



All for a Sister
A NOVEL

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All for a Sister

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❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧

CELESTE, AGE 20

LOS ANGELES

1925

CELESTE WALKED BACKWARD through the house, a lifetime of poise and confidence in every step.

“Perhaps something here? On the stairs?” She ascended four steps, then turned, striking a dramatic pose along the banister, one leg stretched provocatively from her fringed skirt.

“That’s a nice one, Miss DuFrane.” The photographer, Jimmy from *Photoplay*, seemed more indulging than enthusiastic. “But I think we’re looking for something to bring out more of the ingenue, you know what I’m sayin’? A little more starlet, little less ‘Jazz Baby.’”

Celeste frowned—really more of a pout, and really rather pretty. “I don’t want to come across as another Mary Pickford.”

“Well, you ain’t no Clara Bow, neither. Why don’t we think about goin’ outside? Some fresh-face-in-the-garden action?”

She dropped her pose and clomped down the stairs. “Is that what Mr. Lundi requested?” Indeed, it sounded exactly like something Roland Lundi would say.

Jimmy pushed his hat back, revealing a rapidly receding hairline. “Look, he’s your agent. I just got the memo. ‘Meet the untold story of Celeste DuFrane.’ Already sounds like a headline, don’t it?”

It did, but not one she relished. There was a reason the story hadn't been told—not even to her. Besides, it wasn't Celeste's untold story; it was her mother's, kept in the shadows until the reading of her will. Celeste's story was simple: a beautiful little girl wants to be a movie star . . . and she is. No rise from poverty, no brave tale of immigration, no miraculous discovery in a mundane talent show.

"Follow me, then." She brushed past Jimmy and walked with a measured, swaying step, leading the way through the kitchen, where Graciela's warm, welcoming face looked up from the ever-growing pile of colorful sliced vegetables on the counter.

"Will your guest be joining us for lunch, Miss Celeste?" She spoke with an exaggerated deferential tone, her accent almost comically pronounced, the way she did when she meant to play the maid.

"*Él no es un invitado,*" Celeste said, her Spanish as perfect as Graciela's English. She grabbed a slice of sweet red pepper and bit into its crispness without ever breaking her stride, continuing toward the double French doors leading to the patio, where she stopped short and allowed Jimmy to be a gentleman.

"That part of the mystery?" he said, holding the door wide. "Are you the maid's secret daughter?"

"You got me." Her voice dripped with uncharacteristic sarcasm, but it built up the wall Roland told her to build. She wasn't to say a word until he arrived. With the mystery woman.

Jimmy took the hint and said nothing more until they were standing in the middle of the garden, surrounded by Graciela's perfectly tended roses, their feet resting on the pink cobblestones that intersected the velvet-green grass. It was a day that carried the ocean on the breeze, and Celeste lifted her face to it, breathing deep.

"Aw, that's beautiful," Jimmy said on cue. She knew her blonde

hair, freshly styled, shone in the sunlight, and when she closed her eyes, her carefully applied makeup was its own work of art.

Soon enough, Celeste heard the sound of the shutter, and she opened her eyes.

“Look, you’re a beautiful girl, but I’m not seein’ a story, you know what I mean?”

“How can you say that?”

“California princess. You wanted your own house. You got your own house. You wanted to be in the movies. You’re in the movies. Maybe if you were a star—”

“I have a film premiere next week.”

“You the star?”

“Third lead.”

He touched the rim of his rumpled hat in mock salute. “Have Lundi give me a call when you’re playing Chaplin’s lover, and we’ll talk. Meanwhile—” he hoisted up his camera—“if this turns out any good, maybe I’ll put something together about our California girls. Homegrown, not like the Swede I’m shooting later.”

Celeste worked her face into a smile and balled her fist as if that could keep *Photoplay* from slipping through her fingers. “I understand.”

Rather than leading him back through the house, Celeste pointed Jimmy toward the side gate, where the sad-looking jalopy she’d spotted upon greeting him waited at the edge of the drive to take him away.

Back in the kitchen, Graciela was arranging a platter with slices from a fresh-baked chicken. She glanced up, then looked around expectantly.

“He left,” Celeste said, leaning against the counter and picking at the carcass with delicate fingers. “He said there wasn’t a story.”

Graciela tsked but said nothing.

“Mother confided everything in you—toward the end, I mean. So tell me, what can I expect? What do you know about this woman?”

“*Nada*. Not much more than you already know. She’s been in prison—”

“Because of what happened to my sister.”

“*Sí*. And now she’s coming here.”

“A prisoner. Here. What are people going to think?”

“It’s none of their business, *mija*. That’s why you did good to send that *periodista* away. *Familia, verdad?* Like your mama always said, secrets don’t hurt anyone until they get away.”

“Easy for Mother to say. She’s dead.”

“*Dios la tenga en su gloria*,” Graciela said, crossing herself and punctuating the gesture with a kiss to the tips of her fingers.

“Oh, sure,” Celeste said, “she gets to rest in peace, while the rest of us—”

The three-tone chime of the front door interrupted her thought.

