The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo A Novel (Taylor Jenkins Reid)

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid is a captivating, multi-layered story about the glamorous, secretive life of a Hollywood icon. Through a fascinating interview with a young journalist, Evelyn reveals the truths behind her seven marriages, exploring themes of love, ambition, and sacrifice. With rich character development and an unexpected, heart-wrenching twist, this novel is perfect for fans of complex, emotional stories and unforgettable female protagonists.

Evelyn Hugo to Auction Off Gowns

Evelyn Hugo to Auction Off Gowns: Film legend and iconic 1960s fashionista, Evelyn Hugo, is preparing to auction twelve of her most celebrated gowns through Christie’s, with the proceeds directed toward breast cancer research. At the age of 79, Hugo’s lasting impact on Hollywood and the fashion world remains undeniable, having captivated audiences with both her magnetic performances and her sophisticated, sensual style. Over the years, her wardrobe has become synonymous with timeless elegance, and these gowns, worn during pivotal moments of her career, now stand as pieces of history in both film and fashion archives. Known for her ability to marry sensuality with restraint, Hugo’s fashion choices have shaped the visual culture of her era, influencing not only her contemporaries but also the generations of women who have followed in her footsteps.

The upcoming auction promises to be a momentous event for fashion enthusiasts and collectors alike, as these gowns were worn during some of the most memorable

moments of Hugo’s life and career. Included in the sale are the striking emerald-green Miranda La Conda gown that Hugo wore to the 1959 Academy Awards, a moment that cemented her status as a Hollywood icon. Also featured is the exquisite violet soufflé and organdy scoop-neck gown, worn by Hugo at the 1962 premiere of *Anna Karenina*, a look that became one of her signature fashion moments. Perhaps most poignant of all is the navy-blue silk Michael Maddax gown, worn by Hugo in 1982 when she won her Oscar for *All for Us*, a moment that represented not only her professional success but also the culmination of her decades-long career. Each of these garments represents more than just a piece of fashion; they are windows into the past, each dress telling the story of the woman who wore them and the legacy she built.

While these gowns carry great historical value, the emotional weight behind their sale is perhaps the most significant aspect of this auction. The driving force behind Hugo’s decision to auction off these prized pieces is deeply personal. Evelyn Hugo has been no stranger to public scandal, with her tumultuous personal life often making headlines, particularly her seven marriages, including her decades-long relationship with film producer Harry Cameron. The two were not only partners in life but also in business, with Cameron playing a major role in her career. They shared a daughter, Connor Cameron, who tragically passed away from breast cancer just shy of her 42nd birthday. The loss of her daughter has profoundly shaped Hugo’s decision to dedicate the auction’s proceeds to breast cancer research, turning her personal grief into a source of hope for others.

Evelyn Hugo’s origins, however, are far removed from the glamorous world she would later come to dominate. Born Evelyn Elena Herrera in 1938, she was the daughter of Cuban immigrants, raised in the gritty Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. It wasn’t until she arrived in Hollywood in 1955 that she reinvented herself, adopting the name Evelyn Hugo and blonde hair to match the image of a quintessential film star. It wasn’t long before she was firmly entrenched in the glitz and glamour of the Hollywood elite. Hugo quickly became a household name, known not only for her on-screen talent but also for her fashion-forward looks that made her a trendsetter and a

fixture at major events. Her rise to stardom was swift and sure, a testament to her talent and her keen understanding of how to navigate the complicated world of Hollywood.

Her legacy, however, is not confined to the silver screen. Despite retiring from acting in the late ’80s, Hugo’s influence has endured, and she continues to be celebrated for her contribution to the fashion world, as well as for her charitable efforts. The decision to auction her gowns, many of which hold immense cultural and personal significance, underscores the profound impact she has had—not just as a star but as a woman who is using her platform to make a meaningful difference. For Hugo, the sale of these gowns is more than a business transaction; it is a way to honor her daughter’s memory and contribute to the fight against breast cancer, a cause that has become deeply personal.

In many ways, this auction represents the full circle of Hugo’s life, encapsulating her transformation from a young girl growing up in Hell’s Kitchen to an international movie star and, later, a philanthropist who uses her fame to advocate for causes close to her heart. Each gown in the auction reflects a different chapter of Hugo’s life, from her early Hollywood days to her more reflective moments later in life. The sale of these pieces, then, is not only a way for fans and collectors to acquire a part of Hollywood history but also an opportunity to support a cause that is deeply meaningful to Hugo herself. By auctioning off these gowns, Evelyn Hugo is not just passing on her legacy of style and glamour but also creating a lasting impact on the fight against breast cancer, ensuring that her influence continues to reach beyond the red carpet.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: When Frankie called out to Monique, asking her to step into her office, the young journalist was initially taken off guard. She glanced around at her colleagues, uncertain of whom Frankie was addressing. When it became clear that Frankie meant her, Monique felt a mix of confusion and excitement. She hadn’t expected to be called into her boss’s office, especially after having spent less than a year at Vivant, mostly working on lighter pieces. Frankie, known for her no-nonsense attitude and magnetic presence, had earned Monique’s respect from day one.

Walking into the office, Monique couldn’t help but be captivated by Frankie’s commanding energy. Despite not fitting the mold of conventional beauty—her features were sharp and striking, with widely set eyes and a tall, slender frame—there was an undeniable magnetism about her. Frankie’s bold fashion choices, her love for vibrant colors, and the oversized jewelry she wore only added to her presence. For Monique, Frankie represented something more than just a successful journalist—she embodied a role model for women of color in a field where such figures were often underrepresented.

Sitting down across from Frankie, Monique prepared herself for whatever news was coming. But nothing could have prepared her for what Frankie was about to say. Evelyn Hugo, one of the most iconic movie stars of all time, had specifically requested Monique for an exclusive interview. It was a shocking turn of events, especially given Monique’s relatively junior position at Vivant. She had spent most of her time at the magazine writing light, trendy pieces, far removed from the kind of serious journalism that this opportunity promised.

Frankie continued to explain that Evelyn’s people were asking for an interview related to a charity event she was hosting, but there was a sense that something more was

going on beneath the surface. Frankie suspected that Evelyn, known for her many marriages and turbulent Hollywood career, wanted to craft a specific narrative, one that could only be controlled by someone less seasoned, like Monique. It was a challenge—one that tested both her professional skills and her personal confidence. Frankie, however, didn't seem to doubt Monique's abilities for a second. She was confident that this young writer, despite her lack of experience, had the potential to not just interview a legend but to take charge of the narrative.

As Frankie showed Monique the email confirming the request from Evelyn's team, Monique's emotions swirled. There was a mix of excitement, disbelief, and fear. The pressure was immense—Evelyn Hugo's fame alone could turn this feature into a massive success, but Monique realized it wasn't just about landing the interview. She was being asked to step into the spotlight, to stand her ground, and perhaps even clash with one of Hollywood's most revered figures. In that moment, Monique realized that the story wasn't just about Evelyn Hugo—it was about her as well. This was her opportunity to prove herself, to transition from being the writer working in the shadows of more experienced colleagues to being someone whose work would be front and center.

Monique had always aspired to make an impact in journalism. She dreamed of writing stories that mattered, stories that changed the way people viewed the world. But after months of writing filler pieces and observing her colleagues getting the big assignments, Monique's confidence had taken a hit. Now, with the opportunity to interview a living legend, it felt like everything she had worked for was about to come to fruition. Frankie's words, though tough, were meant to motivate her. Monique wasn't just being asked to write a piece—she was being asked to rise to the occasion, to break free from the constraints of her current position and make her mark.

Frankie's belief in her, combined with the pressure of the assignment, ignited something in Monique. She knew this was her moment. She wasn't just being asked to interview Evelyn Hugo; she was being invited into a world where her voice mattered. It was time to step up, to stop doubting herself, and to show that she could handle the

big leagues. Monique’s response was simple, yet resolute—she was ready. But deep down, she knew this was just the beginning of a much larger journey, one that would require everything she had, both professionally and personally.

The next few days were a whirlwind. Monique found herself researching Evelyn Hugo’s career with an intensity she hadn’t known she was capable of. Every movie, every marriage, every moment of scandal—she devoured it all, knowing that the story she was about to tell would define her career. There was no room for second-guessing or hesitations. As she prepared to meet Evelyn Hugo, Monique understood that the stakes had never been higher, not just for the magazine, but for her own future in the world of journalism.

Chapter 62

Chapter 62 takes the reader through a significant transformation in Evelyn Hugo's life, a shift from the dazzling spotlight of her early years to a quieter, more reflective existence. After decades spent in the media's glare, Evelyn ultimately finds peace in a stable, though passionless, marriage with Robert, who provides her with the consistency she now craves. Following the painful passing of her beloved Celia, Evelyn's once vibrant world fades into a quieter routine, defined by charitable work and a deep devotion to her daughter, Connor. No longer the glamorous actress of her youth, Evelyn channels her energy into philanthropy, dedicating herself to causes she holds dear, such as advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and supporting lung disease research. While the world outside no longer buzzes with the same intensity as it did when she was an icon, Evelyn still has a role to play, using her influence to support and bring attention to the causes that matter most to her.

The narrative shifts focus to Connor, who begins her own journey toward self-discovery and personal fulfillment. After a promising start in the finance world, Connor becomes disillusioned with the career path she had chosen, feeling increasingly disconnected from the corporate world. This sense of dissatisfaction leads her to make a bold move, choosing to leave the financial sector and pursue teaching at Wharton, a decision that surprises and inspires those around her. In this pivotal moment of career reinvention, she is quietly supported by Robert, whose unshakable belief in her abilities highlights the enduring familial bonds they share. While Robert’s support is unwavering, it is evident that this shift also reflects a deeper understanding between them—one that goes beyond expectation and into unconditional love and acceptance. As the chapter unfolds, we see the complexities of family life at play, particularly when Robert passes away, drawing Connor, her boyfriend Greg, and Evelyn closer together. This period of grief deepens their relationship, marking the evolution of their emotional ties and

further solidifying the idea that family is not always about blood, but about the people who support you unconditionally.

However, it is Evelyn’s role as a mother that truly takes center stage in this chapter, particularly when Connor is diagnosed with cancer. The devastating news forces Evelyn to confront a new kind of loss, one that cuts deeper than any she has ever faced before. The grief that accompanies watching a beloved child battle a life-threatening illness is raw and heartbreaking, and Evelyn’s reactions are filled with an emotional intensity that is both deeply personal and universal. As she navigates this heart-wrenching chapter in her life, Evelyn reflects on the meaning of love, purpose, and what it truly means to be a parent. Her willingness to care for Connor and stand by her during this incredibly difficult time allows Evelyn to find a sense of solace, despite the overwhelming pain. Her role as a caregiver, the one who provides comfort and strength, becomes a profound and meaningful way for Evelyn to give back after years of taking from the world. Even as her own world falls apart, she finds meaning in being there for her daughter, and in giving to others through her charitable work, Evelyn discovers a sense of peace that comes from serving others.

As the chapter continues, it becomes clear that Evelyn’s life, once marked by fame, scandal, and the intoxicating allure of celebrity, has transitioned into one defined by quiet reflection and a deep focus on familial bonds. This transformation highlights the unpredictable nature of life itself, as the glamorous past Evelyn once lived has now given way to the real, hard-hitting challenges of mortality and loss. The loss of her daughter’s health forces Evelyn to come to terms with the fragility of life and the fleeting nature of time, and it brings a shift in her perspective about what truly matters. Rather than the adoration of the public or the material accomplishments she once pursued, Evelyn now seeks fulfillment in the quiet moments she shares with her daughter and in the knowledge that she is leaving behind a legacy of love and giving. Her story is no longer about the fame that once defined her, but about the relationships she has nurtured and the ways she has touched the lives of others in more meaningful ways.

In the closing pages of the chapter, Evelyn’s reflections on her life and her connection with Connor emphasize the enduring nature of love and the importance of family. The legacy Evelyn leaves behind is not measured by the number of awards or accolades she has accumulated, but by the way she has impacted those closest to her, and by the way her life has been intertwined with the causes she has supported. Even as she faces the loss of Connor’s health, Evelyn finds a sense of peace in knowing she has given everything she could to make the world a better place. Her grief is not the end of her story, but rather a testament to the depth of her love for her daughter and her willingness to stand by her through the most difficult of times. The chapter ultimately captures the essence of a life well-lived—not one marked by fame or fortune, but by love, sacrifice, and the quiet moments that shape a person’s legacy. This is Evelyn’s true legacy: the relationships she has cultivated, the causes she has championed, and the love she has given and received throughout her life.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

There is a certain freedom in marrying a man when you aren’t hiding anything. Celia was gone. I wasn’t really at a place in my life where I could fall in love with anyone, and Rex wasn’t the type of man who seemed capable of falling in love at all. Maybe, if we’d met at different times in our lives, we might have hit it off. But with things as they were, Rex and I had a relationship built entirely on box office.

It was tacky and fake and manipulative.

But it was the beginning of my millions.

It was also how I got Celia to come back to me.

And it was one of the most honest deals I’ve ever made with anybody.

I think I will always love Rex North a little bit because of all that.

“So you're never going to sleep with me?” Rex said.

He was sitting in my living room with one leg casually crossed over the other, drinking a manhattan. He was wearing a black suit with a thin tie. His blond hair was slicked back. It made his blue eyes look even brighter, with nothing in their way.

Rex was the kind of guy who was so beautiful it was nearly boring. And then he smiled, and you watched every girl in the room faint. Perfect teeth, two shallow dimples, a slight arch of the eyebrow, and everybody was done for.

Like me, he’d been made by the studios. Born Karl Olvirsson in Iceland, he hightailed it to Hollywood, changed his name, perfected his accent, and slept with everybody he needed to sleep with to get what he wanted. He was a matinee idol with a chip on his shoulder about proving he could act. But he actually could act. He felt underestimated because he was underestimated. Anna Karenina was his chance to be taken seriously. He needed it to be a big hit just as much as I did. Which was why he was willing to do

exactly what I was willing to do. A marriage stunt.

Rex was pragmatic and never precious. He saw ten steps ahead but never let on what he was thinking. We were kindred spirits in that regard.

I sat down next to him on my living room sofa, my arm resting behind him. “I can’t say for sure I’d never sleep with you,” I said. It was the truth. “You’re handsome. I could see myself falling for your shtick once or twice.”

Rex laughed. He always had a detached sense about him, like you could do whatever you wanted and you wouldn’t get under his skin. He was untouchable in that way.

“I mean, can you say for certain that you’d never fall in love with me?” I asked. “What if you end up wanting to make this a real marriage? That would be uncomfortable for everyone.”

“You know, if any woman could do it, it would make sense that it was Evelyn Hugo. I suppose there’s always a chance.”

“That’s how I feel about sleeping with you,” I said. “There’s always a chance.” I grabbed my gibson off the coffee table and drank a sip.

Rex laughed. “Tell me, then, where will we live?”

“Good question.”

“My house is in the Bird Streets, with floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s a pain in the ass to get out of the driveway. But you can see the whole canyon from my pool.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t mind moving to your place for a little while. I’m shooting another movie in a month or so over at Columbia, so your place will be closer anyway. The only thing I insist on is that I can bring Luisa.”

After Celia left, I could hire help again. After all, there was no longer anyone hiding in my bedroom. Luisa was from El Salvador, just a few years younger than I was. The first day she came to work for me, she was talking to her mother on the phone during her lunch break. She was speaking in Spanish, right in front of me. “La señora es tan bonita, pero loca.” (“This lady is beautiful but crazy.”)

I turned and looked at her, and I said, “Disculpe? Yo te puedo entender.” (“Excuse me?

I can understand you.”)

Luisa’s eyes went wide, and she hung up the phone on her mother and said to me, “Lo siento. No sabía que usted hablaba Español.” (“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.”)

I switched to English, not wanting to speak Spanish anymore, not liking how strange it sounded coming out of my own mouth. “I’m Cuban,” I said to her. “I’ve spoken Spanish my entire life.” That wasn’t true, though. I hadn’t spoken it in years.

She looked at me as if I were a painting she was interpreting, and then she said, apologetically, “You do not look Cuban.”

“Pues, lo soy,” I said haughtily. (“Well, I am.”)

Luisa nodded and packed up her lunch, moving on to change the bed linens. I sat at that table for at least a half hour, reeling. I kept thinking, How dare she try to take my own identity away from me? But as I looked around my house, seeing no pictures of my family, not a single Latin-American book, stray blond hairs in my hairbrush, not even a jar of cumin in my spice rack, I realized Luisa hadn’t done that to me. I had done it to me. I’d made the choice to be different from my true self.

Fidel Castro had control of Cuba. Eisenhower had already put the economic embargo in place by that point. The Bay of Pigs had been a disaster. Being a Cuban-American was complicated. And instead of trying to make my way in the world as a Cuban woman, I simply forsook where I came from. In some ways, this helped me release any remaining ties connecting me to my father. But it also pulled me further away from my mother. My mother, whom this had all been for at some point.

That was all me. All the results of my own choices. None of that was Luisa’s fault. So I realized I had no right to sit at my own kitchen table blaming her.

When she left that night, I could tell she still felt uncomfortable around me. So I made sure to smile sincerely and tell her I was excited to see her the next day.

From that day forward, I never spoke Spanish to her. I was too embarrassed, too insecure of my disloyalty. But she spoke it from time to time, and I smiled when she made jokes to her mother within earshot. I let her know I understood her. And I quickly grew to care for her very much. I envied how secure she was in her own skin. How

unafraid she was to be her true self. She was proud to be Luisa Jimenez.
She was the first employee I ever had whom I cherished. I was not going to move house without her.

“I’m sure she’s great,” Rex said. “Bring her. Now, practically speaking, do we sleep in the same bed?”
“I doubt it’s necessary. Luisa will be discreet. I’ve learned that lesson before. And we’ll just throw parties a few times a year and make it look like we live in the same room.”
“And I can still . . . do what I do?”
“You can still sleep with every woman on the planet, yes.”
“Every woman except my wife,” Rex said, smiling and taking another sip of his drink. “You just can’t get caught.”
Rex waved me off, as if my worry wasn’t a concern.
“I’m serious, Rex. Cheating on me is a big story. I can’t have that.”
“You don’t have to worry,” Rex said. He was more sincere about that than anything else I’d asked of him, maybe more than any scene in Anna Karenina. “I would never do anything to make you look foolish. We’re in this together.”
“Thank you,” I said. “That means a lot. That goes for me, too. What I do won’t be your problem. I promise you.”
Rex put out his hand, and I shook it.
“Well, I should be going,” he said, checking his watch. “I have a date with a particularly eager young lady, and I’d hate to keep her waiting.” He buttoned his coat as I stood up. “When should we tie the knot?” he asked.
“I think we should probably be seen around town a few times this coming week. And keep it going for a little while. Maybe put a ring on my finger around November. Harry suggested the big day could be about two weeks before the film hits theaters.”

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 opens with the protagonist caught in the web of a scandal ignited by an article from *Sub Rosa*, a magazine known for sensationalizing the lives of Hollywood's elite. The protagonist sits in Harry's office with him and Celia, discussing the fallout of the article that has now become a public issue. *Sub Rosa* has made a name for itself by distorting facts and creating stories that appeal to the public's thirst for gossip. The magazine's shift from truth to fiction has left a trail of consequences, not only for the protagonist but also for Sunset Studios, which is now facing negative press that could damage its reputation and bottom line. The conversation reveals the deep tension between the studio's need for positive publicity and the media's insatiable hunger for scandal. It's clear that, in Hollywood, the public's perception of reality is more important than the truth.

This situation stands in stark contrast to the success the protagonist and Celia had just experienced. They had recently wrapped up filming *Little Women*, a project they hoped would propel them into the next phase of their careers. With award season around the corner, they both felt the excitement of what might be, yet the scandal over the article threatens to overshadow these professional highs. The protagonist and Celia are caught between the duality of their public triumphs and the private struggles that come with fame. Hollywood, as the protagonist reflects, is a place that offers immense success but also imposes a constant battle to keep a pristine image, a battle that is becoming harder to fight as the lines between fact and fiction blur.

As the plot unfolds, the protagonist becomes obsessed with the idea that their maid is the source of the leak to *Sub Rosa*. The betrayal stings more deeply because the maid was someone the protagonist trusted, someone allowed into their private space. To regain control and restore some semblance of order, the protagonist decides to fire the maid, but this decision doesn't solve the problem—it only fuels their desire to act.

They concoct a plan to fake a miscarriage, a drastic move designed to generate sympathy and take attention away from the article. The protagonist believes this will protect their public image and shield their marriage to Don from the harsh judgment of the public eye. The plan is born from desperation, driven by a deep fear of losing everything they have worked for. It’s a moral compromise, one that signals how far individuals in Hollywood will go to maintain their positions at the top.

The decision to feign a miscarriage further illustrates the complexities of living in the spotlight, where maintaining a carefully curated image can often require significant personal sacrifice. In the world of Hollywood, where public opinion is everything, personal integrity often takes a backseat to the pursuit of success and the avoidance of scandal. The chapter lays bare the pressures of fame—the constant balancing act between the truth of one’s private life and the need to project a perfect public persona. The protagonist’s willingness to go to such lengths to preserve their image serves as a reminder of the toll that being in the public eye can take on personal relationships and self-perception.

The chapter delves into the inherent challenges of life in Hollywood, where public perception can make or break a career. Through the protagonist’s inner turmoil and the decisions they are forced to make, the narrative explores the fragile nature of fame. The complex relationships within the industry become more evident as the protagonist struggles to reconcile their personal desires with the demands of the entertainment world. The focus shifts from the scandal itself to the broader implications of living in an industry where loyalty, trust, and truth are frequently sacrificed for the sake of success. The interactions between the protagonist, Harry, and Celia highlight the competing interests at play, where professional alliances are often built on the shifting sands of personal agendas.

As the protagonist reflects on the damage done by the *Sub Rosa* article, they also begin to realize the profound impact that living in Hollywood has had on their sense of self. The conflict between truth and fiction is something they must navigate daily. In Hollywood, it is often easier to manipulate the truth than to face the consequences of

it. The chapter explores how, in a world where image is everything, truth becomes something to be molded, manipulated, and hidden if it stands in the way of success. Through the protagonist’s actions, the narrative conveys the extent to which individuals are willing to go in order to protect their careers, their reputations, and their futures in the ever-changing landscape of Hollywood.

The underlying theme of this chapter is the tension between personal ethics and professional survival. Hollywood, with all its glitz and glamour, is also a world where people are constantly battling for control over how they are perceived. The protagonist, caught in a storm of media scrutiny, must make tough decisions that will define their future. By the end of the chapter, it becomes clear that in this world, there are no easy answers. The line between right and wrong is blurred, and sometimes, the choices made are not just about survival—they are about maintaining a grip on the fragile image of perfection that the public demands. The complexities of Hollywood life are laid bare, showing that the price of fame is often much higher than most can imagine.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 begins with the narrator seeking refuge from the chaos of their life in the quiet sanctuary of Celia’s apartment. With the bustling world outside temporarily put on hold, the narrator spends their days immersed in books, the peaceful solitude offering a brief escape from the emotional turmoil they carry. Meanwhile, Celia is occupied with the filming of her latest movie, her focus split between the demands of her career and the complex, unspoken bond she shares with the narrator. Their relationship, though rich in physical closeness, is also marked by emotional walls—moments of intimacy and desire linger in the air, but neither of them acknowledges the deeper feelings that threaten to complicate their connection. These underlying emotions remain unspoken, mostly due to the constraints of societal expectations and the narrator’s reluctance to fully accept their sexual identity.

Despite the tension, there are small moments where the narrator's longing for Celia surfaces, subtly hinting at a bond that transcends friendship. The two share quiet evenings together, the space between them filled with a deep, yet unacknowledged yearning. The complexity of their relationship grows as the narrator is faced with the internal battle of wanting to step beyond the limits set by the world around them and give into the feelings they share with Celia. However, their fear of how this would impact their lives prevents them from confronting this reality head-on, leaving them to live in a kind of emotional limbo.

The narrative takes a dramatic turn when Harry arrives with divorce papers from the narrator’s husband, a prominent figure in Hollywood. Harry delivers the papers with a stoic expression, revealing that the terms of the divorce include a significant financial settlement on the condition that the narrator remains silent about their marriage. This stipulation serves as a clear attempt to control the narrative around their marriage, protecting the husband's reputation at all costs while silencing the narrator from

sharing their truth. This effort to stifle the narrator’s voice not only reveals the manipulative nature of their husband but also underscores the disparity in power between the two.

Harry further explains the full extent of the control the narrator’s husband has over their life, revealing the twisted plans he has to ruin their career. He intends to have the narrator loaned out to failing studios, where their projects will surely be unsuccessful, damaging their reputation and professional future. This grim reality speaks to the power structures in Hollywood, where personal lives are treated as commodities to be controlled, and careers are often shaped not by talent, but by the whims of those in power. The manipulation behind the scenes, designed to crush the narrator’s career and silence them, speaks to the dark side of the entertainment industry where power, money, and control dominate, and where personal well-being often comes second.

Faced with this emotionally draining reality, the narrator resolves to take control of their future, deciding to free themselves from the shackles of their manipulative marriage. As they process the information, the financial cushion offered by the settlement allows them to consider new possibilities for their life and career without the constant threat of financial instability. The bond of friendship and support that Harry offers becomes an anchor in this moment, giving the narrator the strength to face the uncertain path ahead. For the first time in a long while, they feel the possibility of a life lived authentically and free from the suffocating grip of their past.

Amidst the turmoil, the narrator finds themselves drawn more strongly to the idea of pursuing a relationship with Celia, realizing that this, perhaps, is the only path forward that offers a chance at genuine happiness. The chapter closes with a hint of hope as the narrator envisions a future where they no longer have to live under the oppressive expectations of their past, but instead can begin to live their truth. This is the beginning of a journey of self-acceptance, not just in their personal life, but in their career as well, where they can finally step into their power, free from the constraints of a marriage that was never meant to define them. The narrative hints at the profound change coming their way, as they seek not only a personal transformation but also a

chance to reclaim their autonomy and live without fear of judgment.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 unfolds as a pivotal moment in Evelyn's life, offering a deeply personal confession that has long been withheld. The conversation begins in a light, casual manner, with Monique asking about mundane things like dinner preferences, but quickly transitions to more profound and introspective topics. As Evelyn opens up about her past, the complexities of her identity emerge, particularly her long-standing love for Celia St. James, a woman who has shaped her in ways both profound and painful. This chapter delves into Evelyn’s inner world, highlighting the complex layers of her sexuality and the depth of her emotions, which have remained hidden for years due to the oppressive societal constraints of her time.

As the conversation deepens, Evelyn reveals a truth that has been buried beneath the weight of societal expectations: she is bisexual. Though she has long struggled with her identity, Evelyn's love for Celia has always been constant, transcending societal judgment and the norms that sought to define her. Her confession is not just about revealing her sexual orientation, but about confronting the unspoken love she has carried with her for Celia, a love that has defined much of her existence. In the moment when Evelyn acknowledges Celia St. James, the recognition of a lifelong bond reflects the raw, unfiltered truth of her emotions—emotions that have been stifled by fear of rejection and societal condemnation.

The conversation with Monique continues to reveal the tension that has been building between Evelyn and the world around her. When Monique makes the mistake of assuming Evelyn is exclusively gay, Evelyn’s frustration becomes palpable. This misstep reflects a common societal issue—people often categorize others based on preconceived notions and rigid labels, failing to appreciate the full complexity of an individual's identity. Evelyn’s insistence on defining herself on her own terms serves as a powerful reminder of how often marginalized individuals are forced into boxes that

limit their true expression. By challenging Monique’s assumptions, Evelyn reclaims her narrative, demanding that her identity be seen in its entirety.

Evelyn's journey is not just about coming to terms with her sexuality but also about navigating the complexities of love, identity, and the external pressures that have shaped her experiences. The jealousy Evelyn feels when Celia’s life with Don becomes public reveals the depth of her emotional turmoil, as she confronts the reality of her own desires and the constraints placed on them. Her internal conflict exposes the painful truths that many LGBTQ+ individuals have faced in past decades—struggling to accept themselves while simultaneously facing a world that refuses to accept them in return. Through Evelyn’s reflections, we gain insight into the struggles of loving someone in a world that punishes such love, particularly when that love is for someone of the same gender.

Monique's mistake in assuming Evelyn’s sexuality, followed by her sincere apology, further emphasizes the importance of listening to individuals and respecting their autonomy in defining their identity. Evelyn’s response to this apology is a quiet but powerful statement about the need for self-definition in a world that often imposes labels. The chapter ultimately underscores the importance of embracing one's true self and fighting against the forces that seek to diminish or erase those truths. Through Evelyn's journey, the narrative highlights not only the personal struggles of identity and love but also the broader societal issues that continue to shape the lives of those who fall outside the norm. Evelyn's courage in revealing her love for Celia is a monumental act of self-acceptance and defiance against the restrictions of her time, making this chapter a significant turning point in the story.

Now This: July 1, 1988

Now This, July 1, 1988, marks another dramatic chapter in the life of Evelyn Hugo, a name that continues to make waves in both Hollywood and tabloid circles. The starlet, whose personal life has always been under intense public scrutiny, is once again facing a divorce, this time from her third husband, Max Girard. As expected, the split is far from amicable, and the circumstances surrounding it promise to make this a messy and high-profile affair. In her divorce filing this week, Evelyn cites “irreconcilable differences,” but the reasons behind their decision to part ways go much deeper than what’s officially written on the paper. Behind the scenes, a storm is brewing, with accusations flying from both parties and a growing public interest in the details of their break-up. The former couple’s marriage has been anything but ordinary, and as it comes to an end, the world is watching, eagerly awaiting the fallout.

Max Girard, who was initially seen as a calming influence in Evelyn's life, has taken an aggressive stance in the aftermath of their separation. Reports suggest that he is not only seeking spousal support but also airing his grievances publicly, with a vendetta that seems to grow by the day. According to sources close to the couple, Girard has been spreading hurtful claims, accusing Evelyn of infidelity, calling her a lesbian, and even suggesting that she owes him her Academy Award. These statements, fueled by his heartbreak and anger, have cast a shadow over the divorce proceedings, with many wondering how much of this is driven by genuine pain and how much is an attempt to tarnish Evelyn’s reputation. While Girard has every right to feel betrayed, his public outbursts are undeniably turning a private matter into a spectacle, keeping the media engaged and eagerly awaiting every new development. His bitterness is palpable, and it’s clear that he’s struggling to cope with the breakdown of his marriage in a way that feels personal, not just professional.

Meanwhile, Evelyn, as always, remains a captivating figure at the center of the storm. Last week, she was seen out to dinner with Jack Easton, a much younger Democratic congressman from Vermont, who has been the subject of much speculation since the two were photographed together. At just 29 years old, Easton is more than two decades younger than Evelyn, and the nature of their relationship has sparked a whirlwind of rumors. While some suggest that the dinner marks the beginning of a new romance, others are more skeptical, questioning whether this relationship is genuine or simply a diversion from the turmoil in Evelyn's life. Evelyn's romantic entanglements have always been part of her public persona, often driven by a desire for companionship and a sense of escape from her tumultuous world. The timing of her dinner with Easton—so soon after the end of her marriage—only fuels speculation about her motives and whether this is a fleeting fling or something more serious. For Evelyn, however, this new chapter may be a chance to find solace after years of emotional highs and lows, even if it means stepping into another whirlwind of public attention. The question remains: is Evelyn truly ready for a lasting connection with Easton, or is she simply seeking a distraction to fill the void left by the collapse of her marriage?

