The Wedding People

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 opens with Phoebe driving alone in the Mercedes toward the Breakers, lost in deep contemplation about happiness and fulfillment. As she drives past the grand mansions that line the way, she can’t help but reflect on the wedding preparations underway—preparations for an event that is destined not to happen. She observes how everything around her seems meticulously curated, with each house perfectly positioned to suggest wealth and comfort. Yet, despite the outward appearance of perfection, Phoebe questions what it really means to have everything and still feel empty. What is it that people are lacking when their lives appear so complete on the surface? The stark contrast between the beauty of her surroundings and her inner turmoil captures the complexity of her situation. She is approaching a pivotal moment, aware that she is carrying a difficult truth with her—Lila will not be attending her wedding to Gary, something Phoebe must soon reveal to him.

When Phoebe arrives at the venue and speaks to Gary, she delivers the difficult news with careful consideration. She recognizes his stoicism in the way he listens, acknowledging that he has already accepted the inevitable. Gary’s response, though calm, carries a deep sense of emotional resignation, embodying the quiet defeat that so often accompanies unspoken pain. Phoebe, feeling the weight of the moment, practices the words she will speak aloud to the crowd: "Lila and Gary will not be getting married today." The announcement lands with a mixture of confusion and disappointment, as the guests, who had gathered in anticipation, now find themselves

questioning the purpose of their presence. The extravagant cost of the event seems absurd, a non-event that has caused much more expense than anyone anticipated. Meanwhile, the mystery surrounding Lila deepens—she is said to be at the hotel, preparing to leave for Canada, leaving everyone to wonder why she would abandon such a significant moment. Her absence casts a long shadow over the ceremony that never truly began.



Once the crowd begins to disperse, Phoebe and Matt cross paths, and their encounter signals a turning point. Phoebe opens up to Matt, explaining her decision to stay in St. Louis no longer. She shares her intention to leave him and pursue her own dreams, a future that will involve living in a nineteenth-century mansion and dedicating herself to writing. These ambitions are not driven by bitterness, but by the desire to carve out a life of her own, one that reflects her personal goals and aspirations. Matt listens with concern, trying to grasp the magnitude of her decision. There is a sense of bittersweetness in their conversation, as they navigate the emotions tied to the end of their relationship. Matt offers his thoughts with a mix of humor and worry, reflecting on their academic lives and what they had once planned together. The conversation reveals how far they have drifted apart, and despite the tenderness of the exchange, there is a deep sadness that underscores their words. It’s a conversation filled with love, but also the painful recognition that their paths have diverged, leading them in different directions.

Despite the heavy emotions in the air, Phoebe finds a moment of levity. She opens a bottle of champagne, the sound of the cork popping offering a brief respite from the tension. They share a toast, and in that fleeting moment, the weight of their conversation is momentarily lifted. It’s a bittersweet celebration of the changes they both face, a quiet acknowledgment that life will move forward, regardless of the pain it brings. Phoebe, in that brief moment of shared joy, feels a mixture of sorrow and liberation. The champagne, a small indulgence, tastes of possibility and new beginnings, even as it symbolizes the end of something that once was. The toast is a tribute to their shared history, and also to their individual futures, now separated by

their choices. As Phoebe takes a sip, she feels a growing sense of clarity about who she is and what she wants from life. In this quiet celebration, she also finds strength in her ability to navigate the unknown, realizing that she is on the cusp of something entirely new.

The chapter ends with Phoebe recognizing the subtle, yet profound, changes she's undergone. Her optimism remains intact, but it is now tempered by the wisdom that comes with facing difficult decisions. There is no longer the same sense of hesitation that once marked her, replaced by a sense of readiness to step into the next chapter of her life. The juxtaposition of sadness and liberation adds complexity to her journey, hinting at the growth she has experienced through the challenges she has faced. Phoebe's willingness to embrace the changes in her life—both personal and professional—marks a turning point in her character arc. As she savors the moment, she understands that the small steps she takes toward her future will be what ultimately defines her. The bittersweet taste of champagne becomes symbolic of the new possibilities that await her, even as she grapples with the remnants of her past.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 marks a dramatic shift in the atmosphere at the Cornwall Hotel, following the cancellation of the much-anticipated wedding. The absence of both the bride and groom casts a shadow over the event, leaving guests feeling uneasy as they attempt to enjoy the hotel's spa amenities. The once vibrant setting is now quiet and subdued, with the lingering tension among the guests palpable. Pauline, who had once been full of energy, now moves through her duties with a heavy heart. She manages refund requests and addresses concerns about allergies, her tone reflecting her own sadness over the abrupt turn of events. Meanwhile, Phoebe stands in line with Nat and Suz, overhearing their hushed conversation about the wedding's sudden end. They speculate on Lila's true feelings toward her fiancé, offering hints that their suspicions about the couple's relationship had been present all along.

As Phoebe listens, she learns that Nat and Suz are set to leave that evening. Although she wishes to extend her stay at the hotel, she is told that there are no rooms available due to another wedding taking place. Pauline delivers the news with a firm finality, leaving Phoebe both frustrated and oddly proud of her decisiveness. Though initially taken aback, Phoebe ultimately accepts the situation, deciding to spend one last night at the hotel before checking out at eleven the following morning. The realization that the wedding had been replaced by another celebration leaves Phoebe reflecting on how quickly life can change. Despite the disappointment of the canceled wedding, Phoebe's thoughts remain fixed on her lingering attachment to the hotel, the sense of tranquility it provides, and her desire to remain in this world for just a little longer.

On the hotel's balcony, Phoebe finds herself thinking about Gary, wondering where he might have gone after the cancellation. She imagines he might seek solitude after everything that's transpired, contrasting his likely preference for quiet reflection with

her own need to escape into the comfort of her bed. As she watches hotel staff dismantling the remnants of the wedding celebrations, Phoebe envisions a white ribbon spiraling down into the darkness, symbolic of the fading dreams associated with the event. With a desire to check in on Gary, Phoebe knocks on his door but receives no response. Shortly after, Marla appears, unaware of Gary's whereabouts, and speculates that he may have left the hotel entirely. The uncertainty about Gary's whereabouts adds to the melancholy of the situation, further emphasizing the emotional toll the wedding's collapse has taken on everyone involved.

Later, in her own room, Phoebe reflects on the luxury of her surroundings, feeling a deep sense of nostalgia for the hotel that has become a temporary home. She wishes she could carry the essence of this space with her, capturing the comfort and calm it provides. With her departure looming, Phoebe contemplates how to mark this transition. She revisits her wedding speech, blending literary analysis with personal reflections on the nature of Victorian marriages. In the midst of this emotional contemplation, an email from Geoffrey offers Phoebe an exciting opportunity—a potential job that evokes the thrill of her childhood dreams. The offer presents a choice between continuing her connection with Gary or diving deeper into her passion for writing. Torn between the two paths, Phoebe ultimately decides to focus on her writing, choosing to explore *Jane Eyre* and analyze the pivotal moments leading to Jane's failed wedding. Energized by this decision, she writes through the night, finding solace in the creative process as she contemplates the impact of her narrative choices.

Phoebe's night of writing becomes a moment of personal liberation, where the weight of the world is momentarily lifted by the act of creation. She revels in the freedom of expressing herself on the page, feeling a sense of fulfillment that had eluded her in the past. This renewed sense of purpose offers Phoebe the clarity she needs to navigate the uncertainties ahead, allowing her to forge her own path forward. As she continues to immerse herself in the analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Phoebe feels a deeper connection to the themes of love, loss, and self-discovery that resonate within the novel. This moment of reflection, set against the backdrop of her current situation, marks a turning point in her journey—one that intertwines her personal growth with her

intellectual pursuits, ultimately leading her toward a future shaped by her own choices.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 begins with Marla insisting on staying in the conservatory, unwilling to leave until she has a chance to see Gary, all while the wedding brunch continues in full swing. The atmosphere at the event is marked by mixed emotions, with guests sharing subdued conversations and a sense of loss hanging in the air. Marla points out the food, but her words are underscored by whispers, as some guests remark that the occasion feels as though someone has died. Even in the absence of the groom, the family members share humorous, yet bittersweet stories from Gary's childhood, which paint a picture of love and affection for him. These anecdotes reveal how deeply his absence is felt, a blend of nostalgia and longing for the connection they once had with him, amplifying the sense of emptiness in the air.

As the day progresses, Jim makes attempts to contact Gary, emphasizing the importance of his presence and the weight of the situation. Meanwhile, the family offers various forms of comfort, acknowledging the recent breakup Gary went through and trying to provide emotional support, even as they all feel his absence. Phoebe, too, feels a deep concern for Gary's well-being and decides to send him a text to let him know about the ongoing storytelling session and the support he has back at the hotel. As she reflects on the situation, her thoughts drift to her own past, specifically her ex-husband, and the emotional traces their marriage has left on her. She begins to think about how her past relationships still cast long shadows over her present, making her question what she really seeks in connection and whether the echoes of the past will ever fade.

In the hotel lobby, the arrival of new wedding guests brings some life back to the otherwise somber space, sparking lighthearted conversations with Pauline. Phoebe tries to immerse herself in these conversations, which distract her momentarily from her growing concerns about Gary. Yet, even amidst the small talk, she is reminded of

Lila’s absence, and the paradox of weddings takes hold of her. There’s a sharp contrast between the joy that one bride should be experiencing and the sense of abandonment that others are feeling, including her own conflicted emotions about the situation. The event, once meant to be a celebration of love and union, has been overshadowed by a sense of loss and uncertainty, and Phoebe’s feelings about weddings are mixed with both sadness and confusion.

Later, while shopping at Marshalls, Phoebe’s phone buzzes with a message from Gary, who comments on the humorous stories being told about him at the wedding. Their text exchange deepens as Gary opens up about his emotional state, revealing that he’s struggling with feelings of inadequacy after his recent breakup. He confesses that he spent the night by his deceased wife’s grave, processing his emotions and reflecting on the profound changes he’s gone through since their time together. This moment of vulnerability opens up a conversation about the difficulties of navigating relationships and the courage required to face one’s true feelings. Through their exchange, Gary also shares insights into Lila’s true interests, including her avoidance of art-related discussions, adding depth to his understanding of her personality. He admits that he regrets not calling off the wedding when he sensed that something was wrong, further highlighting his struggle with trusting his instincts.

As Phoebe and Gary continue their conversation, they find common ground in their shared experiences and mutual understanding of the complexities of relationships. Their exchange becomes a space for honesty and connection, where both share candid thoughts and laughter, slowly forging a deeper bond. In these moments, they both come to the realization that personal growth and the journey toward becoming who they truly want to be takes time, effort, and a willingness to be vulnerable. The exchange between Phoebe and Gary represents a significant turning point in both of their lives, hinting at the possibility of new beginnings and transformative connections. As the chapter draws to a close, Phoebe reflects on the upcoming phase of her life, understanding that she is standing on the precipice of a new chapter, one that will require her to navigate both the beauty and the challenges of her past experiences as she moves forward. The possibility of healing and growth is within reach, and Phoebe’s

journey toward self-discovery feels more certain with each step she takes.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 begins with Lila visiting Phoebe in the morning, on her way to the flower vendor, where she casually mentions a power outage that has affected the flowers. Lila, without discussing the complexities of blending their families, asks Phoebe to accompany Gary for errands due to his back injury from surfing. With a humorous reference to herself in the third person, Lila brushes off concerns about Gary's condition and states her intent to keep him occupied. Despite her calm demeanor, Phoebe dreads spending the day with Gary, as she has been trying to move on from him. This reluctance to spend time with Gary is coupled with an underlying tension, as Phoebe must navigate her feelings while attempting to honor her role in the situation.

