

Chapter One

The Truth Is Out There

I think I can, I think I can.

I hated it as soon as I thought it. What was I, a little engine who could? No, I was a fully grown adult, and I could make it up any hill I wanted, thank you. All I needed was to keep walking, two more blocks, right up to the door of the bar and step inside. People did things like this every day.

Well, people walked into buildings. Did women in their mid-thirties frantically Google “places to be gay in los angeles” at three am after waking up and realizing the bed was half-empty because they’d broken up with the best shot they’d had at *forever* and then the very next evening walk directly from their office to the bar that was high up in the search results?

Maybe not.

A couple of guys fell into step behind me, and I didn't worry any more than I usually did as a woman out in public alone, which was more than *never* but not *lots*. I didn't even necessarily think anything when I heard the word *ass* because, after all, there were plenty of asses in the world; mine was only one of them.

But the talk between the men became pointed, and I felt that sinking realization that it was exactly my ass and my body they were discussing. Their voices grew louder, like they were eager for my reaction, and even though this section of Sunset Boulevard was far too busy for me to worry about safety—much—I hated that I had no good solution. In my dreams I'd whirl around and give them a lecture about bodily autonomy and the male gaze, but somehow I didn't think they were in a learning mood.

I also hated the thought of marching away from them into the queer bar, even though I knew they were unlikely to follow. The decision to head over to the first location in my newer and queerer life had been borne of sleep deprivation and the panic of dying alone; a mild case of street harassment hardly seemed a good omen to begin this quest tonight.

There were a few fast food or fast food-ish restaurants nearby, so I figured I could step into one and wait for the men to continue on to wherever they were heading, some nightmare bro convention at the heterosexual hipster bar down the block, perhaps, to discuss crypto or X or Snyder cuts.

“Hey, assholes,” a voice called out, bright like a bell. “Maybe this is cool behavior under whatever rock y'all normally live under, but this is a society and you're disgusting.”

I turned in the direction of the shouter to see a short woman around my age, dressed in a brightly-patterned jumpsuit with color-coordinated Crocs. I could feel that the group of men had turned in her direction too, and from the muttered apologies and dashes across Sunset and away from her, they had not been prepared for such a confrontation.

“Fucking babies,” the woman muttered. She was Asian American with a short haircut that was more boyband than chic pixie, and for some reason she seemed vaguely familiar. “You OK?”

I nodded. “Yeah, what’s being a woman in the world without bros talking about your ass sometime? It’s fine.”

“It’s categorically *not fine*,” she said, shaking her head. “But I’m glad you’re OK.”

“Thanks to you,” I said.

“Eh,” she said, waving her hand dismissively, like she yelled off street harassers every day. There seemed a possibility that she *did*.

“I should...” I gestured feebly behind me, toward my office and the safe little lot where my car was waiting for me.

She raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. Sometimes I became furiously jealous that other women hadn’t overplucked in the early Aughts and weren’t now dependent on biannual microblading appointments.

“Weren’t you going to Johnny’s?” she asked. Her tone was casual, as if I walked up to queer bars every night. I supposed that she probably did. For this perfectly browed

and stylish and badass woman, going to Johnny's was a normal thing to do. It certainly wasn't the first domino poised to knock over a loop of heteronormative life stages tiles.

"Yeah, but—"

"Trust me, those guys aren't following us in," she said. Her hands were on her hips, but somehow still I felt that her hand was stretched out to mine, tugging me in her direction. My feet stepped closer to her, practically of their own accord.

"No, I just—"

"Come *on*," she said, and this time I didn't just take timid steps in my Converse, I hurried down the sidewalk toward her, and we fell into stride together. I was only five-foot-two, but somehow she was even shorter. For once I felt well-paced with someone.

"If I canceled my plans every time some asshole yelled something at me," the woman said, holding open the door for me, "I'd be a hermit. No offense to hermits. It's just not for me."

