

Chapter 1

It began to snow at dawn. By noon, Washington looked like a toy village in a department store Christmas window, the people like tiny, rosy-cheeked dolls bundled in their winter clothes. The world was shrouded in white, clean and silent. Only the roar of the low-flying planes groaning as they labored to lift themselves through the heavy layer of gray snow clouds brought Lily the message of a harsher reality.

She paid the taxi driver and moved quickly into the airport terminal, her carryall slung over her shoulder. She kept her head down, looking neither right nor left, heading directly toward the Southair gate. After the silence of the snow-covered streets, the terminal was alive with sound.

She could not deny the anxiety that gnawed at her. This journey was a new move, outside their accustomed pattern. She thought of Edward, and her stomach knotted. What she dreaded most was being recognized by someone they both knew. Not now. Not before she was ready. Their objective was to be in control of their lives. Hadn't they managed successfully for more than a year?

Through the crowds, near the numbered Southair gate, she saw Orson leaning against a wall, the collar of his trench coat up, his wavy brown hair moist with melting snow. Like her, he, too, seemed tense. Yet the sight of him calmed her, quickening her heartbeat with anticipation. It

had always been that way. From the first moment, his effect on her had been powerful, life changing.

He did not move forward but stood waiting, gathering her into his arms when she came close enough. He was a head taller, and the heavy coat, smelling of damp as she nuzzled close against it, affirmed his great comforting presence.

"God, I'm scared," she said, her voice muffled as he patted her woolen hat, which was pulled to the eyebrow line over her dark deep-set eyes.

From the pocket of his trench coat he pulled out a single pink sweetheart rose. She took it and smiled.

"Feel better?"

She nodded, inhaling the scent.

"We're delayed. Damned snow. About half an hour at the gate. Another half an hour on the ground."

Picking up his suitcase, one of those compact leather ones guaranteed to fit under the airline seat, he led her to the counter where he produced his tickets for the clerk. They passed through the security check. In the boarding lounge they found seats alone near the window wall, which looked out on a mass of swirling snow. Outside, the Southair 737 was parked like a hoary ghost at the mouth of the passenger chute.

"A few hundred feet up and it's nothing but sun and blue skies," he said. She lay her head on his shoulder and felt the caress of his fingers against her cheek. Reaching up, she stroked the back of his head.

"Four days alone. Imagine," she whispered, her eyes

moistening with emotion. "Days." For them, time was always a gift. They were used to measuring their time together carefully—they had only the morning hours at the apartment, their clandestine hideaway. Yet, Lily thought, wrapped in the safety of Orson's arms, even time itself seemed enriched.

"And Edward?"

"He thinks I'll be in L.A. A round of fashion shows. I told him I hadn't found a place to bunk. Besides, he's absorbed in work. They're all busy jockeying for power when the session opens. He'll barely have time to think, much less miss me." Edward was an Administrative Assistant to Congressman Robert Holmes of Iowa, a man with a thirsty ego and soaring ambitions. No. Edward would not be a problem. Poor Edward, she thought sadly. But how could he possibly understand?

"Will he call the store?" Orson asked.

In his mind, she knew, he was the principal creator of scenarios. "No. He rarely does."

"And will you call him?"

"I told him not to expect me to." She had been hesitant on that point but did not expect it to be a problem. Besides, she wanted to strike the worry from her mind. "Let's not think of them. Not for four days." She sighed. "Can we try?"

"We can try. Unfortunately, it's inescapable."

"Where were you six years ago?" she asked.

"Married," he answered softly. "Safe."

"And now?"

"We'll have four days to talk it out," Orson said.

"I know."

Her stomach lurched as she projected the future. Poor Edward, she thought again, helpless, innocent, so perfectly secure in their marriage.

"Viv thinks I'm on the Concorde to Paris."

"Won't that be trouble?" She looked up at him to search his face but could find no trouble there.

"So we're in the clear," she said, relieved.

"For the moment." He sighed, surely drinking of what was impending, of what they still had to go through, perhaps hurting others and themselves. Then, inexplicably, he chuckled.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"On the flight we're Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Marlboro."

