his long eyelashes and smiled, timidly, as if hoping to please. The contraption released another *poof*, and Cleo felt her heart contract. She did love him, she did.

Afterward they stood at the glass counter, looking down at their pictures. Cleo’s aura was purple and yellow, while Frank’s was red and green.

“Does that mean we’re compatible?” asked Cleo anxiously.

“How long you been together?” asked the woman.

“Six months,” said Frank.

The woman nodded.

“Eighty percent of relationship,” she said, “is tolerating difference.”

“What’s the other twenty percent?” asked Frank.

The woman shrugged. “Fucking.”

She performed the remainder of the reading with perfunctory brusqueness. Frank’s aura suggested that he was creative, charismatic, and worried about money. Cleo’s said she was intuitive, sensitive, stubborn, and needed to drink more herbal tea. That was it. Frank paid the woman and bowed affectedly before Cleo could pull him back out through the beaded curtains. She squinted up at him through the sunshine.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Are we compatible?”

“Well, we have at least twenty percent of the relationship down.”

Then he hooked his arms around her and they kissed for a long time, without self-consciousness or ostentation, while all around them bright pyramids of fruit aged in the Chinatown heat, rows of diamante watches winked in the sun, and women flicked their fans open and closed like thoughts not quite realized.

“Felicitations and congratulations!”

Santiago beamed at them as he opened the door, his large body partially covered by a striped, sauce-stained apron. He was brandishing a bottle of champagne in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other. Wild-haired and robustly built, he reminded Cleo of some friendly mythological god. She submitted to being kissed wetly on each cheek, then spoon-fed a mouthful of golden beets. Behind him every surface of the large kitchen was covered in food. There were the beets with goat cheese, sliced filet mignon in a crushed black pepper sauce, lime-soaked ceviche, roasted asparagus, littleneck clams bathed in white wine, pearl couscous, shaved fennel and parmesan, and three other kinds of salad, one consisting entirely of edible flowers.

“Greatest chef in the world,” Frank said, circling his arm around Santiago’s wide girth. “Remember when you worked at that place that advertised processed meats like it was a good thing? And look at you now!”

Cleo caught Santiago’s eye and smiled. Everyone Frank knew was the greatest *something* in the world. His half sister Zoe was the greatest actor, his best friend Anders was the greatest art director and amateur soccer player, and Cleo, well, Cleo was the most talented painter, the deepest thinker, the most beautiful woman on earth. Why? Because Frank wouldn’t have married anyone else.

Frank plucked one of the edible flowers from the wooden bowl and placed it on his tongue, then gestured for Cleo to do the same. She bit into a cluster of yellow petals and closed her eyes. It tasted peppery and a little sweet, like licorice laced with paprika. Frank made an approving sound and took another.

“I knew I couldn’t disappoint you,” Santiago said, watching them. “You two understand pleasure.” He motioned for them to sit at the dining table.

Santiago had recently opened his own restaurant and was riding a wave of critical and commercial success. His loft was a mix of faux found objects and exorbitant designer furniture; cinder-block side tables and vintage milk crates mingled with cowhide rugs and modernist lounge chairs. The effect was garishly impressive, like a dog walking on its hind legs.

“How was the ceremony?” he asked. “You know I got married at City Hall too.” He winked at Cleo. “It’s how this menace to society came to America.”

“It was phenomenal,” said Frank, using a dish towel to shimmy open the bottle of champagne. “Our witness was the guy from the street cart outside. Kamal. Nice guy. He cried!”

“You are lying to me.” Santiago clapped his hands with delight.

“I’d bought a hot dog from him beforehand,” said Cleo. “So he wasn’t a complete stranger.”

“You couldn’t have asked someone from one of the other weddings to be your witness?”

“What would have been the fun in that?” asked Frank.

“Everything for the story,” said Cleo, nodding toward Frank.

“And that’s why we love him,” said Santiago, slapping Frank’s shoulder. “My mother-in-law was our witness. Looking like, excuse me for saying this but it’s true, she was sitting on a kebab stick the whole time. Disapproving mothers, you know.”

He smiled at Frank.

“Frank doesn’t have to worry about that with me,” said Cleo, and made a noise that was not quite a laugh.

Frank pecked the top of her head. Santiago took the bottle from him and poured three champagne flutes.

“We should send Kamal a bottle of this stuff,” said Frank, swallowing most of his in one gulp.

“I didn’t know you’d been married before,” said Cleo to Santiago.

“For my visa,” said Santiago. “She was a dancer I knew. But we were in love too, you know, for a moment.”

“What happened?” Cleo asked.

Frank refilled his glass.

“Oh man, she died,” said Santiago. “Overdose. Yeah, it was a real bummer. Beautiful woman, beautiful soul.”

Cleo would have liked to ask another question, but Santiago got up to check on the food and Frank wanted to hear some music, and the conversation escaped like smoke.

By the time the wedding guests started to arrive, they had finished two bottles of champagne and sampled every dish. Cleo’s former roommate, Audrey, came first. Slim-hipped, full-lipped, and covered in tattoos of quotes from books she’d only partially read, she was what Frank called one of Cleo’s strays. Cleo went to kiss her, but Audrey stuck out her long pink tongue instead.

“That’s how Tibetan monks greet each other,” she said.

“I thought you were Korean?” said Frank.

Audrey rolled her eyes. Cleo covered Frank’s mouth with her hand.

“Do Tibetan monks drink champagne?” she asked and handed Audrey a glass.

Audrey protruded her tongue again and pressed a pill onto it.

“Only when mixed with Klonopin.” She swallowed it with a gulp, then went to find Santiago, whose restaurant she was a hostess at.

Next, Cleo’s closest friend Quentin arrived. The two had met during Cleo’s first weeks in New York and become inseparable, each as lonely and adrift as the other. Quentin had grown up between Warsaw and New York; his grandmother was a Polish heiress who believed gay people didn’t exist in her country, which meant that Quentin would never have to work a day in his life but must also stay in the closet for the remainder of it. As far as his family was concerned, Cleo had been his girlfriend for the past two years.

“I still haven’t forgiven you for not asking me to be your maid of honor,” he said, kissing Cleo. “But I did get you a wedding present. It’s *very* expensive.”

“Honey, I don’t think you’re meant to tell them that.”

This was Quentin’s sometime boyfriend, Johnny. Johnny had the complexion of a naked mole rat and the same furtive expression, as though constantly looking for a hole through which to