I tried my best not to gape around the bar, to act neutrally and not like when Dorothy Gale ended up in full Technicolor in Oz or when Jenny Schecter stepped into The Planet for the first time. But my middle-of-the-night googling had included an image search, so I'd actually already known that the interior looked simply like a nice Silver Lake bar. Yes, it was my first time in a queer bar, but it wasn't the land of the unknown; it was a well-researched search result.

"Are you meeting someone?" the woman asked.

"No," I said, remembering my late-night fantasies. Me at the bar, looking beautiful and alluring. Cute and mildly intriguing, at least. An unknown woman on the next stool, looking interested and open and ready to lead me into this new world. Now

that I was here, wearing my work clothes, and everyone was just a regular person who didn't care about the nervous and awkward woman who'd just arrived, the fantasy seemed especially...fantastical.

"Is that weird?" I asked the woman, as I scanned the crowd for proof that it was OK that I was here, that I wasn't the oldest or least cool person in the building. That I didn't look the least queer, whatever that meant. Still, I had an idea of what *queer* looked like, and I wasn't sure it was head-to-toe Modcloth, medium brown hair in a grown-out bob I wasn't sure I wanted to maintain, and a pair of pink cat-eye glasses I'd splurged on from Society of the Spectacle.

The woman burst into laughter. "Why would that be weird? Come on, there's two seats at the end."

"Oh," I said, "you don't have to babysit me, I'm sure you have people you're—"

"Weird or not, Clementine, I also was headed here alone," she said, as a jolt rattled me.

"How do you know my name?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, leading me through the lightly crowded room to two empty barstools at the right end of the bar. "We know each other."

"Wait, we do?" I eyed the tall barstools and schemed the least awkward approach.

"No," the woman said, "they've got a little ledge around the bar."

She demonstrated by stepping up first and then sitting down easily at the tall bar. I did the same and, for maybe the first time in my adult life, sat down almost effortlessly at a bar top.

“This place is short-person heaven,” I said. “So how exactly do you know me? Is it rude I feel kind of bonkers?”

“The owner’s girlfriend is like my height,” the woman told me. “So nothing here is awkward. What do you want to drink?”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said. “First you rescue me, now you have to buy me a drink?”

“You’re right,” she said. “I’ll take whatever non-hard seltzer’s on tap, thank you.”

I made eye contact with one of the bartenders and put in the order for my usual drink and the woman’s seltzer. I knew it didn’t really count as buying a woman a drink, except then I wondered if it did. The fantasy had not unfolded like I’d imagined it, but there was no getting around the fact that, despite that, I *was* sitting at a bar with an attractive woman who was making conversation with me. Was this actually as easy as I’d hoped it would be?

“We met at your office party,” the woman said as the bartender deposited the drinks in front of us. “Multiple office parties. Every holiday season. A few other random ones that felt only tangentially work-related. And that summer party to celebrate some milestone.”

“Five years in business,” I said, and vaguely remembered chatting with her about hors d’oeuvres while feeling guilty that I’d left Will on his own. “Are you with one of our clients?”

“Nah, just a friend of the company,” she said. “Also not one to turn down a party invite with free snacks and an open bar. Even after I stopped drinking. Keep those free La Croix coming, man.”

“Oh,” I said, my Diet-Coke-and-Makers paused at my lips. “Is it OK that I—”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “If it was hard for me to watch people drink, I wouldn’t hang out in a bar, would I?”

“I guess not. Still—”

“Still, nothing. I agreed to do a Dry January with a friend for moral support the other year, and then I noticed I felt better and was making better life choices, so it seemed like maybe something I should continue. Dry forever.”

“Makes sense. And I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. Work events are always a lot.” It wasn’t a lie. I liked to keep my professional and personal lives separate, everything in its neat spot like a bento box. Work parties always felt like a sloppy Tupperware container just knocking everything together. “Will you remind me your name?”