Despite the public chaos surrounding her, Evelyn remains a resilient figure. She's no stranger to scandal or controversy, and while the accusations from Max and the media frenzy around her love life may seem overwhelming, Evelyn is determined to maintain control over her narrative. She has weathered storms in her personal life before, from the collapse of her previous marriages to her complicated relationships with fame, and she is far from done. The media loves to paint her as a woman whose life is defined by her romantic entanglements, but Evelyn is more than just her love affairs. She's a survivor, a woman who's constantly reinventing herself, even in the face of public humiliation. As Max's accusations continue to mount and the media's gaze intensifies, Evelyn is proving, once again, that she's more than capable of handling whatever comes her way. Her story is far from over, and whether or not her relationship with Jack Easton evolves into something more lasting, one thing is clear: Evelyn will continue to live her life on her own terms, even if that means taking risks and

embracing the fallout. The world will be watching every step of the way, as Evelyn Hugo’s next chapter unfolds.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins with Monique waking up ahead of her alarm, the quiet stillness of the early morning providing a brief moment of solitude before the rush of the day begins. She checks her emails, quickly scanning through messages until one from her boss, Frankie, demands her attention. The subject line, “KEEP ME UPDATED,” in bold caps, feels like a command, reminding Monique of the pressure she’s under. As she prepares for the day ahead, Monique finds herself balancing a mix of emotions—confidence, uncertainty, and the weight of expectations from both her job and the assignment she’s about to undertake.

Monique’s morning routine is simple but deliberate. She dresses carefully, choosing an outfit that reflects a sense of professionalism while still being comfortable enough for a long day ahead. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she notices the subtle changes in her appearance since her relationship with David ended. While always slender, Monique has shed a few extra pounds, particularly around her face, a side effect of the emotional toll of her past relationship. She feels a sense of empowerment as she recognizes her renewed confidence—physically and mentally. It’s as if this new phase of her life has finally begun, and she’s ready to embrace it fully.

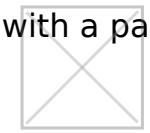
After making herself breakfast and having a brief moment of reflection, Monique picks up her phone to call Frankie. She carefully crafts her response to her boss, maintaining a calm and even tone despite the tension running beneath the surface. She knows that Frankie expects results, but Monique isn’t ready to share the complexities of her situation with Evelyn just yet. The truth is, Monique is still figuring out how to navigate this assignment, and the more she interacts with Evelyn, the more she realizes just how complicated and fascinating the woman really is. But she puts on a facade for Frankie, promising that everything is going smoothly, even if it’s not quite the reality.

As Monique makes her way to Evelyn’s luxurious apartment, she’s once again reminded of the vast divide between their worlds. Evelyn’s building—an architectural marvel overlooking Central Park—is a statement of both elegance and power. The doorman, a warm and gracious presence, greets Monique as if she’s a long-awaited guest, leading her to the elevator without a second thought. As Monique enters the apartment, she’s struck by the richness of the space—every detail carefully curated to reflect Evelyn’s wealth and status. She’s about to step into the life of one of the most iconic figures in Hollywood history, and despite her nerves, Monique is determined to rise to the occasion.

Inside, Monique meets Grace, Evelyn’s assistant, who immediately puts her at ease with her friendly and approachable demeanor. Grace, who seems genuinely delighted to meet Monique, offers her a warm welcome despite the formality of the situation. Monique is keenly aware of her own insecurities, but Grace’s warmth helps her shake off some of the nervousness that’s been building up. As Grace leads her to Evelyn’s study, Monique is struck by the beauty and tranquility of the space—so different from her own modest apartment. It’s a reminder that she’s about to engage with someone who has lived a life of immense privilege and glamour, yet Monique is determined to remain focused on the task at hand.

Evelyn enters the room with all the poise and confidence of a woman who knows her worth. Her presence is magnetic—her beauty timeless, and her aura one of quiet strength. Monique watches as Evelyn moves with grace, her every action seemingly deliberate and controlled. The casual elegance Evelyn exudes is both disarming and empowering, and Monique can’t help but feel a sense of awe as they sit down to talk. Evelyn, however, doesn’t waste any time before surprising Monique with a bold declaration—she’s not here to discuss the gowns she’s auctioning off; instead, she wants to tell Monique her life story. This revelation catches Monique off guard, but as Evelyn begins to outline the terms of their conversation, it’s clear that this will be far more than just a simple interview. Evelyn wants to share the truth behind her marriages, her career, and her image—a story of both triumphs and regrets.

Monique’s initial shock gives way to intrigue as Evelyn sets the stage for what promises to be an unforgettable journey. The weight of what Evelyn is offering Monique—the chance to tell the full, unvarnished truth of her life—becomes clear. This isn’t just another celebrity profile. It’s an opportunity for Monique to capture the essence of a woman who has been at the center of Hollywood’s most glamorous and scandalous moments. Monique realizes that she’s not just interviewing Evelyn; she’s being entrusted with a part of history, and this is a chance that could shape her entire career.



Evelyn’s proposition to Monique is bold—she wants to tell her life story, but not for the typical glossy magazine spread. Instead, she’s offering a deeper, more intimate account, one that will reveal the raw truths of her life behind the fame and beauty. Monique is hesitant, uncertain about the consequences of accepting such an offer, but the allure of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is too great to ignore. Evelyn’s confidence and control over the situation are palpable, and Monique knows that from this moment forward, her life will never be the same. The decision to take Evelyn’s offer isn’t an easy one, but Monique is starting to understand the power that lies in the story Evelyn is about to unfold.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 begins with the protagonist reflecting on her lavish wedding to Don at the iconic Beverly Hills Hotel, attended by three hundred guests, mostly Hollywood elites. The wedding is orchestrated almost entirely by Don’s parents, Mary and Roger Adler, with little input from the couple themselves. The protagonist wears a breathtaking jewel-necked taffeta gown, designed by Vivian Worley, the head costumer at Sunset Studios, embellished with rose-point lace and long sleeves. Her hair is elegantly styled by Gwendolyn into a simple yet flawless bun, with a delicate tulle veil completing the look. While the wedding is a public spectacle controlled by others, the protagonist feels a deep sense of commitment as she exchanges vows with Don, a man she believes to understand her better than anyone else.

After the wedding, as the couple is basking in the celebration, Harry pulls the protagonist aside to check on her emotional state. Despite the overwhelming excitement of the wedding and the glamour of being Hollywood’s newest golden couple, Harry asks if she is truly happy with Don. The protagonist, feeling like the center of attention, reassures him that she is fine, believing with her youthful optimism that Don is indeed her happy ending. At just nineteen, she feels she has found someone who sees her, and with his reassuring presence, she feels a sense of completion. However, as Harry continues to speak to her, a hint of discomfort arises, and she curiously asks why he has never made any romantic advances toward her, despite the close friendship they’ve shared for years.

Harry, always a charming and likable man, deflects her question with humor, offering to kiss her on the cheek if she desires. The protagonist, in her slightly tipsy state, pushes further, wondering if she’s been giving off signals that she wanted more from their friendship. Harry, though clearly avoiding the topic, explains that he simply doesn’t see her that way, despite her being a stunning woman. The protagonist is

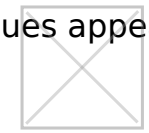
taken aback by his response, but she remains composed, not entirely sure how to process his admission. The conversation marks a turning point for her, as she grapples with the realization that the relationships in her life often come with certain expectations—some unspoken and some deeply rooted in the dynamics of Hollywood.

As the protagonist looks over at Don, swaying with his mother on the dance floor, her mind drifts to the growing sense of unease in their marriage. Don is seven years older than her, and despite their passionate connection, she begins to feel the weight of their differences. Don, a successful actor with a legacy to uphold, is determined to rise above his parents' shadow and prove himself as a major star. Meanwhile, the protagonist is trying to navigate her own desires for success while balancing the public persona of being a wife in a famous marriage. The differences in their ambitions, as well as Don's complex relationship with fame, start to create an undercurrent of tension in their otherwise perfect life.

Harry's admission, that he's never been attracted to her, leads the protagonist to reflect on her role in her own relationships. She realizes that, just like with Don, she has always played a part to meet certain expectations, whether those are romantic, professional, or personal. Her image in the eyes of others, particularly in Hollywood, has been carefully cultivated and constructed. The protagonist begins to feel the weight of constantly performing for the camera, even in her most personal relationships. The conversation with Harry reveals her inner conflict, as she struggles to separate who she is from who others expect her to be. Despite the glamorous wedding and her belief that she's found her "happy ending," she starts to question whether she can ever truly escape the roles imposed on her by society, fame, and the expectations of those around her.

As Harry and the protagonist continue their conversation, the tension is palpable. The protagonist, still processing the reality of her marriage and her complex relationships with the men in her life, realizes that the road to happiness might not be as simple as it once seemed. She wants to believe in the ideal of love, but she's beginning to understand that love, like fame, comes with its own set of rules, compromises, and

challenges. Harry’s rejection, though gentle, serves as a reminder that even in the most glamorous and idealized relationships, there are limits. The protagonist, despite the facade of perfection, feels more lost than ever, caught between the desire to please others and the need to preserve her own sense of identity. The narrative captures the tension between public admiration and personal fulfillment, as the protagonist grapples with the complexities of love, fame, and self-discovery in an industry that values appearances above all else.



Chapter 53

Chapter 53 begins with Celia stepping into the challenging role of Lady Macbeth in a 1988 film adaptation. Instead of aiming for the Best Actress category, she strategically places herself in the Best Supporting Actress race, a decision reflecting her deep understanding of the Hollywood game. This choice not only showcases her intelligence but also her insight into the intricacies of the industry, where certain categories provide a better chance for recognition. While Celia is focusing on her craft, the narrator is facing a personal struggle, recognizing the realities of aging in Hollywood, an industry where youth and beauty are constantly prioritized. Instead of attending the glitz and glamor of the Academy Awards, the narrator decides to spend the evening in a more meaningful way, choosing family over fame. In doing so, she comes to terms with how the industry's emphasis on appearance has pushed her into smaller, less impactful roles as she ages. This revelation is poignant, as she reflects on the stark contrast between the glamour of her youth and the more subdued roles she now finds herself offered, emphasizing the painful truth of Hollywood’s superficial demands.

On the night of the ceremony, the narrator remains in New York with her daughter and Harry, watching the events unfold from a distance. Celia's win, seen from afar, stirs an emotional reaction, especially when Celia mentions a private joke in her acceptance speech, one that recalls their shared history. This moment captures the narrator's complex feelings toward Celia, combining admiration with a sense of longing for what could have been. Heeding Harry’s advice, the narrator decides to take a step toward reconciliation, sending Celia a letter filled with congratulations and admiration. This letter marks the beginning of a heartfelt exchange between the two, where they both open up about the past, their mistakes, and the love they once shared. Through their written words, it becomes clear that despite the years apart, the bond between them has not entirely disappeared. Both women acknowledge the faults that led to their

separation but also the lasting emotional connection that still lingers between them. This exchange sets the stage for the possibility of healing, as both women reflect on their shared past and express a mutual desire to reconnect.

Celia’s reply is filled with raw honesty and vulnerability, apologizing for past actions and referencing a film project that had once caused a rift between them. Despite the pain, there is an underlying hope in her words—a glimmer of possibility for rebuilding their relationship. She speaks of the life they could have had together, and in doing so, she expresses regret over the years lost to misunderstandings and choices. The narrator, touched by this, begins to question if it is possible for past lovers to evolve into friends, realizing that it’s never too late to try and make peace. There is a strong desire to not let the remaining years of their lives be wasted, to try and mend the fractures that time has created. As the chapter concludes, the narrator reflects on the power of forgiveness, recognizing the immense weight carried by years of silence, and contemplates whether they can start anew. This chapter not only explores the deep emotional complexity of their relationship but also the broader themes of love, loss, and the passage of time. It poignantly delves into the struggles of letting go of past hurts in order to make room for healing and connection, leaving the reader to consider whether true reconciliation is always possible or if certain wounds are too deep to mend. The possibilities of rebuilding love and friendship are tenderly explored, leaving the future open for hope and renewal.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

For two months, I was living in near bliss. Celia and I never talked about Mick, because we didn’t have to. Instead, we could go wherever we wanted, do whatever we wanted. Celia bought a second car, a boring brown sedan, and left it parked in my driveway every night without anyone asking questions. We would sleep cradling each other, turning off the light an hour before we wanted to fall asleep so that we could talk in the darkness. I would trace the lines of her palm with my fingertips in the mornings to wake her up. On my birthday, she took me out to the Polo Lounge. We were hiding in plain sight.

Fortunately, painting me as some woman who couldn’t keep a husband sold more papers—for a longer period of time—than outing me. I’m not saying the gossip columnists printed what they knew to be a lie. I’m simply saying they were all too happy to believe the lie I was selling them. And of course, that’s the easiest lie to tell, one you know the other person desperately wants to be true.

All I had to do was make sure that my romantic scandals felt like a story that would keep making headlines. And as long as I did that, I knew the gossip rags would never look too closely at Celia.

And it was all working so goddamn beautifully.

Until I found out I was pregnant.

“You are not,” Celia said to me. She was standing in my pool in a lavender polka-dot bikini and sunglasses.

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

I had just brought her out a glass of iced tea from the kitchen. I was standing right in front of her, looming over her, in a blue cover-up and sandals. I’d suspected I was pregnant for two weeks. I’d known for sure since the day before, when I went to

Burbank and saw a discreet doctor Harry had recommended.

I told her then, when she was in the pool and I was holding a glass of iced tea with a slice of lemon in it, because I couldn't hold it in anymore.

I am and have always been a great liar. But Celia was sacred to me. And I never wanted to lie to her.

I was under no illusions about how much it had cost Celia and me to be together and that it was going to continue to cost us more. It was like a tax on being happy. The world was going to take fifty percent of my happiness. But I could keep the other fifty percent.

And that was her. And this life we had.

But keeping something like this from her felt wrong. And I couldn't do it.

I put my feet into the pool next to her and tried to touch her, tried to comfort her. I expected that the news would upset her, but I did not expect her to hurl the iced tea to the other side of the pool, breaking the glass on the edge, scattering shards in the water.

I also did not expect her to plunge herself under the surface and scream. Actresses are very dramatic.

When she popped back up, she was wet and disheveled, her hair in her face, her mascara running. And she did not want to talk to me.

I grabbed her arm, and she pulled away. When I caught a glimpse of her face and saw the hurt in her eyes, I realized that Celia and I had never really been on the same page about what I was going to do with Mick Riva.

"You slept with him?" she said.

"I thought that was implied," I said.

"Well, it wasn't."

Celia raised herself up out of the pool and didn't even bother to dry off. I watched as her wet footprints changed the color of the cement around the pool, as they created puddles on the hardwood and then started dampening the carpet on the stairs.

When I looked up at the back bedroom window, I saw that she was walking back and forth. It looked like she was packing.

“Celia! Stop it,” I said, running up the stairs. “This doesn’t change anything.”

By the time I got to my own bedroom door, it was locked.

I pounded on it. “Honey, please.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Please,” I said. “Let’s talk about this.”

“No.”

“You can’t do this, Celia. Let’s talk this out.” I leaned against the door, pushing my face into the slim gap of the doorframe, hoping it would make my voice travel farther, make Celia understand faster.

“This is not a life, Evelyn,” she said.

She opened the door and walked past me. I almost fell, so much of my weight had been resting on the very door she had just flung open.

But I caught myself and followed her down the stairs.

“Yes, it is,” I said. “This is our life. And we’ve sacrificed so much for it, and you can’t give up on it now.”

“Yes, I can,” she said. “I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want to live this way. I don’t want to drive an awful brown car to your home so no one knows I’m here. I don’t want to pretend I live by myself in Hollywood when I truly live here with you in this house. And I certainly don’t want to love a woman who would screw some singer just so the world doesn’t suspect she loves me.”

“You are twisting the truth.”

“You are a coward, and I can’t believe I ever thought any differently.”

“I did this for you!” I yelled.

We were at the foot of the stairs now. Celia had one hand on the door, the other on her suitcase. She was still in her bathing suit. Her hair was dripping.

“You didn’t do a goddamn thing for me,” she said, her chest turning red in splotches, her cheeks burning. “You did it for you. You did it because you can’t stand the idea of not being the most famous woman on the planet. You did it to protect yourself and your precious fans, who go to the theater over and over just to see if this time they’ll catch a half frame of your tits. That’s who you did it for.”

“It was for you, Celia. Do you think your family is going to stick by you if they find out the truth?”

She bristled when I said it, and I saw her turn the doorknob.

“You will lose everything you have if people find out what you are,” I said.

“What we are,” she said, turning toward me. “Don’t go around trying to pretend you’re different from me.”

“I am,” I said. “And you know that I am.”

“Bullshit.”

“I can love a man, Celia. I can go marry any man I want and have children and be happy. And we both know that wouldn’t come easily for you.”

Celia looked at me, her eyes narrow, her lips pursed. “You think you’re better than me? Is that what’s going on? You think I’m sick, and you think you’re just playing some kind of game?”

I grabbed her, immediately wanting to take back what I’d said. That wasn’t what I meant at all.

But she flung her arm away from me and said, “Don’t you ever touch me again.”

I let go of her. “If they find out about us, Celia, they’ll forgive me. I’ll marry another guy like Don, and they’ll forget I even knew you. I can survive this. But I’m not sure that you can. Because you’d have to either fall in love with a man or marry one you didn’t love. And I don’t think you’re capable of either option. I’m worried for you, Celia. More than I’m worried for me. I’m not sure your career would ever recover—if your life would recover—if I didn’t do something. So I did the only thing I knew. And it worked.”

“It didn’t work, Evelyn. You’re pregnant.”

“I will take care of it.”

Celia looked down at the floor and laughed at me. “You certainly know how to handle almost any situation, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, unsure why I was supposed to be insulted by that. “I do.”

“And yet when it comes to being a human, you seem to have absolutely no idea where to start.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“You are a whore, Evelyn. You let men screw you for fame. And that is why I’m leaving you.”

She opened the door to leave, not even looking back at me. I watched her walk out to my front stoop, down the stairs, and over to her car. I followed her out and stood, frozen, in the driveway.

She threw her bag into the passenger’s side of her car. And then she opened the door on the driver’s side and stood there.

“I loved you so much that I thought you were the meaning of my life,” Celia said, crying. “I thought that people were put on earth to find other people, and I was put here to find you. To find you and touch your skin and smell your breath and hear all your thoughts. But I don’t think that’s true anymore.” She wiped her eyes. “Because I don’t want to be meant for someone like you.”

The searing pain in my chest felt like water boiling. “You know what? You’re right. You aren’t meant for someone like me,” I said finally. “Because I’m willing to do what it takes to make a world for us, and you’re too chickenshit. You won’t make the hard decisions; you aren’t willing to do the ugly stuff. And I’ve always known that. But I thought you’d at least have the decency to admit you need someone like me. You need someone who will get her hands dirty to protect you. You want to play like you’re all high and mighty all the time. Well, try doing that without someone in the trenches protecting you.”

Celia’s face was stoic, frozen. I wasn’t sure she’d heard a single word I’d said. “I guess we aren’t as right for each other as we thought,” she said, and then she got into her car.

It wasn’t until that moment, with her hand on the steering wheel, that I realized this was really happening, that this wasn’t just a fight we were having. That this was the fight that would end us. It had all been going so well and had turned so quickly in the other direction, like a hairpin turn off the freeway.

“I guess not” was all I could say. It came out like a croak, the vowels cracking.

Celia started the car and put it in reverse. “Good-bye, Evelyn,” she said at the very last minute. Then she backed out of my driveway and disappeared down the road.

I walked into my house and started cleaning up the puddles of water she'd left. I called a service to come and drain the pool and clean the shards of glass from her iced tea. And then I called Harry.

Three days later, he drove with me to Tijuana, where no one would ask any questions. It was a set of moments that I tried not to be mentally present for so that I would never have to work to forget them.

I was relieved, walking back to the car after the procedure, that I had become so good at compartmentalization and disassociation. May it make its way to the record books that I never regretted, not for one minute, ending that pregnancy. It was the right decision. On that I never wavered.

But still I cried the whole way home, while Harry drove us through San Diego and along the California coastline. I cried because of everything I had lost and all the decisions I had made. I cried because I was supposed to start *Anna Karenina* on Monday and I didn't care about acting or accolades. I wished I'd never needed a reason to be in Mexico in the first place. And I desperately wanted Celia to call me, crying, telling me how wrong she'd been. I wanted her to show up on my doorstep and beg to come home. I wanted . . . her. I just wanted her back.

As we were coming off the San Diego Freeway, I asked Harry the question that had been running through my mind for days.

"Do you think I'm a whore?"

Harry pulled over to the side of the road and turned to me. "I think you're brilliant. I think you're tough. And I think the word whore is something ignorant people throw around when they have nothing else."

I listened to him and then turned my head to look out my window.

"Isn't it awfully convenient," Harry added, "that when men make the rules, the one thing that's looked down on the most is the one thing that would bear them the greatest threat? Imagine if every single woman on the planet wanted something in exchange when she gave up her body. You'd all be ruling the place. An armed populace. Only men like me would stand a chance against you. And that's the last thing those assholes want, a world run by people like you and me."

Chapter 17

"Chapter 17" opens on a night of quiet celebration and reflection, as Celia joins the narrator to mark the release of a new article. While Don is unsure if the decision to release the article was the right one, and Harry is preoccupied with a secretive new relationship, the narrator sees this moment as an opportunity to unwind and enjoy life. The evening is spent in the comfort of the narrator's home, without the usual entourage or staff, a rare occurrence that allows the protagonist to feel a bit more human, rather than the polished, public figure that she is known to be. As Celia searches the kitchen for a corkscrew, their easygoing banter reveals the stark contrast between their personal lives and their public personas. The lack of staff, with the studio still vetting applicants for a maid, highlights the vulnerability and realness of the moment, making the kitchen—a space usually distant for the wealthy—feel almost unfamiliar.

The kitchen, in all its domestic simplicity, represents a part of life the protagonist never really had a chance to experience growing up. Being wealthy has a way of detaching people from the simple pleasures and responsibilities of life, such as cooking or even choosing the right wineglass. It’s a reflection of how, in the world of the rich and famous, parts of their homes—and, by extension, their lives—can feel like a performance or set, rather than something authentically theirs. As Celia finds the corkscrew and the protagonist fumbles for wineglasses, they share an understated laugh, recognizing how much of their lives are dictated by others. Their glassware choices become a metaphor for their lives: a mismatch of identities and roles, trying to find what fits, even as they stumble through the motions of their day-to-day existence.

The conversation shifts to their backgrounds, with Celia reflecting on her privileged upbringing in Georgia. Despite being surrounded by wealth and family, her life is far from perfect. Her parents, with their notions of Southern nobility, and her siblings,

some of whom don’t even understand her career in movies, paint a picture of family ties that are both suffocating and supportive. In contrast, the narrator shares that her familial relationships are virtually nonexistent. Having been estranged from her father and relatives back in Hell’s Kitchen, she has no longing for those connections. This conversation reveals the divide between the two women: Celia, who has money and family history but yearns for a sense of authenticity, and the narrator, who has carved her own path, driven solely by her ambition. It’s a connection that transcends their differences, one rooted in mutual admiration and understanding of the sacrifices each has made to get where they are.

As the night continues, their conversation becomes more candid, with Celia showing a surprising vulnerability as she discusses her desire to stand out in a world that often defines women by their appearances. The protagonist, on the other hand, is aware of the attention her looks garner, but it’s the quiet strength she has built in her rise to fame that defines her. Their friendship is tested, not by jealousy or competition, but by an understanding of what it means to truly be seen in a world obsessed with surface-level beauty. As Celia takes the protagonist’s hand, toasting to her being “absolutely unstoppable,” their bond deepens, showing the layers of support they provide for one another. The celebration, however small and intimate, marks a pivotal moment in their relationship: a reminder that behind the glittering façades of Hollywood, there are real, raw emotions and struggles at play.

When the conversation turns to their careers, both women express admiration for one another, albeit with subtle tensions beneath the surface. Celia reflects on how the protagonist's performance in *Father and Daughter* was so captivating that it left a lasting impact on her, while the protagonist, ever self-critical, deflects the compliment. Despite the mutual admiration, the tension between them is palpable, with both women struggling to reconcile their competitive instincts with their desire to support one another. The chapter explores the complexities of female friendships in the high-stakes, image-driven world of Hollywood, where every relationship has its roots in ambition, rivalry, and shared experiences of navigating an industry that demands

constant reinvention.

Their discussion shifts to more personal revelations as they start a fire in the fireplace, a simple, almost childish endeavor that leads to a playful moment of camaraderie. The contrast of the warm, intimate setting with the world outside—the chilly desert winds and the Hollywood facade—creates a space for honesty and vulnerability. In a world where both women are constantly performing, this moment of trying to start a fire becomes symbolic of their desire for something real and grounding. Celia, once again, shows her carefree side as she grabs the wine and drinks directly from the bottle, a rebellious act that only deepens the protagonist's sense of closeness to her. It’s in these moments, unguarded and raw, that the true nature of their friendship is revealed—not in the glitz and glamour, but in the shared understanding of the pressures they face.

Their playful moment takes a turn when the protagonist, in a teasing act, spills wine on Celia’s shirt. The act, though accidental, serves as a turning point in their evening—a reminder that, despite the tension in their careers and friendships, they can still laugh and enjoy each other’s company. As the protagonist leads Celia to her bedroom to change, they share a quiet, poignant exchange. The protagonist's confession that she doesn’t know if she loves Don anymore reveals the emotional turmoil that comes with their relationship. Celia, with her directness, pushes for an answer, but the protagonist’s response shows the complexity of love in a world where public image often blurs the lines between affection and obligation. This moment encapsulates the heart of the chapter: navigating love, fame, and the intricate dynamics of female friendships in an industry built on illusions.

Celia's final question, “Do you love him?” cuts through the emotional fog of the evening, and the protagonist's answer is complex and unresolved. It’s not a simple declaration of love, but rather an acknowledgment of the complicated, layered nature of their relationship. The chapter concludes with the protagonist offering Celia a shirt from her closet, a seemingly trivial act that holds deeper significance. The lilac button-down blouse, which doesn’t fit the protagonist well but would suit Celia perfectly,

symbolizes the passing of both material and emotional wealth between them. In this quiet moment, as Celia dons the shirt, they share an unspoken understanding—both women have found something rare in one another, a bond forged in the fires of ambition, love, and mutual respect. It is this connection that will carry them through the challenges ahead in the ever-turbulent world of Hollywood.



Chapter 65

Chapter 65 takes the protagonist on a turbulent emotional journey, from fury to self-realization, as the truth about her father’s death is slowly revealed. The anger that begins to well up inside her starts as fear, a deep, instinctive dread that quickly transitions into disbelief. The sense of disbelief evolves into denial, as she struggles to accept the reality of the situation—“No, this can’t be true. It’s a mistake, surely.” But when the truth finally hits her, it’s impossible to ignore. The anger is no longer just a reaction to being misled—it becomes a response to the years of false assumptions that have clouded her understanding of her father’s death. She realizes that for so long, she had blamed her father for his own tragic end, and now, in the face of this new information, that long-held belief crumbles. What once seemed like a simple narrative of a man making a fatal mistake is revealed to be far more complicated, and with this new truth comes an overwhelming flood of emotions.

As Evelyn’s confession sinks in, the protagonist is left with a deep, simmering rage. It’s a fury that, unlike the grief she initially felt, refuses to be subdued. The betrayal she feels isn't just from Evelyn’s actions but from the realization that she had spent years blaming the wrong person. The letter Evelyn has kept for years, hidden away and now thrust into the protagonist’s hands, becomes the catalyst for all this new understanding. In the letter, her father confesses feelings for someone else, revealing the love he had for Harry, a love that, for so long, was never fully understood by the protagonist. The truth of her father's struggle between duty and passion complicates her perception of him entirely. It’s not just the anger she feels for what Evelyn has done, but a mix of regret, confusion, and a sense of deep loss as she realizes how much she didn’t know about her father. Her emotions surge, as everything she thought she knew about the past is now under review, and she is left with a burning need to understand the whole truth, even if it makes her uncomfortable.

The protagonist’s anger reaches a boiling point, manifesting physically as she steps toward Evelyn, confronting her face to face. Her emotions are raw and volatile, and she struggles to contain them. She pushes Evelyn, her actions fueled by years of pent-up resentment and pain. She accuses Evelyn of manipulating her, using her to confess her life story while leaving the protagonist to deal with the fallout. In her rage, the protagonist tells Evelyn that she’s glad no one is left to love her, a comment born from a mixture of anger and betrayal. But as quickly as her fury erupts, it fades into something else—regret. She steps back, realizing the depth of her own feelings and the complex nature of the relationship she shares with Evelyn. Evelyn, despite her many faults, has given her a glimpse into her father’s soul, and now the protagonist must decide what to do with this newfound knowledge.

The letter, though a painful gift, reveals the hidden layers of the protagonist’s father’s life—things she had never known. In his words, the protagonist discovers that her father was a man torn between his love for Harry and his responsibilities as a father and husband. He writes about how he couldn’t leave his family, despite his deep affection for Harry, because of his love for his daughter and his desire to provide her with stability. The protagonist is struck by the sacrifice her father made, giving up a passionate love to stay with his family. It’s a revelation that forces her to reconsider her entire view of him. The man she had blamed for his own death, the man she had resented for his perceived mistakes, was in fact a man of deep love and commitment. This realization shifts the entire narrative of her life, replacing the anger she had once felt with a more nuanced understanding of her father’s struggles and choices.

As she sits down to read the letter, her father’s words begin to reshape the memories she’s held onto for so long. The bloodstains on the letter—a stark visual reminder of the accident that claimed her father’s life—make her pause, questioning whether it was her father’s blood that marked the paper or someone else’s. Yet, despite the lingering physical reminders of the past, the emotional weight of the words on the page carries more significance. The protagonist begins to reframe her understanding of her father, seeing him not as the man who caused his own demise, but as a man

caught between duty and desire, love and responsibility. The realization is overwhelming, as she grapples with the truth that the person she blamed for so many years might not have been the one at fault. It’s a heavy burden to bear, and she finds herself needing space to process it all.

In the quiet after Evelyn leaves, the protagonist is left alone with the letter, the truth, and the complex emotions that have come to the surface. For the first time in nearly three decades, she has a new perspective on her father, one that reshapes her understanding of his life and choices. The weight of the letter, the words her father wrote to Harry, provide a new lens through which she can view her father’s legacy. She begins to see him not as the man who was responsible for the car accident, but as a father who loved her deeply, who made sacrifices for her, and who chose to stay in a life that was not entirely his own to ensure her happiness. This shift in perspective doesn’t erase the pain of his death, but it adds depth to her understanding of who he was. She feels an immense sense of loss, not just for the man he was, but for the years spent misunderstanding him, and the years she now has to reconcile with this new knowledge.

The chapter closes with the protagonist holding the letter, her mind swirling with thoughts of her father and the truth that Evelyn has revealed. She realizes that this moment—this revelation—is the beginning of a new chapter in her own life. It’s a moment of reckoning, where she must decide what to do with the truth she’s been given. Will she let it define her, or will she let it guide her toward understanding? The choice is hers, but for now, she’s left to process the weight of the past and how it will shape her future. The anger that once consumed her begins to fade, replaced by a sense of clarity and a new understanding of the man her father truly was.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 begins with Don's unexpected apology as he sits down to meet Evelyn. She had already ordered her iced tea and taken a few bites of a sour pickle, thinking that his apology was merely for being late, something that didn’t seem necessary. However, when Don’s apology comes with a weight that feels different, it catches her off guard. He is noticeably thinner than before, his pale face showing the marks of a man who has seen better days. Time had not been kind to Don, and the years apart had taken a toll, both physically and emotionally. His once charming appearance, which had always been striking, now had a worn quality, yet there was still something magnetic about him. Even now, his presence seemed to draw attention in a way that only someone with his particular brand of charisma could.