As they set off on their errands, Phoebe is conflicted, feeling both anxious and excited about a public speaking engagement later that day. Throughout their time together, she and Gary engage in banter, discussing their mutual discomfort with aging and the physical pains that come with it. They laugh about their shared experiences of bodily changes, turning what could have been complaints into a humorous exchange. This lighthearted conversation helps ease some of the tension between them, providing a sense of camaraderie before the weight of the day's responsibilities settles in. Despite the playful moments, Phoebe remains aware of the underlying emotions she is trying to suppress, particularly the complexity of her feelings for Gary.

After picking up preordered liquor from a store, Phoebe receives an unexpected text from Geoffrey, the mansion keeper, regarding a caretaker position at Newcombe Mansion. Intrigued by the opportunity, Phoebe decides to meet Geoffrey after she drops Gary off. Upon arriving at the mansion, she is greeted by Geoffrey, a charming southern gentleman who explains the requirements for the caretaker position. Phoebe is eager to discuss her research on historical buildings, something that sparks a renewed passion in her during the interview. Her enthusiasm for the subject gives her

a sense of purpose, offering a brief escape from the emotional complexity of her day. As the conversation shifts to the mansion’s potential and her qualifications, Phoebe begins to envision a new path forward, one that could provide her with a fresh start away from the current emotional turmoil.

While exploring the mansion, Phoebe and Gary discuss the lavish interiors, leading them to philosophical conversations about happiness and art collection. Gary, in a moment of unexpected vulnerability, admits that he feels happiness in the present moment, offering a rare glimpse into his emotional state. This honesty deepens their connection, as Phoebe begins to realize the weight of her unresolved feelings for him. Despite their comfortable exchange, the reality of Gary’s impending marriage looms large, and Phoebe’s heart aches at the thought of him marrying someone else. These moments highlight the deep emotional pull she feels toward Gary, complicating her ability to move on, especially as they share such intimate and meaningful conversations.

They continue their day by stopping at Gary’s tailor, where Phoebe’s mixed emotions resurface. She begins questioning whether she can truly move forward from her current life as a teacher to embrace a new life in Rhode Island. The thought of leaving her career behind conflicts with the powerful pull she still feels toward Gary, creating an emotional tug-of-war. Their shared moments throughout the day blur the lines between friendship and something deeper, making Phoebe question whether her feelings for Gary are just remnants of the past or if they still hold significance in her life. This internal conflict continues to build as the day goes on, making her feel more uncertain about her path forward.

At the barber, Gary opens up further, sharing a moment of vulnerability about how much he misses teaching. In this conversation, they connect over the pretense they both have had to maintain in their professional lives, revealing the pressures they each face. This mutual understanding brings them even closer, but the reminder of Gary’s impending marriage remains a constant undercurrent, making it difficult for Phoebe to fully embrace their connection. She recognizes the delicate balance between her

loyalty to Lila and her undeniable feelings for Gary, knowing that these emotions complicate her role as maid of honor in his upcoming wedding.

As they return to the hotel, the atmosphere between Phoebe and Gary shifts, filled with unspoken feelings and powerful emotions. Lila’s unexpected appearance amplifies Phoebe’s fears, reminding her of the impending wedding and the complicated role she will play in it. The realization that while she and Gary have shared a meaningful day together, the reality of his marriage to Lila is fast approaching, hits Phoebe hard. She must now prepare herself for the role she has agreed to as maid of honor, all while grappling with the unresolved emotions she harbors for Gary. This chapter leaves Phoebe in a state of emotional flux, torn between her loyalty to her friend and the lingering love she feels for the man about to marry someone else.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 opens with a charged atmosphere at Lila’s wedding rehearsal, held at the Breakers, where the tension is palpable. Patricia, Lila’s mother, is visibly tired, her demeanor somber as she prepares for the upcoming events, while Nancy, the event planner, arranges the guests in order of importance. Laughter briefly fills the air when Nancy humorously advises everyone to avoid touching the venue, lightening the mood for a moment. After Nancy leaves, the tension in the room begins to subside, allowing the atmosphere to shift to one of more subdued anticipation. Marla, ever the social connector, introduces her son, Oliver, to Phoebe, revealing his passion for literature, particularly the Percy Jackson books. Despite this pleasant interaction, Phoebe feels an emotional disconnect from her distant husband, ignoring his attempt to reach out via phone.

As the rehearsal dinner continues, various personal struggles and connections are revealed. Marla expresses her insecurities about her marriage, highlighting the tension she feels within her own relationship. Meanwhile, Phoebe begins to explore a deeper connection with Jim, Lila’s brother, as their intimacy grows, offering Phoebe a rare sense of emotional safety amidst the chaos of the evening. Observing the couple as they exchange vows and prepare for their marriage, Phoebe is struck by the symbolism of the act. She watches Lila and Gary, considering the significance of signing away their pasts as part of the wedding ritual. This prompts Phoebe to think about her own potential actions with Jim, whose younger age and easy company offer her a welcome escape from the emotional storm that surrounds her.

The dinner itself is a mix of humor and tension, with Lila caught between her mother’s overt display and her desire for autonomy on her special day. A provocative painting of Lila herself, brought by Patricia, further stirs the emotions, creating friction between them. Jim’s speech, which starts as a heartfelt tribute to the family, gradually turns

into a comedic onslaught, breaking the tension and bringing the room to laughter. His speech, though humorous, also highlights the deep familial bonds that exist, reminding everyone of the love and connection that is central to the ceremony. However, beneath the surface of laughter, there is a growing sense of unease, particularly with Lila’s agitation toward Jim’s quirks and the frustrations that build throughout the night.

As the evening continues, the tensions in Lila and Gary’s relationship come to the forefront, exacerbated by their disagreement over the omitted palate cleansers, which once again highlights their deeper issues. This trivial argument reveals cracks in their marriage that seem to have been building over time, hinting at larger unresolved conflicts. The speech that Jim delivers about love, grief, and familial bonds brings the dinner to an emotional climax, uniting the guests despite the chaos surrounding them. It serves as a reminder that, despite the dysfunction, family can still be a source of strength and unity, even in moments of turmoil. This emotional speech underscores the fragile nature of relationships, both romantic and familial, that are on the verge of breaking under the weight of unspoken truths.

In the aftermath of the dinner, Lila’s insecurities come to light as she grapples with her strained relationships and the pressure of familial expectations. She and Phoebe engage in a tense conversation about loyalty, love, and the complexity of their roles in each other’s lives, revealing the deep emotional divides that separate them. The chapter takes a darker turn with the unexpected appearance of Juice, whose presence further complicates the already fragile dynamics within the family. This incident highlights just how precarious their relationships are and sets the stage for more tension and emotional unraveling. As Phoebe reflects on her interactions with Gary, she is left contemplating the unresolved feelings between them, while the external festivities continue without resolution. This foreshadows further emotional developments, suggesting that the quiet conflicts simmering beneath the surface will eventually come to a head, leading to significant changes for the characters involved.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 begins with a moment of deep emotional tension as Phoebe enters her hotel room, only to find herself face-to-face with Matt. The atmosphere is thick with uncertainty as they stand together, their history weighing heavily in the air between them. Phoebe, unsure of what to feel, is struck by the realization that the man in front of her, once her husband, now feels like a stranger. Matt, equally unsure of how to navigate the encounter, stands awkwardly, and their reunion is marred by discomfort and confusion. The awkwardness is compounded by Gary, Phoebe's current partner, leaving with her daughter, Juice, which intensifies the sense of strangeness between Phoebe and Matt. The separation of their lives is undeniable, and in this moment, the vast emotional distance between them becomes glaringly clear.

Matt begins by expressing his concern for Phoebe, revealing the emotional turmoil he experienced when he thought she might be dead after her sudden disappearance. The weight of his words is evident, as he opens up about the pain he felt, especially the loss of their dog, Harry, which had become a symbol of their shared life. This admission adds depth to Matt’s character, showing a vulnerability that has been hidden for years. Their conversation shifts as they both revisit old wounds, with Matt still seeing Phoebe as his wife despite the divorce that has torn them apart. Phoebe, on the other hand, finds herself reflecting on their past with bitterness and regret, questioning the actions that led them to such a painful separation. The dialogue between them is a mixture of raw emotion, with moments of tenderness interspersed with the uncomfortable truth of their estranged relationship.

As their conversation unfolds, Phoebe asserts her independence, making it clear that she has grown and changed in the years since their separation. She confronts Matt about the abandonment she felt when he left her, particularly during the most difficult times in their marriage. She also brings up his infidelity with Mia, acknowledging the

deep betrayal she felt when he chose to be with someone else. Despite the anger and hurt she expresses, Phoebe also confesses that, in a strange way, she is glad Matt still cares enough to find her after all these years. It’s a moment of vulnerability for both of them, as they both realize the complexity of their emotions. Phoebe acknowledges the space she now occupies in her own life—independent, stronger, and resolute in her own desires.

Their shared history continues to hover over their conversation, and Matt’s desire to reconnect with Phoebe is palpable. He expresses regret for his past mistakes, particularly the choices he made that led to their separation. His longing to rekindle something that once was is evident, but Phoebe is resolute in her stance. She tells him that their relationship, as they once knew it, is forever changed. Despite the moments of warmth and nostalgia they share, Phoebe is determined to keep moving forward, no longer willing to return to the dynamic they once had. She sees herself as someone different now, and while she recognizes the past’s emotional pull, she knows that her future lies ahead, not behind.

As their conversation grows more emotionally intense, their reflection on their shared memories culminates in a kiss. The kiss, however, is fraught with conflicting emotions for Phoebe. On one hand, she feels an undeniable attraction to Matt, a lingering connection from their past that is impossible to ignore. On the other hand, she recognizes the need to establish new boundaries in her life, boundaries that this kiss complicates. The kiss serves as a poignant reminder of the love they once shared, but it also underscores the reality of the changes that have taken place. For Phoebe, this moment becomes an internal battle between her heart and her head, as she struggles to reconcile the love she still feels with the person she has become.