“Chloe,” she said. “Chloe Lee. How’s your boyfriend?”

“Oh.” How had I managed to forget her? Now, I could picture her clearly, wearing a similarly bright outfit and laughing with me about bacon-wrapped dates or whatever while Will stood alone in a corner of the outdoor space. *I’m not good at parties*, he always said, which was fine except for the times I needed him to at least fake it for a little while. Still, I remember feeling guilty when I finally joined him again, even though it was only now that I realized it had been because I’d had a better time talking to Chloe than camping out in that quiet corner with him. “He’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

She took a swig of her seltzer and set it down as a smirk settled across her face, practically stretched out to her jawline. I remembered how a jawline had done it, once upon a time, me staring at an actress’s face, up on a movie theatre screen like it was the

only thing in the world. *I wish I could put my thumb right there*, I'd thought, imagining what it would feel like if we'd kissed. By the time the lights came up, I knew I wasn't straight. A few weeks later, I met Will.

"I figured," Chloe said, still smirking, still in possession of that strong jawline, still looking right at me. "A girl doesn't tend to go to Johnny's alone if she's got some boring guy at home waiting for her."

"He isn't boring," I said. It would have been so much easier if he was! Or inconsiderate! All those stereotypes about guys not being able to find the clitoris? Will could have led expeditions!

"Ah, so it was just that he's a man?" Chloe asked with a grin.

"No, that was fine, I'm bisexual so whatever." I said it like it was nothing, but it wasn't nothing. It wasn't something I'd said many times aloud. It wasn't old and well-trod information to most people in my life. "It was just that..."

"Just what?" Chloe asked, leaning in a little.

"You're really—"

"Nosy? Yeah, tell me about it. No, literally, tell me what your non-boring boyfriend—"

"*Ex*-boyfriend."

"—what your ex-boyfriend was, if not boring, that ended it."

I took another sip of my drink as I tried to think how to phrase it. No one had heard it from me, not really. The problem was that it was tough to talk about without saying the whole truth, and I wasn't sure the whole truth was for everyone.

"We wanted different futures," I said.

“Like one of you wanted to go to Mars with a robot and one of you wanted a self-driving car on earth,” she said with a laugh.

“Yep, that was it,” I said, hoping that was enough. Her stare didn’t falter, though. Her stare told me that nothing but the truth would get me out of this.

“We met in college, and—seriously, he was a really good guy. The best in a lot of ways. Almost everything was easy. Like in our twenties, it was *the easiest*. I wanted to move back to LA after college, and he wanted to move here too. And we found a place together and both got good jobs and had friends and all the stuff you want to happen.”

I couldn’t believe how fast it had poured out of my mouth. Weeks without one real truth aloud and now all of it to a—well, not a *stranger*, but not far off. Still, I felt like I wanted to keep going, and not only because Chloe was still watching me intently.

“Anyway, then—you know. You turn thirty, and all of your friends start getting engaged and then married and suddenly people are *pregnant* and you go home from like the millionth baby shower of some acquaintance, to your boyfriend, like, so happy for everyone but also so relieved you have a different kind of life, except—”

“Except he wanted all the weddings and babies too?” Chloe asked.

“Yeah, exactly, it turns out. But I kept thinking—I don’t know. I felt like even though I’d never seen myself as like a bride or whatever, we could get married in a courthouse as a compromise or something, and then hopefully the kids thing would just kind of...” I laughed now at my former self’s naivety. “I thought it might wear off! And he’d also genuinely want exactly the life we already had.”

I downed the rest of my drink. “Anyway, it didn’t. It felt like more and more he’d say things about our future *adult* life together, when we’re married, when we have kids, all of that, and it was like—”

“You’re an adult already!” Chloe said, waving her hands wildly.

“Literally exactly,” I said, feeling warmed from her words as well as the intensity in which she said them. “I’m thirty-six!”

“That’s practically middle-aged,” Chloe said, and we both cracked up.