Don begins by telling Evelyn that he’s been sober for 256 days, a statement that hits harder than he perhaps anticipated. His confession isn't just about his past mistakes but is a genuine admission of self-awareness. Evelyn, though caught off guard by the depth of his apology, still feels a need to remind him of all the pain he caused her and others. His history of being a cheater, his unkindness, and the emotional toll he took on her—she couldn’t let those things be erased by a mere apology. Don takes full responsibility for these actions, acknowledging that he failed her and that he cannot take back what was done. This apology feels genuine, but it’s also overwhelming because Evelyn came to him for a professional matter—wanting to discuss working together on a movie, not to revisit the wounds of their past.

The waitress arrives to take their orders, and Evelyn chooses a Reuben sandwich, recognizing that if she’s going to engage in a meaningful conversation about Don’s apology and what comes next, she needs something substantial to eat. Don orders the same, and as they speak, it becomes clear that the waitress knows exactly who they are. There’s a subtle recognition in the way she holds back a smile, trying to remain

professional in front of the famous duo. Once the waitress leaves, Don continues, saying that his apology can’t erase the past, but that he’s working every day to be a better man, hoping that it brings Evelyn some sense of comfort. But Evelyn, ever practical, responds by saying that being a better man now doesn’t make up for the pain he caused. His transformation, though commendable, comes too late to undo the emotional damage, and she is steadfast in her belief that an apology alone doesn’t heal the scars.



Don, however, insists that he is committed to changing and not repeating the mistakes of his past. He promises he will never hurt anyone the way he hurt her, or Ruby, again. His words, though earnest, begin to soften Evelyn’s hard exterior, if only briefly. Still, she isn’t ready to forgive him just yet, and she makes it clear that actions speak louder than words. She reminds him that if things had gone differently in his life—if his career hadn’t crashed and burned, if Ari Sullivan hadn’t dropped him the way he had orchestrated for her—he might still be living a reckless, unrepentant life. The fact that he was here, apologizing, was the direct result of his fall from grace, and Evelyn was under no illusion about that. He had only come to this place because life had forced him to, not because he had made an effort to change on his own.

Don, sensing her skepticism, shares a deeply personal reflection: that he loved her from the moment he met her. He confesses that his love for her was intense, almost consuming, and that he ruined it by becoming someone he could no longer recognize. The guilt of his actions haunts him, and he wishes he could go back to their wedding day and make things right. This longing for redemption, for a second chance, is something he knows is impossible. But, in this moment, he offers Evelyn the one thing he has left: a sincere apology, delivered from the bottom of his heart. He wants her to know how incredible he believes she is, how great they were together, and how deeply he regrets the way he treated her.

Evelyn listens to him, her emotions conflicted. Part of her is touched by his vulnerability, but another part of her feels a sense of distance. She cannot simply let go of the past and allow this new version of Don to take away the pain that still lingers.

His words, though heartfelt, are not enough to erase the years of hurt, of betrayal, and of abandonment. Still, there is something deeply human in Don’s confession, something that makes Evelyn wonder if she is capable of forgiveness. However, she remains guarded, unwilling to trust that the man sitting across from her is truly the man he claims to be now. He is asking for redemption, but it is clear to her that redemption is a long road, and it doesn’t come easily.



As the conversation winds down, Evelyn is left with a mixture of emotions. She recognizes that Don has changed, at least on some level, but she also understands that change isn’t always enough to undo the past. The journey toward healing is a personal one, and while Don’s apology is a step in the right direction, Evelyn knows that it will take more than words to heal the wounds he left behind. She stands firm in her conviction that no matter how much he regrets his actions, the damage cannot be undone by a simple apology. Nonetheless, Evelyn begins to feel a shift within herself, wondering if it’s possible to find peace with the past, or if some wounds are simply too deep to ever fully heal.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 begins in the early morning hours, after the eventful night, when Harry had already left to check on Connor at the hotel. Max and I find ourselves lingering in the courtyard of a mansion owned by the head of Paramount, a setting filled with opulence and grandeur. The soothing sound of water spraying from the circular fountain above us adds a serene backdrop as we sit together, reflecting on the night’s success and what we’ve accomplished, both professionally and personally. Max’s limo pulls up, a familiar sight, but one that signals the end of our evening together.

Max offers to give me a ride back to my hotel, his casual tone belying the undercurrent of the night’s tension. When I ask where his date has gone, he nonchalantly shrugs, admitting she was more interested in the tickets than his company. It’s a moment that lightens the mood, as I joke about his "poor" situation, yet Max dismisses it with a grin, claiming that he’s just spent the evening with the most beautiful woman in the world—me. His flirtatious words, though charming, are met with my playful eye roll. Still, when he offers a more humble gesture, suggesting we go grab hamburgers, my curiosity is piqued.

I had every intention of going back to my hotel, to be with Connor, to feel the comfort of my routine. But as Max opens the limo door and invites me to join him, the idea of a late-night burger seems oddly appealing, even in my glamorous gown. We drive to a nearby Jack in the Box, where the limo driver struggles to navigate the drive-through, leading Max and I to decide it’s easier to step inside. There we stand, completely out of place in our formal attire, behind a group of teenagers ordering fries. It’s a surreal moment, one that I wouldn’t have imagined happening that night, but Max, ever the gentleman, doesn’t seem phased.

As we reach the front of the line, the cashier, recognizing me instantly, reacts with a level of excitement I'd grown accustomed to but never quite comfortable with. Her exclamation, "Oh, my God! You're Evelyn Hugo!" sets off a chain reaction. I laugh it off, using the line I'd perfected over the years: "I have no idea what you're talking about." It's an automatic defense mechanism, one that's worked countless times before, and tonight is no different. The reaction from the staff and customers only grows, as the cashier calls out to others to witness the sight of me, standing in a gown in a fast-food restaurant.



Max, who finds the situation amusing, tries to remain lighthearted, but the growing crowd begins to encircle us. I can feel the eyes of everyone in the room, their curiosity and admiration more intrusive than flattering at this point. What started as an innocent detour for food quickly escalates into a scene, with more and more people from the back of the restaurant coming forward to take a look. The sense of being on display—like a caged animal—is something I've never quite gotten used to. Despite the discomfort, I maintain composure, signing autographs and politely nodding at the requests for photos, hoping for an escape soon.

Max, ever the pragmatist, tries to ease the situation by asking for the burgers, but his casual request is drowned out by the frenzy around us. The enthusiasm is overwhelming, but I do my best to remain kind, signing paper menus and hats that are shoved in my direction. Even as I repeatedly say, "We really should be going," the crowd only grows more persistent, unwilling to let the moment end. It's the paradox of fame—the desire for personal space constantly clashing with the public's need for acknowledgment. As one of the older women in the crowd mentions seeing me win an Oscar just hours earlier, I nod, acknowledging her observation but turning the attention back to Max, who, with a simple wave, claims his own share of the accolades.

Still, the scene doesn't ease, and Max, ever protective, steps in, urging the crowd to give me some space. He effortlessly takes charge, his voice cutting through the noise as he clears a path for us. With the burgers finally in hand, he picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder in a way that's both playful and assertive. We exit the restaurant,

Max carrying me as if we’re escaping a mad house, and I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. The limo ride back to the hotel is a quiet respite after the chaos, though I find myself reflecting on the contrasting worlds I exist in—the glamorous, spotlight-filled life I lead and the normalcy I crave in private moments like this.



Chapter 46

Chapter 46 dives deeper into the personal and professional complexities of Evelyn's life, particularly regarding her infamous role in a film that both catapulted her career and nearly destroyed her reputation. Despite the movie being a commercial success, the impact it had on Evelyn's public image was far from positive. Her portrayal of a woman with unapologetic sexual desires ignited public outrage, especially given the film's explicit nature and its controversial X rating. The backlash was swift and brutal, with critics labeling her as promiscuous, while ignoring the brilliance of her performance. The public’s reaction to her role as Patricia—who boldly expressed her sexual desires—was seen as scandalous and morally offensive to many, even though the role itself was groundbreaking and powerful. Evelyn found herself at the center of a moral panic, where the boundaries of art and personal integrity were blurred, and she became a scapegoat for society’s discomfort with female sexual empowerment.

In spite of the film's massive success, Evelyn explains how this controversy cost her more than just an Oscar nomination—it robbed her of her dignity in the eyes of many. Don Adler, a man with a notorious reputation, won the Oscar for his performance, while Evelyn was overlooked, despite delivering what many considered an exceptional performance. This injustice stung deeply for Evelyn, especially since she knew how groundbreaking her portrayal was. Yet, instead of being applauded for pushing boundaries, she was condemned and reduced to a stereotype of the "sexpot" that the media could easily vilify. Her portrayal of a woman who openly desired sex became a point of fixation for the public, while her true acting skill and dedication to the role were ignored. The hypocrisy of the situation—where the same people who clamored to see the film were the ones chastising her for it—was something Evelyn could never fully reconcile.

The conversation turns inward as Evelyn reflects on the personal costs of her career, especially in her relationship with Celia. She admits, with deep regret, that her obsession with fame and the sacrifices she made for her career ultimately drove a wedge between her and the woman she loved. Evelyn’s bisexuality, often sensationalized by the press, was not the source of their breakup, though it played a role in the complexity of their relationship. The true issue, Evelyn acknowledges, was her inability to fully commit to Celia, as she balanced her love for her with an insatiable hunger for success. She used her relationships with men as stepping stones, leveraging her sexuality to advance in the industry, while keeping her true desires—those for Celia—locked away. This disloyalty, Evelyn recognizes, was not one of physical infidelity, but emotional betrayal. She used her body to gain power, not realizing that by doing so, she was distancing herself from the one person who truly understood her.

Evelyn admits to using her body in ways that felt empowering in the moment but ultimately left her feeling empty and regretful. She acknowledges that, at the time, using her sexuality was the only currency she had, and she didn't know how to stop once it had become a means to an end. She slept with men like Mick to protect her career, making choices that, in retrospect, she realizes were selfish and short-sighted. She slept with Harry because she wanted a child, thinking that her marriage to Celia would be scrutinized if they adopted. These decisions, she confesses, were made with a sense of urgency and fear that she might lose everything she had worked so hard to achieve. The tragedy, Evelyn says, is that she continued to use her body even after she no longer needed to. Instead of stepping away from this behavior, she kept using it, even knowing it would hurt Celia and ultimately lead to the unraveling of their relationship.

The guilt Evelyn carries isn’t just about the choices she made with men; it's about how those choices affected Celia, the woman who truly held her heart. She deeply regrets how her selfishness made Celia complicit in her actions, forcing her to approve of decisions that were harmful to their relationship. The weight of this realization is

profound: Celia may have left her in anger, but it was the culmination of years of small betrayals and emotional neglect that led to the final break. Evelyn’s actions, while born out of fear and ambition, left wounds too deep to heal, even though she never physically cheated on Celia. Her greatest sorrow is that she couldn't fully give herself to Celia, couldn’t honor their love the way she should have. Instead, she used her body for everything except the one thing it was meant for: true intimacy with the person she loved most.



In her reflections, Evelyn admits that her tragedy was not just about fame, but about the choices she made at the expense of her relationship. She used her sexuality for power, for protection, and for validation, all while knowing deep down that it was hurting the one person who had always been there for her. This internal conflict, her desire for success juxtaposed with her need for love, ultimately destroyed what could have been the most meaningful relationship of her life. The complexity of her feelings—her love for Celia, her ambition, and her fear of losing everything—created a tragic cycle that she couldn't break. It wasn't just the men she slept with or the roles she played that caused the pain; it was the way she neglected the emotional truth of who she was and who she loved. In the end, Evelyn’s true tragedy is not her fame or her sexuality, but the emotional distance she allowed to grow between herself and Celia, and the irreparable damage that distance caused to their love.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 is a pivotal moment in the protagonist’s journey, as she desperately searches for a way to help Harry reclaim his life. Harry’s relationship with his daughter, Connor, is the foundation of his potential recovery. Connor’s love for her father is unconditional, and her dependence on him serves as a constant reminder of the responsibility Harry has to stay sober and present. The deep bond they share is unmistakable—Connor’s likeness to Harry grows every day, from her broad frame to her striking ice-blue eyes, a physical manifestation of their shared history. But despite the joy they bring each other, Harry’s struggles with alcohol are far from over. When Connor is not with him, Harry retreats back into his old habits, drinking himself to sleep and spiraling into emotional isolation.

The protagonist understands that Harry needs more than just Connor’s love to stay on track; he needs purpose, and for her, the key to unlocking that purpose lies in work. She knows the only thing that will truly get Harry out of his self-destructive cycle is finding a project he can feel passionate about, one that will give him a reason to get out of bed every morning. This is where the protagonist’s role comes in—not just as a supportive partner but as someone who can find the right project that speaks to both Harry and herself. She sets out on a tireless search for the perfect script, knowing that if Harry believes the role is important enough for her, he might just find the strength to engage with it fully.

After weeks of reading hundreds of scripts, she comes across one from Max Girard. The script is called *All for Us,* and it speaks to her on a personal level—it’s a story about a single mother struggling to survive in New York City, trying to balance her dreams with the harsh realities of raising three children. The story was deeply moving, one that would resonate with Harry’s struggles—both as a father and as someone who has fought to find meaning in his life. The protagonist knows that this script, with its

portrayal of resilience and hope, could provide Harry with the incentive to rise above his addiction. But it’s not just the role that excites her—it’s the opportunity to play a powerful, complex character that would showcase her skills and finally give her the recognition she’s been striving for. Her need for this role is not only personal; it is the catalyst she believes will pull Harry out of his funk.

She doesn’t waste any time in presenting the script to Harry, hoping it will spark something within him. At first, he resists, as he has resisted so much of life in recent months. But when she mentions how this role might finally win her that elusive Oscar, something clicks. Harry picks up the script, and for the first time in a long while, he seems genuinely engaged. The project provides not only the possibility of professional success for her but also a tangible way to help Harry. The film might not be the magic cure for all his problems, but it gives him a reason to leave his bed and re-engage with the world. The filming process itself becomes a source of solace for both of them, a distraction from the darkness Harry faces every day. While the film doesn’t fix everything, it does give him a sense of purpose—a reminder that there is something in his life worth fighting for.

Months pass, and the protagonist and Harry attend the Oscars together. Max Girard, who has become an increasingly important figure in her life, attends with a model named Bridget Manners, but he jokingly laments that all he truly wanted was to attend with her. The jokes about her past marriages, including her many failed relationships, add a touch of levity to the otherwise tense atmosphere. Despite being technically “on a date” with someone else, it feels as though Max, the man who helped her find her voice in the industry, is right there beside her, providing quiet support. As they sit in the front row together, it’s clear that, for the protagonist, these are the two men who have been constants in her life—Max, her professional partner, and Harry, the man who shares her past, with whom she has fought so many battles.

Meanwhile, Connor is back at the hotel with Luisa, watching the ceremony on television. Earlier in the day, she had given each of them drawings for good luck—a gold star for the protagonist and a lightning bolt for Harry. The simplicity of the

gesture is a touching reminder of the innocence and love that Connor still holds for both her parents, despite the complications that lie between them. The protagonist tucks her gold star into her clutch, and Harry, ever sentimental, carefully places his lightning bolt drawing in the pocket of his tuxedo.

When the nominees for Best Actress are announced, the protagonist is overwhelmed by an unexpected realization—she hadn't truly believed she could win. Despite years of hard work, despite the struggles and triumphs, there's a nagging doubt that her accomplishments would ever truly be recognized. The Oscar represents more than just a trophy; it represents credibility, validation, and the kind of respect she's always sought. But when her name is finally called, the reality of it is almost too much to process. She stares ahead, her heart racing as her breath catches in her throat, unsure if she's hearing things correctly. Then, Harry squeezes her hand, and she hears his voice whisper, "You did it." In that moment, everything she's worked for, everything she's sacrificed, suddenly feels worth it. She stands, her legs unsteady, and makes her way to the podium, her heart still pounding in her chest.

When she reaches the podium, she takes the Oscar from Brick Thomas, her hands shaking slightly as she places it over her heart, trying to steady her breathing. The applause fills the room, a tidal wave of sound that seems to go on forever. And then, as the noise subsides, she leans into the microphone, her speech flowing between what she had prepared and what she was feeling in that moment. The words come from the heart, acknowledging the people who have helped her along the way—Max, Harry, and, most importantly, Connor. She realizes now, as she stands there with her Oscar in hand, that the journey to this point has been about more than just fame. It's about the people who have shaped her life, who have loved her through the highs and lows, and who have reminded her time and again that she is enough, just as she is.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51 unfolds in the midst of Evelyn's emotional turmoil as she faces a crossroads in her marriage with Harry and her relationship with Max. The scene begins with a poignant conversation between Evelyn and Harry at a playground in Beverly Hills, where they watch their daughter, Connor, swing. The tension between Evelyn and Harry becomes evident as Harry reacts to the divorce note from Max, the man Evelyn has been considering a future with. Harry’s reaction, initially silent and contemplative, reveals the deep bond between him and Evelyn, even though their marriage has been strained for years.

Harry, in a moment of rare clarity, tells Evelyn that despite the divorce, nothing would change between them. His words echo a deep understanding of their relationship and the years they’ve spent together. Evelyn, however, isn’t so sure, as the emotional stakes of their situation are far more complex than Harry can admit. He suggests that a divorce might even make sense, not just for their personal well-being but for appearances as well. In the midst of their conversation, Harry urges Evelyn to consider the possibility of falling in love with someone else, particularly Max. He believes that Evelyn deserves to experience love in a way she hasn't before, and despite his own heartache, he encourages her to take that step forward. However, Evelyn remains conflicted, caught between her loyalty to Harry and her growing feelings for Max.

Later, as Evelyn and Max discuss their future together, the complexities of their relationship are laid bare. Max’s confession of love for Evelyn, delivered with certainty, contrasts with her doubts and fears about stepping away from her life with Harry. She grapples with the idea of leaving Harry, whom she’s known for years, for a man who is not only significantly older but someone she’s still unsure about. Max, however, reassures her, pushing her to see the history they share and the deep connection that has always existed between them. Despite his bluntness about Harry’s sexuality and

their long history together, Max’s declaration of love stands firm, and it becomes clear that he’s ready to move forward, with or without Evelyn’s final decision.

Evelyn, now torn between her past with Harry and the new possibilities with Max, realizes the impact that the decisions ahead will have on her life. Her reflections lead her to understand that she has always been defined by the men she’s been with, whether it was Harry or Max, and it’s time to consider what she truly wants for herself. Max’s words resonate deeply with her, especially his acknowledgment of her role as the driving force behind their creative successes. He speaks of their connection as something that transcends the professional, suggesting that their bond is one of mutual inspiration and admiration. Evelyn’s internal conflict intensifies, but her realization that she has the power to choose her own path becomes increasingly clear.

In a significant moment of vulnerability, Evelyn begins to acknowledge the weight of the choices she faces, and how these decisions will shape not only her future but her identity. Despite her fears, she recognizes that her relationship with Harry is no longer fulfilling her and that the possibility of a different kind of love with Max might be worth the risk. Max, with his unyielding desire and belief in their connection, becomes both her anchor and her push toward something new. But as they continue to discuss their future, Evelyn’s conflicting emotions underscore the complexity of moving on from a relationship that has been her foundation for so many years. This chapter delves into the deep emotional and psychological struggles that come with choosing between the familiar and the unknown, between staying in a comfortable but stale relationship and risking everything for a new, uncertain love.

Chapter 18

"Chapter 18" opens with Celia expressing her reluctance to attend a glamorous event. She hesitates, dressed in a stunning black dress with a daring deep-V neckline. It was the kind of dress that was too bold for anyone not in the public eye, and the kind that could cause trouble for someone trying to avoid unwanted attention. Adorning a diamond necklace, loaned by Sunset at Don’s request, Celia embodied the kind of dazzling beauty only reserved for the brightest stars of Hollywood. While Sunset wasn’t in the business of offering such luxuries to freelance actresses, Celia's charms seemed to make everyone want to indulge her. And as Celia had a way of getting what she wanted, Don was happy to oblige. After all, Don's rise to stardom had been meteoric, and his success was not only benefiting him but those around him, including Celia and the protagonist.

It’s clear that Don’s career was flourishing, with his role in *The Righteous*, his second Western, propelling him into the limelight. After lobbying for a second chance with the director, Ari Sullivan, Don was proving himself as a legitimate action star. The success of the film, crowned by rave reviews, positioned Don at the top of the Hollywood food chain. His newfound status meant that he had the power to ask for whatever he desired, which included a beautiful piece of jewelry for Celia. But it wasn’t just the diamond necklace that highlighted Don's power—it was the entire web of influence that surrounded him, tying the characters together in a network of ambition, desires, and expectations.

The protagonist, dressed in an emerald green gown, stood out from the crowd at the premiere, but not just because of her striking appearance. The dress was beginning to define her signature look—elegant, graceful, and bold, with its off-the-shoulder neckline and cinched waist. As she surveyed Celia's reflection in the mirror, fiddling with her bouffant hairstyle, the tension between them was palpable. Though Celia

hesitated to attend the event, the protagonist knew what was at stake. A movie premiere wasn’t just a red carpet walk; it was an opportunity for exposure, for validation, and for leveraging relationships in the industry.

As the two women exchanged banter, the protagonist's authoritative tone came through clearly, emphasizing who held the reins in their professional and personal lives. Celia, despite her doubts, ultimately agreed to play along, knowing that her actions, while reluctant, were necessary for her career advancement. The dynamic between the two women wasn’t just about friendship but about navigating an industry that required both women to be at their best. Their constant push and pull was what made them both formidable, yet vulnerable to the same challenges of living in a world where reputation and public image could make or break a career.

At the premiere, the night unfolded like a well-scripted performance, with each character playing their role for the cameras and the crowd. The protagonist, walking with Don by her side, knew the importance of this moment. It wasn’t just about looking beautiful or walking the red carpet with confidence—it was about creating an image, solidifying their place in the public eye. The entire scene was choreographed for maximum effect, with four cars and four eligible bachelors acting as a perfect metaphor for the way the industry presented its stars: polished, composed, and surrounded by their most glamorous personas. Yet, beneath the surface, the protagonist’s internal monologue painted a different story. There were layers of insecurity, self-doubt, and the undeniable knowledge that their worth in Hollywood was often contingent on how others saw them.

The tension between the protagonist and Celia only deepened as the evening went on. Their friendship was complicated, torn between admiration and competition. As Celia gained attention from the press, the protagonist wrestled with her own feelings—recognizing Celia's undeniable talent and charm, yet also feeling the sharp pang of rivalry. The camera flashes, the reporters’ questions, and the constant scrutiny of their every move weren’t just part of the job; they were an integral part of what kept them relevant. The protagonist knew that the public’s fascination with Celia

would only grow, and in that moment, she chose to embrace it rather than push against it.

As the night wore on, Don and the protagonist shared a quiet moment of reflection. Don, ever confident, spoke of the future and the inevitable accolades they would both receive. While the protagonist could see herself earning recognition for her work, she couldn’t ignore the growing prominence of Celia in the industry. There was a certain bittersweetness to watching someone else, someone so close, rise to such heights. However, instead of feeling jealous or resentful, the protagonist found herself genuinely happy for Celia. It was clear to her that Celia was destined for greatness, and that realization only strengthened their complex bond.

At the end of the evening, the protagonist found herself not consumed by envy but by a quiet sense of satisfaction. As Celia's star continued to rise, the protagonist understood that their friendship, though fraught with tension, was ultimately built on mutual respect and a shared understanding of what it meant to thrive in Hollywood. They were each other's biggest competitors and supporters at the same time, a paradox that defined much of their careers in the spotlight. The chapter ends with the protagonist contemplating the true cost of fame—the recognition, the accolades, and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of success.

By the time the lights dimmed and the movie began, the protagonist realized that Hollywood’s games were as much about endurance as they were about talent. As Celia’s performance captivated audiences, the protagonist knew that the true test of their friendship and their careers had only just begun. The industry they were in didn’t just demand success—it demanded a personal investment that would continue to shape their lives, for better or for worse. And for the protagonist, despite the rivalry and complexities of their relationships, the real victory was not in beating Celia, but in recognizing her strength and embracing the unpredictable nature of their shared journey to the top.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 opens with the protagonist and Don in the quiet privacy of their bedroom, a rare moment of intimacy amidst the whirlwind of Hollywood life. Don, ever the confident one, casually asks how the rehearsals are going, and the protagonist admits that Celia is as talented as anticipated, perhaps even more so. Don, however, is more focused on his own career trajectory, boasting about the success of *The People of Montgomery County* and his impending contract renewal. He is at the peak of his career, and with his leverage, he claims that Ari Sullivan would give him anything he asked for to keep him happy. Don's suggestion to remove Celia from the project entirely to maintain the protagonist's status seems like an easy solution. However, the protagonist refuses, stating that it is not necessary, as Celia is only in a supporting role. Instead, the protagonist chooses to focus on their own position as the lead, expressing a calm acceptance of the situation and even finding something about Celia that is appealing.

The next day, during their lunch break, the protagonist and Celia take an impromptu trip in Celia’s vintage pink 1956 Chevy, a car that reflects her bold personality. Despite her poor driving skills, which have the protagonist gripping the door handle in fear, the two women are in high spirits. As they make their way through Hollywood Boulevard, Celia suggests they stop at Schwab’s, a well-known hangout where many of the city’s most influential figures, including the famous columnist Sidney Skolsky, often spent their time. The protagonist immediately senses that Celia wants to be seen there, not only for a milkshake but to boost her own visibility in the industry. Initially, the protagonist is skeptical, interpreting Celia’s desire to be seen with them as a strategic move. However, Celia insists that her intentions are genuine—that she simply wanted to enjoy a milkshake together, but she thought of Schwab’s as an additional opportunity for exposure once they were already out. The protagonist, however, is not

easily convinced and remains wary of Celia's motives.

Their conversation and dynamic shift as they decide to drive to a quieter spot, CC Brown's, for ice cream instead. Here, the protagonist asserts their control over the situation by suggesting a change in plans, refusing to let Celia steer them into the spotlight against their will. By choosing a location that is more subdued and less likely to attract attention, the protagonist makes it clear that they won't be used for the benefit of someone else's image. At CC Brown's, as they sit and share milkshakes, the protagonist uses the moment to impart some life lessons to Celia. They explain the importance of pushing boundaries in Hollywood to get ahead and that, in the end, everyone is using someone, whether they admit it or not. The protagonist admits, without hesitation, that they have used others to get to where they are, and they are fine with that. Hollywood, the protagonist emphasizes, is a game that requires people to be ruthless, to use others without guilt, and to be unapologetically ambitious in the pursuit of success.

As Celia absorbs this hard truth, she expresses some discomfort at the idea of using others, though she has no doubt that the protagonist's approach has worked. The conversation between them continues, revealing the growing complexity of their relationship. The protagonist, initially defensive, begins to understand that Celia is not only trying to learn but also seeking a genuine partnership that could benefit both of them. Celia's ambition is just as strong as the protagonist's, but where the protagonist has become adept at using people to climb the ladder, Celia still wrestles with the ethics of such tactics. Despite this, there's a mutual recognition that, in Hollywood, survival often requires compromise, and both women are aware of the stakes at play.

The conversation takes a more personal turn as Celia admits she feels more drawn to the protagonist, not just for her fame but for the way she unapologetically takes what she wants. The protagonist, while initially skeptical of Celia's admiration, is somewhat disarmed by the sincerity behind her words. Their bond, forged in the fires of ambition, continues to grow, though it is a complicated one, built on mutual respect for each other's abilities and drive. Celia acknowledges that the protagonist is currently more

famous and powerful, but she doesn’t let that discourage her. In fact, Celia expresses a desire to become even bigger, to eclipse the protagonist’s success. The tension between them, however, doesn’t feel hostile—it feels like the beginning of a potential partnership, where both women have something to gain from the other. Celia suggests that they help each other grow in the industry, though the protagonist is cautious, unsure of what this could mean for their future competition.

The chapter ends on a poignant note, with Celia declaring her intention to learn from the protagonist, offering to help with her scenes and teach her what she knows. This proposal seems to mark the beginning of an unspoken agreement between them—one where each woman will lift the other up in a world where success often depends on the strength of your allies. As they share a moment of mutual understanding, both women realize that they are far from the typical actresses in Hollywood. They are calculating, driven, and determined to make their mark in an industry that rewards both talent and ruthlessness. Celia’s final confession that she truly likes the protagonist, not just for her success but for her unapologetic nature, reveals a layer of authenticity beneath the surface-level rivalry that has defined their relationship so far. The protagonist, in turn, begins to soften toward Celia, realizing that perhaps their futures, while inevitably competitive, might be brighter if they truly help each other rather than tear each other down.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 opens with the protagonist recalling the troubling cycle of violence and reconciliation in her marriage. Don hits her once, apologizes, and she convinces herself it won't happen again, but when she expresses doubt about having a family, it happens again. She tries to justify his actions, believing that maybe it was her fault for not communicating clearly. The next day, Don brings flowers, gets down on his knees, and apologizes, but the cycle continues. The protagonist, caught between conflicting emotions, starts to accept these apologies as part of their routine, even though deep down, she knows this isn’t how love should feel.

Later, after an argument at the Oscars, Don, drunk and upset over his loss, takes his frustration out on her once more. He shoves her out of the car, calling her background into question, and despite her anger, she lets it slide once again. The next morning, he comes crawling back with another apology, and though the protagonist doesn’t believe him anymore, she accepts it because it’s easier than addressing the truth. She compares this behavior to fixing a broken dress with a safety pin—something that feels like part of her routine. This resignation becomes more apparent when Harry Cameron visits her dressing room with good news: *Little Women* is getting the green light, and she’s been cast as Jo March.

Harry's announcement about the cast stirs both excitement and trepidation in the protagonist. Celia St. James, the young actress who has been gaining attention for her role in a period piece, will play Beth. Ruby and the protagonist are both wary of Celia's talent and the potential threat she poses to their careers, especially considering the favorable attention Celia has been receiving. Celia’s beauty and innocence seem to stand in stark contrast to the protagonist’s more established star power, but she recognizes that Celia’s growing influence could overshadow them if they don’t deliver top performances. The protagonist, despite her reservations, resolves to give the best

performance of her life, determined that when audiences see *Little Women*, they won't remember Beth but rather the middle sister who dies. Harry, always the supportive friend, reassures her that her talent will shine through and that the world already knows how great she is.

In the midst of the conversation, Harry notices a bruise on the protagonist's face, a remnant from her latest altercation with Don. His concern is evident, and he promises to take action, offering to talk to Ari Sullivan. However, the protagonist is firm in her resolve, unable to leave Don despite the abuse. Her complex feelings of love for him are interwoven with a sense of dependency—she acknowledges that her desire for him and his approval often overrides her sense of self-worth. She loves him, and she wants him, but she also craves the spotlight, a desire that ties her even more tightly to the very man who hurts her. This internal conflict, the battle between her love for Don and her yearning for independence, reveals the painful reality of living under the public's gaze, where personal relationships are often overshadowed by ambition and image.