"Who?"

"At the ticket counter I saw these signs—Calvin Klein and Marlboro cigarettes. Not very original, but I can't think of anything. Anything but you."

"And I, you."

"Is it possible to love someone so completely?"

"Yes..." She paused. "Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?" he asked, showing a mock pout.

"An error in timing but not in intensity." Lifting her face, she kissed him on the tip of his nose.

"How do you feel?" he asked suddenly.

"Fine. It's too early yet."

Suddenly a voice blared over the speaker: "Fifteen minutes to boarding. Sorry for the delay, folks."

"Good," Orson said. "If things go well, we can be having

a cocktail on the beach by five. You'll love the place. The unit looks out on the water."

"Were you there with her? With Viv?" She had wanted to ask him before but had hesitated, knowing he had been to Key West before with his wife.

"Of course not. This is ours. Once we went there for a party. I remembered the name: Fulton's Beachside."

"Just you and me, kid," Lily said. "Well, almost." Her fingers touched his eyes, which closed automatically. She loved to touch him there, to caress his long lashes.

"Oh, that." He smiled, opening his eyes and showing little nests of happy wrinkles. She started to draw his head down for a long kiss, but he held back, his eyes furtive.

"Coward," she said.

"Cautious."

Above all caution, she thought. It had underscored everything from the beginning. Honored in the breach, she thought wryly. Passion was more powerful than caution, they had learned.

"I know we're ready. We've got to resolve it somehow," she said with exasperation.

"We'll have four days to mull it over."

"And over and over?"

"No. We'll have to decide."

"Until you called, I had resolved not to tell you. To take" —she paused— "well, measures. Then when you said it's time, I knew you had to know."

"When I called you at Trudie's cocktail party, I was certain. Exactly then."

"You took a chance. Edward was still working."

Even telephone calls between them were deliberately rare. She remembered that his voice had frightened her.

He moved his hand along her sleeve until their fingers entwined. Between them, there was never enough touching.

"I was standing there, looking through the fog of smoke, watching the people. I had had three martinis, but I was dead sober. Viv was off in a corner talking to some woman. In the background I heard this buzz of conversation. Someone was saying something to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I just wanted to be with you. Just with you. Always. I ached for you. No point hiding it forever. It must be confronted. We have to think of ourselves, of our love. We'll go away. With clear minds, just the two of us, we'll plan what we must do and how. I remembered Fulton's Beachside, and I called you."

"Here I am."

"I told you I'd always know when the time had come."

"And I'd know."

"Well, it's time."

"You may get sick of me in four whole days. Ninety-six hours. We've never had such continuity."

"And you may get sick of me."

"Never. I'll never be sick of you. Never in ten lifetimes. Because I'll love you through ten lifetimes. No. Through ten eternities."

"There can't be ten eternities."

"Stop being a lawyer."

"That's another thing. I'm going to change that, too."

"What will you be, then?"

"Something I can do that means I'll be around you all day long. Day and night. Something. We'll figure it out at Fulton's Beachside."

"Maybe we can be paid to make love." She laughed. "To each other. Then we don't have to go anywhere, do anything."

They were silent for a moment. She nuzzled a kiss on his neck.

"I'm being overly demonstrative."

"The hell with it."

He bent down and kissed her on her lips. Opening one eye, she saw a woman smile and quickly turn away.

"You electrify me, you know that."

"Uh-huh."

From the very moment she had sat down beside him on the Eastern shuttle, he electrified her. A strange, powerful feeling had surged through her body, a feeling that he, too, admitted experiencing. Like two chemicals in separate containers reacting by osmosis. Was it random selection? Or did it have an inevitability about it, a design? Had it lain embedded, just beneath the level of conscious thought—some life-changing force suddenly revealed through what appeared to be coincidence? Wasn't it everyone's secret wish? Everyone's search? Connecting was like finding the other half of one's self, the missing part. So why couldn't it have happened before we both were married? Why now? Providence playing practical jokes, she had told him. How

else to explain it? I don't believe in providence, he had countered. What then? They decided, finally, on Kismet, and the hell with it. It was beyond questioning. It had happened.