“Thanks, that’s comforting.” I shrugged. “I tried to talk to him about it but even though before it was like we always just kind of *got* each other, it was different. I could never get out the right words or—I don’t know. I actually started getting terrified every time he’d say something like ‘hey, can I ask you something,’ or ‘hey, I’ve got a question for you’ or even just ‘hey’ because it felt like a proposal was lurking around any given corner, and then I’d have to say no and break his heart or, like... kind of accidentally get married.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “Oh my god, Clementine, did you accidentally get married?”

I laughed and shook my head, while Chloe flagged down a different bartender, who she seemed to know.

“Can you get my friend a drink on the house because she just went through some weird bullshit with a man?”

“I don’t need—” I stopped because Chloe and the hot bartender dressed in a vintage Amoeba Records shirt and faded Levis seemed to be in cahoots and also this was

what I'd wanted when I'd told my friends that Will and I had broken up. Instead they'd acted like I'd unrolled a funeral out right in front of them on our group chat.

"Let me know how this is, and also I'm sorry about your man bullshit," the bartender said, kindly, before setting a pink cocktail in front of me and heading off to serve another customer.

"You didn't have to do this," I told Chloe.

"I like using my connections," she said. "So, if you didn't get accidentally married, what happened?"

I sighed, and it didn't feel like enough, somehow, so I sighed again. "Last month we went to the wedding of one of his colleagues, and afterwards he looked...I don't know. All misty-eyed."

Chloe made a face. "Gross."

"Stop," I said, though I laughed. "Then he stared at me in this really serious way that wasn't normal for us and said he was going to drive up soon to talk to my father about *my hand in*—"

"No," Chloe said, shaking her head. "What year is it? The days of yore or some shit?"

"I mean, I know some people like tradition and everything but that had never been us before." And I'd reminded him of that, but sometimes in the middle of talking to someone you saw the distance in their eyes and how for them the real conversation had already happened in their head and you weren't really part of it.

"Anyway," I continued, "I woke him up at like three a.m. that night and told him we didn't want the same things, and even if I got married someday it wouldn't be in some

kind of white-dress-and-traditional-ceremony kind of way that involved *my father's permission*, and even though I think kids are great and hilarious and the future and blah blah blah, I'd never seen myself as a mother and that wasn't going to change. And I didn't want him trying to give up what he wanted, so it made sense to end things."

It also hadn't made sense at all. Will had been my life for literally half of my life. Will and I were an *our* more than I was a *me*. Will made the morning coffee while I did yoga and then I did the morning dishes. Will checked the locks before coming to bed because he knew it made me feel safer.

But the early morning hours after the breakup had been the best I'd slept in months, like my body knew something my heart hadn't fully accepted yet.

"Good for you," Chloe said. "Also, he does sound boring."

I laughed and tried a sip of my cocktail, which lacked the comfort of my usual but was a little tart and a lot of refreshing all at once. Maybe it was time to give up all my old usuals. "He wasn't. I still feel like a jerk for breaking his heart."

"Nah, you did the right thing," she said. "If it makes you feel better, I get it completely. It feels like all of my friends are getting married or having babies and it's like they're all adults and I'm the child. I didn't think I'd have to deal with so much of it, being queer and all, but it turns out this shit comes for all of us."

"Love is love," I said, and we both burst into laughter.

"So what's your story?" Chloe asked.

"I thought I just told you," I said. "I thought I just told you in, like, *great detail*."

"That was your backstory," Chloe said. "Sorry, is it weird to say *backstory* after those jerks just harassed you about your ass?"

“Chloe,” I said, and burst into even louder laughter, as she joined in.

“Why are you, Clementine I-don’t-know-your-white-girl-last-name, walking into Johnny’s alone post-boring-guy breakup?”

“It’s Hayes. And you’re really...” I tried to think of a nicer word than *nosy*. “Are you a journalist or something? A podcast interviewer?”