This chapter lays bare the psychological complexity of the protagonist's relationship with Don. Her emotional turmoil is compounded by the way Hollywood's expectations shape her identity. The tension between her love for Don and her need to remain relevant in the industry creates an ongoing struggle, one that is only intensified by the cycle of violence and reconciliation. The theme of self-sacrifice, both personally and professionally, is at the forefront of this chapter, as the protagonist navigates the fine line between surviving in Hollywood and preserving her dignity. Despite the hardships, she remains determined to prove herself, not just as an actress, but as a woman who can overcome the obstacles that life—and the men in her life—continue to throw at her. It's a poignant exploration of how love, power, and ambition can entangle to shape one's identity in a world where appearances are everything.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 opens with the devastating news of John’s sudden death in 1980, a loss that left everyone reeling. At just shy of fifty, John was the healthiest and most athletic among them, a man who exercised regularly and avoided bad habits like smoking. His unexpected death from a heart attack seemed incomprehensible, especially considering his lifestyle. Yet, life often doesn’t make sense, and his passing left an indelible void in the hearts of those who knew him, especially his family and close friends. John’s absence was felt deeply, and the grief his death caused permeated every aspect of their lives.

For Connor, who was just five years old at the time, the death of her beloved Uncle John was difficult to understand. Trying to explain where he had gone was an impossible task, but perhaps the hardest part was explaining why her father, Harry, was so devastated. Harry’s grief manifested in a profound way; for weeks, he struggled to get out of bed, barely able to function. When he did manage to rise, it was only to reach for a bottle of bourbon. His days were filled with sorrow and numbness, a fog of alcohol that masked his deep pain, making him distant and unkind. It was a harsh reality for the family to witness, but despite Harry’s suffering, the protagonist remained determined to support him in any way possible.

While the protagonist struggled to comfort Harry, the grieving process for Celia was also very public. Photographs of her, tear-streaked and exhausted, as she entered her trailer on a film set in Arizona, reflected the rawness of her own heartbreak. The protagonist longed to console Celia, to gather everyone together and support each other through the pain, but the circumstances made that impossible. Despite the distance between them, the protagonist knew that her focus needed to remain on helping Harry recover, even if that meant sacrificing her own emotional needs in the process. She and Connor made daily visits to Harry’s apartment, trying to bring some

normalcy to his life. Connor stayed in her own room, while the protagonist slept on the couch in Harry’s bedroom, tending to his needs as he struggled to take care of himself.

One morning, the protagonist woke up to find Harry and Connor in the kitchen, sharing a quiet moment. Connor was happily pouring herself cereal, unaware of the emotional turmoil her father was experiencing. Harry, still in his pajama bottoms, stood by the window, his gaze lost in the distance. He held an empty glass in his hand, and when he turned back to face Connor, the protagonist greeted them with a simple "Good morning." It was then that Connor, with the innocence only a child could possess, asked her father, "Daddy, why do your eyes look wet?" This question hung in the air, leaving the protagonist unsure whether Harry had been crying or if he had simply started drinking early that morning, a mixture of emotions that was difficult to decipher.

The funeral brought the family together in a way that nothing else had. The protagonist wore a vintage black Halston, a symbol of respect and mourning. Harry, on the other hand, donned an all-black ensemble, from his suit to his socks, his grief evident in every part of his appearance. There was no escaping the weight of the loss, and grief seemed to cling to Harry as if it were part of his very being. His face, forever marked by the pain of John’s death, reflected the deep sorrow that he struggled to carry with him. Despite the funeral and the solemn occasion, it was clear that Harry’s mourning was not just about John’s death—it was about his own inner turmoil, his inability to cope, and the overwhelming sense of loss that consumed him.

Through these moments of deep emotional struggle, the protagonist learned just how much one person’s grief could affect everyone around them. They could only move forward one day at a time, offering support when needed and allowing room for personal healing. Despite the overwhelming grief and the harsh realities of the situation, the protagonist remained steadfast in their role as the caregiver, providing the emotional anchor that Harry and Connor needed, even when it felt like the world was falling apart.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

I wore a cream-colored cocktail dress with heavy gold beading and a plunging neckline. I pulled my long blond hair into a high ponytail. I wore diamond earrings.
I glowed.

The first thing you need to do to get a man to elope with you is to challenge him to go to Las Vegas.
You do this by being out at an L.A. club and having a few drinks together. You ignore the impulse to roll your eyes at how eager he is to have his picture taken with you. You recognize that everyone is playing everyone else. It’s only fair that he’s playing you at the same time as you’re playing him. You reconcile these facts by realizing that what you both want from each other is complementary.
You want a scandal.
He wants the world to know he screwed you.
The two things are one and the same.
You consider laying it out for him, explaining what you want, explaining what you’re willing to give him. But you’ve been famous long enough to know that you never tell anyone anything more than you have to.
So instead of saying I’d like us to make tomorrow’s papers, you say, “Mick, have you ever been to Vegas?”
When he scoffs, as if he can’t believe you’re asking him if he’s ever been to Vegas, you know this will be easier than you thought.
“Sometimes I just get in the mood to roll dice, you know?” you say. Sexual implications are better when they are gradual, when they snowball over time.
“You want to roll dice, baby?” he says, and you nod.
“But it’s probably too late,” you say. “And we’re already here. And here’s OK, I

suppose. I’m having a fine time.”

“My guys can call a plane and have us there like that.” He snaps his fingers.

“No,” you say. “That’s too much.”

“Not for you,” he says. “Nothing is too much for you.”

You know what he really means is Nothing is too much for me.

“You could really do that?” you say.

An hour and a half later, you’re on a plane.

You have a few drinks, you sit in his lap, you let his hand wander, and you slap it back. He has to ache for you and believe there is only one way to have you. If he doesn’t want you enough, if he believes he can get you another way, it’s all over. You’ve lost.

When the plane lands and he asks if the two of you should book a room at the Sands, you must demur. You must be shocked. You must tell him, in a voice that makes it clear you assumed he already knew, that you don’t have sex outside of marriage.

You must seem both steadfast and heartbroken about this. He must think, She wants me. And the only way we can make it happen is to get married.

For a moment, you consider the idea that what you’re doing is unkind. But then you remember that this man is going to bed you and then divorce you once he’s gotten what he wants. So no one is a saint here.

You’re going to give him what he’s asking for. So it’s a fair trade.

You go to the craps table and play a couple of rounds. You keep losing at first, as does he, and you worry that this is sobering both of you. You know the key to impulsivity is believing you are invincible. No one goes around throwing caution to the wind unless the wind is blowing their way.

You drink champagne, because it makes everything seem celebratory. It makes tonight seem like an event.

When people recognize the two of you, you happily agree to get your picture taken with them. Every time it happens, you hang on to him. You are telling him, in no small way, This is what it could be like if I belonged to you.

You hit a winning streak at the roulette table. You cheer so ebulliently that you jump up and down. You do this because you know where his eyes are going to go. You let

him catch you catching him.

You let him put his hand on your ass as the wheel spins again.

This time, when you win, you push your ass against him.

You let him lean into you and say, “Do you want to get out of here?”

You say, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. I don’t trust myself with you.”

You cannot bring up marriage first. You already said the word earlier. You have to wait for him to say it. He said it in the papers. He will say it again. But you have to wait. You cannot rush it.

He has one more drink.

The two of you win three more times.

You let his hand graze your upper thigh, and then you push it away.

It is two A.M., and you are tired. You miss the love of your life. You want to go home. You would rather be with her, in bed, hearing the light buzz of her snoring, watching her sleep, than be here. There is nothing about here that you love.

Except what being here will afford you.

You imagine a world where the two of you can go out to dinner together on a Saturday night and no one thinks twice about it. It makes you want to cry, the simplicity of it, the smallness of it. You have worked so hard for a life so grand. And now all you want are the smallest freedoms. The daily peace of loving plainly.

Tonight feels like both a small and a high price to pay for that life.

“Baby, I can’t take it,” he says. “I have to be with you. I have to see you. I have to love you.”

This is your chance. You have a fish on the line, and you have to gently reel him in.

“Oh, Mick,” you say. “We can’t. We can’t.”

“I think I love you, baby,” he says. There are tears in his eyes, and you realize he’s probably more complex than you have given him credit for.

You’re more complex than he’s given you credit for, too.

“Do you mean it?” you ask him, as if you desperately hope it’s true.

“I think I do, baby. I do. I love everything about you. We only just met, but I feel like I can’t live without you.” What he means is that he thinks he can’t live without screwing

you. And that, you believe.

“Oh, Mick,” you say, and then you say nothing more. Silence is your best friend.

He nuzzles your neck. It’s sloppy, and it feels akin to meeting a Newfoundland. But you pretend you love it. You two are in the bright lights of a Vegas casino. People can see you. You have to pretend that you do not notice them. That way, tomorrow, when they talk to the papers, they will say that the two of you were carrying on like a couple of teenagers.



You hope that Celia doesn’t pick up a single rag with your face on it. You think she’s smart enough not to. You think she knows how to protect herself. But you can’t be sure. The first thing you’re going to do when you get home, when this is all over, is to make sure she knows how important she is, how beautiful she is, how much you feel your life would be over if she were not in it.

“Let’s get married, baby,” he says into your ear.

There it is.

For you to grab.

But you can’t look too eager.

“Mick, are you crazy?”

“You make me this crazy.”

“We can’t get married!” you say, and when he doesn’t say anything back for a second, you worry that you’ve pushed slightly too far. “Or can we?” you ask. “I mean, I suppose we could!”

“Of course we can,” he says. “We’re on top of the world. We can do anything we want.”

You throw your arms around him, and you press against him, to let him know how excited—how surprised—you are by this idea and to remind him what he’s doing it for. You know your value to him. It would be silly to waste an opportunity to remind him.

He picks you up and sweeps you away. You whoop and holler so everyone looks. Tomorrow they will tell the papers he carried you off. It’s memorable. They will remember it.

Forty minutes later, the two of you are drunk and standing in front of each other at an

altar.

He promises to love you forever.

You promise to obey.

He carries you over the threshold of the nicest room at the Tropicana. You giggle with fake surprise when he throws you onto the bed.

And now here comes the second-most-important part.

You cannot be a good lay. You must disappoint.

If he likes it, he'll want to do it again. And you can't do that. You can't do this more than once. It will break your heart.

When he tries to rip your dress off, you have to say, "Stop, Mick, Christ. Get a hold of yourself."

After you take the dress off slowly, you have to let him look at your breasts for as long as he wants to. He has to see every inch of them. He's been waiting for so long to finally see the ending of that shot in *Boute-en-Train*.

You have to remove all mystery, all intrigue.

You make him play with your breasts so long he gets bored.

And then you open your legs.

You lie there, stiff as a board underneath him.

And here is the one part of this you can't quite come to terms with but you can't quite avoid, either. He won't use a condom. And even though women you know have gotten hold of birth control pills, you don't have them, because you had no need for them until a few days ago when you hatched this plan.

You cross your fingers behind your back.

You close your eyes.

You feel his heavy body fall on top of you, and you know that he is done.

You want to cry, because you remember what sex used to mean to you, before. Before you realized how good it could feel, before you discovered what you liked. But you push it out of your mind. You push it all out of your mind.

Mick doesn't say anything afterward.

And you don't, either.

You fall asleep, having put on his undershirt in the dark because you didn’t want to sleep naked.

In the morning, when the sun shines through the windows and burns your eyes, you put your arm over your face.

Your head is pounding. Your heart is hurting.

But you’re almost at the finish line.

You catch his eye. He smiles. He grabs you.

You push him off and say, “I don’t like to have sex in the morning.”

“What does that mean?” he says.

You shrug. “I’m sorry.”

He says, “C’mon, baby,” and lies on top of you. You’re not sure he’d listen if you said no one more time. And you’re not sure you want to find out the answer. You’re not sure you could bear it.

“OK, fine, if you have to,” you say. And when he lifts himself off you and looks you in the eye, you realize it has accomplished what you had hoped. You have taken all the fun out of it for him.

He shakes his head. He gets out of bed. He says, “You know, you’re nothing like I imagined.”

It doesn’t matter how gorgeous a woman is, to a man like Mick Riva, she’s always less attractive after he’s had sex with her. You know this. You allow it to happen. You do not fix your hair. You pick at the mascara flakes on your face.

You watch Mick step into the bathroom. You hear him turn on the shower.

When he comes out, he sits down next to you on the bed.

He is clean. You have not bathed.

He smells like soap. You smell like booze.

He is sitting up. You are lying down.

This, too, is a calculation.

He has to feel like the power is all his.

“Honey, I had a great time,” he says.

You nod.

“But we were so drunk.” He speaks as if he’s talking to a child.

“Both of us. We had no idea what we were doing.”

“I know,” you say. “It was a crazy thing to do.”



Chapter 66

Chapter 66 begins with the protagonist sitting on the couch, her mind overwhelmed with the memories of her father. The images of him lifting her in the air in the backyard or sharing banana splits for breakfast are tinged with a bittersweet sorrow, as she has always associated them with the way he died—believing that his mistakes led to his untimely passing. Now, as she reflects on his life, she struggles with how to view him. A defining trait that once anchored her perception of him is gone, replaced by a more complex understanding of who he was and how his life came to an end, for better or worse.

After sitting for what feels like an eternity, replaying memories and imagined scenes of her father’s final moments, the protagonist can no longer remain still. She rises from the couch and walks into the hallway, determined to find Evelyn. She discovers Evelyn in the kitchen with Grace, and holding up a letter, she confronts Evelyn, questioning the real reason behind her visit. Evelyn, who had orchestrated this meeting under the guise of needing help with a story, admits that she had planned this all along, but it wasn’t just about the letter—it was about a connection, about finding someone who could understand the complexity of her life and the story she wanted to share. The admission of wanting the protagonist to write her story—unflinching and honest—becomes a key moment, as Evelyn reveals her desire to control her narrative, even in the final chapters of her life.

As the conversation unfolds, Evelyn defends her actions, challenging the protagonist's notion of self-interest. The protagonist, however, is not easily convinced. Evelyn's boldness in confronting her, urging her to take responsibility for her own ambitions, reveals the complexity of their relationship. The protagonist, still grappling with her emotions over her father’s letter and the messiness of her own life, is forced to reckon with the uncomfortable truth of how much she has been influenced by Evelyn’s

calculated moves. Yet, despite the tension, Evelyn provides clarity in her final words about the nature of life—no one is completely a victim or a victor. We are all somewhere in between, constantly navigating the gray areas of our actions and motivations.

Evelyn’s sharp insights into life’s contradictions leave the protagonist questioning her own role in the story. She walks away briefly to wash her hands, seeking a moment of solitude to calm the nerves that seem to take over when faced with Evelyn’s candidness. But as Evelyn continues to reveal more about her past, including her battle with breast cancer and the urgency of finalizing her affairs, the protagonist is once again confronted with her complexity. Evelyn, despite her fame and manipulation, is deeply human, facing her mortality and trying to leave behind something meaningful. The protagonist, still wrestling with her feelings of shame, guilt, and even a twinge of sympathy, ultimately makes the decision to step away. Yet, in that moment, she’s also forced to acknowledge the enormous weight of Evelyn's life and the responsibility of telling her story.

In the final part of this chapter, Evelyn lays out her plan for the protagonist: finish the book, finalize her will, and deal with the legacy she will leave behind. She places the letter—the one she’s held onto for decades—into the protagonist’s hands, further emphasizing the weight of what she’s about to undertake. The protagonist, feeling both burdened and conflicted, decides she’s had enough for the day, telling Evelyn she can’t take any more of the conversation. This interaction leaves the protagonist with a whirlwind of emotions, but it also marks a turning point—one that forces her to confront the painful reality of her feelings toward Evelyn and the task ahead of her. The book, the story, and Evelyn’s legacy are now intertwined with the protagonist’s own journey, one that will demand more than just writing—it will require grappling with the complexities of life, loss, and the imperfect nature of human relationships.

The conversation between Evelyn and the protagonist is charged with a blend of vulnerability and power, showcasing the tension between the two women as they navigate the complexities of truth, legacy, and self-perception. The protagonist is

caught between her personal grievances and the moral weight of telling a story that is at once her own and someone else’s. This chapter serves as a critical turning point, setting the stage for the protagonist’s evolution as she faces the challenges of writing Evelyn's story, all while confronting her own emotions and understanding of her father. As Evelyn’s looming presence continues to shape the protagonist’s path, it’s clear that this narrative will be anything but simple, and it will demand more than the protagonist ever anticipated.



Chapter 33

Chapter 33 was a turning point, one that unfolded with a precision only possible in Hollywood. For over two years, Rex and I maintained the illusion of marriage, living in a lavish home in the hills, starring in films together, and playing the roles our careers demanded. Our lives were structured like a well-rehearsed performance—separate morning routines, shared car rides to the set, and carefully choreographed public appearances. The cameras flashed as we held hands upon arrival, playing the part of devoted spouses, only to retreat to our own corners once the show was over.

Despite the perfectly curated façade, we both led lives outside our scripted marriage. My evenings were often spent with Harry or a select few from Paramount, sometimes even on discreet dates with men I trusted to keep my secrets. My affairs were fleeting, never anything worth risking my reputation over—just momentary indulgences that meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. I assumed Rex played the same game, that he too sought out distractions without ever letting them jeopardize our carefully controlled narrative.

But then, one morning, everything changed. Rex came into the kitchen as I sipped my coffee, waiting for Harry to pick me up for tennis. There was something about the way he moved, the way he hesitated before speaking, that made Luisa quietly excuse herself. And then, in the stillness of the moment, he confessed something I never saw coming: "I’m in love." The words felt foreign coming from him, almost absurd, yet the certainty in his voice made them impossible to ignore.

"In love?" I asked, struggling to hide my surprise.

He chuckled at my disbelief. "It doesn’t make sense to me either. But it’s real."

"Who is she?" I pressed, still trying to make sense of his confession.

"Joy. Joy Nathan," he admitted, his expression softening as he spoke her name.

The revelation sent a ripple through the carefully constructed arrangement we had built. Rex had always been detached, indulging in meaningless flings, but this was different. He was no longer satisfied with fleeting affairs—he wanted a real relationship, something authentic, something lasting. And, as if that wasn't enough of a shock, he followed it with an even bigger bombshell: "She's pregnant."



My mind immediately began calculating damage control. The public narrative had to be handled with precision, especially with our latest film, *Carolina Sunset*, set to premiere. "We'll spin it," I said, thinking quickly. "The stress of filming, the emotional toll of playing a crumbling couple—it tore us apart in real life, too." It was the perfect angle. People loved tales of poetic downfall, of love lost to ambition.

But there was another obstacle: time. Rex needed to be married before Joy gave birth, and that meant we had to move fast. "We'll say that we fell out of love, that we lived separate lives," Rex suggested. But I knew better. A narrative like that could hurt our careers, making us seem cold, disconnected—unworthy of the romantic leads we played on screen.

I needed an angle that would protect us both while fueling the public's fascination. And then it hit me: "We'll say we had affairs," I said, my mind racing ahead of my words. "You with Joy. Me with Harry." It was a perfect illusion—scandalous enough to sell tickets, yet balanced in a way that softened the blow for both of us. If the public thought we had both strayed, it would neutralize any resentment toward Joy and make the whole ordeal seem inevitable.

Rex hesitated for only a moment before nodding. "It's not a bad plan."

"It makes both of us look bad," I admitted.

"But it'll sell tickets," Harry chimed in as he entered the room, immediately catching up on the conversation.

The plan was set into motion, but Harry, ever the realist, saw the flaw before I did. "People in town won’t believe it," he warned me later that day. "Not us. They know me. They know who I really am." He wasn’t wrong. Too many people in Hollywood had seen through the charade of straight men marrying for appearances. "We need proof," I said. "Undeniable evidence."

And that’s how we found ourselves planning a staged scandal. A night in the hills, just secluded enough to look private but open enough to be caught by eager photographers. "We’ll make it look like we got caught in the act," Harry suggested. "But who do we trust to tip off the press?" The answer came to me in an instant, though I wished it hadn’t.

I picked up the phone and dialed a number I hadn’t called in years. "Ruby, it’s Evelyn. I need a favor," I said without hesitation.

She laughed on the other end. "Well, that’s a first."

I laid out the plan, instructing her to leak the story about me and Harry to the tabloids. But then, unexpectedly, she threw me off balance. "So, is Rex about to be single?" she asked, a knowing edge to her voice.

I hesitated. "Haven’t you had enough of my leftovers?"

"Don pursued me," she countered, and suddenly, I understood. I understood the unspoken history, the hurt hidden beneath her sharp words. And then it dawned on me—she knew what I had gone through with Don. And she had gone through it, too.

"Did he—" I started, my voice softer.

"It was nothing I couldn’t cover up," she said, her words laced with false pride. It broke something in me, hearing her say it so casually, as if she had convinced herself it was just another part of the game we played to survive.

"Come by for dinner sometime," I offered, knowing we’d never actually do it.

"Let’s not pretend we’re the type to be friends, Evelyn," she said, and for the first time, I respected her honesty.

As I hung up the phone, the plan was set. The illusion would be complete. By the next morning, the world would know about my "affair" with Harry, and soon enough, Rex would be free to marry Joy. We had rewritten the script once again, turning real life into the kind of story only Hollywood could manufacture.



Chapter 50

Chapter 50 starts with Evelyn suggesting that it’s time to wrap up for the day. It's been a long day filled with busywork, and both of them are feeling the exhaustion. This is evident as the protagonist realizes that she has missed several calls and emails, possibly including an important one from David, alongside other personal messages waiting for her attention.

After acknowledging Evelyn's suggestion, the protagonist begins to organize her belongings, feeling the weight of the day’s discussions and its impending continuation. She checks her phone, only to confirm her suspicions of missed communications—multiple calls from David and others beckon her attention, each perhaps with its own urgent narrative or plea for a callback. As she says goodbye to Evelyn, she steps out onto the bustling city street, the air unexpectedly warm, prompting her to adjust her attire and prepare to face the personal elements of her life she momentarily put aside.

The interaction with her phone becomes a bridge between her professional obligations and the personal ties that weave through her life. She first addresses a voicemail from her mother, which brings a mix of amusement and annoyance. Her mother’s message is filled with the usual mix-ups and endearing reminders of her impending visit, along with a humorous confusion over airport logistics—a common theme in their conversations given her mother’s adventurous yet often misguided navigational skills.

As the protagonist navigates through the voice mails, she grapples with the emotional weight of an impending conversation with David. The thought of listening to David’s message fills her with a mix of anticipation and dread, knowing that his words might redefine the contours of their relationship. She postpones this confrontation, opting instead to deal with simpler, less consequential tasks—until she no longer can ignore

the inevitable. This decision to delay reflects a deeper uncertainty about her readiness to face potential disappointments or changes that his message might entail.

David’s voicemail, once played, reveals his unexpected presence in New York, and specifically in what used to be their shared space, now solely hers. His message is laden with a sense of urgency and a plea for resolution, hinting at unresolved issues and the emotional clutter they both need to sort through. This revelation propels her into a state of hurried motion, cutting through the city’s subway system, as she races towards a confrontation she’s neither fully prepared for nor can she avoid.

Upon her return, the confrontation with David unfolds, revealing the layered complexities of their relationship. The dialogue between them is charged with a raw honesty, as they navigate through their shared history, disappointments, and the differing visions of what their future could entail. David’s presence in her apartment, performing mundane tasks like washing dishes, acts as a poignant metaphor for the remnants of intimacy that still linger, making the prospect of their final separation all the more tangible and heart-wrenching.

In this critical exchange, the protagonist confronts not only David but also her own reflections on self-worth, love, and the personal sacrifices one must weigh in the balance of relationships. The conversation turns to a discussion about potential and lost futures, where the protagonist strongly voices her newfound resolutions about self-respect and the necessity to prioritize her own life’s narrative over accommodating others' expectations.

As David departs, the protagonist is left to contemplate the empty space he leaves behind, both physically and emotionally. This moment of solitude marks a significant turn in her journey towards self-assertion and finding clarity in her life’s direction. It’s a poignant reminder of the painful yet necessary endings that pave the way for new beginnings—ones that she must forge on her own terms, equipped with a deeper understanding of her desires and boundaries.

The following day’s interactions hint at life’s relentless pace, as she immediately transitions back into professional roles, showcasing her adaptability and the continuous blending of her personal growth with her professional responsibilities. This juxtaposition highlights a fundamental truth about modern life’s demands and the inner resilience required to navigate them effectively.



Chapter 45

Chapter 45 captures a pivotal moment in Evelyn’s career and her personal life, as she navigates the challenges of shooting *Three A.M. in New York*, a film that demands more of her than she initially anticipated. The long days on set take their toll, with Connor being cared for by Luisa, Celia, and Harry while Evelyn is consumed by her work. As the days stretch on, the emotional weight of her role as Patricia, a woman caught in a destructive relationship with Mark, portrayed by Don Adler, intensifies. Evelyn observes that Don, once charming but increasingly distant, is no longer the man she knew. His performance, however, is powerful and raw, a reflection of his own personal struggles. It’s clear that Don is no longer simply acting; he’s drawing deeply from his own life, which makes the scenes all the more electric and heartbreaking.

Despite the mounting pressures, Evelyn senses that *Three A.M.* has the potential to be something truly special. She feels an intuitive connection to the project, believing it could not only shift public perception of her but also change lives. Her belief in the film's power drives her to make sacrifices in her personal life. She gives up time with Connor and Celia, apologizing frequently for her absences. It’s clear that while Celia supports her, there’s a growing tension beneath the surface. Celia's support is often silent but unwavering, though Evelyn knows deep down that her partner may regret encouraging her to take on the film. Evelyn, despite the pain of neglecting her loved ones, feels this is a project worth the cost, a project that could redefine her.

The turning point comes when Max Girard, the director, approaches Evelyn with an idea that shakes her to her core. He wants to create a love scene that pushes the boundaries of what has been shown before. His suggestion to depict a woman enjoying sex not out of obligation or love, but for her own pleasure, is revolutionary. Evelyn feels a mixture of shock and exhilaration at the thought of portraying a woman who is not just sexually liberated but truly in control of her desires. As Max proposes the idea,

Evelyn’s initial hesitation gives way to curiosity. She agrees to do the scene, but in doing so, she fails to consider the ramifications it will have on her relationship with Celia. She doesn’t consult Celia beforehand, nor does she give her partner a chance to voice her concerns. Instead, she goes ahead, motivated by the desire to push artistic boundaries, without fully understanding the emotional cost it will incur.

Later, when Evelyn returns home, she struggles with guilt and the weight of her decision. She buys flowers for Celia, hoping to soften the blow of what she’s about to reveal. When she confesses the details of the scene to Celia, the reaction is a mixture of hurt and resignation. Celia, though understanding of Evelyn’s professional commitment, cannot reconcile with the fact that Evelyn is so willing to expose herself so intimately with someone else. Evelyn, caught between her passion for the project and her commitment to Celia, tries to explain, but the tension is palpable. The scene they shoot becomes more than just a cinematic moment; it is the catalyst for a deeper rift in their relationship. Evelyn’s guilt compounds as she realizes that in her pursuit of artistic integrity and fame, she has once again neglected the emotional needs of the woman she loves. Despite Celia’s attempt to be understanding, it becomes clear that this decision is one that will haunt their relationship, pushing Celia to the brink.

As the emotional fallout from the scene and Evelyn's lack of communication continues, their bond starts to unravel. Celia’s pain reaches a breaking point, leading her to make the difficult decision to leave. She cannot bear to live in a relationship where Evelyn’s professional choices overshadow their personal connection. Evelyn, in a desperate attempt to salvage the relationship, rushes to Los Angeles to find Celia, confronting her in a moment of raw emotion. But when she reaches Celia’s door, the silence that follows speaks volumes. Celia, though still in love with Evelyn, cannot continue to live with the pain of sharing her with the world in such an intimate and public way. Evelyn’s world, once so sure and full of promise, now crumbles beneath the weight of her own choices.

Chapter 57

Chapter 57 marks a significant and emotional turning point for Evelyn, Celia, and Connor as they face the aftermath of Harry's tragic death. Six months have passed since the loss, and Evelyn has come to the difficult decision that Connor’s environment has become increasingly toxic and detrimental to her well-being. After Harry’s death, which was surrounded by shock and grief, Evelyn recognizes the familiar pain of loss that she herself experienced when her mother died many years earlier. She sees how Connor’s pain has turned into destructive behavior, and Evelyn’s motherly instinct pushes her to act. Knowing that Connor’s mental health is at stake, Evelyn determines that a change of scenery would help provide a fresh perspective and an opportunity for healing. The allure of escaping the overwhelming pressures of their current life—the media’s invasive attention, the drug dealers, and the unhealthy environment that has surrounded them—becomes a driving force. Evelyn’s vision for their future shifts towards a simpler, quieter life where she can protect Connor and allow her the space to heal away from the toxicity of their past life in the limelight.

In the midst of her worries, Evelyn finds solace in her nightly phone calls with Celia, who, though physically distant, remains a constant source of support and strength. These conversations serve as a form of stability for Evelyn, a lifeline that keeps her grounded even when everything around her feels uncertain. Celia, knowing the weight Evelyn is carrying, suggests a bold move to Aldiz, a quiet fishing village nestled on Spain’s southern coast. It’s a significant shift—a move towards anonymity, far from the spotlight and the pain that fame and public scrutiny have brought them. It’s not just about escaping; it’s about finding peace and a chance to rebuild their lives in a place untouched by the media frenzy they’ve endured. The move to Aldiz would mean a complete change in lifestyle, and it also meant saying goodbye to their long-time caretaker, Luisa, who had been a steady presence in their lives for years. Though

parting with Luisa is difficult, Evelyn understands that this new chapter requires them to embrace a more mundane life, one that might offer more peace and healing for their fractured family. Despite the sacrifices, Evelyn is drawn to the simplicity of the life Celia envisions—a life where she can devote herself to her daughter and the people she loves without the distractions that have defined her past.

The day comes when Evelyn must share this decision with Connor, and she approaches the conversation with a mixture of hope and fear. The decision to move to Aldiz is only one part of the change—Evelyn also announces that she is retiring from acting, fully committing to a life with Celia. She's determined to be open with Connor, treating her not as a child, but as someone who deserves to know the full truth. But as she reveals their plans, Connor's response is far from what Evelyn had hoped for. Rather than embracing the change, Connor expresses indifference, retreating into herself and yearning for solitude. This reaction cuts deeper than Evelyn anticipated, as it highlights just how much distance has grown between them. Despite all the years of love and effort, Evelyn realizes that Connor has yet to fully heal from the loss of her father, and the wounds are still raw. Evelyn feels a pang of sadness, knowing that she cannot fix everything for her daughter, but she remains steadfast in her belief that this move is the best step forward for them both.

As the days leading up to the move pass, Evelyn navigates a whirlwind of logistical tasks while holding onto the hope that a change of location can bring the healing they so desperately need. Two days before their departure, she attempts to reassure Connor about the independence and freedom she will have in Aldiz, hoping to spark a sense of enthusiasm for this new chapter. But deep down, Evelyn knows that the road ahead will be challenging, filled with uncertainty, and perhaps even more emotional upheaval. Still, she believes that moving away from the chaos of their past will offer them a chance to heal and rebuild their relationship. The idea of starting fresh in Aldiz, away from the suffocating pressures of their former life, gives Evelyn a sense of hope, even if she can't predict the future. She understands that healing takes time, and while the move is a desperate attempt to mend their broken lives, it represents the

first step toward reclaiming the peace they once had. The simplicity of the village offers a calm, quiet place for them to begin again, away from the eyes of the world and the painful memories that have followed them for so long.