The chapter concludes with Phoebe in a reflective state, processing the emotional whirlwind of the day. She understands that her relationship with Matt has reached a critical juncture, one where the past must be let go in order for her to embrace the future. The emotional complexity of their interaction lingers in Phoebe’s mind, with her recognizing the need to confront her feelings for Matt head-on. However, she also

knows that, despite the lingering attraction, she cannot return to the life they once had together. Her journey toward self-discovery is far from over, and she realizes that this chapter with Matt—though significant—must come to an end. The emotional tension between them signals a turning point, as Phoebe looks ahead to a future where she can forge her own path, free from the emotional ties of the past. The kiss may have sparked old feelings, but Phoebe’s resolve to build a new life remains unshaken.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 begins with Phoebe waking up beside her husband, who appears to be peacefully enjoying a deep, restful sleep—something she finds herself envious of. As she glances at her phone, she notices it’s devoid of any messages, and a feeling of uncertainty begins to seep in. She remembers that today is Gary's wedding day, which leads her to question her choices. Phoebe struggles with guilt, questioning whether she has made a mistake by walking away from Gary and finding herself with someone who does not feel like her true partner. This internal conflict marks the beginning of her emotional journey through the day, as she grapples with the complexities of love, commitment, and the consequences of her decisions.

Later, when Phoebe enters the bridal suite, she finds Suz and Nat already prepared, signaling that the wedding is fast approaching. The room is filled with excitement and anticipation, but Phoebe notices that Lila, dressed in a floral silk robe, remains distant and seemingly aloof. As the women shower Lila with enthusiasm, Phoebe observes her friend’s quiet demeanor, sensing an underlying tension that contrasts sharply with the outward celebration. During this moment, a stylist named Tiff begins to work on Phoebe, suggesting a side bang, a small yet significant change that excites Phoebe and transforms her look. This minor adjustment to her appearance helps to shift Phoebe’s focus away from the mounting tensions and adds a refreshing spark of confidence to her, allowing her to feel more connected to the moment.

The mood in the suite changes when Jim enters with an eccentric offering of spoons, hoping to make amends for his previous behavior. However, his attempt to apologize only seems to deepen the tension, especially when Lila remains silent, her aloofness unsettling Phoebe. It becomes clear to Phoebe that Lila’s calm exterior may mask deeper uncertainties about the wedding and her relationship with Gary. Lila’s mother, Patricia, offers champagne to the group, but Lila surprisingly declines, opting to stay

sober, further adding to the sense of unease. The quiet that envelops Lila during these moments speaks volumes, and Phoebe is left to wonder about the stability of her friend as she approaches such a monumental event in her life.

With all the women ready, Lila asks Phoebe to help her with her dress, commenting on its beauty while voicing a deep-seated fear that the wedding may be doomed. In this vulnerable moment, Phoebe realizes that Lila's concerns are rooted in genuine worry about her future with Gary, something that has been building beneath the surface. The two engage in an honest conversation about love and loyalty, with Phoebe attempting to reassure Lila about Gary's commitment, though her own voice trembles with uncertainty. It becomes clear that Phoebe is not entirely convinced about the stability of Lila and Gary's relationship, but she still offers her support to Lila in a bid to soothe her nerves. Their exchange allows them both to connect on a deeper level, offering a fleeting glimpse of understanding amidst the emotional chaos that is unfolding.

As they prepare to leave the bridal suite, another obstacle arises when Lila rejects the black town car, insisting it does not meet her expectations of a vintage option for the wedding. This small, seemingly trivial issue sparks a heated confrontation, with Phoebe trying to reason with Lila about how the details of the day should not overshadow its true meaning. Lila's tears betray her deep insecurities and fears about her marriage to Gary, as she expresses doubts about their love and questions whether she's making the right choice. Phoebe, seeing her friend's vulnerability, steps in to offer emotional support, suggesting that Lila prioritize self-care and freedom from the marriage if it doesn't bring her happiness. This moment of understanding highlights the complex emotions Lila is navigating, and Phoebe's willingness to listen further strengthens their bond.

Lila, in her moment of reflection, acknowledges that despite the grandeur of the wedding, something about it feels wrong to her. Phoebe, now more attuned to Lila's inner turmoil, reminds her of the practicalities and fleeting nature of weddings. The exchange becomes a pivotal moment of emotional connection, where the two women recognize that love does not always conform to societal expectations or traditional

roles. Their conversation culminates in a recognition of the deeper, more meaningful aspects of love, with Phoebe expressing her gratitude for Lila’s influence on her throughout the week. This emotional exchange not only deepens their friendship but also underscores the complexity of relationships, both romantic and platonic, and the importance of understanding one’s true desires in a world that often prioritizes appearances over authenticity.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 opens during Lila’s bachelorette party, held in a luxurious spa that begins with a “water journey,” a term that Marla finds off-putting. As the group immerses themselves in the tranquil spa environment, they share playful banter about topics like nudity, relationships, and the role of social media, which is sparked by Phoebe’s humorous comments on healing and sexting. Each of the women engages with different pools, each seeking their own personal path to relaxation while revealing subtle glimpses of their lives. This setting offers a rare opportunity for the characters to relax and reflect, but their individual struggles remain present beneath the surface. Their discussions, though lighthearted, hint at deeper emotions and concerns, including those related to relationships, identity, and self-acceptance. The spa day thus serves as a backdrop for exploring the complex nature of each character’s inner world, their desires, and the challenges they face.

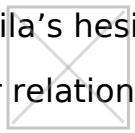
Amid the relaxation, Lila is burdened with anxiety over marrying Gary, especially regarding his traditional beliefs about their wedding, which conflicts with her own personal views. The thought of having a church wedding, something that Gary insists upon, feels increasingly alien to Lila, who has her own beliefs and desires for what her marriage should look like. Phoebe, acting as a source of comfort, encourages Lila to breathe deeply and let go of the mounting pressure, helping her manage her anxiety amidst the growing family expectations. Despite Phoebe’s calming presence, the peace of the day is broken when Jim, with his usual flair for dramatic flair, arrives with gossip about a vintage car being “fucked.” This shocking statement causes confusion and disarray among the group, with Lila particularly thrown by the audacity of the remark, which only serves to heighten her already fragile state of mind. The moment shifts from calm reflection to chaotic distraction, underlining the tension between personal desires and external pressures.

Later, as the women regroup to celebrate and unwind, their conversations dive into more complex topics about relationships, intimacy, and their internal struggles. They discuss the challenges of marriage, sharing their hopes and anxieties about commitment and the changes it will bring. Marla, in particular, reflects on her own shortcomings in her marriage, and through an emotional bond with Phoebe, they share their respective battles with love, understanding, and maintaining a sense of self. These conversations offer an honest look into the women's fears and hopes, emphasizing how much they all grapple with the idea of love, fidelity, and personal growth. Each woman reveals a part of herself that is struggling with the expectations of others, both in their romantic lives and in society. These candid discussions create a space of collective vulnerability, where the characters are able to explore their feelings about their relationships, both with themselves and with others.

The narrative turns more introspective as the women continue their dialogue, contemplating their identities, desires, and fears for the future. They find humor and strength in shared experiences, though underlying anxieties about commitments and personal growth are evident in their words. Lila, in particular, expresses her fear of losing her sense of self as she transitions into marriage, sharing her internal conflict about her future role as a wife. She confesses to envisioning a life beyond simply fulfilling others' expectations, a realization that marks a significant moment of self-awareness for her. Her fear of losing herself in the process of becoming someone's wife speaks to the universal fear many individuals have when transitioning into significant life roles. This internal battle for identity highlights the complexity of love and the toll that societal pressures and expectations can take on personal fulfillment. The women's willingness to engage in these conversations creates an atmosphere of mutual support and understanding, allowing them to confront their anxieties together.

As the night progresses, the party atmosphere intensifies, and Lila's vulnerability becomes even more evident. In a heartfelt moment, she admits her doubts about going through with the marriage, exposing the conflict between her desires and the expectations placed on her. Phoebe, ever the supportive friend, steps in to help Lila face these fears head-on, urging her not to run from the discomfort but to embrace it

and find clarity in the process. This shift from avoidance to acceptance represents a pivotal moment for Lila, who begins to acknowledge her inner turmoil rather than suppressing it. The chapter concludes with a deeper understanding between Lila and Phoebe, highlighting their friendship as a source of emotional strength. At the same time, the emotional complexity of Lila’s situation begins to mirror Gary’s own struggles with the loss of his first wife, adding another layer of depth to the narrative. This juxtaposition of Lila’s hesitations and Gary’s past pain sets the stage for the evolving dynamics of their relationship. As Phoebe and Gary share a quiet moment, the chapter hints at potential transformations in their connections, leaving readers wondering how these emotional journeys will unfold.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 opens with a light-hearted moment the morning after a wild night, as Lila teases Phoebe for cleaning the room, her hangover from the previous night’s celebration evident. Though Lila seems disoriented, she casually mentions their plans for the day, including the surfing lesson awaiting them, yet her tone reflects little enthusiasm. Juice, her companion, pushes for them to hurry, as they are already behind schedule, but Phoebe, sensing the need for space, decides to stay behind and give Lila some alone time amidst the chaotic wedding preparations. Phoebe’s decision to hold back hints at a growing understanding of the emotional undercurrents in the group, as she navigates her own feelings and obligations within this turbulent atmosphere.

As Lila prepares for the day, she shares her doubts about her ability to surf, admitting she never wanted to take part in the activity in the first place. Despite initially promising Juice a morning of surfing, Lila now feels a reluctance, revealing her underlying disinterest. This moment of vulnerability contrasts sharply with Phoebe’s quiet introspection, as she contemplates her own place in the wedding festivities and the role she is expected to play. Beneath the surface, tensions regarding her feelings for Gary begin to surface, adding complexity to Phoebe's interactions as she processes her emotional state. Lila’s casual approach to the day’s events juxtaposes with Phoebe’s more serious internal dialogue, highlighting the differences in their perspectives and their evolving relationships with the people around them.

At the beach, Phoebe and Gary fumble as they struggle to fit into their wetsuits, providing a lighthearted moment that breaks the tension between them. Their awkwardness, while comedic, also draws them closer, with Gary’s laughter making Phoebe smile and adding warmth to the moment. The ease of Gary’s humor contrasts with the difficulty of their shared challenge, and Phoebe begins to appreciate the

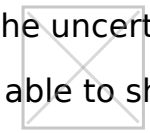
authenticity of his laughter, which brings a sense of ease amid the discomfort. The interaction deepens their connection, allowing Phoebe to let go of some of her previous reservations, even as the complexities of her feelings continue to linger beneath the surface. Their shared laughter signals the growing comfort between them, while also setting the tone for the day ahead.

When they meet Aspen, their surf instructor, Phoebe recalls her yoga lessons from the pandemic, which help her feel more grounded and present as she prepares to catch her first wave. As she manages to stand on the board for the first time, the exhilaration of success quickly turns into a thrilling tumble into the ocean, where the saltwater and the rush of the waves overwhelm her senses. This experience, though brief, allows Phoebe to feel a sense of freedom and vitality that she had been missing. The dynamic between the trio—Phoebe, Gary, and Juice—grows more familial as they cheer for Juice, who quickly masters the waves, further bonding them through shared moments of joy and success. The playful camaraderie strengthens their connection, making the day feel more like an adventure among close friends than an obligation.

