

SECRETS AND SCANDAL EXCERPT

As I walk away from the bar after exchanging absurd air kisses with Kori, my phone rings. Veronica Sharpe's name flashes across the screen.

"Did you get it?" she says between heavy breaths. I figure she's on the treadmill in her office. Veronica's middle name is Multitasker.

"Hi to you too."

"Okay, hi. Tell me, did Emily Delaney, my number-one reporter, get Kori Koffee to spill her beans?"

"You know I got it."

I hear the treadmill beep indicating her workout is complete.

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"No, it's great." I adjust my voice to try to sound happy about it. "It's just, you know, Kori Koffee." I scrunch up my nose as if smelling her signature perfume, Kori Glory.

I get to the corner and bang on the walk button as Range Rovers and BMWs whisk by me, windshields framing aging yet pulled-tight faces of actresses and trophy wives desperate to get to their spa appointments.

"This deserves a celebration," Veronica presses forward. "Meet me at Garnish in twenty minutes."

I'm tired and not completely in the mood for Veronica and her celebrity-obsessed conversation, but I do love the bruschetta at Garnish. "Fine, but you're buying."

"What else is new?" she snorts. "Anyway, I want to hear about your date last night." I start to say I don't want to talk about it, but before I can protest, she hangs up.

When I walk into Garnish, Veronica already has an order of bruschetta waiting for me, as well as a tall mojito with extra lime.

"This almost makes up for that assignment." I lift my glass, and she clinks her beer bottle against it.

"So, she's pregnant?" Veronica's eyes gleam. "Obviously." I take a long drink.

“And you got it on the record?”

“Everything is on the record. She saw the recording light.”

“Fair enough,” Veronica nods.

My phone rings, and Crystal’s name lights up the screen.

I hit ignore and place it back on the table.

“So, how was the date?” Veronica asks.

“I’d tell you, but I don’t think you could handle it.”

“Try me.” She narrows her eyes, waiting for the goods. “No, I mean I don’t think you could handle how boring it was.” I stretch my neck to the left and then the right, trying to ease out of the topic.

“How can that be? I thought this guy was pretty much perfect.”

I know she’s right. He is perfect - on paper. We were seated next to each other at a fund-raiser three months ago. He’s an entertainment lawyer who gets invited to top-shelf parties with true A-list celebrities. Come to think of it, that’s probably why Veronica was so excited when we started dating. He’s tall and fit with blue eyes and blond hair bleached by time spent in the pool and on the tennis court.

I really was excited when he asked me out. And I had a good time shopping for furniture for his new condo. I also had fun on our second date at Chez Rodrigo. But by our third date at the beach, I realized I was enjoying our dates because I like shopping and Spanish/French fusion cuisine, and sand beneath my feet, and not so much because I like him.

“I think I’m simply...” I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know. He is a great guy.” I roll my eyes at my inability to articulate my feelings.

“Sure. He’s just not your guy.” Veronica takes a drink and nods at her own conclusion.

“Easy for you to say, Mrs. Sharpe.” At forty-one, Veronica is eight years older than me and has been happily married for twelve.

“I didn’t find my husband by staying with the wrong guys.” She motions to the waiter to bring her another beer. “If this guy isn’t right for you, move on. But...”

“But what?”

“Maybe you could stay friends?” She grins and blinks feigned innocence. “Those are some pretty fabulous parties he goes to.”

“Your concern for my emotional well-being is touching.” I shake my head. “Don’t worry, I stay friends with all my exes. It’s how we do it here in LA.”

Veronica gives me a knowing smile. “Naturally.”

Still, even with her reassurance, I wonder what is wrong with me that I’m not falling for Derek, a guy any normally functioning girl would be over the moon to date.

My phone dings as a text message comes in from Crystal.

Call me ASAP

I can’t imagine what Crystal could possibly have to tell me that’s urgent. I plop the phone into my purse.

“Look, I know you’re going to hate it when I say this.” Veronica tucks a strand of shiny black hair behind her ear. “I used to hate it when people said it to me.”

“Then don’t say it.” I put my hand up to block her words.

But she says it anyway. “When it’s the right guy, you just know.”

I throw my hands in the air. “I don’t believe you.” “Believe it. Now go home and write my cover story.”

As Veronica signs the credit card slip, my phone rings and Crystal’s name flashes across the screen again.

“I gotta take this,” I say pulling on my sweater. It’s October, and even though it’s still in the seventies, I’ve acclimated to LA’s weather over the past fifteen years. Because of this, I usually need an extra layer on days dipping below eighty degrees. “I’ll email you the story by tomorrow.”

“You’re the best.” Veronica stands and polishes off her beer.

“You know it,” I say, hitting the accept button on my phone.

“Know what?” Crystal asks.

“Sorry, I was talking to my boss. So, where’s the fire?” “What fire?”

“Crystal, you both called and texted in the past twenty minutes.”

“I just wanted to make sure you heard. I mean I know you’d eventually hear from someone, but I thought it might be easier coming from me.” Crystal’s words are quick and breathless.

I unlock my car door and slip inside, the leather seats still warm from the late-afternoon sun.

“Slow down. What are you talking about?”

“So, then you haven’t heard about Lois?”

My heart starts beating faster as my mind anticipates the many possible directions Crystal’s next sentence could go. “No. What about Lois? What’s she gotten herself into now?”

“Emily...I’m so sorry, but Lois Miller is dead.”