Evelyn’s decision to relocate to Aldiz becomes a symbol of hope, of trying to rewrite their lives after years of grief and loss. The move to a quiet, serene fishing village is Evelyn’s way of protecting what remains of her family and providing Connor with the environment she needs to start over. Although Connor may not fully understand the significance of the move at the moment, Evelyn is determined to give her the space to heal. This chapter in their lives isn’t just about running away from the past; it’s about giving themselves the opportunity to rebuild from scratch, to create new memories, and to rediscover what it means to live without the constant shadow of fame and loss hanging over them. Though they may face challenges, Evelyn knows that the act of moving to Aldiz represents a glimmer of hope, a new beginning, and the possibility of finding peace once again. It’s a step toward the future, even as they carry the weight of their past, and it’s the first step in rebuilding their fractured family.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

“You and Celia didn't have any contact at all?” I ask.

Evelyn shakes her head. She stands up and walks over to the window and opens it a crack. The breeze that streams in is welcome. When she sits back down, she looks at me, ready to move on to something else. But I’m too baffled.

“How long were the two of you together by that point?”

“Three years?” Evelyn says. “Just about.”

“And she just left? Without another word?”

Evelyn nods.

“Did you try to call her?”

She shakes her head. “I was . . . I didn’t yet know that it is OK to grovel for something you really want. I thought that if she didn’t want me, if she didn’t understand why I did what I did, then I didn’t need her.”

“And you were OK?”

“No, I was miserable. I was hung up on her for years. I mean, sure, I spent my time having fun. Don’t get me wrong. But Celia was nowhere in sight. In fact, I would read copies of *Sub Rosa* because Celia’s picture was in them, analyzing the other people with her in the photos, wondering who they were to her, how she knew them. I know now that she was just as heartbroken as I was. That somewhere in her head, she was waiting for me to call her and apologize. But at the time, I just ached all alone.”

“Do you regret that you didn’t call her?” I ask her. “That you lost that time?”

Evelyn looks at me as if I am stupid. “She’s gone now,” Evelyn says. “The love of my life is gone, and I can’t just call her and say I’m sorry and have her come back. She’s gone forever. So yes, Monique, that is something I do regret. I regret every second I didn’t spend with her. I regret every stupid thing I did that caused her an ounce of pain. I should have chased her down the street the day she left me. I should have begged her to stay. I should have apologized and sent roses and stood on top of the Hollywood sign and shouted, ‘I’m in love with Celia St. James!’ and let them crucify me for it. That’s what I should have done. And now that I don’t have her, and I have more money than I could ever use in this lifetime, and my name is cemented in Hollywood history, and I know how hollow it is, I am kicking myself for every single second I chose it over loving her proudly. But that’s a luxury. You can do that when you’re rich and famous. You can decide that wealth and renown are worthless when you have them. Back then, I still thought I had all the time I needed to do everything I wanted. That if I just played my cards right, I could have it all.”

“You thought she’d come back to you,” I say.

“I knew she’d come back to me,” Evelyn says. “And she knew it, too. We both knew our time wasn’t over.”

I hear the distinct sound of my phone. But it isn’t the familiar tone of a regular text message. It is the beep I set just for David, last year when I got the phone, just after we were married, when it never occurred to me that he’d ever stop texting.

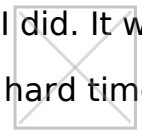
I look down briefly to see his name. And beneath it: *I think we should talk. This is too huge, M. It’s happening too fast. We have to talk about it.* I put it out of my mind instantly.

“So you knew she was coming back to you, but you married Rex North anyway?” I ask, refocused.

Evelyn lowers her head for a moment, preparing to explain herself. “*Anna Karenina* was way over budget. We were weeks behind schedule. Rex was Count Vronsky. By the time the director’s cut came in, we knew the entire thing had to be reedited, and we needed to bring someone else in to save it.”

“And you had a stake in the box office.”

“Both Harry and I did. It was his first movie after leaving Sunset Studios. If it flopped, he would have a hard time getting another meeting in town.”



“And you? What would have happened to you if it flopped?”

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 takes us back to Evelyn’s thirty-sixth birthday in 1974, a moment of opulence and indulgence with her closest friends, including Harry, Celia, and John. The group dines at the Palace, a restaurant that was known for being one of the most expensive places to eat at the time. Evelyn reflects on how, back then, she would throw money around without a second thought. She was surrounded by luxury, from the caviar to the private planes, to the grand staff that could have filled a baseball team. Looking back now, she finds it almost mortifying, realizing how little she valued the wealth that came easily to her. Yet, despite this, she acknowledges that those lavish experiences were part of the world she lived in at the time, one where extravagance felt natural and unremarkable. The group posed for pictures, knowing they would soon appear in the tabloids, as their lives were always under the public’s watchful eye.

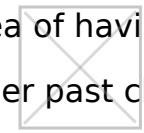
The night unfolds with a sense of camaraderie and celebration, as Celia buys them a bottle of Dom Perignon, and Harry indulges in four manhattans. The atmosphere is lively, with the group enjoying the extravagance of it all. When the dessert arrives, with a candle in the middle, they sing to Evelyn, marking the occasion with a warmth and closeness that signifies their bond. The playful exchange continues when John, knowing they’re all watching their figures, insists Evelyn have a bite of the cake. Despite their best efforts to remain disciplined with their diets, Evelyn can’t help but give in. The light-hearted teasing turns into a toast from Celia, who raises her glass to Evelyn, celebrating her radiant presence and the way she makes everything around her feel as if they’re living in a dream. Celia’s words are not just a toast to Evelyn’s beauty but a nod to the woman who had lit up every room she entered, leaving a lasting impact on everyone she met.

Later that night, as the evening winds down, there's a shift in tone. The fun and excitement of the evening give way to a more intimate and contemplative conversation. As Celia and John leave to hail a cab, Harry gently helps Evelyn into her jacket. Harry's words, "Do you realize that I'm the longest marriage you've had?" catch Evelyn off guard, making her reflect on how much their relationship has meant to her. With almost seven years of marriage under their belts, Evelyn realizes that their connection has become one of the most stable and enduring parts of her life. Harry's unspoken thought about starting a family resonates deeply with Evelyn. At thirty-six, she realizes that if she is going to have a child, the time to decide is now. For years, she had pushed aside the thought of motherhood, focusing instead on her career. But in this moment, she begins to feel the pull of what it would mean to bring a child into the world and to create something beyond her personal and professional identity.

Evelyn's desire for a child becomes a major topic of discussion, but it's not just about her and Harry—it's about the future they envision together. She knows that the decision to have a baby is not just hers to make; it involves Celia and John, too. Her career will inevitably be affected, and the shift from being a woman of the spotlight to a mother will be immense. But Evelyn's desire to create a family, to have something tangible to care for, outweighs the fear of change. She contemplates the impact it would have on her relationships, particularly with Celia. Their bond has always been unconventional, but Evelyn knows that this decision will require even more compromise and understanding. As Celia and Harry are both a part of her life, it's clear that they all need to have a say in this shared vision of the future. Evelyn's acknowledgment of the complexities of motherhood and the sacrifices it entails further deepens the emotional weight of the chapter, highlighting the sacrifices one must make for love and family.

The chapter examines the emotional depth of Evelyn's relationships, showing the vulnerability and love that can exist within a complex family dynamic. It also reflects on the sacrifices made in the pursuit of personal desires, such as the balance between career ambitions and the desire to have a family. The central theme of this chapter

revolves around the intricacies of making life-altering decisions, where personal desires, societal expectations, and love intersect. Evelyn’s internal conflict, as she faces the possibility of motherhood, highlights the universal struggles that come with navigating identity, desire, and responsibility. The chapter serves as a poignant exploration of the power of love and the sacrifices that come with it, making it a relatable and emotionally impactful moment in Evelyn’s journey. As she begins to entertain the idea of having a child, it represents a turning point in her life where she must reconcile her past choices with the future she envisions.



Chapter 67

Chapter 67 begins with the protagonist walking into her home, feeling both emotionally and physically drained. The weight of the day seems to bear down on her as she instinctively throws her bag onto the couch, her movements almost robotic. She’s tired, angry, and overwhelmed, with her eyes aching as if they've been squeezed dry, a physical manifestation of the mental exhaustion she’s experiencing. Without bothering to take off her coat or shoes, she sits down and, almost mechanically, responds to an email from her mother containing flight details for her visit the next day. The action is almost automatic, something to occupy her mind, to keep the overwhelming emotions at bay. As she stretches her legs out on the coffee table, she hits an envelope resting on the surface, which she hadn’t noticed before. In that moment, she realizes the presence of the coffee table itself—a detail she had overlooked—symbolizing how disconnected and out of touch she feels with her surroundings.

The envelope, simply addressed to "M," holds an unexpected message from David, her estranged partner. His letter, though brief, speaks volumes, reopening the door to past emotions and unresolved issues. He expresses regret over the coffee table, a seemingly trivial object, but one that holds significant meaning between them. David’s admission that he should never have taken it, paired with the enclosed key to the apartment and business card of his lawyer, reveals his attempt at closing this chapter. He acknowledges his failure in certain aspects of their relationship, expressing gratitude for what the protagonist has done—actions he could not bring himself to take. It’s a stark reminder of their broken marriage, and yet, the protagonist is left unsure of how to feel. The letter sits there as a symbol of the past, of unresolved emotions, and her body reacts instinctively—she places it down and goes back to her position on the couch, kicking off her shoes, as if trying to rid herself of the weight of it

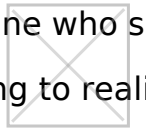
all. The letter is a reminder of a life she is trying to move away from, yet it keeps pulling her back.

After placing the letter aside, the protagonist lies back, her thoughts drifting toward the influence of Evelyn Hugo, the woman who has unknowingly altered the course of her life. The protagonist reflects on how Evelyn’s presence in her life has sparked a series of life-changing decisions—decisions that pushed her to end her marriage, confront her fears, and ultimately become a successful writer. She realizes that without Evelyn’s guidance, she wouldn’t have had the courage to stand up to Frankie or confront the personal challenges that loomed over her. Evelyn’s impact on her life is undeniable, and as the protagonist lays on the couch, the weight of this realization settles in. It’s clear that Evelyn wasn’t just a catalyst for the protagonist’s career success, but also for her personal transformation. The protagonist is beginning to understand that, despite the pain of her past decisions, she has found strength through Evelyn's guidance and her own willpower.

This chapter explores the tension between the protagonist's past and her present. David’s letter serves as a haunting reminder of the unresolved emotions she is trying to bury, but it also highlights how far she has come. It’s a testament to her growth and the evolution of her understanding of herself. As she reflects on her past with David, she recognizes that without Evelyn, she might have never found the courage to make the difficult decisions that led her here. Evelyn has, in a way, been both a mentor and a mirror, reflecting back to her the strength she hadn’t realized she possessed. Despite the lingering pain of her broken marriage and the uncertainty that still looms over her, the protagonist begins to see that the challenges she’s faced are the very things that have shaped her into the woman she is becoming. The weight of her past decisions, while heavy, is also a stepping stone to the future she is now actively working toward.

The chapter delves deeply into the protagonist’s struggle between her past and her potential future. David’s letter, while offering a sense of closure, also stirs up feelings she has long tried to bury. But instead of retreating from the discomfort, she starts to embrace it, realizing that the past, with all its pain, has shaped her in ways she can

now begin to understand. Evelyn, who has been a guiding force in her life, represents not just the successful career she has built, but the personal growth that has come from overcoming her deepest fears. The protagonist's journey of self-discovery and empowerment becomes clearer as she acknowledges the lessons she has learned, the strength she has gained, and the path that now lies ahead. She’s no longer defined solely by the past or by the relationship with David. She has the power to move forward, to redefine who she is, and to embrace the future with the confidence she’s only just beginning to realize she possesses.



As the protagonist continues to reflect on the events that have shaped her, there’s a growing understanding that she is in control of her narrative now. The struggles she has faced, including her marriage’s end, her career decisions, and her personal challenges, are no longer defining her in a negative way. Instead, they are part of the story that she is still writing, a story of resilience and change. With each decision she makes, she takes another step forward, not just toward career success, but toward personal peace and fulfillment. This chapter captures a pivotal moment in the protagonist’s journey, as she begins to embrace the strength that has been within her all along, a strength that has only been made clearer through her struggles and triumphs.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 explores the turning point in Evelyn Hugo’s career, as the success of her movie *Father and Daughter* catapults her into the public eye. This success is a landmark moment, with Sunset Studios proudly crediting her as “Introducing Evelyn Hugo” at the beginning of the film. For Evelyn, this recognition symbolizes the culmination of her dreams, but it also brings with it new expectations. As her career flourishes, so does the pressure to continue this trajectory, setting the stage for the tough decisions that will come. The weight of fame becomes both a blessing and a burden, as Evelyn navigates the complexities of maintaining success while trying to remain true to herself.

Evelyn’s reflection on her mother’s absence during the movie’s premiere shows her emotional connection to the sacrifices her mother made. Her success is not just for herself, but also a tribute to the woman who, despite never witnessing it, inspired her journey. This deep-seated emotional motivation fuels Evelyn’s drive to conquer the industry, but the path ahead is not as simple as she initially believed. Although she hoped to move forward with *Little Women*, the studio quickly shifts its focus to another project, *Next Door*, where she will once again play a character akin to her previous roles. The studio's demand for more of the same, rather than new and challenging opportunities, becomes a frustrating reality that many rising stars face — the typecasting trap.

On set, the dynamic between Evelyn and her new co-star, Ed Baker, begins to mirror the complexity of her relationship with Don. While their professional interactions are electric, Evelyn finds herself torn between the career-driven image she must uphold and her genuine feelings for Don. Despite the chemistry between them, Evelyn cannot ignore the pervasive sense of superficiality that haunts many of her interactions within Hollywood. However, there’s one person who remains a steady presence in her life —

Harry. Unlike most people in the industry, Harry genuinely cares about Evelyn's success and well-being, making him one of the few individuals she can trust. Their conversations are candid and real, providing Evelyn with insight into how to navigate the industry without losing herself in the process.

Harry's advice to Evelyn emphasizes the calculated nature of fame in Hollywood. He recommends that she continue to build a predictable brand for herself before breaking out with a performance that will truly surprise her audience. This strategy is a reflection of the broader Hollywood system, where image, timing, and marketability often outweigh an actor's desire for artistic expression. For Evelyn, this advice presents an internal struggle — she wants to challenge herself as an actress but knows that adhering to the studio's plan is her best chance to maintain a steady career. Harry's perspective forces Evelyn to confront the reality that, in this business, much of success is about strategic positioning and timing rather than genuine artistic freedom.

As Evelyn's relationship with Don deepens, it becomes clear that the line between personal and professional is increasingly blurred. The public is fascinated by their romance, and their every move seems to be scrutinized for its potential to fuel their careers. This constant public attention creates a facade of a perfect relationship, but behind closed doors, Evelyn is grappling with the complexity of her feelings. She enjoys the attention and the chemistry with Don, but she also realizes that they are both playing roles — in their marriage and in their public lives. Don's desire to maintain their image as Hollywood's golden couple forces Evelyn to question the authenticity of their connection and what it truly means to be in love with someone when so much of their relationship is governed by external pressures.

The underlying tension between Evelyn's career ambitions and her personal life sets the stage for future conflict. As her professional successes continue to pile up, Evelyn is left to navigate the personal cost of her rising stardom. The difficult decisions she makes in this chapter will shape not just her career but also her sense of identity as she juggles fame, love, and the sacrifices she must make to stay on top. The careful balancing act of career and relationships is a theme that will continue to unfold, and

Evelyn is slowly realizing that staying true to herself in a world driven by fame might not be as simple as it once seemed.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22

“How did you remain so confident? So steadfast in your resolve?” I ask Evelyn.

“When Don left me? Or when my career went down the tubes?”

“Both, I guess,” I say. “I mean, you had Celia, so it’s a little different, but still.”

Evelyn cocks her head slightly. “Different from what?”

“Hm?” I say, lost in my own thoughts.

“You said I had Celia, so it was a little different,” Evelyn clarifies. “Different from what?”

“Sorry,” I say. “I was… in my own head.” I have momentarily let my own relationship problems seep into what should be a one-way conversation.

Evelyn shakes her head. “No need to be sorry. Just tell me different from what.”

I look at her and realize that I’ve opened a door that can’t really be shut. “From my own impending divorce.”

Evelyn smiles, almost like the Cheshire Cat. “Now things are getting interesting,” she says.

It bothers me, her cavalier attitude toward my own vulnerability. It’s my fault for bringing it up. I know that. But she could treat it with more kindness. I’ve exposed myself. I’ve exposed a wound.

“Have you signed the papers?” Evelyn asks. “Perhaps with a tiny heart above the i in Monique? That’s what I would do.”

“I guess I don’t take divorce as lightly as you,” I say. It comes out flatly. I consider softening, but… I don’t.

“No, of course not,” Evelyn says kindly. “If you did, at your age, you’d be a cynic.”

“But at your age?” I ask.

“With my experience? A realist.”

“That, in and of itself, is awfully cynical, don’t you think? Divorce is loss.”

Evelyn shakes her head. “Heartbreak is loss. Divorce is a piece of paper.”

I look down to see that I have been doodling a cube over and over with my blue pen. It is starting to tear through the page. I neither pick up my pen nor push harder. I merely keep running the ink over the lines of the cube.

“If you are heartbroken right now, then I feel for you deeply,” Evelyn says. “That I have the utmost respect for. That’s the sort of thing that can split a person in two. But I wasn’t heartbroken when Don left me. I simply felt like my marriage had failed. And those are very different things.”

When Evelyn says this, I stop my pen in place. I look up at her. And I wonder why I needed Evelyn to tell me that.

I wonder why that sort of distinction has never crossed my mind before.

ON MY WALK to the subway this evening, I see that Frankie has called me for the second time today.

I wait until I’ve ridden all the way to Brooklyn and I’m heading down the street toward my apartment to respond. It’s almost nine o’clock, so I decide to text her: Just getting out of Evelyn’s now. Sorry it’s so late. Want to talk tomorrow?

I have my key in my front door when I get Frankie’s response:

Tonight is fine. Call as soon as you can.

I roll my eyes. I should never bluff Frankie.

I put my bag down. I pace around the apartment. What am I going to tell her? The way I see it, I have two choices.

I can lie and tell her everything’s going fine, that we’re on track for the June issue and that I’m getting Evelyn to talk about more concrete things.

Or I can tell the truth and potentially get fired.

At this point, I’m starting to see that getting fired might not be so bad. I’ll have a book to publish in the future, one for which I’d most likely make millions of dollars. That could, in turn, get me other celebrity biography opportunities. And then, eventually, I could start finding my own topics, writing about anything I want with the confidence

that any publisher would buy it.

But I don't know when this book will be sold. And if my real goal is to set myself up to be able to grab whatever story I want, then credibility matters. Getting fired from Vivant because I stole their major headline would not bode well for my reputation.

Before I can decide what, exactly, my plan is, my phone is ringing in my hand.

Frankie Troupe.

"Hello?"

"Monique," Frankie says, her voice somehow both solicitous and irritated. "What's going on with Evelyn? Tell me everything."

I keep searching for ways in which Frankie, Evelyn, and I all leave this situation getting what we want. But I realize suddenly that the only thing I can control is that I get what I want.

And why shouldn't I?

Really.

Why shouldn't it be me who comes out on top?

"Frankie, hi, I'm sorry I haven't been more available."

"That's fine, that's fine," Frankie says. "As long as you're getting good material."

"I am, but unfortunately, Evelyn is no longer interested in sharing the piece with Vivant."

The silence on Frankie's end of the phone is deafening. And then it is punctuated with a flat, dead "What?"

"I've been trying to convince her for days. That's why I've been unable to get back to you. I've been explaining to her that she has to do this piece for Vivant."

"If she wasn't interested, why did she call us?"

"She wanted me," I say. I do not follow this up with any sort of qualification. I do not say She wanted me and here is why or She wanted me and I'm so sorry about all this.

"She used us to get to you?" Frankie says, as if it's the most insulting thing she can think of. But the thing is, Frankie used me to get to Evelyn, so…

"Yes," I say. "I think she did. She's interested in a full biography. Written by me. I've gone along with it in the hopes of changing her mind."

“A biography? You’re taking our story and turning it into a book instead?”

“It’s what Evelyn wants. I’ve been trying to convince her otherwise.”

“And have you?” Frankie asks. “Convinced her?”

“No,” I say. “Not yet. But I think I might be able to.”

“OK,” Frankie says. “Then do that.”

This is my moment.

“I think I can deliver you a massive, headline-making Evelyn Hugo story,” I say. “But if I do, I want to be promoted.”

I can hear skepticism enter Frankie’s voice. “What kind of promotion?”

“Editor at large. I come and go as I please. I choose the stories I want to tell.”

“No.”

“Then I have no incentive to get Evelyn to allow the piece to be in Vivant.”

I can practically hear Frankie weighing her options. She is quiet, but there is no tension. It is as if she does not expect me to speak until she has decided what she will say. “If you get us a cover story,” she says finally, “and she agrees to sit for a photo shoot, I’ll make you a writer at large.”

I consider the offer, and Frankie jumps in as I’m thinking. “We only have one editor at large. Bumping Gayle out of the spot she has earned doesn’t feel right to me. I’d think you could understand that. Writer at large is what I have to give. I won’t exert too much control over what you can write about. And if you prove yourself quickly there, you’ll move up as everyone else does. It’s fair, Monique.”

I think about it for a moment further. Writer at large seems reasonable. Writer at large sounds great. “OK,” I say. And then I push.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

The night of the academy awards, Rex and I sat next to each other, holding hands, allowing everyone a glimpse of the romantic marriage we were peddling around town. We both smiled politely when we lost, clapping for the winners. I was disappointed but not surprised. It seemed a little too good to be true, the idea of Oscars for people like Rex and me, beautiful movie stars trying to prove they had substance. I got the distinct impression that a lot of people wanted us to stay in our lane. So we took it in stride and then partied the night away, the two of us drinking and dancing until the wee hours.

Celia wasn’t at the awards that year, and despite the fact that I searched for her at every party Rex and I went to, I didn’t lay eyes on her. Instead, Rex and I painted the town red. At the William Morris party, I found Harry and dragged him into a quiet corner, where the two of us sipped champagne and talked about how wealthy we were going to be. You should know this about the rich: they always want to get richer. It is never boring, getting your hands on more money.

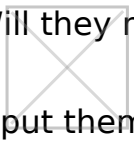
When I was a child, trying to find something to eat for dinner besides the old rice and dry beans in the kitchen, I would tell myself that if I could just have a good meal every night, I’d be happy. When I was at Sunset Studios, I told myself all I wanted was a mansion. When I got the mansion, I told myself all I wanted was two houses and a team of help. Here I was, just turned twenty-five, already realizing that no amount would ever really be enough.

Rex and I went home at around five in the morning, the two of us downright drunk. As our car drove away, I searched my purse for keys to the house, and Rex stood beside me breathing his sour gin breath down my neck. “My wife can’t find the keys!” Rex

said, stumbling ever so slightly. “She’s trying very hard, but she can’t seem to find them.”

“Would you be quiet?” I said. “Do you want to wake the neighbors?”

“What are they going to do?” Rex said, even louder than before. “Kick us out of town? Is that what they will do, my precious Evelyn? Will they tell us we can’t live on Blue Jay Way anymore? Will they make us move to Robin Drive? Or Oriole Lane?”



I found the keys, put them in the door, and turned the knob. The two of us fell inside. I said good night to Rex and went to my room. I took off my dress alone, without anyone there to unzip the back of it. The loneliness of my marriage hit harder in that moment than it ever had.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and could see, in no uncertain terms, that I was beautiful. But it didn’t mean anyone loved me. I stood in my slip and looked at my brassy blond hair and my dark brown eyes and my straight, thick eyebrows. And I missed the woman who should have been my wife. I missed Celia. My mind reeled with the thought that she might be with John Braverman that very moment. I knew better than to believe any of it. But I also feared that I didn’t know her the way I thought I did. Did she love him? Had she forgotten me? Tears welled in my eyes as I thought about her red hair that used to fan across my pillows.

“There, there,” Rex said from behind me. I turned around to see him standing in the doorway. He had taken off his tux jacket and undone his cuff links. His shirt was half buttoned, his bow tie undone, hanging on either side of his neck. It was the very sight that millions of women across the nation would have killed for.

“I thought you went to bed,” I said. “If I’d known you were up, I’d’ve had you help me get my dress off.”

“I would have liked that.”

I waved him off. “What are you doing? Can’t sleep?”

“Haven’t tried.”

He walked farther into the room, closer to me. “Well, try, then. It’s late. At this rate, the two of us will be asleep until evening.”

“Think about it, Evelyn,” he said. The lights streaming in through the windows lit his blond hair. His dimples glowed. “Think about what?”

“Think about what it would be like.” He moved closer to me and put his hand on my waist. He stood behind me, his breath once again on my neck. It felt good to be touched by him.

Movie stars are movie stars are movie stars. Sure, we all fade after a while. We are human, full of flaws like anyone else. But we are the chosen ones because we are extraordinary. And there is nothing an extraordinary person likes more than someone else extraordinary.

“Rex.”

“Evelyn,” he said, whispering into my ear. “Just once. Shouldn’t we?”

“No,” I said, “we shouldn’t.” But I was not wholly convinced of my answer, and thus, neither was Rex. “You should go back to your room before we both do something we’ll regret tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “Your wish is my command, but I’d like it very much if you changed your wish.”

“I won’t change it,” I said.

“Think of it, though,” he said. He raised his hands higher up my torso, the silk of my slip the only thing between us. “Think of the way I’d feel on top of you.”

I laughed. “I will not think about that. If I think about that, we’ll both be sunk.”

“Think of the way we’d move together. The way we’d be slow at first and then lose control.”

“Does this work with other women?”

“I’ve never had to work this hard with other women,” he said, kissing my neck.

I could have walked away from him. I could have slapped him right across the face, and he would have taken it with a stiff upper lip and left me alone. But I wasn’t ready for this part to be over. I liked being tempted. I liked knowing I might make the wrong decision.

And it would absolutely have been the wrong decision. Because as soon as I got out of that bed, Rex would forget how badly he’d worked to get me. He’d remember only that he’d had me. And this wasn’t a typical marriage. There was too much money on the line.

I let him flick one side of my slip off. I let him run his hand underneath the neckline of it.

“Oh, what it would be to lose myself in you,” he said. “To lie underneath you and watch you writhe on top of me.”

I almost did it. I almost ripped my own slip off and threw him onto the bed. But then he said, “C’mon, baby, you know you want to.” And it became perfectly clear just how many times Rex had tried this before with countless other women.

Never let anyone make you feel ordinary.

“Get out of here,” I said, though not unkindly.

“But—”

“No buts. Go on to bed.”

“Evelyn—”

“Rex, you’re drunk, and you’re confusing me for one of your many girls, but I’m your wife,” I said, with all obvious irony.

“Not even once?” he said. He seemed to sober up quickly, as if his hooded eyes had been part of the act. I was never really sure with him. You never knew exactly where you stood with Rex North.

“Don’t try it again, Rex. It’s not going to happen.”

He rolled his eyes and then kissed me on the cheek. “G’night, Evelyn,” he said, and then he slipped out my door just as smoothly as he’d come in.

The next day, I woke up to a ringing phone, deeply hungover and mildly confused about where I was.

“Hello?”

“Rise and shine, little bird.”

“Harry, what on earth?” The sun in my eyes felt like a burn.

“After you left the Fox party last night, I had a very interesting conversation with Sam Pool.”

“What was a Paramount exec doing at a Fox party?”

“Trying to find you and me,” Harry said. “Well, and Rex.”

“To do what?”

“To suggest that Paramount sign you and Rex to a three-picture deal.”

“What?”

“They want three movies, produced by us, starring you and Rex. Sam said to name a price.”

“Name a price?” Whenever I had too much to drink, I always woke up the next morning feeling as if I were underwater. Everything looked muted, sounded blurry. I needed to make sure I was following.

“What do you mean, name a price?”

“Do you want a million bucks for a picture? I heard that’s what Don’s getting for *The Time Before*. We could get that for you, too.”

Did I want to make as much money as Don? Of course I did. I wanted to get the paycheck and mail a copy of it to him with a photo of my middle finger. But mostly I wanted the freedom to do whatever I wanted.

“No,” I said. “Nope. I’m not signing some contract where they tell me what movies to be in. You and I decide what movies I do. That’s it.”

“You aren’t listening.”

“I’m listening just fine,” I said, shifting my weight onto my shoulder and changing the arm that was holding the phone. I thought to myself, I’m going to go for a swim today. I should tell Luisa to heat the pool.

“We choose the movies,” Harry said. “It’s a blind deal. Whatever films you and Rex like Paramount wants to buy. Whatever salary we want.”

“All because of *Anna Karenina*?”

“We’ve proven your name brings people into the theater. And if I’m being entirely clear-eyed about this, I think Sam Pool wants to screw over Ari Sullivan. I think he wants to take what Ari Sullivan threw away and make gold out of it.”

“So I’m a pawn.”

“Everyone’s a pawn. Don’t go around taking things personally now when you never have before.”

“Any movies we want?”

“Anything we want.”

“Have you told Rex?”

“Do you honestly think I would run a single thing by that cad before running it by you?”



“Oh, he is not a cad.”

“If you had been there to talk to Joy Nathan after he broke her heart, you’d disagree.”

“Harry, he’s my husband.”

“Evelyn, no, he’s not.”

“Can’t you find something to like about him?”

“Oh, there’s plenty to like about him. I love how much money he’s made us, how much he will make us.”

“Well, he’s always done good by me.” I told him no, and he walked out my door. Not every man would do that. Not every man had.

“That’s because you both want the same thing. You, of all people, should know that you can’t tell a single thing about a person’s true character if you both want the same thing. That’s like a dog and a cat getting along because they both want to kill the mouse.”

“Well, I like him. And I want you to like him. Especially because if we sign this deal, Rex and I will have to stay married quite a bit longer than we originally thought. Which makes him my family. And you’re my family. So you’re both family.”

“Plenty of people don’t like their families.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “Let’s get Rex on board and sign this thing, OK? Get your agents together to hammer out the deal. Let’s ask for the moon.”

“OK,” I said.

“Evelyn?” Harry said, before getting off the phone.



Chapter 59

Chapter 59 takes the reader through an emotional journey of healing, reconnection, and a bittersweet realization of love and time lost. Connor found her way back to life on the rocky shores of Aldiz, her recovery a slow but steady process, like a flower slowly blooming after a long winter. She enjoyed the simple pleasures of playing Scrabble with Celia and, as promised, joined Evelyn for dinner every evening. Sometimes, she even arrived early to help in the kitchen, rolling out tortillas from scratch or stirring a pot of caldo gallego, a traditional Galician broth passed down from Evelyn’s mother. Each of these small actions symbolized her gradual reawakening, a return to something more stable, more whole.

Surprisingly, the person Connor gravitated toward the most was Robert, the easygoing, silver-haired man with a broad frame and a gentle nature. At first, Robert had no idea how to interact with a teenage girl—he was hesitant, even a bit intimidated, unsure of what to say or how to connect. But rather than letting the silence stretch between them, it was Connor who reached out first, asking him to teach her how to play poker, to share insights about finance, or even to take her fishing. Slowly, a bond formed between them, one that neither of them had anticipated. Robert never replaced Harry in Connor’s life—no one ever could—but in his own way, he offered a quiet stability, a sense of comfort that helped ease her grief. She sought out his advice, bought him a sweater for his birthday, and let him into her life in small but meaningful ways.