As the session progresses, the waves grow larger, and the trio's laughter grows louder, signaling their deepening bond and increasing enjoyment of the activity. The experience becomes one of exhilaration, not just from the waves but from the sense of unity they feel as they conquer the surf together. Afterward, they head to Flo's for lunch, celebrating their accomplishments from the day while Phoebe reflects on the growing emotions she feels for Gary. The camaraderie of the day and the simple joy of being together highlight the complexity of her feelings, blending happiness with a sense of bittersweetness. Phoebe's desire to connect with Gary intensifies, but she remains apprehensive about fully opening up to him, fearing that the moment might be fleeting and not last.

Despite the underlying tension, Phoebe finds herself immersed in the warmth of the day, trying to savor the joy and simplicity of the moments spent with Gary and Juice. As they go through mundane errands, Phoebe is able to find humor in life's simplicity, drawing closer to Gary in ways she hadn't anticipated. The ease with which they

navigate these small tasks together creates a sense of normalcy, one that Phoebe hasn’t experienced in a long time. Yet, as the day draws to a close, she feels the subtle pang of realization that moments like these are fragile, and the warmth she’s found might not last forever. Still, she’s grateful for the connections she’s made, and she finds herself wishing for more of these small, joyful moments with Gary. These fleeting instances remind Phoebe of the deeper emotional complexities she’s facing, pushing her to confront the uncertainty of her feelings while appreciating the rare moments of happiness she’s able to share with those around her.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 delves into Phoebe's mounting anxiety as she struggles with Lila’s absence before the Blending of the Families event. She finds herself worried that Lila may harbor resentment, particularly after Phoebe had left Gas-X at her door without packaging. Despite these concerns, Phoebe reflects on the joy and love she has found with Gary, realizing that Lila encouraged her to embrace those emotions fully. However, when Phoebe sits down to write her maid of honor speech, she is filled with uncertainty. The words seem difficult to find, and she feels as though she is writing about a topic she cannot truly believe in. The conflicting emotions she harbors toward Lila and Gary’s relationship make the task feel more daunting, and she becomes increasingly unsure about the sincerity of the words she is about to write for someone else’s relationship.

Her internal conflict deepens as Phoebe reflects on Lila and Gary’s bond. She realizes that their connection is not based on love, but rather on fear—fear of loneliness, and the emotional need to fill the void of solitude. Lila and Gary’s relationship seems built more on convenience than genuine affection, and this realization disturbs Phoebe as she reflects on how they both long for love but are unable to find it with each other. At this moment, Phoebe’s path crosses with Jim, who initially asks for her help with his own wedding speech, but soon becomes an unexpected ally in navigating the turmoil surrounding the event. Jim’s doubts about Gary and Lila’s relationship mirror Phoebe’s own concerns, and their shared contemplation of Gary’s authenticity and the depth of his emotions forms a powerful bond between them. As they brainstorm together, Phoebe finds comfort in Jim’s willingness to be open about the uncertainty they both face, and the two friends begin to explore the complexities of the situation with greater clarity.

Jim’s honesty takes a more personal turn when he shares a nostalgic memory of his own feelings for Lila. He recalls the time when he, out of a sense of loyalty to Gary, decided to step aside for him, despite his own deep affection for Lila. Jim reflects on the painful but selfless decision to prioritize Gary’s happiness over his own desires, and this moment reveals a profound emotional sacrifice. It’s clear that Jim’s relationship with Lila was shaped by a deep sense of responsibility and friendship, which only adds to the emotional weight of the situation. In a lighter moment, Jim suggests using marijuana edibles to ease their creative block as they both struggle with writing their speeches. This suggestion brings some comic relief to the otherwise tense atmosphere, and the humorous discussion about paranoia adds a sense of levity to the situation. Jim’s lightheartedness helps Phoebe temporarily release some of the pressure she’s been feeling, offering a much-needed moment of escape from the emotional complexity of the wedding.

As they wait for the effects of the edibles to kick in, the unique nature of their shared predicament becomes clear. Two friends, tangled in their own unresolved emotions and personal conflicts, find themselves trying to navigate the complicated relationships around them. As Phoebe continues to work on her speech in her room, her thoughts wander, and she begins to reflect on her own life. She begins considering the possibility of change, contemplating future options such as finding new housing and exploring teaching opportunities that might allow her to start fresh. The idea of beginning anew fills her with a sense of purpose and excitement, providing an optimistic outlook for what lies ahead. While she is still in the midst of emotional uncertainty regarding the wedding and her place in it, she feels a renewed sense of control over her own future. This chapter concludes with Phoebe feeling both accomplished and hopeful, having gained insight into her own desires and the courage to take action toward them. Her personal growth is evident, and the chapter highlights her ability to move forward with determination despite the complexities of her current situation.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 begins with Phoebe waking up with an overwhelming urge to connect with the ocean, prompting her to head for a walk along the Cliff Walk. As she prepares, she spots Lila and Gary posing for photographs in the conservatory, dressed formally for the occasion, which seems unusual given the early hour. Although she briefly admires Lila’s beauty, her mind quickly drifts to Lila’s harsh judgments about fashion, reminding her of the superficial nature of their relationship. The tension in the air is palpable for a moment, but Phoebe chooses to leave, stepping out to the coast where she can enjoy some solitude and collect her thoughts.

During her walk, Phoebe encounters a cheerful yellow dog, and, feeling playful, she engages in a lighthearted race with the animal. She reflects on how much she longs for a pet, imagining the joy and freedom it could bring to her mornings. The dog leads her to a more dangerous area near the cliffs, where signs warn of the risks, and here, she meets a fisherman who offers a friendly greeting. As they chat, Phoebe contemplates her relationship with her father, recalling how he viewed loneliness with a sense of optimism, as if it was something to be embraced rather than avoided.

Sitting on the rocks, Phoebe experiences a deep sense of gratitude as she takes in the vast, raw ocean before her, feeling both small and infinite in its presence. This peaceful moment is abruptly interrupted by a text message from her husband, Matt, which brings forth a wave of frustration and resentment. She decides not to respond, feeling that he should understand the pain she’s going through and share in the emotional turmoil she feels. As she begins to reflect more deeply on her life and the choices she has made, the fisherman, who is busy reeling in a fish, invites her to join him. Phoebe helps him reel in a sea robin, but the realization that the catch has little value leaves her feeling disillusioned, mirroring her own perceptions of worthlessness in her current state.

After returning to solid ground, Phoebe reflects on her resilience, acknowledging how she has survived the emotional turbulence that has marked much of her life. Her thoughts shift to Edith Wharton and the nearby house that carries no nostalgia for her, representing instead a space of loss and artistic beginnings during Wharton’s less understood years. This house, like much of her surroundings, holds little personal meaning for Phoebe, but serves as a reminder of both what has been lost and what can emerge from periods of uncertainty and change. As Phoebe heads back from the coast, she encounters Gary, whose lighthearted nature brings a much-needed contrast to her heavy thoughts. Their exchange is filled with banter about loss and relationships, prompting Phoebe to confront the changes in her life and the identity she is forming in the face of them.

The chapter concludes with Phoebe heading back to the festivities, the anticipation of her role as maid of honor settling into her consciousness. Despite the complex emotions she’s been grappling with, she feels a renewed sense of purpose and a glimmer of humor in the midst of the bridal chaos. Her reflections on the morning, from her quiet time by the ocean to her interaction with Gary, allow her to embrace her responsibilities with a clearer mind, ready to face whatever challenges the day may bring. As she steps forward into this new role, she is reminded of the importance of balance between duty, personal growth, and the inevitable joys and struggles that accompany significant life events.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 presents a poignant exploration of Phoebe’s internal struggles as she drives Juice, her husband’s child from his affair, through the quiet streets. Her thoughts are consumed with her feelings of inadequacy as a mother, particularly when compared to others. Phoebe recognizes that her emotional distance and less traditional approach to motherhood are often highlighted by people around her, which causes her to reflect on her own upbringing. Growing up with a father who wasn’t particularly affectionate, Phoebe became accustomed to withholding her emotions. This shaped her resistance to the emotional expressions that are expected from mothers in conventional society. Despite her detachment, Phoebe feels a genuine love for children, but her affection comes without the overt displays many other mothers exhibit. This contrast between her inner emotions and outward expectations becomes a source of internal conflict, leaving Phoebe to question how she fits into the role of a mother.

The chapter shifts to a Thanksgiving gathering, where Phoebe’s feelings of alienation are made clear. Surrounded by her husband and Mia, Juice’s mother, who bond over stories of parenting, Phoebe feels like a stranger in her own family. Their easy camaraderie highlights the distance between Phoebe and her husband, who seems more engaged with Mia than with her. This disconnect prompts a painful realization: Phoebe fears the growing rift between her and her husband, a rift that began with his affair and now seems to widen with every passing moment. She feels increasingly isolated, as the intimacy between her husband and Mia underscores her own feelings of abandonment. The emotional weight of this fear—of losing her husband both emotionally and physically—settles heavily on Phoebe, marking the beginning of a profound shift in her perspective on love, loyalty, and connection.

Phoebe’s day continues with a shopping trip alongside Juice, during which they share a warm and humorous exchange. As they talk, Juice reveals his strong disapproval of Lila, his father’s new partner, and Phoebe sees this as an opportunity to encourage his sense of self-worth and independence. Their conversation about style, self-image, and societal expectations takes on a deeper meaning, shedding light on the generational differences that separate them. Phoebe recognizes that while Juice is forming his own understanding of identity, she, too, is navigating her own journey of self-discovery. They discuss how societal pressures shape their perceptions of themselves and others, but it becomes clear that Phoebe is committed to teaching Juice the importance of staying true to who he is, regardless of outside opinions. In this moment, Phoebe also learns from Juice, who shows her the simplicity of being true to oneself and how his openness to change contrasts with her own struggles.

Throughout their shopping experience, Phoebe begins to feel a sense of empowerment. As she picks out clothes and accessories that represent who she wants to be, she feels liberated from the constraints of maternal expectations that have been placed upon her. The act of choosing items that express her individuality brings a much-needed sense of control back into Phoebe’s life, even as the shadow of her relationship troubles looms large. Despite the emotional confusion she’s facing with her husband and her feelings of displacement, Phoebe embraces this small victory over the expectations surrounding her. It is through these simple, yet significant, moments that she begins to carve out space for herself. The sense of ownership over her choices becomes a symbol of her independence, offering her a fleeting but powerful respite from the chaos and uncertainty of her personal life.

As the day progresses, Phoebe and Juice share more meaningful moments, discussing themes of love, loss, and identity. This conversation with Juice deepens their bond, bringing them closer together as they navigate their individual journeys through life. Phoebe finds comfort in the connection they share, as it becomes clear that despite the turmoil in her marriage and the weight of her responsibilities, she can still find moments of clarity and hope. By the end of the chapter, Phoebe’s reflections have shifted. She now approaches her role as a mother and wife with a renewed sense of

purpose, having embraced her individuality and understood the importance of connecting with herself, her daughter, and others in her life. The chapter concludes on a hopeful note, with Phoebe feeling empowered and ready to take on whatever challenges lie ahead.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 opens with Phoebe returning an outfit borrowed from Lila’s mother, Patricia, before a bachelorette party. Patricia, surprised by the return, directs Phoebe to place the clothes near the raven sculptures that decorate her room. The presence of the ravens adds an eerie atmosphere, and Patricia half-jokingly suggests that they represent all that has been lost in her life. Although Patricia clearly desires privacy, Phoebe senses the loneliness in her presence and feels compelled to offer companionship. Despite the tension, Phoebe can't ignore her instincts and initiates a conversation, sensing a deeper need for connection in Patricia’s life.