Normally it fell to Graciela to greet guests and visitors, but this time Celeste waved her off. The sound of her high heels bounced between the shining tiles and the high ceiling, a sound that she had always found both powerful and reassuring. At the entry hall, she paused for just a moment to check her face in the mirror. She took a deep breath, grasped the door’s brass handle, and opened it wide.

“There’s our girl,” Roland said with the affection of a favorite uncle. He stood, hat in hand, wearing a crisp, pale-blue suit, accessorized with a blue-and-gold cravat, his black hair slicked to perfection. Once over the threshold, he greeted Celeste with a kiss to her cheek and whispered, “We need to talk. Just you and me.”

She nodded, feeling completely incapable of uttering a word as the woman standing behind him came into full view.

She was smaller than Celeste had expected. In the movies, evil women were always large and looming, casting shadows across entire rooms. They had untamed hair; square, widely spaced teeth; and nostrils that flared to accentuate a maniacal grin. But this girl—or woman, she supposed—seemed perfectly pleasant. Potentially pretty, even, with a bit of makeup and some decent clothes. She wore a cheap dime-store hat that sat on her head like a brown, overtipped bowl, and beneath it, more brown in the uneven tufts of hair. The haircut must be new, Celeste surmised, because the woman's fingers fidgeted with the ends of it under her scrutiny. Celeste had done the same thing last year when she finally succumbed to fashion and had her own blonde tresses bobbed.

"You must be Dana," she said at last, remembering that manners must always trump fear.

"I am," the woman said, holding out her hand only after Celeste's second prompting. It was small and rough and cold, and Celeste found herself tugging to bring her inside.

"Welcome," she said. "We have a saying here. *Mi casa es tu casa*. It means, 'My house is your house.'" She let forth the last of her nerves in a giggle. "I guess, for us, that's really true."

Not even the slightest hint of a smile tugged at Dana's lips. "I'm sorry for that." She spoke as if unused to any form of conversation. "I had no idea . . ."

"And there's my spicy chickadee," Roland said, injecting himself into the dialogue.

"Bah!" Graciela brushed right past him and, without waiting for permission, wrapped the frail stranger in her soft embrace, muttering a message of welcome and blessing. Pulling back slightly, she said, "*Venga conmigo*. Come with me, upstairs. Your room is ready, and you can take a nice bit of a rest before lunch."

Dana looked to Celeste and Roland for permission.

"It's all right," Celeste reassured, eager to be released from the discomfort of this introduction. Perhaps it would be best if they got to know each other in increments. Neither she nor Roland spoke as they watched the two ascend the stairs, Graciela carrying the single satchel and Dana following behind, head down, hands limp at her sides.

"So," Roland said when the others were clearly out of earshot, "no *Photoplay*?"

"Thank goodness." She gave him a sidelong glance. "You've had better ideas, you know."

"Indeed I have. In fact, I had a better one on the train. Shall we?"

He took half a step, and she took the hint, escorting him to the room that had been her father's office. She was in the process of having the whole place redecorated. White—walls, carpet, furniture—with heavy curtains and a wall left empty to serve as a screen for intimate viewings. She sat and he followed, taking a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it with the ornate crystal lighter on the low, glass-topped table.

"You made me look like an idiot," Celeste said as Roland busied himself with the smoking ritual. "They didn't even send a reporter, you know. Just a photographer. What's a photographer supposed to do with an untold story?"

"Forget about them," he said through a first puff of smoke. His voice was low and rough, perfectly matched to the faint crackle of the burning tobacco. "We're going to tell that story ourselves."

"Good luck. After today, I'll be lucky to get my picture in the funny papers."

"Listen, sweetheart. We're going for something much bigger than the papers. This story?" He used his cigarette to trace a rectangle between them. "It's got silver screen written all over it."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THIS IS ONE OF those stories born from the question *What if. . . ?* It's no secret that I've long been fascinated with the 1920s. Such a fabulous decade. Such a decadent decade. And yet we know the roots of evangelism held strong. Whether talking about one of my books or teaching one of my classes, I always visit the idea of the Twenties mindful of the swift, sweeping changes: hemlines, communication, transportation, values, norms, vocabulary—everything made new within half a generation.

But what if you missed it? What if you were dropped, like a time traveler, into this world you knew nothing about? Thus, Dana was born.

I have to admit it was a blast to write a character as deliciously amoral as Marguerite DuFrane. And I've been waiting for the chance to lurk around the movie sets of a newly minted Hollywood. Alas, with this novel, I bid farewell to the very real Aimee Semple McPherson, and I will always be grateful to Bill Jensen (aka Agent Bill) for introducing her to me. Also, sadly, I'll be stepping away from Roland Lundi—a character I've grown to love as much as any romantic hero.

I'm off to new stories, and I hope you'll follow me! Look me up on my website, www.allisonpittman.com, or find me on Facebook (Allison Pittman Author Page) and Twitter (@allisonkpittman).