Robert, in turn, showed his care through actions rather than words—painting her bedroom, preparing her favorite barbecue ribs on weekends, and offering support without ever demanding it. With time, Connor began to rebuild her trust in the world, allowing herself to believe that opening her heart again was not a mistake. Her teenage years, marked by the deep wounds of losing her father, had left scars that

would never fully fade. But Evelyn saw the changes—Connor stopped reckless partying, began focusing on school, and started achieving A’s and B’s. When she received her acceptance letter to Stanford, Evelyn looked at her daughter and realized that she had raised a young woman who was grounded, strong, and ready to take on the world.

The night before Evelyn and Connor left for the United States to move her into college, Celia, Robert, and Evelyn took her out for dinner by the water. The small seaside restaurant was cozy and intimate, the air filled with the scent of salt and grilled seafood. Robert handed Connor a neatly wrapped gift, a poker set, and grinned as he told her, "Take everybody’s money, like you’ve been taking mine with all those flushes." Connor, with a mischievous glint in her eye, quipped, "And then you can help me invest it." The exchange was simple, but it encapsulated the warmth and connection they had built over time. Though Robert always insisted he married Evelyn for Celia, Evelyn suspected that, deep down, he had also done it to be part of a family, to experience a kind of stability that had always eluded him. While he was never meant to settle down with one woman, this unconventional arrangement had given him something meaningful, something he may not have realized he wanted until he had it.

With Connor off at Stanford and returning only for breaks, Evelyn and Celia finally had the chance to experience the life they had always dreamed of—free from scrutiny, free from the pressures of Hollywood. Without the prying eyes of the media, their days in Spain were peaceful, spent walking along the beach, reading newspapers on their balcony, and savoring the simple joy of just being together. For the first time in decades, they were able to love each other openly, without fear of judgment or scandal. Evelyn felt an overwhelming sense of peace waking up beside Celia every morning, watching the sunrise illuminate her golden hair as it fanned across the pillow. These were the moments she had longed for, the ones she had fought so hard to reach.

As the years passed, Evelyn found herself reconnecting with the language of her youth, embracing Spanish once more—at first out of necessity, but eventually out of pride. She enjoyed challenging Celia and Robert to piece together what she was saying with their limited Spanish skills, laughing as they tried to keep up. It felt like rediscovering a part of herself she had buried long ago, a part that had been waiting patiently to be revived. But even in the beauty of these moments, there was an unspoken truth hanging over them like a dark cloud—Celia’s health was failing, and time was running out. No matter how perfect their days seemed, Evelyn knew that their happiness had an expiration date.

One evening, as they lay in bed together in the darkness, Celia whispered a painful confession. "I know I shouldn’t," she said, voice thick with regret, "but sometimes I get so mad at us for all the years we lost." The weight of missed time, of love wasted on fear and circumstance, settled over them like a heavy fog. Evelyn reached for her hand, squeezing it tightly. "I know," she whispered back, feeling the same ache deep in her bones. Celia’s voice cracked as she asked, "If we loved each other this much, why couldn’t we have made it work sooner?"

Evelyn thought for a moment before answering. "We did," she said softly. "We’re here now." But Celia shook her head. "But all the years, Evelyn. All the years we wasted." They both knew the truth—they had fought so hard against themselves, against the world, against the expectations placed upon them. The world had made their love difficult, forcing them into silence, into separations that had cost them so much. Celia sighed. "Being yourself—your true, entire self—will always feel like swimming upstream." But even then, she admitted, "The last few years with you have felt like taking your bra off at the end of the day." Evelyn laughed at the comparison, even as her heart ached.

At that moment, the fear of losing Celia again, this time permanently, was unbearable. The thought of a world without Celia in it was a nightmare Evelyn couldn't face. She had lost her before, but this time, there would be no chance to get her back. And so, without hesitation, Evelyn blurted out the only thing that made sense. "Will you marry

me?" Celia laughed at first, assuming she was joking, but Evelyn stopped her. "I’m serious. I want to marry you. Seven marriages in, shouldn’t I finally get to marry the love of my life?"

Celia shook her head, her voice tinged with sadness. "We both know that’s not possible." But Evelyn wouldn’t accept that. "Marriage is just a promise," she insisted. "Who needs legal documents or witnesses? All we need is each other." Celia was quiet for a long time, considering the weight of what Evelyn was saying. And then, at last, she exhaled and said, "OK. I’m in."

Evelyn turned on the lamp, and they sat up in bed, facing each other, holding hands as they performed their own private wedding ceremony. In that moment, there were no tabloids, no agents, no judgmental whispers—just the two of them, promising each other forever. Evelyn looked into Celia’s eyes and asked, "Do you, Celia, take me, Evelyn, to be your wife? In sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, till death do us part?" Celia’s lips curled into a small smile, her eyes glassy with emotion. "I do." Evelyn repeated the words back to her, sealing the moment with a quiet but powerful "I do."

Then Evelyn frowned. "Wait—we don’t have rings."

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 opens with Evelyn preparing for a dinner with Ronnie Beelman and suggesting that the work they've been doing can continue the following day. The narrator, in the process of packing up their things, pauses for a moment to exchange a brief but meaningful conversation with Evelyn. Evelyn, who is known for her confident demeanor, reassures the narrator that their progress together has been solid, showing her trust in the narrator's abilities and setting a foundation of mutual respect that will likely grow as their professional collaboration deepens.

The scene transitions to a phone conversation between the narrator and their mother. As soon as the call starts, the mother immediately brings up the topic of the narrator's life after David, demonstrating her ongoing concern about the narrator's past relationship. From the beginning, it's clear that the mother had never fully approved of the relationship, which adds an undercurrent of tension to their conversation. The mother's doubts about the depth of the narrator's connection with David are clear, as she questions whether the engagement was the right decision. The narrator, feeling defensive, still seems to have some lingering doubts about the choice to get engaged to David, and these doubts feel validated by the way things have turned out. The mother's early caution about David stands in stark contrast to the narrator's current emotional struggle, making the conversation uncomfortable yet revealing.

As the conversation with the mother continues, the tone shifts to a more lighthearted direction. The mother mentions that she's planning a visit, a prospect that fills the narrator with both apprehension and curiosity. While there is a sense of reluctance to have the visit, the narrator acknowledges that perhaps it might be beneficial. There's an underlying understanding that, while the visit might not be the most fun, it could still offer some value in terms of emotional clarity. The narrator agrees to the visit, albeit reluctantly, knowing that it might provide some sense of closure or guidance

amid the turmoil they are currently facing. This moment is significant because it speaks to the complex relationship between the narrator and their mother, a dynamic that will likely evolve as the story progresses.

Next, the narrator brings up the package sent by their mother, which has yet to arrive. This leads into a discussion about Evelyn Hugo, and how the narrator's professional relationship with her has deepened. The narrator reveals that Evelyn has suggested a change in their professional path—recommending that the narrator write a book instead of sticking with the planned article for *Vivant*. This revelation raises a few suspicions, as the narrator starts to wonder whether Evelyn has a hidden agenda or if she is strategically positioning the narrator for a bigger opportunity. The narrator, while intrigued by the idea, becomes increasingly aware of the possibility that Evelyn’s motives might not be entirely pure, hinting at a more complicated relationship than originally thought.

As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that the narrator is caught in the midst of several personal and professional dilemmas. The complicated dynamics with their mother and Evelyn bring to the surface a mix of emotions—doubt, curiosity, and suspicion—that the narrator must navigate. Meanwhile, Evelyn’s actions continue to raise questions about her true intentions and how much influence she really has over the narrator’s career. This chapter hints at the larger themes of power, manipulation, and ambition that will likely play a significant role in the unfolding story. As the narrator’s relationship with Evelyn grows, so does the tension, making it clear that both their personal and professional lives are intertwined in ways that the narrator may not fully understand yet.

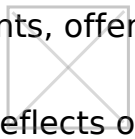
Chapter 14

Chapter 14 begins with Evelyn suggesting to the protagonist that they pick up their conversation tomorrow, a casual statement that underscores the complexity of their interactions. The sun has already set, and as the protagonist scans the room, they notice the remnants of several meals scattered around, a sign of the time spent working through the day. The protagonist’s mind is clouded with the weight of the situation—questions about their next steps linger, and as they begin packing up their things, Evelyn casually drops a bombshell: her publicist has received an email from the protagonist’s editor inquiring about a potential photo shoot for the June cover. This unexpected development sends the protagonist into a swirl of uncertainty, as they realize they have not yet shared their plans with their team, adding another layer of complexity to an already complicated situation.

The protagonist is keenly aware that they need to update their editor, Frankie, on the circumstances, but they remain unsure about how to proceed. There’s a slight hesitation in their response, a tint of embarrassment as they admit they have not made their next move clear yet. Evelyn, sensing the protagonist’s discomfort, reassures them with a calm and understanding demeanor. She expresses no judgment, subtly acknowledging the often-blurry line between truth and fabrication in their industry. Evelyn’s words ring with a knowing confidence: “You’ll do what you need to do.” Yet, despite this reassurance, the protagonist remains uncertain about what actions to take next.

Later, when the protagonist returns home, they are greeted by a heavy package from their mother, sitting just inside their building’s door. It takes considerable effort to drag it inside, and upon opening the box, the protagonist finds it filled with photo albums from their late father. Each album is stamped with "James Grant" in the corner, a reminder of the father’s career as a photographer in the film industry. The protagonist,

feeling compelled to reconnect with a piece of their past, sits down on the floor and begins flipping through the albums. These candid on-set photos capture fleeting moments of directors, actors, and extras, showing a side of Hollywood that most people never see—the raw, unscripted moments where no one is posing for the camera. The protagonist remembers how much their father loved his work, especially taking photos of people unaware of him. It’s clear that he thrived in capturing the unnoticed moments, offering a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes world of cinema.



The protagonist reflects on their own childhood, recalling a time when they were just six years old, visiting their father on a work trip in Vancouver. The cold, distant environment of the city, coupled with their father’s long absences, left an impression on them. It was during that trip that their father imparted a piece of advice that would shape the protagonist’s entire life: "You have to find a job that makes your heart feel big, not small. Promise me that.” The protagonist made that promise, but by the age of eight, they had lost him. That advice stayed with the protagonist throughout their life, pushing them to pursue a career that would fuel their passion and expand their soul, a mission that was both empowering and challenging. In high school, they dabbled in various activities—photography, theater, and sports—but nothing seemed to click. It wasn’t until they started writing about people in college that they felt a deep connection to something. Writing, they realized, was the job that would make their heart feel big.

The protagonist’s journey led them from composition classes at USC to journalism school at NYU, and from there to a career that fluctuated between freelance work for obscure blogs and eventually finding a stable position at *Vivant*. Along the way, they met David, worked with various publications, and eventually landed the story of a lifetime with Evelyn. Reflecting on their father’s words, the protagonist realizes that their entire career trajectory—one defined by passion for storytelling and connection—has been rooted in that promise. They wonder briefly if they would have pursued this path with such determination if their father had still been alive to guide them. Would his untimely death have made his advice feel more precious, or would

they have taken it for granted if it had been available indefinitely?

As the protagonist reaches the end of the last photo album, they come across images that are far more personal. The photos, taken at a family barbecue, show a side of their parents' lives that had nothing to do with Hollywood. The protagonist's mother, who appears in the background of many of the images, was a constant presence, yet there's something about seeing these candid moments that highlights how much their father loved capturing the essence of ordinary life. One photo stands out: a shot of the protagonist as a young child, eating cake with their hands, looking directly into the camera with their father's arm around them and their mother holding them. The image captures a fleeting moment of familial love, untouched by the industry's demands. The protagonist reflects on their name—Elizabeth Monique Grant—and how it changed after their father's death. Initially called Elizabeth, they became Monique to honor their father's love for the name, a tribute to a part of him that would never leave them.

This reflection brings the protagonist to a deeper understanding of their identity and the sacrifices made by both their parents. Their mother, a white woman, and their father, a Black man, had faced immense challenges raising a child in a racially divided society. The family's struggles to find a place where they felt accepted, moving from Baldwin Hills to Brentwood, are a testament to the difficulties of living in a world that wasn't ready for their love. It wasn't until much later that the protagonist met someone, Yael, who shared a similar background—a biracial person with a Dominican father and Israeli mother. Yael's sense of self, grounded in her unique identity, made the protagonist feel less isolated, as they, too, navigated the complexity of being "half something." Growing up feeling like two halves—one piece of each parent—was a challenge, but it also shaped who the protagonist became. This complex identity is something the protagonist continues to grapple with, even as they carve out a place for themselves in Hollywood.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 opens with a question from Evelyn's companion, who is perplexed by her decision to agree to work with Don, despite his past actions. "Why did you agree to do it?" they ask, suggesting that Evelyn could have used her influence to have him removed from the film. Evelyn responds with a candid explanation, revealing the complexities behind her decision. "You don't go throwing your weight around unless you're sure you'll win," she begins. At the time, she wasn't entirely confident that she could have Max, the director, fire Don if she had demanded it, as she was only about eighty percent sure of the outcome. More importantly, she felt that asking for Don's removal might have been unnecessarily cruel. Don had fallen on hard times, with no recent hits, his name fading from the public's memory, and rumors about his drinking spiraling out of control. It wasn't lost on Evelyn that his personal life was in shambles, and despite their history, she couldn't bring herself to add to his misery.

The conversation shifts as her companion presses further, asking if she had compassion for Don, considering their past relationship and the abuse she endured. Evelyn responds thoughtfully, "Relationships are complex," acknowledging that love can often be tangled with pain and hardship. She admits that people are messy, and that while it may seem counterintuitive, she preferred to err on the side of compassion rather than judgment. She explains that it wasn't simply about feeling bad for Don, but about understanding the complexity of their shared history. Her actions were not about excusing what had happened between them, but about navigating a nuanced reality where emotions, history, and personal growth intersected. Her decision wasn't rooted in sympathy for Don as much as it was about recognizing the complexity of her own feelings and the situation at hand. "I'm saying you should have a little compassion for how complicated it must have been for me," Evelyn says, inviting her companion to consider the emotional toll of balancing all these factors.

The dynamic shifts as Evelyn's companion reflects on their own misunderstanding of the situation. "I'm sorry," they say, realizing that they had made a premature judgment without truly understanding the complexity of Evelyn's position. There's an acknowledgment of ignorance about the unique challenges Evelyn faced in deciding how to handle her past and her career. Evelyn, with her characteristic grace, accepts the apology with a gentle smile. She offers an insightful distinction between forgiveness and absolution, explaining that forgiving someone doesn't mean excusing their actions. "Don was no longer a threat to me," she continues. "I was not scared of him. I felt powerful and free." This feeling of liberation allowed her to make decisions on her terms, without being controlled by past trauma. Her strength became apparent as she tells her companion how she moved forward with the project, despite the emotional weight of working alongside Don. With Celia's hesitant support and Harry's cautious trust, Evelyn took the steps necessary to proceed professionally. The logistics were set into motion, with her representatives arranging a meeting with Don's people. Despite her past with him, Evelyn was in control, confident in her ability to handle the situation.

In this chapter, Evelyn's nuanced understanding of forgiveness, her recognition of her own power, and her ability to navigate complex emotional terrain shine through. By sharing her experience, she offers valuable insight into the difficult balance of moving forward while acknowledging the complexities of past relationships. The situation she describes demonstrates the importance of self-compassion, strength, and a commitment to making empowered decisions, even when they involve difficult people from one's past. It serves as a reminder that forgiveness isn't about absolution but about taking control of your life and your choices. Evelyn's story speaks to the broader theme of growth—learning to set boundaries, embrace one's own power, and ultimately choose peace without erasing the past.

Chapter 68

Chapter 68 begins with the protagonist reflecting on her decision to visit Evelyn’s apartment, unsure exactly when she made up her mind to go. It was almost as if the decision was made for her, as she suddenly found herself on the way there, walking through the familiar streets from the subway. The closer she gets to Evelyn’s apartment, the more she realizes that there was no other choice but to come; it was as inevitable as anything could be. She understands that her position at Vivant, the magazine she works for, is something she fought for and cannot afford to jeopardize. Her arrival, while feeling somewhat rushed, also feels like the natural step in her journey, even though she’s the last to arrive.

As Grace opens the door, it’s clear that the morning has been chaotic for her. Grace’s usual calm demeanor is replaced with a stressed appearance, hair falling from her ponytail, a tiredness in her eyes. She explains how Evelyn had a team of people arriving earlier than expected, starting with a makeup artist at dawn and a lighting consultant who found the most flattering spot for the shoot. Grace had been scrambling to get everything ready, including scrubbing the terrace for two hours, a task made more difficult by the cold weather. Grace jokes that she’s looking forward to her vacation, something she clearly needs after the exhausting morning. Despite the stress, Grace’s humor helps lighten the mood, and her laughter echoes in the air, offering a brief reprieve from the tension.

The photo shoot begins, and the protagonist steps out onto the terrace, where Evelyn is being surrounded by a bustling crew. It’s clear that Evelyn is in her element, surrounded by lights, cameras, and equipment, with a wind machine blowing her hair dramatically as she dons a silk green gown. Even in her later years, Evelyn commands the room in a way that is almost magnetic. As the photographer captures her, it’s evident that she hasn’t lost any of the star power that made her famous. The

protagonist, once intimidated by her, now sees Evelyn not just as an icon but as a woman in full control of her environment. However, watching her in this setting, the protagonist realizes that Evelyn’s true essence, the one that resonates with people, is not just in her looks or her fame but in the confidence and self-assuredness she exudes naturally.

Evelyn then notices the protagonist behind the lighting crew and calls for a few photos together. Despite her reluctance, the protagonist steps forward, uncomfortable with the sudden request but unable to refuse. The moment feels loaded, as Evelyn’s desire for a photo isn’t just about vanity but about marking this part of her life. As the camera clicks, the protagonist feels exposed, caught between the conflicting emotions of her personal discomfort and her professional obligation. Evelyn's warmth, however, shines through, and there’s a sincerity in her smile that the protagonist hadn’t expected. For a brief moment, Evelyn’s true concern for her well-being becomes evident, adding a layer of depth to their complicated relationship. The protagonist, caught in a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, finds herself playing a role she never quite signed up for: pretending to be captivated, pretending to be okay, even as everything within her feels unsettled.

After the photo shoot concludes, and the team starts packing up, the protagonist prepares to leave, feeling the weight of the day. Evelyn is upstairs changing, and the protagonist takes a moment to speak with Grace, who is cleaning up the kitchen. Grace reveals that she’s headed on a much-needed vacation to Costa Rica, courtesy of Evelyn, who gave her two tickets for a week-long trip. It’s a thoughtful and generous gesture, further showcasing Evelyn’s ability to surprise and care for those around her in meaningful ways. As Grace excitedly prepares for her trip, she shares her gratitude, and Evelyn’s gesture becomes a symbol of the different ways she nurtures those close to her, even as she deals with the whirlwind of her own fame.

When Evelyn joins them downstairs, she is dressed casually but still radiates the same beauty and presence that makes her seem both plain and extraordinary at the same time. She insists that Grace leave for her vacation, expressing how much she

appreciates Grace’s help and how important it is for her to take a break. Evelyn’s concern for Grace is genuine, and her appreciation comes through in her insistence that Grace relax and enjoy herself. The protagonist observes the scene, starting to realize that Evelyn’s capacity for caring is often masked by her public persona. There’s a quiet understanding between the two women, an unspoken bond that goes beyond the surface of their relationship.



The protagonist begins to see Evelyn in a new light. She’s no longer just the iconic figure she once thought she knew but a woman who has built relationships over the years with care, dedication, and generosity. Evelyn’s kindness and thoughtfulness, even in the midst of her demanding life, show a deeper side of her that’s not immediately visible to the public. As Grace leaves for her vacation, the protagonist is left to reflect on the layers of Evelyn’s character that are just beginning to unfold. There’s still much she doesn’t understand about Evelyn, but she’s starting to realize that, like anyone, Evelyn is a complex figure with many sides—some known only to those closest to her.

This moment offers the protagonist a chance to reflect on her own place in Evelyn’s life, and the role she plays in telling Evelyn’s story. The complexities of their relationship are only just beginning to surface, and as the protagonist steps away from the apartment, she finds herself pondering what she’s learned. Evelyn’s life, full of fame, mystery, and power, is slowly becoming a little more human, a little more accessible, as the protagonist navigates the intricacies of their connection. It’s clear that there’s much more to Evelyn than meets the eye, and the protagonist’s journey to uncover the truth behind her public persona has only just begun.

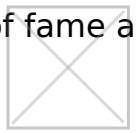
Chapter 6

Chapter 6 delves deep into Evelyn’s challenging upbringing, where her mother, a chorus girl who had emigrated from Cuba at a young age, played a central role in shaping her early life. Evelyn, unaware of her mother's full history, later realized that the term "chorus girl" was often a euphemism for something much darker. Her mother’s death when Evelyn was only eleven left a lasting emotional scar. The innocence of her childhood was abruptly cut short as she inherited adult burdens, such as conveying her mother's grave illness to her father. This moment in her life marked the beginning of a deep sense of loss and responsibility that would stay with her.

After her mother's death, Evelyn was forced to reckon with the raw reality of adolescence. As her body matured, she was met with both unwanted attention and the painful isolation that came with it. Her physical development, while expected in many ways, also became a source of vulnerability. As she walked the streets, she quickly became aware of the power her body had over men, a recognition that made her uncomfortable yet also gave her a sense of both power and fear. At the same time, her relationships with her peers became strained. The girls in her neighborhood began to distance themselves from her, and she soon realized that her emerging sexuality was something she had to navigate alone. The trauma of her early experiences, coupled with an unhealthy relationship with a local boy, Billy, who took advantage of her, marked a pivotal point in her life. His manipulation of her, using promises of affection and coercion, reinforced her belief that survival often came at the cost of her dignity.

Evelyn's understanding of relationships was further complicated by this betrayal, but it also sparked her transformation into someone who began to take charge of her own life, albeit in an imperfect and sometimes painful way. She realized that she was capable of making choices—not necessarily the right choices, but decisions nonetheless. It was a lesson in agency, however flawed, that would follow her

throughout her life. As she navigated this difficult period, her desire to escape her surroundings grew more intense. She wasn’t just seeking an escape from her dysfunctional home life and her abusive father but from the toxic environment of Hell’s Kitchen altogether. Hollywood became a beacon of hope, not just for a career but for freedom—freedom from a life filled with pain, fear, and disappointment. But as much as she was drawn to the promise of a new life in Hollywood, Evelyn was also aware that the pursuit of fame and fortune could come with its own set of compromises and sacrifices.



Her decision to move toward Hollywood was a blend of necessity and aspiration. Despite the exploitation and hardships she faced, Evelyn's resilience began to manifest in a drive to build a future on her terms. The allure of Hollywood’s fame was more than just a dream; it represented the possibility of escaping the cycle of poverty, abuse, and anonymity that had defined her life up until that point. She was ready to reinvent herself and build a future where her name could stand for something beyond her past. This chapter sheds light on the complexities of Evelyn's character—her strength, her vulnerability, and her deep yearning for a life that was entirely hers.

This formative period shaped her understanding of relationships, self-worth, and the cost of success. Through Evelyn’s eyes, we see a young woman, shaped by trauma but undeterred by it, navigating a world that is both alluring and treacherous. Hollywood, for all its promise of glamour, remains a double-edged sword—offering a chance at greatness but requiring sacrifices that will come to define Evelyn's future. Her journey toward stardom was not just about becoming a famous actress, but about reclaiming agency over her own destiny, even if it meant making difficult choices along the way. The chapter sets the stage for the complex narrative of Evelyn’s rise to fame, where the personal and professional intertwine in a way that will challenge her beliefs and her heart.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 unfolds on Harry’s forty-fifth birthday, a day that marks a quieter, more reflective celebration than one might expect. Instead of a lavish party or an extravagant night out, Harry simply wants to spend the day with those closest to him, seeking the comfort of family without the trappings of formality. His request is straightforward, reflecting his desire for peace and simplicity, something many of us crave as we grow older. In response, Evelyn, Celia, and John devise a plan to celebrate in a way that would honor Harry’s wish. The idea of a picnic in the park seems like the perfect solution—a casual yet thoughtful gathering where the family can connect and enjoy each other’s company.

John, always thinking ahead, heads to the sporting-goods store to purchase a large umbrella, not only to provide shade from the sun but also to keep them out of the public eye. The idea of keeping their celebration intimate, away from prying eyes, shows how much they value their privacy. Celia gets to work on making sangria, a refreshing drink that will add a special touch to their afternoon. Meanwhile, Luisa handles the food, ensuring that there will be enough to eat for everyone, filling the picnic baskets with homemade dishes that reflect her love for the family. The sense of care and attention to detail is evident in every aspect of the day, ensuring that Harry’s birthday will be memorable in the simplest, most meaningful way.

As the family prepares, they surprise Harry with the plan, taking him to the park with Connor happily riding on his back. She giggles as he bounces her up and down, and the joy of the moment is palpable. The sound of Connor’s laughter fills the air, providing a backdrop of innocence and happiness that is both uplifting and heartwarming. Harry, intrigued by what’s unfolding, asks for a hint, but John, knowing Harry’s perceptiveness, refuses to give anything away. Their playful banter continues, with Connor laughing again as Harry calls her name, a sound that lightens the

atmosphere even further. When they finally reach the park, Harry’s eyes fall upon the picnic setup: the umbrella, the blankets, and the baskets all laid out under the open sky. His smile says it all—it’s exactly what he wanted. A simple family picnic, just the five of them, and it’s perfect.

This picnic is not just a celebration of Harry’s birthday but also a celebration of their family’s closeness and their ability to find joy in everyday moments. The ease of the day, with no expectations or pressures, allows them to relax and simply be with one another. Harry’s contentment is evident as he closes his eyes for a moment, taking in the peace that surrounds him. There’s something profoundly beautiful in the simplicity of it all: no extravagant gifts or grand speeches, just the pleasure of being together in a quiet, heartfelt way. Evelyn, Celia, and John have all contributed to making the day special, demonstrating their deep care for Harry and their understanding of what truly matters to him.

As they share the picnic, it’s clear that this moment is more than just a meal in the park. It symbolizes the strength of their bond, the love they have for one another, and their ability to embrace the little things in life. It’s in these moments—where there are no distractions, no expectations—that we often find the truest sense of happiness. The day, with its simplicity and warmth, will remain in Harry’s memory as one of the most perfect birthday celebrations he could have asked for. The time spent together, without the need for anything extravagant, becomes a cherished memory for the entire family. It’s a reminder that sometimes, the best moments are the quiet, unassuming ones that allow us to truly appreciate the people we hold dear.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

The morning after, I walked into Evelyn's office, anxiety tightening my chest so much that I could feel the sweat dripping down my back. My thoughts were running wild, making it hard to even focus on the conversation happening in front of me between Evelyn and Grace. As Grace set down a platter of charcuterie, my gaze was glued to the cornichons as I tried to push my nerves away. They chatted about Lisbon’s summer offerings, but my mind was far from the conversation, trapped in the upcoming conversation I needed to have with Evelyn.

Once Grace stepped out of the room, I turned toward Evelyn. “We need to talk,” I said, my voice edged with both urgency and a hint of unease. Evelyn’s response was a laugh, lighthearted as ever, “Honestly, it feels like that’s all we ever do.” I pressed on, focusing on the matter at hand. “About Vivant, I mean.”

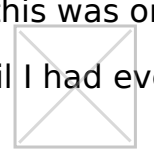
“OK,” Evelyn replied, giving me her full attention. “Talk.” I could feel my heart racing, but I steadied myself as I dived into my request. “I need some sort of timeline for when this book might be released,” I said, waiting for her to give me something to work with. "Please," I added mentally, hoping she'd understand the pressure I was under.

Evelyn’s tone remained calm as she listened, yet I could feel the growing frustration inside me. “I’m listening,” she finally said, waiting for me to elaborate. “If you don’t tell me when this book could realistically be sold, I could lose my job. This could be years away—or even decades,” I explained. It wasn’t just about my career; it was about survival, and I needed clarity.

Evelyn, ever the sharp one, quipped, “You certainly have high hopes for my lifespan.” I couldn’t hide my exasperation. “Evelyn, I either need a firm date or I need to promise

Vivant an excerpt for the June issue.” I crossed my arms, steeling myself for her response, my patience on the edge.

After some thought, she finally replied with a nod. “OK. You can give them an excerpt—whatever part you want—for the June issue. But only if you stop pushing for a timeline.” My moment of triumph was fleeting. I didn’t let the joy show on my face because I knew this was only part of the bigger negotiation. I wasn’t done yet. I couldn’t rest until I had everything I needed to secure my position.



The weight of the moment hit me. Evelyn needed something from me, something important, even if I wasn’t sure exactly what it was. I wasn’t just an employee. I had leverage, and I had to use it just as she would if she were in my position. And now, the real test was about to begin. I gathered my courage, prepared to take control of the situation the way Evelyn would.

“You need to sit for a photo shoot. For the cover,” I demanded. The room fell into a heavy silence as I met her eyes, unflinching. “No,” she replied instantly, her response sharp and firm.

“It’s nonnegotiable,” I pressed, feeling the weight of the moment. She tried to argue, but I stood my ground. “Everything is negotiable. Haven’t you gotten enough already? I’ve agreed to the excerpt.”

“You and I both know how valuable fresh images of you would be for this,” I continued, my voice steady. Still, she refused. “I said no.”

This was it. I had to push harder, just like Evelyn would. “You agree to the cover photo, or I’m out.” I could see her sitting straighter now, taken aback.

“Excuse me?” Evelyn asked, her voice low with disbelief. I held her gaze and wasn’t afraid to stand my ground. “You want me to write your life story. I want to write your life story. But these are my terms,” I said firmly. “I’m not going to lose my job for you. I keep my job by delivering a feature with a cover. So either you give me a timeline, or you agree to this photo shoot. Those are your choices.”

Evelyn studied me carefully. For the first time, I saw a flicker of respect in her eyes, maybe even admiration. “You’re having fun with this, aren’t you?” she said, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“I’m just protecting my interests,” I said, finally letting a small smile slip through.

“Yes, but you’re also good at it. And I think you’re delighting in it just a little bit,” Evelyn teased, her smile growing. “I’m learning from the best,” I said with a shrug, my smile widening.



Evelyn’s expression softened. “Yes, you are.” She paused, scrunching her nose in thought. “A cover?” she asked one last time, her resistance finally cracking.

“A cover,” I repeated, standing firm in my decision. It was my turn to win this battle, and I had no intention of backing down.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 is a pivotal moment in Evelyn's journey, as it delves into the complexities of her relationships, particularly with Celia. Throughout this chapter, Evelyn begins to confront the truth about her life, which she has long hidden behind the façade of public success and fame. Celia, who shares a complicated bond with Evelyn, struggles with jealousy despite knowing that their relationship, like the others in their circle, is built on the need to appear as something it's not. The dynamics between the four of them—Evelyn, Celia, Harry, and John—are portrayed as deeply entwined with both personal and public pressures. Evelyn, now married to Harry, believes that they are embarking on a new chapter of their lives, one that will finally bring them the happiness and stability they've longed for. However, her desire to build a family and live authentically is challenged by the weight of societal expectations and the complexities of love and identity.