She looked into his eyes. They were rich brown, but sometimes in very bright light they were tan, like those of some droopy-eyed puppy, full of innocence. Sometimes long moments, maybe hours, passed as they locked onto each other's gaze and said nothing, as if it were the most concentrated excitement in the world. Which, of course, it was.

Because of the movement of people in the lounge, her eyes drifted. A profile made her heart jump, but when the man turned fully, the face was unfamiliar. She nevertheless ducked her head below his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"I thought it was somebody we knew. God. I wish all that was over."

"Soon," he said.

"Will it be the same without the danger, the sense of adventure?" Thoughts like that troubled her. What happened after was as much on her mind as the impending wounds to be inflicted on Edward and Vivien.

"We'll know when we get there," he teased. It always amazed her that the intensity of their conversation was mostly focused on themselves, their situation, their personal options, their love. As if nothing else was meaningful or existed—not careers or money or things. Only their unfortunate attachments intruded.

They had this single dilemma: hurting Edward and Vivi-

en and, of course, little Ben, Orson and Vivien's son. Affairs like this were usually triangles, another woman, another man. Theirs was a quadrangle. Counting Ben, a pentagon. Five lives. Now six. If only the others were mean-spirited, cruel, uncaring.

"Looks awesome," a man said, standing before the window and watching the swirling eddies of snowflakes. The framed wall reminded her of a huge Jackson Pollock hanging in a vast gallery. It was not all monochromatics; there were colors in it as well, the reds, greens, and blues of airplanes' insignia. Apparently the powers who ran things were undaunted by the blizzard, and the periodic roar told them that planes were flying.

"Maybe it would be easier to go away and never come back. Just disappear. Mr. and Mrs.... What was that name again?" She shifted her eyes from the window.

"Calvin Marlboro," he said.

"But what would my name be?"

He looked around the lounge, searching for a name.

"How about Godiva?"

She giggled, looking at the poster on the wall that hawked Godiva chocolates.

"I'd like that. Can I ride through the streets naked on a horse?"

"Only if I'm with you."

"You think we can do it on a horse?"

"Hell, we've done it everywhere else."

That was another marvel of their relationship, the limitless sexual energy. That was why he had finally rented the

apartment where they could have a place to be together. Not a moment was ever wasted. They were without inhibitions or secrets or barriers. They shared an intimacy so powerful that sometimes they seemed like one person. They had even tried to express themselves in written words; read aloud, the paper was quickly destroyed. A secret life. That was what they had, a rich, glorious, delirious secret life. When she thought about it, any resolution frightened her. Would what they had resist change? Yet it could not go on like this. Not now. Biology had mysteriously intruded. Had it been oversight or design? Or deliberate forgetfulness? He had asked for no explanations.

"Does this happen to other people?" she asked, after they had been silent for a long time.

"I hope so," he whispered.

For a time it became oddly silent in the lounge, and the snow outside swirled in great clumps of white, obscuring any view.

"Suppose they close the airport?" she asked.

"They fly in this weather. They're fully prepared with all kinds of equipment."

An ear-splitting roar reminded them, once again, that the planes were flying. Groups of passengers began to drift toward the entrance to the passageway. An old woman in a wheelchair was being moved through the knot of people, followed by a woman holding a baby. A group of men in uniform moved into the lounge.

"We're lucky," said one of the men who wore a colonel's insignia. "The Eastern plane was delayed up north."

"We're lucky, too," Lily whispered.

"The luckiest two people on earth."

"God, I'm happy." She tucked her arm under his and pressed closer.

The agent announced that the plane was ready for boarding, and the passengers who were still seated stood up and joined the line near the passageway.

"It's in the eighties in Miami," a woman said. People within earshot smiled, as if the remark had allayed their apprehension.

"No sense getting up until the line thins out," Orson said.

"You're so practical and brilliant," she teased. "That's why I fell in love with you. Your razor-sharp mind."

"I thought it was my body."

"I never noticed."

She slid her hand downward under his raincoat and caressed him there.

"Do you suppose we could figure out a way?" she giggled.