Their conversation begins with Phoebe thanking Patricia for the clothes and mentioning her visit to Patricia’s gallery, praising the impressive collection of artists it has showcased over the years. Patricia opens up about her passion for art, mentioning her love for both living and deceased artists. She humorously discusses her collection, which includes Hudson River School paintings and a Warhol piece, but the discussion soon takes a more somber turn. Patricia begins to connect art with death, revealing her discomfort with the "death paintings" hanging over her bed, which represent the constant reminder of loss in her life. This dialogue about art and its intersection with personal grief becomes an insightful moment for both women, as they reflect on the presence of death in their lives, both symbolically and literally.

As the conversation continues, Patricia shares a drink with Phoebe, an elderberry hibiscus margarita, and reflects on her current situation. She confesses her feelings of being trapped in the chaos of Lila’s wedding preparations, expressing how Lila’s restrictions have stifled her freedom and sense of autonomy. The conversation naturally shifts to Patricia’s relationship with her daughter, Lila, where she admits that their bond was once much stronger before grief and emotional distance took hold. Patricia’s sense of loss is not only tied to her husband but also to the deterioration of

her relationship with Lila. This discussion about family dynamics reveals how personal grief and unresolved emotions affect connections between loved ones. Patricia’s vulnerable sharing about her relationship with Lila shows how loss, both emotional and physical, shapes familial bonds and affects her sense of self.

The deeper the conversation goes, the more intimate the topics become, with Patricia offering her wisdom about love, aging, and loss. She recalls her tumultuous marriage to Henry and the profound pain of losing him, reflecting on how love transforms as one ages. Patricia expresses regret that Lila, much like herself, seeks validation from men, warning her that true love and self-acceptance can only come through experiencing and processing loss, not through seeking replacements. This insight comes from Patricia’s own hard-earned wisdom, and she shares it with Phoebe in the hope of guiding her away from making similar mistakes. Their discussion about love, loss, and self-worth speaks to the complexities of relationships, particularly in the context of generational struggles with identity and validation.

As the chapter continues, the conversation shifts toward acceptance of aging and the lessons that come with it. Patricia urges Phoebe to embrace her true self, advising her not to conform to societal expectations or the persona others may expect her to be. Patricia’s reflections on her own choices about style and identity emphasize the importance of personal authenticity over external validation. This chapter beautifully portrays the evolving relationship between Patricia and Phoebe, as they connect on a deeper emotional level, sharing stories of love, regret, and the complexities of their respective familial bonds. Through their intimate exchange, both women begin to understand the importance of accepting themselves as they are, moving away from the societal pressures that have shaped their past choices.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins with Phoebe joining Lila’s wedding party, which carries an eerie, almost cult-like sense of camaraderie. Lila introduces Phoebe to her friends, including High Bun, who despite her name now wears a long fishtail braid, and Neck Pillow, sporting an eye-catching diamond necklace. The introductions are quirky and lighthearted, with humor revealing the unique personalities of the group members, especially Marla, the groom’s sister, and Juice, the groom’s daughter, who prefers to be called by her unusual nickname. The interactions are a blend of humor and oddities, creating a peculiar dynamic between the characters that makes Phoebe both intrigued and slightly uncomfortable.

As the conversation progresses, Phoebe observes Lila’s demeanor shift—she becomes quieter and less assertive around the wedding guests, revealing a more reserved side of herself. This transformation causes Phoebe to feel protective of Lila, reminding her of her own wedding experiences where similar shifts in mood occurred. Though Phoebe tries to lighten the atmosphere with humor, Lila remains subdued, while others engage in sarcastic banter and familiar exchanges, which only make Phoebe feel more out of place. The contrasting dynamics among the group members become clearer, as Phoebe reflects on her role in the wedding and her discomfort with the tensions simmering beneath the surface.

Lila begins to share the story of how she met Gary, the groom, at her mother’s art gallery, and the group eagerly discusses this connection. They are especially intrigued by the coincidence that Gary was also her father’s doctor, which adds a layer of significance to their relationship. During the storytelling, there’s a humorous exchange about a nude painting, but the mood shifts quickly when tensions arise within the group, resulting in an awkward silence. The story about Lila and Gary’s meeting is both charming and unsettling, as it reveals more about their relationship and the

awkwardness in the room, setting the tone for the unfolding dynamics. The group’s reactions to the story suggest underlying discomfort, and it becomes evident that the group’s interactions are far from seamless.

As the conversation draws to a close, the women prepare to depart for the wedding venue, but the dynamics shift again when the topic of transportation comes up. High Bun and Lila decide to drive a vintage convertible, but the car’s old mechanics require Phoebe’s help, as she is familiar with stick shifts. This marks the beginning of a change in the group’s mood, as the journey toward Bowen’s Wharf is filled with a blend of anticipation and nostalgia. The car ride reveals different sides of the women, with Phoebe observing their contrasting personalities and interactions. Their conversations drift from lighthearted banter to deeper, more personal exchanges, as they navigate through the traffic chaos, punctuating the journey with humor despite the undercurrents of discomfort.

Upon reaching Bowen’s Wharf, the group’s arrival is met with a mix of excitement and unease, as Phoebe notices Gary in the crowd. Their past connection from the hot tub is briefly acknowledged, but the moment is overshadowed by the awkwardness of the situation. Juice’s outburst about her recently "deceased" virtual dog named Human Princess shifts the tone of the gathering, revealing deeper emotional currents within the family. The mention of loss and memories brings a more somber undertone to the event, highlighting the complexities of family relationships. The chapter ends with the group being invited to continue their gathering on a boat, maintaining a balance of fascination, tension, and unexpected emotional revelations among the characters. This scene encapsulates the emotional intricacies of the gathering and the undercurrent of unspoken feelings that will continue to shape the interactions between the characters.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 opens with the characters aboard a small sailboat, a setting that quickly becomes a canvas for playful exchanges and subtle tension. As they sail, the captain warns them not to lean too far back to prevent tipping the boat, sparking a wave of light-hearted banter among the group. Marla, ever the critic, jokingly challenges the captain’s instruction, making the moment feel more like an inside joke than a genuine concern. Meanwhile, Lila remains composed, chatting comfortably and requesting a drink called "Vacations in a Cup," which sparks a humorous debate among the group about how to properly pluralize the drink’s name. This seemingly trivial argument becomes a symbol of the playful dynamics at play within the group, particularly highlighting Marla’s legal background. Her instinct to argue over technicalities contrasts sharply with the others’ more relaxed attitude, leading to laughs and shared memories, including a funny story about their college days spent stealing wine from a church. It’s clear from these interactions that the group, despite their differing personalities, shares a bond rooted in familiarity and a sense of humor.

As the conversation flows, however, a sudden shift occurs when an awkward silence settles in. Marla’s inability to read the room becomes evident, her playful nature stalling in the presence of unspoken tension. Gary, Lila’s fiancé, tries to break the silence and smooth over the discomfort, but his efforts only highlight the complexities within his relationship with Lila. Their bond, while outwardly harmonious, is tainted by Gary’s emotional baggage from past struggles, creating an underlying tension that Phoebe begins to notice more acutely. Her husband’s strained connection with Lila contrasts with the jovial nature of the rest of the group, raising questions about the authenticity of their love and the emotional distance between them. This disconnect is further emphasized as the group’s light-hearted banter, which serves as a mask for deeper issues, continues. Marla’s need for constant validation and approval from

others adds to the discomfort, as it becomes apparent that while the group is trying to maintain a cheerful atmosphere, there are cracks forming in their relationships, most notably between Lila and Gary.

Phoebe, now the center of attention, is asked to weigh in on the grammatical debate regarding the pluralization of the drink. As an English professor, she offers a solution that brings a much-needed sense of clarity and comedic relief, capturing the group's attention momentarily. This moment of focus on Phoebe lightens the atmosphere, allowing everyone to momentarily shift their attention from the underlying discomfort to the humor of the situation. The group shares a few drinks in a much-needed break from the tension, yet the mood remains undercut by the looming reality of Marla's personal distractions. As Marla frets over an expired car registration, the shift in focus pulls the group's energy away from the momentary joy and back toward the unresolved issues that seem to plague each of them. Marla's anxiety over minor inconveniences serves as a metaphor for the larger emotional struggles she faces, particularly her need for control in an otherwise chaotic life.

Phoebe, though momentarily distracted by the group's dynamics, finds herself in the midst of her own internal turmoil. Still reeling from the loss of her dog, Harry, Phoebe grapples with feelings of disconnection. She begins to reflect on her personal sense of identity, realizing that her grief is not only linked to the loss of her dog but also to her ongoing struggles with her place in the world. The chapter touches on the disparity between Phoebe's emotional journey and Marla's desperate need for order, highlighting how each character's internal battles manifest in different ways. As Phoebe attempts to reconnect with her own sense of joy and purpose, she reflects on the idea that true emotional healing often comes from embracing one's struggles, not avoiding them. This realization brings a sense of clarity to Phoebe's perspective, though it's clear that her journey is far from over. The emotional climax of the chapter comes when Juice, Gary's daughter, performs a makeshift funeral for her virtual dog named Human Princess, which leads Phoebe to confront her own grief. The simple act of honoring the loss of something, even if it's just a virtual dog, resonates deeply with Phoebe, reminding her that grief, while personal, is something that can be shared. It is

this connection to others—whether through humor or through shared loss—that offers the promise of emotional resolution in a world filled with uncertainty. The chapter concludes with Phoebe contemplating the delicate balance between joy and sorrow, recognizing that while these emotions coexist, they also shape the paths we take toward healing and understanding.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 begins with Pauline, dressed in navy linen, greeting the wedding guests with a cheerful demeanor, though she is clearly fatigued from handling various complaints. Lila, expressing dissatisfaction with her mattress, hints at deeper emotional struggles tied to a recent funeral experience during their sailing trip. This behavior underscores Lila's tendency to direct her frustrations toward minor issues, relying on Pauline’s support to solve what seem to be trivial problems in comparison to the emotional weight Lila is likely carrying. The interaction between Lila and Pauline reflects the dynamic of their relationship, with Lila's superficial concerns masking something more profound and unresolved.

As Lila vents her complaints, Phoebe observes Gary's increasing ability to make decisions, a stark contrast to how she once perceived him as overly passive. This realization causes Phoebe to pause and reflect on how she and others often box people into rigid roles, limiting their growth and potential. Her thoughts evolve into a deeper exploration of her own identity and the insecurities she still carries. Phoebe recognizes the limitations she places not only on others but also on herself, seeing how these perceptions have shaped her interactions and relationships, particularly in terms of her connection with Gary. This internal reflection begins a pivotal moment of self-awareness for Phoebe, marking a turning point in her personal growth.