As Evelyn contemplates the idea of having a child, she is confronted with the reality that this decision extends beyond just herself and Harry. It's a decision that also involves Celia and John, who are just as invested in their lives, even though the truth about their relationships remains hidden from the public. Evelyn's internal conflict grows as she reflects on her past choices—decisions that she now sees as a product of her need to conform and find validation through external approval. While she grapples with the possibility of becoming a mother, Evelyn also realizes that the choices she makes will not only impact her personal happiness but also affect her public image and the dynamics of her relationship with Celia. It is a complex web of love, loyalty, fear, and ambition that Evelyn is trying to navigate, all while maintaining the carefully crafted persona that has brought her so much success.

In this chapter, Evelyn also begins to take stock of the larger social movements taking place around her, particularly the LGBTQ+ rights movement. The Stonewall riots,

which serve as a backdrop to this moment in the story, highlight the stark contrast between the life Evelyn is living and the activism that is sweeping the country. While she is living in a golden cage, trapped by the expectations of those around her, the men and women fighting for their rights outside are doing so with bravery and conviction. The juxtaposition of Evelyn's struggles with those of the LGBTQ+ community serves as a critical moment of reflection for her. She begins to question her role in this fight for freedom and self-expression, realizing that the very rights she has taken for granted have come at the expense of others who are risking everything to live authentically.

This moment of self-awareness is further deepened by Evelyn's realization that she has spent her life avoiding the truth about herself. Her career, her relationships, and her choices have all been shaped by the need to keep up appearances, to maintain a certain image for the public. But now, as the world around her is changing and evolving, she sees the cracks in her own carefully constructed world. The men and women who fought for their right to exist publicly as their true selves in the Stonewall riots represent a kind of courage that Evelyn realizes she has yet to fully embrace. They are willing to risk everything for the right to be who they are, and in contrast, Evelyn feels she has never truly allowed herself that same freedom. It is a moment of deep emotional reckoning, where Evelyn begins to understand that living authentically is not just about personal freedom—it's about embracing the power of vulnerability and the courage to step into the world without the layers of protection that have kept her safe for so long.

In the final portion of the chapter, Evelyn's bond with Celia is explored with nuance. Their relationship is marked by both love and tension, and this chapter further highlights the ambivalence that exists between them. Evelyn acknowledges that while Celia has been a central figure in her life, their connection is complicated by the sacrifices and compromises they've each made for the sake of preserving their public personas. Celia's desire to be there for Evelyn and support her, despite the deep-seated emotional conflicts, underscores the complexities of their relationship. Evelyn, for all her self-awareness, continues to struggle with how much of herself she is willing

to reveal, not just to the world, but to the people she loves the most. The chapter underscores the theme of identity—how much of it is shaped by the external world and how much of it can truly be our own.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27

"I'm going out on a date with Mick Riva.”

“Like hell you are.”

When Celia was angry, her chest and her cheeks flushed. This time, they’d grown red faster than I’d ever seen.

We were in the outdoor kitchen of her weekend home in Palm Springs. She was grilling us burgers for dinner.

Ever since the article came out, I’d refused to be seen with her in Los Angeles. The rags didn’t yet know about her place in Palm Springs. So we would spend weekends there together and our weeks in L.A. apart.

Celia went along with the plan like a put-upon spouse, agreeing to whatever I wanted because it was easier than fighting with me. But now, with the suggestion of going on a date, I’d gone too far.

I knew I’d gone too far. That was the point, sort of.

“You need to listen to me,” I said.

“You need to listen to me.” She slammed the lid of the grill shut and gestured to me with a pair of silver tongs. “I’ll go along with any of your little tricks that you want. But I’m not getting on board with either of us dating.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“We have plenty of choices.”

“Not if you want to keep your job. Not if you want to keep this house. Not if you want to keep any of our friends. Not to mention that the police could come after us.”

“You are being paranoid.”

“I’m not, Celia. And that’s what’s scary. But I’m telling you, they know.”

“One article in one tiny paper thinks they know. That’s not the same thing.”

“You’re right. This is still early enough that we can stop it.”

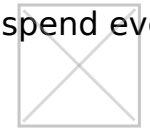
“Or it will go away on its own.”

“Celia, you have two movies coming out next year, and my movie is all anyone is talking about around town.”

“Exactly. Like Harry always says, that means we can do whatever we want.”

“No, that means we have a lot to lose.”

Celia, angry, picked up my pack of cigarettes and lit one. “So that’s what you want to do? You want to spend every second of our lives trying to hide what we really do? Who we really are?”



“It’s what everyone in town is doing every day.”

“Well, I don’t want to.”

“Well, then you shouldn’t have become famous.”

Celia stared at me as she puffed away at her cigarette. The pink of her lipstick stained the filter. “You’re a pessimist, Evelyn. To your very core.”

“What would you like to do, Celia? Maybe I should call over to *Sub Rosa* myself? Call the FBI directly? I can give them a quote. ‘Yep, Celia St. James and I are deviants!’ ”

“We aren’t deviants.”

“I know that, Celia. And you know that. But no one else knows that.”

“But maybe they would. If they tried.”

“They aren’t going to try. Do you get that? No one wants to understand people like us.”

“But they should.”

“There are lots of things we all should do, sweetheart. But it doesn’t work that way.”

“I hate this conversation. You’re making me feel awful.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But the fact that it’s awful doesn’t mean it’s not true. If you want to keep your job, you cannot allow people to believe that you and I are more than friends.”

“And if I don’t want to keep my job?”

“You do want to.”

“No, you want to. And you’re pinning it on me.”

“Of course I want to.”

“I’d give it all up, you know. All of it. The money and the jobs and the fame. I’d give it all up just to be with you, just to be normal with you.”

“You have no idea what you’re saying, Celia. I’m sorry, but you don’t.”

“What’s really going on here is that you’re not willing to give it up for me.”

“No, what’s going on here is that you’re a dilettante who thinks if this acting thing doesn’t work out, you can go back to Savannah and live off your parents.”

“Who are you to talk to me about money? You’ve got bags of it.”

“Yeah, I do. Because I worked my ass off and was married to an asshole who knocked me around. And I did that so I could be famous. So I could live the life we’re living. And if you think I’m not going to protect that, you’ve lost your mind.”

“At least you’re admitting this is about you.”

I shook my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Celia, listen to me. Do you love that Oscar? The very thing you keep on your nightstand and touch before you go to sleep?”

“Don’t—”

“People are saying, given how early you won it, you’re the kind of actress who could win multiple times. I want that for you. Don’t you want that?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you’re gonna let them take that away just because you met me?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Listen to me, Celia. I love you. And I can’t let you throw away everything you have built—and all your incredible talent—by taking a stand when no one will stand with us.”

“But if we don’t try . . .”

“No one is going to back us, Celia. I know how it feels to be shut out of this town. I’m just finally making my way back in. I know you’re probably picturing some world where we go up against Goliath and win. But that’s not gonna happen. We’d tell the truth about our lives, and they’d bury us. We could end up in prison or in a mental hospital. Do you get that? We could be committed. It’s not that far-fetched. It happens. Certainly, you can count on the fact that no one would return our calls. Not even

Harry.”

“Of course Harry would. Harry’s . . . one of us.”

“Which is precisely why he could never be caught talking to us again. Don’t you get it? The danger is even higher for him. There are actually men out there who would want to kill him if they knew. That’s the world we live in. Anyone who touched us would be examined. Harry wouldn’t be able to withstand it. I could never put him in that position. To lose everything he’s worked for? To quite literally risk his life? No. No, we’d be alone. Two pariahs.”

“But we’d have each other. And that’s enough for me.”

She was crying now, the tears streaking down her face and carrying her mascara with them. I put my arms around her and wiped her cheek with my thumb. “I love you so much, sweetheart. So, so much. And it’s in part because of things like that. You’re an idealist and a romantic, and you have a beautiful soul. And I wish the world was ready to be the way you see it. I wish that the rest of the people on earth with us were capable of living up to your expectations. But they aren’t. The world is ugly, and no one wants to give anyone the benefit of the doubt about anything. When we lose our work and our reputations, when we lose our friends and, eventually, what money we have, we will be destitute. I’ve lived that life before. And I cannot let it happen to you. I will do whatever I can to prevent you from living that way. Do you hear me? I love you too much to let you live only for me.”

She heaved into my body, her tears growing inside her. For a moment, I thought she might flood the backyard.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” I whispered into her ear. “I love you more than anything else in the entire world.”

“It’s not wrong,” Celia said. “It shouldn’t be wrong, to love you. How can it be wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, sweetheart. It’s not,” I said. “They’re wrong.”

She nodded into my shoulder and held me tighter. I rubbed her back. I smelled her hair.

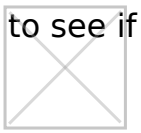
“It’s just that there’s not much we can do about it,” I said.

When she calmed down, she pulled away from me and opened the grill again. She did not look at me as she flipped the burgers. “So what is your plan?” she said.

“I’m going to get Mick Riva to elope with me.”

Her eyes, which already looked sore from crying, started to bloom again. She wiped a tear away, keeping her eyes on the grill. “What does that mean for us?” she said.

I stood behind her and put my arms around her. “It doesn’t mean what you think it means. I’m going to see if I can get him to elope with me, and then I’m going to have it annulled.”



“And you think that means they’ll stop watching you?”

“No, I know it means they will only watch me more. But they will be looking for other things. They will call me a tart or a fool. They will say I have terrible taste in men. They will say I’m a bad wife, I am too impulsive. But if they want to do any of that, they’ll have to stop saying I’m with you. It won’t fit their story anymore.”

“I get it,” she said, grabbing a plate and taking the burgers off the grill.

“OK, good,” I said.

“You’ll do whatever you have to do. But this is the last I want to hear about it. And I want it to be over and done with as soon as possible.”

“OK.”

“And when it’s over, I want us to move in together.”

“Celia, we can’t do that.”

“You said this would be so effective that no one would ever mention us.”

The thing is, I wanted us to move in together, too. I wanted it very much. “OK,” I said. “When it’s over, we’ll talk about moving in together.”

“OK,” she said. “Then we have a deal.”

I put my hand out to shake hers, but she waved it away. She didn’t want to shake on something that sad, that vulgar.

“And if it doesn’t work with Mick Riva?” she asked.

“It’s gonna work.”

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 delves deeper into Evelyn’s emotional landscape as she reflects on the complexities of her relationships, particularly with Celia, and the insecurities that arise with the passage of time. As Evelyn recalls the tension-filled moments with Celia, she admits that she never directly confronted her partner about the hurtful words. Instead, her response was often to retreat, to avoid conflict, and to use her beauty as a way to diffuse the situation. She knew the power her physical appearance had—something that had always worked in her favor, particularly when dealing with Celia's mood swings. The recognition of this truth is mixed with both frustration and acceptance, as Evelyn acknowledges that Celia, like many before her, was captivated by the allure that Evelyn had built her career on. But even as she used her beauty as a tool, there’s a sense of regret, a realization that relying on physicality to maintain control was both a privilege and a burden.

The conversation shifts as Evelyn reflects on her youth and how much of her identity was bound to her appearance. She speaks candidly about how, when she entered Hollywood, her beauty was her most valuable currency, the only thing that set her apart from others who might have had greater acting chops or more training. She was aware of this power and used it with purpose, knowing it was the gateway to roles, fame, and attention. However, as she approaches her thirties, she begins to face the undeniable reality of aging. The fear of growing older in an industry that worships youth and physical beauty becomes a constant weight. This chapter highlights a universal fear—especially for women—about what happens when society no longer finds you desirable based on superficial standards. The idea that her beauty would eventually fade forced Evelyn to consider her worth beyond just what she could offer with her looks, and this internal conflict is both poignant and relatable for anyone who’s experienced the pressure of external expectations.

What stands out in this reflection is Evelyn's understanding of her own vulnerability, a vulnerability that had always been masked by the confidence that came with her looks. Celia's words, although unintentional, cut to the heart of Evelyn's greatest fear: the realization that as her body changed, her relevance in Hollywood might diminish. Her career had been built on the belief that beauty equaled success, and with aging comes the inevitable challenge of confronting that belief head-on. It’s a powerful moment of self-awareness for Evelyn, who, despite her fame, is still tethered to the same societal pressures that affect millions of women. The fear of being overlooked, the loss of power that came with physical appeal, and the anxiety about career longevity are all emotions that many women in the public eye face. Yet, in Evelyn’s raw honesty, there’s a deeper lesson about the futility of relying solely on beauty to define one’s identity or to sustain career success.

This chapter not only brings forth Evelyn’s personal battle with aging but also speaks to a larger conversation about women in the entertainment industry—how they are often valued for their looks and how those looks eventually fade. The vulnerability she expresses here is something that many can relate to, even beyond the realm of Hollywood, where the emphasis on youth and beauty is perhaps most pronounced. It serves as a critique of an industry that often rewards superficial qualities, and it forces us to ask: how do we find our worth in a world so focused on external validation? Evelyn’s reflection is a call to action for anyone, especially women, to redefine their value by nurturing their inner qualities, talents, and resilience. As she navigates the complex emotional terrain of her career, it is clear that true fulfillment comes not from external appearances but from embracing and evolving with the changes that life brings. This message speaks to the need for growth, both personally and professionally, and for women to push back against the unrealistic standards that society often places on them.

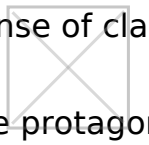
Chapter 69

Chapter 69 presents a profound internal conflict as the protagonist faces a momentous decision in the subway tunnel, questioning whether to intervene in Evelyn’s planned suicide or honor her autonomy. As he stands before the turnstiles, the weight of his choices presses upon him. Should he stop her? Should he turn around and seek help? Should he respect her decision to end her life on her own terms? This pivotal moment encapsulates a deep moral struggle—one that many may encounter when confronted with life-or-death decisions involving loved ones. The protagonist wrestles with the idea of betrayal, asking whether intervening would diminish the trust Evelyn has placed in him, or if, by walking away, he would abandon his ethical duty to prevent harm.

This dilemma deepens as the protagonist reflects on his relationship with Evelyn. She didn't choose him out of obligation, but because she believed in his understanding of life and death—his ability to see the value in mercy, even in situations where the definition of mercy is ambiguous. Her faith in him is grounded in their shared understanding of the need for dignity in death, something the protagonist knows all too well. He feels conflicted between wanting to respect Evelyn’s autonomy and his instinct to protect her from making a permanent decision in a moment of deep pain. This struggle highlights the delicate balance between compassion for someone’s suffering and respect for their wishes, a theme that resonates with the reader and invites deep reflection on the complexities of life, death, and the right to choose one’s own fate.

As the protagonist boards the train and heads to the airport to meet his mother, there’s a poignant shift in focus. His earlier decision to turn away from Evelyn becomes a turning point as he acknowledges that, while his emotions are still tangled in the web of her situation, life moves forward. He briefly reflects on the depth of his relationship

with Evelyn—how she entrusted him with her story and her decision. Yet, his realization that Evelyn's choice to die must be respected, no matter how painful it is for him to witness, allows him to release the weight of his own guilt. The protagonist's emotional journey continues, not in the subway station where his internal conflict raged, but in the simple, grounding presence of his mother. This shift marks the importance of family and human connection in moments of crisis, providing both comfort and a sense of clarity.



At the airport, the protagonist is embraced by his mother, an interaction that brings with it a catharsis of emotion. The rawness of his tears, which seem to have been building for years, reflects the enormity of what he's just experienced and the complexity of the relationship he has with both his mother and Evelyn. It's a moment of vulnerability that contrasts sharply with the stoic, decision-filled subway scene. His mother's unconditional love and acceptance provide the protagonist with the space to process his grief and guilt without judgment, showing the immense power of parental support in navigating life's most difficult moments. Through this quiet yet profound act of comfort, the protagonist is reminded of the strength found in the simplicity of familial love.

In their conversation, the protagonist's mother opens up about her relationship with his father, offering insight into the nuances of their bond. She reveals that their love, though not fueled by passion, was rooted in deep mutual respect and a shared understanding. This reflection serves as a counterpoint to the protagonist's own search for meaning in his relationships. His mother's story about their quiet but deeply affectionate marriage reminds him that love comes in many forms—some obvious and others more subtle, but just as powerful. Her candidness about the sacrifices made and the love they shared deepens the protagonist's understanding of commitment and partnership, allowing him to reflect on his own evolving views on love, intimacy, and connection.

As the protagonist listens to his mother speak about her late husband, he realizes how much he has yet to understand about his parents' relationship. In sharing these

intimate memories, his mother opens a window into a love story that is simple yet profound, and in doing so, she helps him understand the layers of complexity that come with the emotions of love and loss. This revelation deepens his appreciation for the connection they had, recognizing that love isn’t always about grand gestures or passionate moments, but about the everyday shared experiences that bind two people together. The protagonist begins to understand that, while the idea of love may change and evolve over time, the core of it remains constant—a partnership that transcends time and circumstance.

The conversation with his mother also brings clarity to the protagonist's thoughts on his father’s life. Though he had previously harbored doubts about his father's possible infidelity or sexual identity, he comes to realize that these questions, while important in their own right, don’t change the love and support his father gave him. He understands that love is not always about labels or societal expectations, but rather about the bonds that are formed through care, loyalty, and mutual understanding. The protagonist comes to a profound realization that his father’s love for him, his mother, and their family, remains unchanged regardless of the complexities of his personal life. This understanding helps him let go of the lingering confusion he had about his father's true identity and what it meant for their family.

As the narrative draws to a close, the protagonist reflects on the choices he has made, and the choices that lie ahead. The journey with Evelyn, his emotional revelations with his mother, and the deeper understanding of his father’s life and legacy all contribute to his evolving perspective on love, loss, and the importance of respecting others' choices. He now sees that sometimes, the most important decision is not about what action to take, but about how we choose to see and honor the lives of those we love. Whether it’s through respecting Evelyn’s right to die on her own terms or cherishing the quiet, steadfast love his parents shared, the protagonist learns that love, in all its forms, is complex, transformative, and ultimately shaped by the choices we make in our relationships with others. This realization will guide him as he continues on his own journey of self-discovery, ever aware that the love we give and receive is one of the most powerful forces in shaping who we are.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of my life began with a decision that could redefine how the world perceived me. I chose a daring dress, one that flirted with the boundaries of modesty, to make an unmistakable statement. Alongside Harry, I drove up Hillcrest Road, our destination unknown but the intention clear. My makeup was understated, just nude lipstick—striking enough to leave an impression, yet subdued enough not to steal the scene. This wasn’t about perfection; it was about capturing a moment that felt real, spontaneous, unfiltered by the usual glamor.

Harry pulled the car over, a silent cue that it was time to enact the scene we'd mentally rehearsed, though no script could truly prepare us for the act of feigning intimacy. “How do we want to play this?” he asked, a trace of nerves betraying his usual cool demeanor. I teased him about his experience with women, easing into our roles with playful banter that belied the tension of the moment. “Pretend I’m not who I am, and just let go,” I suggested, trying to blur the lines between our reality and the roles we needed to portray.

We scrambled to dishevel our appearances, laughing through the nerves. My dress slipped slightly off one shoulder; Harry ruffled his hair. Our laughter was cut short by the approaching headlights of another car—our cue to embrace. Harry’s kiss was desperate, convincingly passionate, and perfectly timed, just as the vehicle passed. The kiss wasn’t just for show; it was a desperate grasp at normalcy in our convoluted lives.

After the moment passed and the car's lights dimmed in the distance, Harry’s words brought me back to a startling reality. “We could actually do this,” he mused. “Marry, for real. Imagine that?” His proposal wasn’t traditional, nor was it entirely driven by love as society defines it. It was a partnership offer, born out of mutual respect and

affection, and a shared understanding of our unconventional circumstances.

His idea spiraled into a deeper conversation about futures we'd barely let ourselves imagine. Family, stability, companionship—elements of a conventional life that we both craved but had resigned ourselves to sacrificing for our careers and personal freedoms. “Could we live a life based on a complex love, but not the romantic kind the world expects?” he pondered aloud. My heart was torn—moved by his proposal but painfully aware of the complications our unique bond would entail.



As we sat there, parked under the canopy of night, our dialogue shifted from hypotheticals to what such a commitment would mean. Could we navigate a marriage of convenience and still fulfill our emotional needs discreetly? Harry’s honesty about his needs and my own desires for genuine love laid bare the complexities we'd face. Yet, there was something profoundly comforting about contemplating a shared life with someone who understood me so deeply.

In that moment, caught between the staged kiss and the sincere proposal, I realized how blurred the lines had become between performance and reality. Our lives, so publicly orchestrated, now faced a private crossroad. The decision to marry under unconventional terms was as much about embracing our realities as it was about challenging societal norms. It was a proposal not just of marriage but of a shared life's journey, regardless of its unconventional beginnings.

Harry’s suggestion opened up a realm of possibilities that was both exhilarating and daunting. As I contemplated his words, the idea of creating a family together, of providing a stable home for potential children, and of redefining what marriage could mean for people like us took root. It was a radical idea, fraught with challenges, but it was also a testament to the enduring human desire for connection, for family, and for a love that transcends conventional boundaries. In a world that often seemed too rigid for our kind of stories, Harry offered a narrative filled with potential—a chance to craft our own version of happiness, unconventional yet unapologetically ours.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 marks a pivotal point in my career, where *Little Women* became an enticing promise that remained just out of reach. Instead of being granted the role I longed for, I was pushed into a series of sentimental comedies, films designed to mold me into the quintessential Hollywood blonde. Sunset Studios saw my rising popularity as an opportunity to keep me in a specific lane, ensuring that my image was carefully curated to fit their vision. Though I yearned for more challenging roles, I quickly realized that resisting the studio's demands would be futile, and so I played along, embracing my newfound stardom as best as I could.

My first leading role came in *Father and Daughter*, a touching drama where Ed Baker played my widowed father, and together, we navigated new love and loss. This film solidified my place as a bankable actress, though I knew that my path to true artistic fulfillment would be a long one. In the midst of filming, Harry, ever the strategist, encouraged me to attend high-profile dates with Brick Thomas, a former child star whose ego was large enough to fill the entire Sunset lot. These outings, carefully orchestrated by the studio, were meant to generate publicity and craft a romantic narrative around me. Though I played my part, smiling through staged interactions and perfectly timed laughter, the reality was far from glamorous.

One particular night, I accompanied Brick to Chasen's, dressed to perfection while he showed up in casual clothes, only to be redressed by the studio stylist. Paparazzi swarmed us, cameras flashing as we pretended to be engrossed in each other's company. Brick, always self-absorbed, assumed I had idolized him as a teenager and smugly asked if I had posters of him on my walls. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I played along, knowing the game I had to participate in. Later that night, as we changed back into our everyday clothes, he leaned in, hinting that we could turn the rumors into reality. I laughed it off, brushing him aside, realizing just how transactional

Hollywood relationships could be.

Despite my distaste for these empty encounters, I continued the charade with other actors, enduring dull conversations and lackluster chemistry. Then, everything changed when Harry arranged a date with Don Adler. Unlike the others, Don exuded a charm that felt both effortless and magnetic. He arrived at my apartment holding a bouquet of lilies, his smile warm and inviting. The sincerity in his gesture caught me off guard—after so many staged interactions, it was refreshing to meet someone who seemed genuinely interested in me, beyond what the cameras captured.

Don took me to Mocambo, the most exclusive nightclub in town, where we danced under the soft glow of chandeliers, surrounded by Hollywood’s elite. Unlike other men who sought to possess me, Don simply appreciated my presence, treating me as someone to admire rather than control. His confidence, his wit, and his unwavering attention made me feel seen in a way I hadn’t before. As we danced the night away, I found myself drawn to him, the lines between performance and reality blurring. By the end of the evening, as he walked me to my door, he asked when he could see me again. For the first time in my carefully managed Hollywood life, I didn’t need to fabricate an answer—I wanted to see him just as much as he wanted to see me.

The moment felt different, more real than any of the orchestrated dates I had endured before. Don wasn't just another industry pawn looking to elevate his own status—he made me feel special, as though I was more than just a rising star. Perhaps, I thought, this was what love was supposed to feel like. Yet, even as I let myself believe in the possibility of something real, I knew that in Hollywood, love and ambition were often intertwined in ways that could be both exhilarating and dangerous.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 captures a pivotal moment in Evelyn's life as she navigates motherhood, career choices, and the complex dynamics of her relationships. From the first moment she held Connor, Evelyn was smitten, feeling a deep, unconditional love for the baby. With her round blue eyes and full head of hair, Connor reminded her of Celia, and in that instant, Evelyn felt a profound connection to her. She was a baby full of needs, constantly seeking attention, and Evelyn quickly found herself drawn to her, spending countless hours caring for her. Harry, though not living in the same home, played an integral role in their day-to-day lives, stepping in when help was needed and offering emotional support. Despite the challenges, the bond between Evelyn and Harry grew stronger as they navigated the early days of parenthood together, each learning from the other and growing closer in the process.

During the months when Celia was away filming, Evelyn and Harry's life took on a domestic routine that seemed almost traditional. Harry, who had always been more like family than just a friend, took on the role of caretaker—making breakfast, running Evelyn's baths, and even offering emotional comfort when Evelyn struggled with her insecurities about motherhood. Their dynamic had shifted, with Harry stepping into a support role that gave him a sense of purpose and connection to the family. The time they spent together deepened their bond, leading Evelyn to a realization about their relationship. "If there are all different types of soul mates," Evelyn said to Harry one afternoon, "then you are one of mine." She recognized that the love between them, though not romantic, was a profound and irreplaceable connection. In their shared moments with Connor, Harry and Evelyn found a sense of unity that solidified their bond, a bond that was stronger than she had ever imagined.

As Celia and John returned home, life returned to its previous state, though with a few subtle changes. The household dynamic shifted slightly, with Celia now back at the

center of Evelyn’s world and Harry returning to his own home. The first morning after Celia’s return brought with it a subtle, unspoken tension as Celia took over kitchen duties, making oatmeal for everyone instead of allowing Harry to prepare the traditional bacon and eggs. Evelyn noticed the shift in power within their home, as Celia subtly asserted her place in the family dynamic, making decisions for everyone, including what they ate for breakfast. Though Evelyn tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy, she couldn’t help but feel the complexity of her relationships shifting once again. Celia’s quiet actions reflected the underlying tension between them, and Evelyn realized that these dynamics weren’t as simple as they once seemed.

The conversation then moves to a professional crossroads for Evelyn, as Celia suggests that she take a role in Max Girard’s new film, *Three A.M.* Though Evelyn has kept in touch with Max since working with him in the past, Celia’s suggestion feels loaded. Celia, despite her clear dislike for Max, acknowledges that the role is perfect for Evelyn—a chance to break free from the image of just a mother and reclaim her sensuality and power as an actress. Evelyn is initially hesitant, unsure of how the public will perceive her after having a child. But Celia encourages her, urging her not to let her motherhood define her career and to remain bold and daring in her choices. “The Evelyn I love doesn’t care about that,” Celia says, pushing her to take the role and defy expectations. Evelyn begins to see the dual layers of her relationship with Celia—on one hand, Celia’s selfless love and encouragement, and on the other, her desire for Evelyn to remain the glamorous, untouchable bombshell she has always been. Celia’s complexity isn’t lost on Evelyn; it’s a part of what makes their relationship both challenging and beautiful.

Evelyn takes the time to reflect on Celia’s advice, weighing the impact the role could have on her life. She recognizes the desire to prove to herself that she’s still the woman she once was, the woman who captivated audiences and defied expectations. After confiding in Harry and taking a few days to think, Evelyn decides to go for the part. She wants to prove that she is still her own person, not defined by motherhood or the expectations of others. This decision becomes a pivotal moment in Evelyn’s journey, where she chooses to reclaim her autonomy and embrace her desires, both as

a woman and an artist. This chapter highlights the complex, ever-evolving relationships in Evelyn’s life—her love for Connor, her connection to Harry, her complicated bond with Celia, and her struggle to balance motherhood with her identity as an actress. It’s a powerful reminder of how the choices we make, and the relationships we navigate, shape our identities and futures.



Chapter 56

Chapter 56 marks a devastating chapter in Evelyn's life as she faces the aftermath of Harry’s tragic death. His loss is compounded by the weight of unspoken guilt and the realization that the decisions she had been making had come to a head. Harry was the one person Evelyn couldn't control or manipulate into following her wishes, and his reluctance to leave everything behind for Europe highlights the tension in their relationship. The loss of a close confidant like Harry makes Evelyn realize the complexity of their intertwined lives and how difficult it is to let go of the past. Harry’s refusal to retire and move to Europe is symbolic of his resistance to the changes that Evelyn desperately wants to make in their lives. The dialogue between them, laced with tension and frustration, reveals how deeply they are both struggling with their own issues, yet Evelyn still desires a future with Celia. Harry’s reluctance to leave his comfort zone, his unease with the idea of retirement, and his hesitations about the future demonstrate a man caught between his responsibilities and the emotions that govern him. His eventual realization of his own desires speaks volumes about how little control we have over the most important aspects of life, such as love and family.

As the months pass, Evelyn continues to grapple with the complexities of family life. She juggles her duties to Celia, Connor, and her career, all while trying to navigate the growing rift between her and her daughter. Despite being a world-renowned star, Connor sees her mother as nothing more than an embarrassment, a cruel reminder of how far their relationship has fallen. The constant rejection from Connor weighs heavily on Evelyn, making her feel even more isolated, even though she has Celia by her side. But as much as Evelyn wants to be a part of Connor’s life, she cannot shake the feeling that the demands of her career and her love for Celia are pulling her further away from her daughter. It is a difficult balancing act, and the emotional toll it takes on Evelyn is evident as she tries to find peace with her own choices. In these moments

of quiet reflection, she understands that no matter how hard she tries, she can’t force Connor to accept her or understand her decisions. Yet, Evelyn's unwavering love for her daughter pushes her to continue reaching out, hoping one day they will rebuild the connection that seems so distant.

The turning point in this chapter comes when Evelyn, still reeling from Harry’s death, faces the haunting reality of what it means to live without him. Despite the deep pain, she realizes she cannot allow herself to wallow in grief forever. The emotional weight she carries after losing Harry brings her to a place of clarity, where she knows that she must continue to push forward, even when the future seems uncertain. The events of that fateful night, where Evelyn witnessed Harry's tragic accident, leave a lasting impression on her—one that forces her to take action. The emotional toll of that experience compels Evelyn to help Harry, even in his last moments, and to make sure that his secrets, his mistakes, and the burden of his actions remain hidden. Evelyn’s decision to cover up the truth of Harry’s involvement in the accident—while painful—is done out of love and a deep sense of responsibility. It reflects the complexities of Evelyn's character: someone who has spent her life navigating the boundaries of fame, love, and sacrifice. These actions, though difficult, demonstrate the lengths she is willing to go to protect the people she loves, even if it means sacrificing her own sense of morality.

The weight of Evelyn’s grief becomes even more pronounced as she faces the consequences of the decisions she made in the aftermath of Harry's death. Her mourning is not just for Harry, but for the life they could have had together, and for the pieces of herself that she is forced to leave behind in order to keep her family intact. The guilt of the lies she tells, the people she deceives, and the world she hides from is a constant burden that hangs over her. In her moments of solitude, Evelyn questions her own choices, but she also begins to accept that the sacrifices she’s made are part of who she is. Her emotional turmoil is compounded by her deep love for Harry, a love that was never fully realized in the way she had hoped. It is this love, coupled with the need to protect her daughter and those she holds dear, that continues to drive Evelyn forward, even as the world around her seems to crumble.

Evelyn Hugo, Legendary Film Siren, Has Died

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it’s invalid.
I will provide the chapter now.