"We've been very resourceful before."

She looked around the lounge as though she were assessing the conditions.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Crazy for you."

She sighed and removed her hand as her eyes roved through the lounge.

"Sometimes I think someone is following us, watching." He followed her gaze, but the lounge was emptying. In their circumstances, she knew, paranoia was a natural condition.

“Even though I know I haven’t given Edward a single hint, not a moment’s insecurity.”

“He could pick up vibes. Sometimes I truly believe that Vivien knows.”

“But you said you were a good actor.”

“It’s not an easy part to play.”

“Especially in bed.”

His forehead wrinkled, but the frown was brief. “We agreed not to talk about that.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I think about it. You and her.”

“And you and Edward.”

“I’m not made for all this intrigue, the lies, the dissimulation. It’s damned hard work.”

“You think I am? You think it’s easy being with Vivien and thinking only about you? So far it’s been a miracle.”

“We keep them secure, that’s why.”

“And we’ve been awfully careful.” He paused. “Almost.”

“It can’t go on. Not now.”

“No.” He shook his head. She could tell he was getting anxious.

“You’d think they’d have gotten suspicious by now.”

“That would have been the worst thing that could happen. Not until we’re ready to make the final break. Both of us at the same time. Flat-out honest. Cold turkey. We are dealing with two good people, people we once chose to spend our lives with, decent, sensitive people. We agreed that we would not draw out the pain—”

“No matter what, it will hurt.” She thought of Edward again and sighed.

"We'd better go," Orson said, getting up, clutching her hand as they walked to the desk and then through the passageway into the plane. Most of the others had already settled into their seats. They chose two, midway in the aircraft. Although the row had three seats, she took the middle seat, leaving the aisle seat empty. She could not bear to be that far away from him.

"The stewardess will think I'm foolish."

"Who cares what she thinks?" he said. He was still edgy from their discussion, and she stroked his thigh while he looked out of the plane's window at the wall of falling snow. In her other hand she still clutched the stem of the little pink rose.

"We met just like this," she said cheerfully. Always, when they discussed the others, it dredged up sadness and guilt. Recalling how they met always cheered them.

The plane lurched slightly as it backed off from the passenger chute. Then the pilot made an announcement.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen." The pilot's drawl had an air of sarcasm. "It's not like this in Miami, folks. This is no way to live. There'll be at least a thirty-minute delay as we go through de-icing procedures. I'm shutting off the No Smoking sign. I really feel sorry for you Yankees." A wave of laughter passed through the cabin.

"Just get us the hell out of here," a man piped, causing another ripple of laughter.

They could hear the jet's glow lumbering whine and see the backdraft scattering the snow as the plane taxied forward for a long time, finally stopping near one of the large

hangars. Outside, men with hoses sprayed the wings with de-icing liquid.

Unfastening her seat belt, Lily stood up, opened the overhead rack, and took out a blanket and two pillows.

"Might as well get cozy," she said, placing the pillows behind them and covering them both with a blanket. "How do you get rid of this damned thing?" she said, referring to the armrest. He fiddled with it and slid it out, leaving no space between them. Turning slightly sideways, she ran her hand over his chest while his hand stroked her earlobe.

"I don't need any de-icing," she giggled.

"Me neither."

"Four days of you. I warn you, I'll give you no rest."

"Idle threats."

"Not so idle." She slid her hand down and caressed his thigh.

The stewardess came by, and Lily closed her eyes, feigning sleep.

"She should see what I have," she whispered.

"You're incorrigible."

"I adore you."

"Just adore?"

"Beyond adore."

"Like love?"

"Beyond even that."

"Beyond that?"

"It's only a word," she said. She hugged him closer. "Will it be like this when we're together?" she asked.

"We are together."

"I mean permanently."

"If not, we'll have gone through a lot of hell for nothing."

He looked down at her. She raised her lips to his, parted them, and they kissed deeply.

"Why you?" she asked.

"Why you?"

SAMPLE

Continue reading...

Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2OCnPMX>

iBooks: <https://apple.co/2KlQuCs>

Kobo: <https://bit.ly/2OfLL9>