Lila then suggests a mattress topper as a possible solution to her discomfort, which leads to further communication between her and Pauline, as they discuss the logistics of the wedding. Meanwhile, Phoebe and Gary engage in a playful moment, attempting to "free the books" on the hotel shelf in a lighthearted act that showcases the growing connection between them. This simple act of playful collaboration provides a contrast to the tense undercurrent of Lila's worries about her wedding events, particularly the delayed arrival of her friend Vivian. The contrast between the lightness Phoebe shares

with Gary and the burden of Lila’s anxieties highlights the differing emotional states within the group, marking the complexity of their relationships.

After a brief conversation with Lila’s mother, who criticizes the hotel decor, the chapter delves into broader themes of human connection and vulnerability during times of transition. Phoebe, amidst the logistics and family pressures surrounding the wedding, finds herself laughing, revealing how unexpected connections can emerge even in stressful situations. These moments of camaraderie highlight the interplay between the humor and tension present during such life events, showing how individuals navigate their personal struggles while forming bonds with others. Phoebe begins to recognize the potential for new beginnings, even in the most unlikely places, as she faces her internal conflicts alongside the growing warmth between her and Gary.

As the chapter progresses, Phoebe’s internal struggles become more pronounced. She reflects on her evolving relationship with Gary, as well as the way her past has shaped her current views on intimacy and loneliness. The weight of her past experiences finally leads Phoebe to a moment of self-realization, where she resolves to take a more engaged approach to life, embracing vulnerability and connection. This shift in perspective signals a potential change in her approach to relationships and emotional openness, marking the beginning of a more profound personal transformation.

In the final moments of the chapter, Lila seeks Phoebe's support, asking her to step in as her maid of honor. This request marks a significant shift in their dynamic, with Phoebe agreeing to take on the role, despite her previous desire for isolation. This moment represents a turning point for Phoebe, as she begins to open herself up to the possibility of rebuilding connections and stepping out of her emotional cocoon. The chapter closes on this note of new beginnings, setting the stage for Phoebe’s journey toward deeper relationships and personal growth, as she begins to embrace the interconnectedness of life and the people around her.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Phoebe awakening in a hotel room, surrounded by the familiar scents that affirm her sense of being. The morning after a chaotic party, she is left to confront her feelings of grief and shame that have become part of her daily routine. Despite the weight of these emotions, she resists the pull of despair, especially after the emotional turmoil of her recent suicide attempt. She recognizes the need to reclaim control over her thoughts and actions, even if just by small, everyday tasks like brushing her teeth or drinking water. These actions, while simple, help her regain a sense of purpose and push back against the numbness she has been experiencing.

Determined to take further action, Phoebe tries to ground herself in her environment. She decides to take a bath, but is thwarted by the lack of a drain stopper, which leads her to the hot tub instead. In a symbolic gesture, she removes her wedding ring and slips into the plush hotel robe, a small yet significant act of releasing the constraints of her past. The hot tub becomes a place of renewal, where the heat begins to ease her physical and emotional tension. This moment of solitude becomes a quiet rebellion against her previous self, marking the start of a new chapter in her life. The act of embracing this change is made clearer as she steps into the tub, symbolizing her willingness to move forward.

While on her way downstairs, Phoebe notices an oddly arranged set of books in the hotel lobby and instinctively aligns their spines. This small act of orderliness serves as a defiance against the dullness of her surroundings, a reminder that even the smallest actions can counteract the feeling of being trapped in mundanity. Upon reaching the hot tub, she immerses herself in its warmth, feeling the stress and weariness of the past days begin to melt away. Her solitude is briefly interrupted by a man who joins her in the tub. Their exchange begins lightheartedly, offering Phoebe a rare moment of relief from her usual state of introspection. Their casual banter about appearances and

life experiences serves as a refreshing shift from the weight of her thoughts.

The conversation soon takes a deeper turn when Phoebe opens up about her struggles with suicide. She reflects on the absurdity of her situation, considering the contrast between her internal pain and the festive environment of the wedding. The man listens empathetically and shares his own personal struggles, creating a sense of connection that both surprises and comforts Phoebe. What begins as a casual conversation grows into a moment of mutual understanding and vulnerability. They discuss the complexities of honesty, attraction, and the burdens they each carry. This exchange becomes a rare instance of emotional honesty for Phoebe, offering a glimmer of hope that connection, however fleeting, can still be possible.

Realizing the depth of her own desires, Phoebe openly expresses, “I want to fuck you.” This statement, raw and direct, signifies a pivotal moment in her journey of self-realization. Her previously held reservations about intimacy and vulnerability begin to dissolve, and she recognizes a yearning for genuine connection. The conversation with the man, while initially lighthearted, now carries the weight of unspoken truths, opening the door to the possibility of something more meaningful. In this moment, Phoebe takes a step forward in shedding her old fears and embracing the future with a newfound clarity about her desires and her place in the world. As the chapter closes, she picks up *Mrs. Dalloway* from the shelf, symbolizing a new chapter in her life, one filled with curiosity and the hope for what lies ahead after her pain. This small but significant act of reclaiming her interest in life offers a sense of agency, suggesting that Phoebe is ready to face the world with a renewed spirit, embracing the challenges and joys that await her.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 delves deeper into the developing relationship between Phoebe and Matt as they face the pressures of graduate school, especially the stress of completing their dissertations. For two months, they sit together in the graduate computer lab, both silently absorbed in their respective work. Their focus is suddenly interrupted when the power goes out, plunging the lab into darkness. This unexpected event brings them closer, as Phoebe becomes worried about potentially losing her work. Matt's calm demeanor in this moment is a stark contrast to Phoebe's anxiety, as he reassures her that everything will be fine. Despite her initial panic, Phoebe is comforted by Matt's presence, which hints at the growing connection between them as they share this moment of vulnerability.

As the power is restored, Phoebe breathes a sigh of relief when she discovers that her work was not lost. The tension between them lightens as they engage in a playful conversation about historical figures and their attractiveness, a discussion that sparks laughter and brings them closer. They begin to bond over their shared experiences, especially their families' failure to understand the depth of their academic pursuits. Phoebe reflects on her father's concerns about her focusing too much on her studies and not enough on her social life. This resonates with Matt, as he too has felt misunderstood by those around him, creating a sense of mutual understanding. Their exchange allows them to connect on a deeper level, as they find common ground in their experiences and their desire to be understood.

However, as the chapter progresses, Phoebe is hit with the reality of her situation. After a tense moment, she realizes that her dissertation work has been lost, prompting her to panic. The looming deadlines and pressure to complete her work start to overwhelm her. In contrast, Matt remains calm and collected, showing no signs of stress as he navigates through the same challenges. Phoebe admires Matt's ability to

stay grounded, while she feels less confident in her standing within the department. Despite her self-doubt, she finds comfort in their budding connection, understanding that their shared time together is worth more than the stress of her work. This moment reveals the complexities of their relationship, as Phoebe begins to lean on Matt for emotional support, finding solace in his unwavering presence.

Throughout the summer, Phoebe and Matt's relationship continues to blossom as they both finish their dissertations. They take breaks from their academic struggles to engage in fun activities, such as bowling and drives along the Mississippi River. These shared moments of joy help them unwind and deepen their connection, as they navigate the challenges of post-graduate life. Phoebe, in particular, finds herself drawn to the themes of love and indifference in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which mirrors some of her own internal struggles. As she reads, she reflects on her growing feelings for Matt and her own internal conflict about their relationship. Despite the uncertainty of the future, she feels a deep emotional connection with him, which contrasts with the isolation she has often felt in the past.

The arrival of the fall semester introduces new challenges for both Phoebe and Matt. Phoebe takes on an adjunct position, which adds pressure to her already full plate, while Matt begins a new job that shifts his focus. This change in their lives forces Phoebe to confront her own dreams and desires, particularly her longing for a tenure-track position in Wisconsin. As she faces this crossroads, she wishes for Matt to take charge and make decisions for their future together. She feels conflicted, as the weight of decision-making falls heavily on her, despite her desire for a partnership where both contribute equally. This internal struggle reveals Phoebe's vulnerability, as she grapples with the fear of being alone in her professional and personal decisions.

The chapter concludes on a hopeful note, with Phoebe and Matt sharing a quiet yet significant moment during a solar eclipse. In this fleeting moment of connection, Matt casually suggests that they get married, offering a sense of comfort and assurance for Phoebe. The proposal, though casual, represents the natural growth of their relationship and the deep bond they have formed. Phoebe feels both surprised and

relieved by this suggestion, as it signifies a shift toward commitment in their relationship. The solar eclipse symbolizes a new beginning for them, as they embrace the possibility of a shared future. In this moment of clarity, Phoebe realizes that despite the uncertainties and challenges ahead, their love provides a sense of stability and hope, a feeling that had been missing from her life for so long.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins with Phoebe being abruptly awakened at noon by a loud knock on her door. Lila, eager to show off a hat she's considering for an upcoming sailing trip, walks into the room, sparking Phoebe's reflection on Lila's apparent lack of curiosity about others. Despite the gravity of her own feelings of despair, Phoebe finds it hard to comprehend how Lila could enter her space without asking how she's truly doing, particularly when she's struggling with thoughts of suicide. This moment highlights the emotional disconnection Phoebe feels, as she grapples with the insensitivity of others towards her internal turmoil.

As the conversation shifts, Lila reveals her own vulnerabilities, particularly her concerns about what others think of her. She explains how a mishap at the previous night's reception left her feeling humiliated, exposing her insecurities despite her otherwise composed appearance. Phoebe, still grappling with the aftermath of a secret encounter from the night before, reflects on her own experiences of feeling small or misunderstood, similar to how she once felt when meeting her husband. The contrast in their emotional states prompts Phoebe to reflect on the complexities of their friendship and her own feelings of isolation.

The conversation continues as Lila opens up about her relationships with her friends, Nat and Suz, while also expressing her frustration with her mother's unrealistic expectations. Lila reveals how her mother often shares distorted, exaggerated stories about her at public gatherings, which only deepens her sense of frustration. Phoebe, sensing an opportunity to provide insight, questions the concept of "wonderful" in Lila's description of her relationship with Gary, challenging the authenticity of the connection. This leads to a deeper, more philosophical discussion about love, friendship, and the expectations placed on them by others. Through this conversation, Lila is forced to confront the realities of her relationship with Gary and the emotional

complexities that come with it.

As the dialogue unfolds, Lila jokingly admits that she struggles with the concept of true emotional connection, yet still finds humor in the absurdities of life. This leads to a lighthearted exchange about their mutual experiences, though the conversation is abruptly interrupted when Lila announces that she needs to address an issue with her mother’s room. Before leaving, she casually suggests Phoebe try making her bed to improve her mood, a piece of advice Phoebe dismisses with humor, though tinged with bitterness. Lila’s unawareness of Phoebe’s deeper struggles highlights the ongoing disconnect in their friendship and serves as a reminder of the emotional walls Phoebe feels.