She shrieked with laughter. “I’m a dog groomer! I told you, I’m just nosy.”

“I bet you ask dogs questions all day,” I said. It sounded like flirting out of my mouth, but that was because it was. I hadn’t flirted with anyone for real in—oh my god, nearly twenty years? But it didn’t feel effortful with Chloe. It just felt like talking.

“I don’t have to ask dogs questions,” she said. “They’re eager, you know?”

“I’m not...*not* eager,” I said, but even my tone dripped with hesitancy. “And I’m not really sure why I’m here. Do people even meet in bars? Everyone’s just on apps, I guess.”

“‘Do people even meet in bars?’ Clementine, please. Of course people still meet in bars. I meet women in bars—in this very bar—all of the time.”

I gulped at the thought of it, the reality of me and a woman and this bar and where it could lead. Was I actually ready for it—every single thing that *it* entailed? I felt seventeen again, in all of the worst ways.

“So you broke up with your boring boyfriend before he could ambush-propose you,” Chloe said, “and since you’re a little bit gay, you thought it was time you dated a woman instead.”

I wanted to protest her easy summation, but what was there to protest?

“Something like that.”

Chloe grinned at me, but whatever heat I'd hoped had been building between us was gone—if it had even been there in the first place. My inexperience felt tangible, taking up space at the bar between us. “Tale as old as time.”

Yes, by the time someone was quoting a Disney song lyric at you, it didn't seem very likely they hoped to take off your clothes later.

“I can always spot ‘em,” Chloe said. “Baby gays and the big new world of queerness.”

“Queerness isn't new to me,” I said, feeling a frown pull my mouth downward. At work I often worked hard to keep my face neutral; it wasn't good for business to let your clients see how terrible you sometimes thought their ideas were. “I've known I was bi since—”

“Sure, of course,” Chloe said. “You saw a hot girl like Kristen Stewart or your gym teacher, whatever, now you're single and you're making up for lost time.”

“It was Gillian Anderson,” I said, which made Chloe snort.

“Well, good luck out here,” she said, hopping to her feet. “I should run. My dog's been home alone for awhile and if we don't get in our walk soon there'll be hell to pay later.”

“OK,” I said, wondering if I should stand and leave as well? No, I would wait a respectable amount of time, and when I was certain she'd walked away, I could head back to my car and then back to my home and my cat and all the other things that didn't make me feel like I was a clueless teenager again.

“Here,” Chloe said, shoving her phone into my hands. “Put in your information.”

I gave her a look, but wordlessly tapped to her contacts and typed in my name and number. She snatched the phone back from me and typed furiously. By the time she'd headed out of the bar, my phone dinged with a new message from an unknown 323 number. When I opened the text, a photo of Gillian Anderson as Dana Scully gazed right at me.

I had no idea how to respond and so instead I flagged down the hot bartender—to be fair, they were all hot, but the one who knew Chloe and had given me a free drink just happened to be the hottest—to close my tab.

“How'd that drink work out for you?” she asked, running my credit card. “I'm thinking of adding it to the menu. Did it help your man trouble?”

“Yeah, my man trouble has been handled,” I said, wishing I could signify that I wasn't a straight woman with *current* man trouble, I was a queer woman with *previous* man trouble and I was ready for whatever was next. “You should add it to the menu so that whenever I have girl trouble, it can handle it as well.”

I literally grimaced as I said it, the clunkiest way a person had probably ever attempted to come out.

The bartender, though, just laughed and shoved her hair back from her face. “If you're hanging out with Chloe, yeah, I should probably put a rush order getting it added to the menu.”

A startled laugh popped out of me, and I added a giant tip to my credit card receipt before walking outside. Had it all actually gone OK? I'd come out to a stranger, exchanged numbers with an extremely attractive woman, and all before seven-thirty pm on a Tuesday. The next phase of my life had truly begun.