After Lila leaves, she acknowledges her need for coffee, ordering room service to make their day easier. With a cheeky reference to a dish called "Patriotic French Toast," Lila lightens the mood, though Phoebe’s thoughts remain clouded. As Phoebe contemplates her internal struggles, including the dark thoughts that linger in her mind, she begins to reconsider her outlook. The prospect of sailing and the chance to try on new clothes that Lila has left behind sparks a small but noticeable sense of hope within Phoebe, offering a flicker of positivity in her otherwise despairing journey.

The chapter ends with Phoebe preparing for the day ahead, feeling a mixture of emotions. On the one hand, she feels a deep sense of disappointment in herself, but on the other hand, there’s a hint of excitement about the day’s potential. Reflecting on the unpredictability of life and the small moments that can shift her perspective, Phoebe begins to see how even the smallest changes, such as a day out on the water, can lift her from the depths of her despair, even if only for a short while. This subtle shift in her mindset marks the beginning of a possible change in Phoebe’s journey, a shift from deep sadness to a more hopeful outlook.

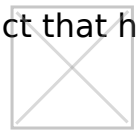
Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins with Phoebe grappling with the weight of her mortality, haunted by the regrets and disappointments of her life. Surrounded by the remnants of a past filled with restrictions and concerns, she embraces a moment of rebellion, pouring herself a glass of German chocolate wine as she reflects on what she's missed—particularly her long-held dream of seeing the ocean. Despite acknowledging this unfulfilled wish, she is burdened by the recent separation from her husband, Matt, who chose to end their marriage over Zoom during the pandemic. His departure has left her feeling abandoned, hurt, and betrayed, amplifying her sense of loss and isolation.

As she gazes out at the ocean from her hotel room, Phoebe attempts to indulge in a small comfort by ordering a luxurious final meal, hoping for lobster and oysters. However, her plans are thwarted by the hotel staff, who inform her that room service has been suspended due to an opening reception. The idea of interacting with cheerful guests at the reception causes her anxiety, compelling her to abandon the idea of the meal and retreat further into herself. The tension she feels in this moment reveals the depth of her despair, amplifying her sense of disconnection from the world around her.

Reflecting on her life, Phoebe is reminded of the emotional and professional challenges she's faced, particularly the struggles tied to her career as an educator. A conversation with one of her students, Adam, who contemplates dropping out of college to pursue a passion for making pants, mirrors Phoebe's own confusion about her purpose. Her inner turmoil about her career path and identity begins to surface, as she contemplates her struggles with finding meaning in both her work and her personal life. This interaction highlights her growing feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty, signaling a shift in her self-perception and her ability to navigate the complexities of her own existence.

The narrative takes a more intense turn when Phoebe encounters Mia, the woman Matt left her for. They meet in a photocopier room, and a tense conversation unfolds between them. As Phoebe confronts Mia, expressing her feelings of betrayal and hurt, she uncovers painful truths about her marriage. Mia admits to loving Matt, and Phoebe realizes that their relationship had already been on shaky ground long before Mia entered the picture. This revelation marks a turning point for Phoebe, as she comes to terms with the fact that her marriage had been broken before the affair, deepening her sense of loss.



As the chapter progresses, Phoebe becomes overwhelmed by grief, her world becoming increasingly suffocating. After struggling to cope with her emotions, she is struck by the sudden death of her beloved cat, Harry, compounding her sense of despair. Seeking solace in alcohol, Phoebe tries to numb the pain, but the following morning, the harsh reality of her situation crashes down on her. She begins to reflect on the inevitability of death and the concept of rebirth, drawing from the philosophies of Whitman. However, despite these philosophical musings, she can’t help but feel that the future holds little promise, intensifying her inner conflict.

In a final act of defiance against the overwhelming despair she’s feeling, Phoebe decides to take a step toward escape. She books a stay at the Cornwall, symbolizing her attempt to find refuge from the anguish that has consumed her life. This gesture suggests that while Phoebe is still deep in her grief, she is trying to take control of her destiny, seeking solace in a place that might offer her some form of reprieve. The chapter concludes on a note of tentative hope, indicating that Phoebe is beginning to search for a way out of her emotional torment, even if it’s just a temporary escape.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 delves into Phoebe's internal turmoil as she lies on a king-sized canopy bed, grappling with the weight of her impending death. While the wedding reception buzzes below her, she is consumed by unsettling, trivial concerns—like the thought of a bride’s dress stained with blood, which shatters her vision of peaceful closure. Seeking an escape, Phoebe tries to use her old Discman, only to be frustrated by the scratched CD that prevents her from finding solace in music. Stepping out onto the balcony for a brief respite, she lights a cigarette, attempting to calm her nerves, though the act only leads to painful coughing, emphasizing her sense of unease and discomfort.

With the day stretching on without any obligations, Phoebe reflects on her situation, each puff of the cigarette serving as a small relief from her morose thoughts. Despite this, the looming awareness of her mortality fills her with the stark realization that life will go on without her, and that people will easily forget her existence once she's gone. As she watches the wedding guests below, their joy and carefree interaction seem both captivating and foreign, and she feels detached, almost judging their interactions from her elevated perch. This sense of separation amplifies her feelings of isolation and highlights her internal struggle as she contemplates her own place in the world.

The solitude is soon interrupted by a knock on the door, and the bride, a figure of authority and expectation, enters and confronts Phoebe about smoking in her room. Their interaction reveals the underlying tensions between them, particularly around beauty and privilege, as the bride vents about her less-than-ideal room and the lavish wedding plans funded by her deceased father’s wealth. Phoebe, listening to the bride’s complaints, begins to realize how the lack of a loving maternal figure in their lives has shaped both of their perspectives on love, expectations, and identity. The conversation takes an unexpected turn, and Phoebe finds herself empathizing with the bride in ways she hadn’t anticipated, as they both share frustrations about the burdens of familial

expectations.

As the conversation deepens, Phoebe starts to sense a strange connection with the bride, whose own anxiety about marriage and her mother's influence mirrors Phoebe's struggles with her past. They engage in a candid discussion about the value of art and their individual choices in life, with the bride confessing her doubts about living up to her mother’s legacy and the pressures of fulfilling her father’s dreams. Through these shared thoughts on love, loss, and the weight of familial obligations, a fragile bond begins to form between the two women, despite their differences. The conversation becomes a moment of solace for Phoebe, as she finds herself relating to the bride in unexpected ways.

The mood shifts slightly when they share a laugh over dark anecdotes about death and absurdity, with Phoebe momentarily lightening the atmosphere. The bride, sensing Phoebe's hesitation, suggests that Phoebe reconsider her plans, urging her to choose life. Phoebe firmly rejects the idea, reiterating that her decision has already been made. However, the chapter takes a tender turn when the bride begins to floss her teeth, a seemingly insignificant act that nonetheless symbolizes a calm before the storm of her wedding. This simple, intimate moment offers Phoebe a glimpse of companionship, stirring emotions she hasn’t felt in some time. It contrasts the isolation she has been experiencing since her husband's departure and deepens her inner conflict about the intersection of life and death. The chapter concludes with Phoebe contemplating her decision, torn between the weight of her past and the faint possibility of hope in an unexpected connection.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with Phoebe, consumed by a deep sense of isolation, as the last remnants of a wedding celebration echo in the empty room. The space, which was once filled with voices and the hum of happy conversations, now amplifies only the harsh sound of her own thoughts. Her family, with all its complexities and emotional baggage, looms in her mind, offering no comfort but only a reminder of the tangled web of relationships that she struggles to understand. In this silence, Phoebe is confronted with the overwhelming sense of disconnection she feels from herself and her own body. She is caught in a tumultuous internal battle, struggling with self-doubt and self-loathing, and for a fleeting moment, the thought of ending it all seems like a way to escape the relentless noise in her head. The very essence of her identity, wrapped in confusion and sorrow, seems fragile, and the weight of these emotions grows heavier as she contemplates the enormity of her existence, which she no longer feels connected to.

In her quest to numb the pain, Phoebe reaches for another drink, the familiar comfort of alcohol offering her some reprieve, though momentarily. She follows this with a bottle of tuna-flavored painkillers, a desperate attempt to follow through with the resolution she’s made to end her life. But even as she swallows the pills, her mind is flooded with memories of a conversation with her therapist, who had once told her she wasn’t “the type” to follow through with such drastic measures. The words, meant to offer her a sense of reassurance, only intensify her feelings of inadequacy. Phoebe cannot help but compare herself to Mia, someone who seems to approach life with an audacity that Phoebe finds foreign to her own nature. Mia’s daring and fearless attitude toward life contrast sharply with Phoebe’s own self-doubt, and it stirs up feelings of jealousy and frustration. Phoebe is left questioning her place in a world that seems so full of life, while she feels paralyzed by her own indecision and fear.

As Phoebe contemplates her next steps, she finds herself distracted by the lingering scent of the bride’s perfume and the trace of her lipstick left behind in the room. These remnants of the bride’s presence spark a train of thought about her own unfulfilled ambitions and the goals she has abandoned over the years. She thinks of the unfinished novels that are scattered in her mind, fragments of dreams that have never been brought to life. This realization prompts her to shift her focus. Rather than succumbing to the temptation of ending it all, Phoebe resolves to make a final act of defiance. The decision to end her life suddenly seems less like a statement of closure and more like a footnote in the story of her life, an incomplete narrative that she no longer wants to be a part of. Even as she feels a fleeting sense of accomplishment from swallowing the pills, a moment of victory quickly turns to doubt. She begins to question whether the pills will actually work or if they will leave her hanging in a state of uncertainty, just as she has felt throughout her life.

Suddenly, a knock on the door interrupts her contemplation. It’s Pauline, a young woman who offers her assistance, though Phoebe initially feels no inclination to accept. Despite the inner voice telling her to push people away, Phoebe can’t help but feel a sense of familiarity in Pauline’s presence. They share a connection, having both come from the same Midwestern background, and in that moment, Phoebe finds a small degree of comfort in the recognition. Pauline’s presence, so full of life and hope, serves as a reminder of what Phoebe has lost touch with. She listens as Pauline shares her own struggles with her new job, a conversation that Phoebe ultimately dismisses as naive, yet there is something in Pauline’s youthful optimism that stirs Phoebe’s own longing for simplicity, for a time when life seemed less complicated.

Exhausted and emotionally drained, Phoebe sinks into her thoughts again, her mind racing with conflicting emotions. As she listens to the speech being given below her window by the bride’s mother, memories of Lila’s childhood are recounted. The speech meanders through stories of the bride’s early years, evoking a sense of nostalgia and a longing for the uncomplicated nature of youth. These anecdotes provoke Phoebe to reflect on her own childhood, particularly her unresolved issues with her parents. The

fractured relationship with her family and the lack of parental love weigh heavily on her heart, and she is left wondering if she will ever truly understand what it means to be loved in the way others seem to experience. The speech below, while triggering these difficult memories, also serves as a catalyst for Phoebe to confront the emotional void she has carried for so long.

As Phoebe surrenders to the overwhelming despair, something inside her shifts. She begins to recall the importance of completion, the need to face the challenges of life rather than retreat into death. Her thoughts evolve into a desire to continue the story she has been unwilling to finish, to find out if there’s more to her narrative than the dark chapter she feels trapped in. She realizes, despite the sadness and confusion, that she does not want to die, that she has more to explore, more to experience. This epiphany leads her to the bathroom, where she instinctively tries to purge the pills from her system, desperate to undo what she has done. The act is exhausting, both physically and emotionally, yet it marks a turning point for Phoebe. As she listens to the joyous sounds of the celebration below, she feels an unexpected sense of connection to the world she once longed to leave behind. Despite the overwhelming void she feels inside, Phoebe chooses life, clinging to the hope that the next chapter might bring more than she can imagine.

Epigraph

Epigraph, at the start of the passage, immediately sets the emotional tone of the character's internal struggle. The character’s desperate outburst, "It was awful, he cried, awful, awful!" is a stark cry of anguish, highlighting the depth of their despair. The repetition of the word "awful" not only intensifies the emotional weight of the moment but also emphasizes the overwhelming nature of the pain being experienced. Despite this raw expression of suffering, the passage moves toward a subtle but powerful recognition of life's persistence. The line "Still, the sun was hot" serves as a reminder of nature’s unchanging rhythm, while "Still, one got over things" hints at a deeper truth: no matter how crushing the emotional weight may feel, life continues to unfold in ordinary, often unnoticed ways. This quiet acknowledgment of resilience, nestled between moments of profound distress, suggests that the human spirit, though tested, possesses the strength to endure and heal. Even in the most difficult moments, time does not stand still; it marches on, and so too do we.

The internal conflict faced by the character in this excerpt is a tension between suffering and the undeniable passage of time. The phrase "life had a way of adding day to day" reflects the way in which time continues its forward motion, regardless of individual hardship. This creates a contrast between the emotional turmoil the character is experiencing and the persistence of daily life, where, despite personal grief, life proceeds with or without their consent. The use of the word "adding" implies an ongoing accumulation, almost as if time itself is a force that can’t be avoided. This notion reinforces the reality that, even in the darkest moments, time keeps moving, offering a chance for things to shift, even if just slightly. The passage reflects a universal truth about the human experience: suffering can feel all-encompassing, yet time marches on, and with it comes the possibility of healing or simply surviving. This tension between emotional suffering and the inevitability of time’s passage is

something that resonates deeply, reminding us that, though our pain may feel endless, time holds the potential for recovery.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a masterclass in capturing the nuances of human emotion and the passage of time. The epigraph in this passage embodies the tension between the internal emotional landscape and the outward persistence of life. Woolf's works frequently explore the complexities of human consciousness, diving deep into the moments of internal reflection, personal pain, and the way individuals experience time. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, this exploration is central to understanding how characters wrestle with their personal histories and present emotions, often in contrast with the ongoing, seemingly indifferent world around them. In this excerpt, the use of "still" juxtaposes the character's suffering with the continuation of life, forcing a confrontation between these emotional extremes. The structure of the passage, with its simple yet profound language, enhances the emotional impact. The repetition of "still" reflects a persistence, not only in time but in the way life itself refuses to pause for personal crises. This technique mirrors the ebb and flow of human experience—how grief and joy, despair and resilience, are often intertwined in ways that seem contradictory but coexist in a shared reality.

Furthermore, the passage is framed with short, impactful sentences that convey emotional weight without overwhelming the reader. Woolf's use of these simple sentences imbues the text with a quiet power, allowing the emotional turmoil to unfold slowly, forcing readers to reflect on their own experiences with time, suffering, and resilience. The combination of this simplicity with the complex emotional undercurrent creates a poignant portrayal of the human experience, emphasizing the quiet moments where life continues around the character's emotional chaos. Woolf captures the essence of emotional conflict, showing how, even in our darkest times, life's natural rhythms persist, unaffected by our personal despair. It's in these subtle moments of life's continuity that we find the possibility of healing. In this way, Woolf eloquently demonstrates that, while personal suffering can be all-consuming, it does not stop time; instead, time moves forward, carrying us with it, whether we're ready to

move or not.

Ultimately, the passage exemplifies Woolf's exploration of the complexity of human emotion and time. The epigraph offers a potent reminder that, even in moments of despair, life’s continuity holds the potential for resilience. Time’s progression may not offer immediate relief, but it is an undeniable force—one that provides the possibility of growth, understanding, and, eventually, healing. The emotional depth in the excerpt, coupled with Woolf’s signature exploration of the human experience, invites readers to consider how we navigate our own emotional landscapes while life unfolds around us. It serves as a powerful reflection on the tension between personal grief and the unyielding passage of time, showing how, despite our darkest moments, time moves us forward, whether we are ready or not. Woolf’s mastery lies in capturing this delicate balance, making her work a profound exploration of the intersection between human emotion and the unrelenting forward march of time.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces Phoebe Stone, who arrives at the Cornwall Inn, an elegant hotel perched high on a cliff, overlooking the expansive ocean. The scene is painted with nostalgia and an overwhelming sense of both excitement and uncertainty. As she steps out of the cab wearing a striking emerald silk dress—the only possession she truly values after her recent divorce—Phoebe finds herself at a crossroads. She leaves behind her old life in St. Louis, including her marriage and possessions, entering an unfamiliar world amidst the global lockdowns. The weight of her past life lingers, but there is also a feeling of liberation, as she begins to forge a new path, even though the sense of disorientation persists.

As Phoebe reflects on her life before the divorce, memories of the mundane routines she followed as a professor flood her thoughts. Life during the pandemic had been predictable, comfortable in its simplicity, yet it now feels distant from the person she is becoming. She acknowledges the discomfort of no longer fitting into that previous mold of predictability. This realization propels her journey to Newport, a place she hopes will offer a fresh perspective. The emerald dress she chose before leaving for Newport is a symbol of this transformation. It is a bold departure from the conservative, predictable attire of her past life, and it marks her desire to reclaim herself in a world that has shifted beyond recognition.

Upon entering the Cornwall Inn, Phoebe’s emotional state fluctuates between anticipation and confusion. The hotel is bustling with activity, and the check-in line is unexpectedly long, filled with couples preparing for weddings, a stark contrast to Phoebe’s lonely, solitary presence. As she observes the wedding guests, she feels detached from their joy and companionship, as if she is standing on the outside looking in. The bride, with all her attention and affection focused on her, symbolizes everything Phoebe wishes she could possess—connection, happiness, and certainty

about her place in the world. The disparity between the life Phoebe once knew and the one she is trying to embrace only deepens her sense of disconnection.

Finally checking in, Phoebe finds herself caught in a brief conversation with the front desk attendant, which offers little more than pleasantries. However, this exchange serves as a catalyst for Phoebe's internal reflection. She had imagined the Cornwall Inn as her "happy place," a retreat she had dreamed of visiting for years after seeing it in a travel magazine. But as the conversation unfolds, she is confronted with the realization that her emotional baggage is far from left behind. Her name, "Phoebe Stone," which once represented her past life, now feels foreign to her. It is a symbol of the identity she is struggling to leave behind, as if she cannot fully shake off the remnants of her former self.

In the quiet moments that follow, Phoebe reflects on the isolation she feels, not only from others but from herself. She is acutely aware of the sadness that lingers within her, no matter where she goes. The weight of her past life, her divorce, and her identity struggle are carried with her like a shadow that refuses to let go. Phoebe's journey is not just physical but deeply emotional, as she contemplates the path ahead. The chapter concludes with a poignant realization that a "happy place" is not defined solely by location but by the emotional state one brings with them. Despite the grandeur of the Cornwall Inn, Phoebe understands that true peace will not be found until she addresses the emotional turmoil she carries inside. The inner sadness, no matter the place or circumstances, remains an integral part of her journey.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 delves into the emotional turmoil experienced by Phoebe and her husband, Matt, following the heartbreak of a failed pregnancy. The couple embarks on a search for a vacation destination, hoping to find solace and a break from the pain that has marked their fertility struggles. In their quest for healing, Phoebe comes across the Cornwall Inn, a Victorian hotel offering amenities such as hot tubs, yoga, and paddleboarding. Her excitement leads to the creation of a detailed spreadsheet outlining the fun activities they could enjoy during their stay. However, Matt's reaction to Phoebe's meticulous planning reveals a growing sense of frustration. His impatience with her need to quantify every aspect of their lives—especially their attempts to conceive—becomes evident. This marks a deeper rift in their relationship, highlighting the tensions that arise from their differing perspectives on life and its challenges.

As the couple contemplates their getaway, Phoebe reflects on her academic career and the underlying tension in her marriage. She struggles with feelings of inadequacy as she compares her stagnant role as an adjunct professor to Matt’s success at work. His recent achievement of winning an award only deepens Phoebe's sense of professional failure. While Matt’s victory is celebrated by friends and colleagues, Phoebe is left questioning her worth and feeling disconnected from the joy those around her seem to feel. This disparity in their careers and achievements exacerbates the growing divide in their marriage. Phoebe’s internal conflict centers around her complex feelings towards Matt’s success, and her struggle to reconcile these feelings with her own unmet ambitions. The contrast between their professional lives intensifies the strain in their relationship, leaving Phoebe to confront her personal insecurities and the disconnect she feels from both her husband and her career.

The dynamics between Phoebe and Matt further deteriorate as they both face pressures from societal expectations regarding childbearing and professional success.

Phoebe begins to grapple with her identity outside of motherhood, questioning what it truly means to be “normal.” Her thoughts revolve around societal expectations, feeling as though she is failing to meet the milestones expected of her. As Phoebe struggles with the reality of her unfulfilled desires and ambitions, hints of infidelity begin to surface. These insecurities only deepen her sense of isolation, causing Phoebe to question her worth not just as a partner but as an individual. The couple’s interactions are tinged with both humor and sadness, as they attempt to reconnect amid their emotional baggage. The cracks in their relationship become more pronounced, as both Phoebe and Matt are burdened by their unspoken grievances. Through these struggles, Chapter 2 paints a picture of a marriage teetering between hope and despair, with the couple’s future uncertain as they navigate their personal and societal challenges.

Ultimately, this chapter reveals the complexities of Phoebe and Matt’s relationship as they wrestle with their shared disappointments and individual aspirations. It highlights the emotional distance that has formed between them, stemming from their struggles with fertility, professional ambitions, and societal pressures. Phoebe’s introspection on her identity and place in the world provides a deeper look into her character, as she grapples with the tension between her personal desires and the role she feels she is expected to play. As their marriage faces mounting challenges, Phoebe and Matt's journey serves as a poignant reflection of the difficulties many couples face in balancing their ambitions with their emotional needs. Their crisis is not just about their fertility struggles but also about the larger question of what it means to be fulfilled, both individually and as a couple. Chapter 2 reveals the fragile nature of their connection and sets the stage for the difficult journey ahead.