NEW YORK TRIBUNE

Chapter 54

Chapter 54 starts with an emotionally intense exchange between Evelyn and Celia, where Evelyn opens up about her lasting love for Celia. This revelation has been long buried, but as the years have passed, the love Evelyn once had for Celia has never waned—it has only grown stronger. Despite Evelyn’s marriage to Max, the bond between her and Celia still lingers in her heart, and the moment she admits it is a vulnerable one. She makes a heartfelt declaration, revealing how deeply she feels for Celia, despite all that has transpired. This moment captures the complexity of their shared history, as Evelyn attempts to rekindle something that was once lost but still lives in her heart. Celia, however, is cautious, not wanting to dive back into the passionate connection they shared, knowing that the potential for emotional pain still exists. The love they share is undeniable, yet the burden of their past, societal expectations, and the consequences of living in a public eye cloud the possibility of rekindling their relationship. This exchange reflects the inner conflict that both women face: one desires to rebuild what was lost, while the other fears the emotional cost of repeating the past.

Evelyn’s internal struggle is evident as she prepares for her trip to Los Angeles, hoping to reunite with Celia. The deeper she looks at her life, the more she realizes how much she has longed to be with Celia, and the more she struggles with the choice between her marriage and her desire to return to the woman she loves. As she packs Celia’s letters, symbols of their connection over the years, she reflects on how these pieces of her past have shaped her into the woman she is today. The letters hold memories and deep emotional significance, representing the years she has spent loving Celia, even while being caught in a marriage and life she didn’t truly want. Her family and her obligations to Max and Connor are not lost on her, but they no longer feel like enough to suppress the love and yearning she holds for Celia. These letters serve as a

reminder of the deep emotional tie she has with Celia, a connection she knows cannot be ignored. Yet, the external world and its expectations, as well as the family she has created, make it difficult for her to act on her desire to fully embrace who she truly is. In this moment, Evelyn is torn between staying in a life of comfort and familiarity and stepping into an uncertain, but authentic future with Celia.

The chapter takes a sharp turn when Evelyn faces Max's discovery of her hidden relationship with Celia. In an emotional outburst, Max tears up the letters Evelyn has kept secret, exposing the very heart of her private love for Celia. His words are cutting and harsh, revealing his lack of understanding about the depth of Evelyn's feelings and the life they've built. The contrast between his anger and Evelyn's steadfastness in defending her love for Celia is striking, and it showcases the profound divide in their emotional connection. Max's inability to truly understand Evelyn is evident, as he uses hurtful language, accusing her of betrayal, while she defends the love she has for Celia, standing firm in her truth. This confrontation marks a turning point for Evelyn, as she begins to understand that staying in a life built on false pretenses will no longer bring her happiness. She is ready to face the consequences of embracing her truth, even if it means tearing apart the life she has worked so hard to build.

Evelyn's declaration to leave Max and pursue a life with Celia represents a monumental moment of self-liberation. It is a brave choice, one that reflects her willingness to live authentically, no matter the personal cost. For Evelyn, this moment of truth is the beginning of a journey toward emotional and personal freedom, where she no longer has to hide who she truly is. The chapter perfectly encapsulates the tension between desire and duty, love and societal expectation. Evelyn is no longer willing to compromise herself for the sake of appearances or to live a life that feels incomplete. Her pursuit of true happiness, with Celia, symbolizes a powerful reclaiming of her identity and love, and it sets the stage for the changes she will make in her life moving forward. In choosing love over comfort, Evelyn embraces the full power of self-realization, and this act of courage becomes the defining moment of her journey.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52 begins with Evelyn Hugo and Max Girard’s wedding in Joshua Tree, a beautiful yet unconventional ceremony. The couple opted for a small, intimate gathering with only their closest friends and Max’s brother, Luc, attending, setting the tone for a wedding that diverged from Hollywood’s usual grandeur. Evelyn, famous for her glamorous appearances and bold fashion choices, rejected the classic white wedding gown in favor of an ocean-blue maxi dress, marking a clear departure from the past. This choice of dress was symbolic, representing not only her defiance of tradition but also a new chapter in her life, where she was willing to break free from the expectations that had followed her throughout her career. The choice of Joshua Tree as their wedding destination, with its vast and peaceful desert landscapes, further emphasized the simplicity and intimacy of the event, a stark contrast to the public, high-profile weddings that the world typically associated with celebrities like Evelyn.

Despite the serenity of the moment, reality quickly made itself known. The simplicity of their surroundings, while initially appealing, soon became a source of discomfort for Max, who was used to the luxury and excess that came with his high-profile lifestyle. The calm of the desert, with its stark beauty and isolation, stood in sharp contrast to the constant buzz of city life, and Max’s inability to fully embrace the tranquility revealed the underlying tensions in their relationship. Evelyn, too, began reflecting on the complexities of their situation—the difference between their private selves and the public personas they had built. Although they had tried to carve out a space for themselves, free from the pressures of Hollywood, the reality of their fame and the expectations placed upon them continued to weigh heavily on both of them. Evelyn’s growing fear of being loved for the image she projected, rather than for who she truly was, began to seep into her thoughts, making her question the authenticity of their bond.

Max's reaction to a magazine article about their relationship and his frustration with the situation only served to heighten Evelyn’s anxiety. She feared that no matter how much they tried to live outside the prying eyes of the media, they were always tethered to the expectations of their celebrity status. She worried that Max’s discontent, coupled with his public complaints, would overshadow their love and make it difficult for her to ever truly be loved for the person she was behind the headlines. The chapter poignantly explores this tension between public image and personal truth, capturing the conflict Evelyn faces as she navigates her desire for real, meaningful connections while grappling with the suffocating nature of fame. The brief respite she had experienced in Joshua Tree felt increasingly like an illusion, a fleeting moment of peace in a world that constantly demanded she conform to a narrative created by others.

As Evelyn and Max departed from Joshua Tree, they returned to the city with the weight of their public lives bearing down on them once again. Their departure symbolized not just a physical return to their hectic city lives but a metaphorical return to the complexities of their roles in the public eye. Evelyn’s struggle to reconcile her true self with the icon she had become was at the heart of the chapter, as she longed for a life that was authentic, free from the constant scrutiny and judgment. Her journey, marked by moments of love and deep reflection, ultimately points to the inherent tension between living for oneself and living for others. The chapter underscores the challenge of maintaining genuine relationships when the world around you constantly distorts your image and expectations, and it serves as a reminder that authenticity often comes at a personal cost. As Evelyn faces these challenges head-on, she must confront the difficult reality of navigating love, identity, and the pressures of fame, all while holding onto the hope that she can still find a way to live truthfully in a world built on illusions.

Chapter 55

Chapter 55 begins with Evelyn Hugo arriving at Spago, where Celia is already seated, exuding her signature charm even as time and circumstances have altered her. Her red hair, a once-natural shade now altered by dye, is a testament to the passing years, as are the softening lines around her eyes. The warm, 78-degree weather outside contrasts sharply with the restaurant's air-conditioning, which has left Celia's arms covered in goosebumps, a sign that her physical form is still affected by the coldness around her—both literal and figurative. As Evelyn approaches, she's confronted not just by the familiar sight of Celia but by a history of unspoken words, a web of emotions that have never quite been untangled.

Celia's attire—a gauzy cream blouse and black slacks—reflects the grace she has always embodied, though now it carries a quieter, more subdued elegance. Evelyn, noticing the changes that have subtly but surely marked Celia over the years, feels the weight of their shared past. The initial exchange between them is one of familiarity, yet it holds the tension of unresolved emotions. Evelyn's compliments to Celia are genuine but carry an undertone of regret, while Celia's reply— "Ditto"—is both a reflection of her own acknowledgment of time and a veil over the depth of her feelings. As they settle into the dinner, it's clear this isn't just a casual meal. It's a reckoning. They're not merely catching up—they're facing their history, the unresolved hurts, and the lingering connection that has always existed between them.

What starts as an exchange of polite pleasantries quickly evolves into something much more intimate and confrontational. Evelyn, ever the confidante and the person willing to push past the surface, broaches the subject of their past. The tension between them, though palpable, doesn't silence the rawness of their shared words. As they discuss their past—the love they had, the pain of separation, and the choices that both defined and destroyed their relationship—there's a shift in how they see one another.

Both have changed over the years, but those changes don’t erase the lingering love, nor do they erase the bitterness and regret that still fester beneath the surface. Their conversation turns to the complexities of their individual lives—Evelyn’s marriage to Max, Celia’s sacrifices, and the choices they both made for the sake of their careers and reputations.

The conversation between Evelyn and Celia isn’t just a trip down memory lane; it’s a confrontation of the wounds that have remained untouched for years. At the table, they’re not just two women reminiscing about the past—they’re two souls trying to make sense of what they once had and how they’ve changed. As Evelyn confesses her own struggles—her discomfort with the way she’s lived her life, the fame, the marriages, and the constant pressure to hide her true self—Celia listens quietly, but her words cut to the heart of Evelyn’s desires. The dinner becomes a bittersweet moment of reckoning, a realization that while they can never undo the past, they can still attempt to shape the future, albeit with the weight of everything they’ve been through.

At the core of this conversation is an undeniable truth—love, at its purest, isn’t about perfection or even happiness, but about coming to terms with imperfection. For Evelyn and Celia, the road to this realization has been long, filled with brokenness and moments of both beauty and pain. Their dialogue reflects the complexity of human emotions—love, loss, regret, and the yearning for reconciliation. For Evelyn, this dinner marks a crucial moment in her life where she must face the consequences of her decisions, both personal and professional, and figure out what truly matters. Through her conversation with Celia, she begins to understand that the life she’s lived, with all its glamour and heartbreak, has been one of constant self-denial.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Celia was shooting a movie on location in Big Bear for three weeks. I knew that going with her wasn’t an option, nor was visiting her on the set. She insisted she would come home every weekend, but it felt too risky.

She was a single girl, after all. I was afraid the prevailing wisdom erred too close to the question What do single girls have to go home to?

So I decided it was the right time to go to France.

Harry had some connections to filmmakers in Paris. He made a few calls on the sly for me.

Some of the producers and directors I met with knew who I was. Some of them were clearly seeing me just as a favor to Harry. And then there was Max Girard, an up-and-coming New Wave director, who had never heard of me before.

“You are une bombe,” he said.

We were sitting in a quiet bar in the Saint-Germain-de-Prés neighborhood of Paris. We huddled in a booth in the back. It was just after dinnertime, and I hadn’t had a chance to eat. Max was drinking a white Bordeaux. I had a glass of claret.

“That sounds like a compliment,” I said, taking a sip.

“I don’t know if I have before met a woman so attractive,” he said, staring at me. His accent was so thick that I found myself leaning in to hear him.

“Thank you.”

“You can act?” he said.

“Better than I look.”

“That cannot be so.”

“It is.”

I saw Max’s wheels start turning. “Are you willing to test for a part?”

I was willing to scrub a toilet for a part. “If the part is great,” I said.

Max smiled. “This part is spectacular. This part is a movie-star part.”

I nodded slowly. You have to restrain every part of your body when you are working hard not to look eager.

“Send me the pages, and we’ll talk,” I said, and then I drank the last of my wine and stood up. “I’m so sorry, Max, but I should go. Have a wonderful evening. Let’s be in touch.”

There was absolutely no way I was going to sit at a bar with a man who hadn’t heard of me and let him think I had all the time in the world.

I could feel his eyes on me as I walked away, but I walked out the door with all the confidence I had—which, despite my current predicament, was quite a lot. And then I went back to my hotel room, put on my pajamas, ordered room service, and turned on the TV.

Before I went to bed, I wrote Celia a letter.

My Dearest CeCe,

Please never forget that the sun rises and sets with your smile. At least to me it does. You’re the only thing on this planet worth worshipping.

All my love,

Edward

I folded it in half and tucked it into an envelope addressed to her. Then I turned out my light and closed my eyes.

Three hours later, I was awakened by the jarring sound of a phone ringing on the table next to me.

I picked it up, irritated and half asleep.

“Bonjour?” I said.

“We can speak your language, Evelyn.” Max’s accented English reverberated through the phone. “I am calling to see if you would be free to be in a movie I am shooting. The week after next.”

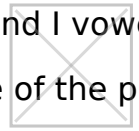
“Two weeks from now?”

“Not even, quite. We are shooting six hours from Paris. You will do it?”

“What is the part? How long is the shoot?”

“The movie is called *Boute-en-Train*. At least, that’s what it is called for now. We shoot for two weeks in Lac d’Annecy. The rest of the shoot you do not need to be there.”

“What does *Boute-en-Train* mean?” I tried to say it the way he said it, but it came out overprocessed, and I vowed not to try again. Don’t do things you’re not good at.



“It means the life of the party. That is you.”

“A party girl?”

“Like someone who is the heart of life.”

“And my character?”

“She is the kind of woman every man falls in love with. It was originally written for a French woman, but I have just decided tonight that if you will do it, I will fire her.”

“That’s not nice.”

“She’s not you.”

I smiled, surprised at both his charm and his eagerness.

“It is about two men who are petty thieves, and they are on the run to Switzerland when they are distracted by an incredible woman they meet on the way. The three of them go for an adventure in the mountains. I have been sitting here with my pages, trying to decide if this woman can be American. And I think she can. I think it’s more interesting that way. It is a stroke of luck. To meet you at this time. So you will do it?”

“Let me sleep on it,” I said. I knew I was going to take the part. It was the only part I could get. But you never get anywhere good by seeming amenable.

“Yes,” Max said. “Of course. You have done nudity before, yes?”

“No,” I said.

“I think you should be topless. In the film.”

If I was going to be asked to show my breasts, wouldn’t it be for a French film? And if the French were going to ask anyone, shouldn’t it be me? I knew what got me famous the first time. I knew what it could do a second time.

“Why don’t we discuss it tomorrow?” I said.

“Let’s talk tomorrow morning,” he said. “Because this other actress I have, she will show her breasts, Evelyn.”

“It’s late, Max. I’ll ring you in the morning.” And I hung up the phone.

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, considering both how beneath me this opportunity was and how lucky I was to be given it. It’s a hard business, reconciling what the truth used to be with what the truth is now. Luckily, I didn’t have to do it for very long.



Two weeks later, I was back on a film set. And this time, I was free of all the buttoned-up, innocent-girl stuff that Sunset had pinned on me. This time, I was able to do whatever I wanted.

It was clear for the entire shoot that Max wanted nothing more than to possess me himself. I could tell by the way he looked at me in stolen glances that part of my allure to Max the director was my allure to him as a man.

When Max came to my dressing room on the second-to-last day of filming, he said, “Ma belle, aujourd’hui tu seras seins nus.” I had picked up enough French by then to know he was saying he wanted to shoot my scene coming out of the lake. When you’re an American movie star with huge boobs in a French movie, you quickly learn that when French men are saying *seins nus*, they are talking about you being topless.

I was fully willing to take my top off and show my assets if that was what it took to get my name back out there. But by that point, I had fallen madly in love with a woman. I had grown to desire her with every fiber of myself. I knew the pleasure of finding delight in a woman’s naked body.

So I told Max I’d shoot it however he wanted but that I had a suggestion that might make the movie even more of a sensation.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Ruby left me there, next to the dryer, with an empty cocktail glass in my hand.

I needed to go back to the party. But I stood there, frozen, thinking, Get out of here. I just couldn't turn the doorknob. And then the door opened on its own. Celia. The raucous, bright-lit party behind her.

"Evelyn, what are you doing?"

"How did you find me?"

"I ran into Ruby, and she said I could find you drinking in the laundry room. I thought it was a euphemism."

"It wasn't."

"I can see that."

"Do you sleep with women?" I asked.

Celia, shocked, shut the door behind her. "What are you talking about?"

"Ruby says you're a lesbian."

Celia looked over my shoulder. "Who cares what Ruby says?"

"Are you?"

"Are you going to stop being friends with me now? Is that what this is about?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Of course not. I would… never do that. I would never."

"What, then?"

"I just want to know is all."

"Why?"

"Don't you think I have the right to know?"

"Depends."

"So you are?" I asked.

Celia put her hand on the doorknob and prepared to leave.

Instinctively, I leaned forward and grabbed her wrist.

“What are you doing?” she said.

I liked the feel of her wrist in my hand. I liked the way her perfume permeated the whole tiny room. I leaned forward and kissed her.

I did not know what I was doing. And by that I mean that I was not fully in control of my movement and that I was physically unaware of how to kiss her. Should it be the way I kissed men, or should it be different somehow? I also did not understand the emotional scope of my actions. I did not truly understand their significance or risk.



I was a famous woman kissing a famous woman in the house of the biggest studio head in Hollywood, surrounded by producers and stars and probably a good dozen people who ratted to Sub Rosa magazine.

But all I cared about in that moment was that her lips were soft. Her skin was without any roughness whatsoever. All I cared about was that she kissed me back, that she took her hand off the doorknob and, instead, put it on my waist.

She smelled floral, like lilac powder, and her lips felt humid. Her breath was sweet, spiked with the taste of cigarettes and crème de menthe.

When she pushed herself against me, when our chests touched and her pelvis grazed mine, all I could think was that it wasn’t so different and yet it was different entirely. She swelled in all the places Don went flat. She was flat in the places Don swelled. And yet that sense that you can feel your heart in your chest, that your body tells you it wants more, that you lose yourself in the scent, taste, and feel of another person—it was all the same.

Celia broke away first. “We can’t stay in here,” she said. She wiped her lips on the back of her hand. She took her thumb and rubbed it against the bottom of mine.

“Wait, Celia,” I said, trying to stop her.

But she left the room, shutting the door behind her.

I closed my eyes, unsure how to get a handle on myself, how to quiet my brain.

I breathed in. I opened the door and walked right up the steps, taking them two at a time.

I opened every single door on the second floor until I found who I was looking for.

Don was getting dressed, shoving the tail of his shirt into his suit pants, as a woman in

a beaded gold dress put her shoes on.

I ran out. And Don followed me.

“Let’s talk about this at home,” he said, grabbing my elbow.

I yanked it away, searching for Celia. There was no sign of her.

Harry came in through the front door, fresh-faced and looking sober. I ran up to him, leaving Don on the staircase, cornered by a tipsy producer wanting to talk to him about a melodrama.

“Where have you been all night?” I asked Harry.

He smiled. “I’m going to keep that to myself.”

“Can you take me home?”

Harry looked at me and then at Don still on the stairs. “You’re not going home with your husband?”

I shook my head.

“Does he know that?”

“If he doesn’t, he’s a moron.”

“OK,” Harry said, nodding with confidence and submission.

Whatever I wanted was what he would do.

I got into the front seat of Harry’s Chevy, and he started backing out just as Don came out of the house. He ran to my side of the car. I did not roll down the window.

“Evelyn!” he yelled.

I liked how the glass between us took the edge off his voice, how it muffled it enough to make him sound far away. I liked the control of being able to decide whether I listened to him at full volume.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It isn’t what you think.”

I stared straight ahead. “Let’s go.”

I was putting Harry in a tough spot, making him take sides. But to Harry’s credit, he didn’t bat an eyelash.

“Cameron, don’t you dare take my wife away from me!”

“Don, let’s discuss it in the morning,” Harry called through the window, and then he plowed out, into the roads of the canyon.

When we got to Sunset Boulevard and my pulse had slowed, I turned to Harry and started talking. When I told him that Don had been upstairs with a woman, he nodded as if he'd expected no less.

"Why don't you seem surprised?" I asked as we sped through the intersection of Doheny and Sunset, the very spot where the beauty of Beverly Hills started to show. The streets widened and became lined with trees, and the lawns were immaculately manicured, the sidewalks clean.

"Don has always had a penchant for women he's just met," Harry says. "I wasn't sure if you knew. Or if you cared."

"I didn't know. And I do care."

"Well, then, I'm sorry," he said, looking at me briefly before putting his eyes back on the road. "In that case, I should have told you."

"I suppose there are lots of things we don't tell each other," I said, looking out the window. There was a man walking his dog down the street.

I needed someone.

Right then, I needed a friend. Someone to tell my truths to, someone to accept me, someone to say that I was going to be OK.

"What if we really did it?" I said.

"Told each other the truth?"

"Told each other everything."

Harry looked at me. "I'd say that's a burden I don't want to put on you."

"It might be a burden for you, too," I said. "I have skeletons."

"You're Cuban, and you're a power-hungry, calculating bitch," Harry said, smiling at me. "Those secrets aren't so bad."

I threw my head back and laughed.

"And you know what I am," he said.

"I do."

"But right now, you have plausible deniability. You don't have to hear about it or see it."

Harry turned left, into the flats instead of the hills. He was taking me to his house

instead of my own. He was scared of what Don would do to me. I sort of was, too.

“Maybe I’m ready for that. To be a real friend. True blue,” I said.

“I’m not sure that’s a secret I want you to have to keep, love. It’s a sticky one.”

“I think that secret’s much more common than either of us is pretending,” I said. “I think maybe all of us have at least a little bit of that secret within us. I think I just might have that secret in me, too.”

Harry took a right and pulled into his driveway. He put the car in park and turned to me. “You’re not like me, Evelyn.”

“I might be a little,” I said. “I might be, and Celia might be, too.”

Harry turned back to the wheel, thinking. “Yes,” he said finally. “Celia might be, too.”

“You knew?”

“I suspected,” he said. “And I suspected she might have… feelings for you.”

I felt like I was the last person on earth to know what was right in front of me.

“I’m leaving Don,” I said.

Harry nodded, unsurprised. “I’m happy to hear it,” he said. “But I hope you know the full extent of what it means.”

“I know what I’m doing, Harry.” I was wrong. I didn’t know what I was doing.

“Don’s not going to take it sitting down,” Harry said. “That’s all I mean.”

“So I should continue this charade? Allow him to sleep around and hit me when he feels like it?”

“Absolutely not. You know I would never say that.”

“Then what?”

“I want you to be prepared for what you’re going to do.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I said.

“That’s fine,” Harry said. He opened his car door and got out. He came around to my side and opened my door.

“Come, Ev,” he said kindly. He put his hand out. “It’s been a long night. You need some rest.”

I suddenly felt very tired, as if once he pointed it out, I realized it had been there all along. I followed Harry to his front door.

His living room was sparse but handsome, furnished with wood and leather. The alcoves and doorways were all arched, the walls stark white. Only a single piece of art hung on the wall, a red and blue Rothko above the sofa. It occurred to me then that Harry wasn't a Hollywood producer for the paycheck. Sure, his house was nice. But there wasn't anything ostentatious about it, nothing performative. It was merely a place to sleep for him.

Harry was like me. Harry was in it for the glory. He was in it because it kept him busy, kept him important, kept him sharp.

Harry, like me, had gotten into it for the ego.

And we were both fortunate that we'd found our humanity in it, even though it appeared to be somewhat by accident.

The two of us walked up the curved stairs, and Harry set me up in his guest room. The bed had a thin mattress with a heavy wool blanket. I used a bar of soap to wash my makeup off, and Harry gently unzipped the back of my dress for me and gave me a pair of his pajamas to wear.

"I'll be just next door if you need anything," he said.

"Thank you. For everything."

Harry nodded. He turned away and then turned back to me as I was folding down the blanket. "Our interests aren't aligned, Evelyn," he said. "Yours and mine. You see that, right?"

I looked at him, trying to determine if I did see it.

"My job is to make the studio money. And if you are doing what the studio wants, then my job is to make you happy. But more than anything, Ari wants to—"

"Make Don happy."

Harry looked me in the eye. I got the point.

"OK," I said. "I see it."

Harry smiled shyly and closed the door behind him.

You'd think I'd have tossed and turned all night, worried about the future, worried about what it meant that I had kissed a woman, worried about whether I should really leave Don.

But that’s what denial is for.

The next morning, Harry drove me back to my house. I was bracing myself for a fight. But when I got there, Don was nowhere to be seen.

I knew that very moment that our marriage was over and that the decision—the one I thought was mine to make—had been made for me.



Evelyn and Me

Evelyn and Me marks the culmination of a journey I never expected to take. When I first agreed to help the legendary Evelyn Hugo with her memoirs, I couldn't have known how deeply it would affect me. Her death earlier this year, while we were still in the middle of compiling her life's story, left me with a sense of unfinished business but also a profound realization. Reflecting on the time I spent with her, I can see that it was filled with moments that were as complex and multifaceted as Evelyn herself. There were days of laughter, frustration, awe, and even admiration, but at other times, confusion and anger would take over as I questioned the person she truly was. What began as a simple memoir project turned into a profound exploration of the intricacies of her life, and more than that, it became a discovery of her deepest, most closely guarded truth.

I found myself constantly wrestling with my own perception of Evelyn. On the one hand, she was a woman who had achieved tremendous success in Hollywood, overcoming numerous obstacles to carve out a legacy that would span generations. But on the other hand, there was this layer of manipulation and deceit, a need for control that constantly worked to obscure the person underneath. It wasn't just her glamorous image that had the world captivated, but her ability to conceal parts of herself that she wasn't ready to share. She was a paradox: a brilliant, strong, and charismatic woman who knew how to win people over and achieve her desires, yet one who hid so much of her soul from the world. These conflicting aspects of her identity were something I found myself pondering often during our time together, and even now, I struggle to come to terms with them.

As I carefully read over our transcripts, reexamining the words that Evelyn spoke to me in the final weeks of her life, I began to understand the depth of the emotional and personal battles she had faced. One of the biggest revelations came when I learned

about her love for Celia St. James. For years, Evelyn had concealed the truth about her sexuality, keeping it buried under layers of fame, public scrutiny, and the pressure to conform to societal norms. But when Evelyn finally confessed her love for Celia, it was not just a personal revelation—it was a statement of freedom. She had lived most of her life hiding that love, yet it had been the truest part of her being. In sharing this truth with me, she was reclaiming a part of herself that had been silenced for far too long. This revelation made it clear that Evelyn was more than just the public persona she had crafted—she was a woman who had loved deeply and struggled with the very same fears, doubts, and societal expectations that countless others had. But her love for Celia was not just an affair—it was the cornerstone of her existence, one that had shaped everything she did, from the choices she made in her career to the way she navigated her relationships.

Evelyn wanted the world to understand the power of that love and how it had fueled her most significant decisions. And even though sharing this truth came at a high personal cost, she chose to reveal it because, to her, the act of loving Celia was both a personal and political defiance of the world's constraints. This confession was, in many ways, Evelyn's most important act of rebellion. By sharing her truth with the world, Evelyn was taking back her narrative, rewriting the rules of what it meant to love, to live, and to be free. It wasn't just about her love for Celia; it was about dismantling the walls of secrecy that had confined her for so long. Evelyn's decision to share this part of herself, to openly claim her bisexuality, was a moment of clarity and courage, one that not only allowed her to embrace her true self but also inspired countless others to do the same. It was a powerful reminder that in the face of societal expectations, there is strength in living your truth, no matter how difficult that might be.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 begins with a deeply intimate and somewhat tense conversation between Evelyn and Celia. Evelyn had always imagined that if they had a child, it would be a shared experience, one they could both raise together. When Celia, lying beside her, questions how this would work, the reality of what Evelyn wants begins to sink in. She describes her vision of raising the child together with Celia, explaining that despite the complicated logistics, she envisions a future in which they would both share the responsibility of parenting. However, Celia, unsure about her place in this new vision, starts asking difficult questions about her role in it, wondering if she can live up to the expectations that Evelyn has. At the same time, Evelyn can’t ignore the emotional pull of wanting to bring a child into the world, a desire she’s held onto despite the complexity of their situation.

As the conversation progresses, Evelyn’s heart aches as Celia admits that she has never wanted children. This revelation brings a sense of sadness and conflict to the conversation, and Evelyn is left wondering if the love they share can be enough to bridge the gap between their differing desires. Celia, her voice cracking with emotion, acknowledges the pain of knowing she cannot provide Evelyn with the one thing she longs for most. The vulnerability in Celia’s admission is palpable, and Evelyn, even though her desire to become a mother is strong, reassures Celia that her love for her is not contingent on her ability to bear a child. Evelyn insists that Celia has already given her everything she ever needed, and that her love transcends the absence of this one thing. The honesty shared between them in this moment deepens their connection, even as they navigate the complexities of their relationship.

The couple's bond, though tested, proves resilient as they discuss the need for Harry to be involved in the conception of the child. Evelyn reassures Celia that her relationship with Harry is not romantic in nature, but purely about creating life. Celia,

although clearly conflicted, begins to accept the necessity of this arrangement. She agrees to support Evelyn in her decision to have a child with Harry, despite her initial reservations about the situation. However, Celia’s internal struggle is evident as she wonders what her role will be in this new chapter. Her willingness to support Evelyn is a testament to the strength of their relationship, but also to the emotional sacrifice Celia is making. She offers a compromise, agreeing to become an “Aunt Celia” and promising to adjust to the unconventional nature of their family structure. Evelyn, recognizing the sacrifice Celia is making, reassures her that their love will remain unchanged, and that the unconventional family they are about to form will be built on mutual respect, understanding, and support.

In this chapter, the author examines the complexities of love, relationships, and parenthood. The dynamic between Evelyn and Celia shows that relationships are not always defined by traditional roles or expectations. Instead, the love they share is deeper and more complicated, built on the foundation of understanding and compromise. The chapter also underscores the importance of communication in a relationship, particularly when it comes to navigating difficult decisions. Evelyn and Celia’s story is a poignant reminder that the strongest relationships are not always those that conform to societal norms, but those that are based on trust, compassion, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. This narrative invites readers to reflect on their own relationships, the compromises they make, and the importance of staying true to their desires while respecting the desires of their partners. Ultimately, the chapter serves as a powerful reminder that love and family can take many forms, and that what matters most is the bond shared between those involved.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 unfolded on one of the most star-studded nights of Evelyn's career—at the Oscars, a place where all her hard work, her sacrifice, and her brilliance were supposed to be crowned with the golden statue that had eluded her for so long. Yet, despite her stunning black beaded dress and the anticipation of recognition, Evelyn's journey that night was more about a return to the past than stepping into the future. Her attire, though captivating, reflected the intricate nature of her career and life, a mix of elegance and personal significance, as the black beads sparkled under the lights. The dress, with slits that reached her mid-thigh, became an emblem not just of her beauty but of the confidence that she wore alongside her reputation.

It wasn't just the dress or the Oscar nomination that defined the night, however; it was the presence of Celia, her former lover, now a competitor in the same category. The air between them was thick with unresolved history, every glance a silent conversation, every moment a chance for what might have been—or still could be. Both women, powerful and accomplished in their own right, shared an undeniable connection that was more complicated than the public was ever allowed to see. The Oscars, a night meant to celebrate accomplishments, turned into a moment of reflection for Evelyn—who was now standing on the precipice of something deeper than just a chance at an award. As much as she longed for the recognition, what she truly yearned for was peace in her heart, to reconcile with the parts of herself that had long been hidden away for the sake of fame and love.

The night was about much more than the physical accolades; it was about navigating relationships that were both emotionally charged and professionally significant. The reunion with Celia, their silent acknowledgment of one another, spoke volumes in the midst of a public spectacle. It was a moment where everything Evelyn had worked for, everything she had sacrificed, seemed to culminate not in an award but in the quiet

moments of reconnection and pain. Their unspoken words seemed to carry the weight of the years, the choices that had led them down separate paths yet somehow brought them back to the same space, sharing this night filled with recognition that neither woman could fully claim.

For Evelyn, this chapter wasn't about the loss of the Oscar—it was about the emotional loss and gain that comes from living in the public eye. The lingering presence of Celia, the weight of what could have been, was far more significant to Evelyn than the award she didn't win. It reflected a deeper truth about her—her need to be seen, not just as a beautiful woman but as someone who had made choices in the pursuit of both love and personal achievement. That night, amidst the lights and the crowd, Evelyn confronted the choices she had made, realizing that winning an Oscar might not have been as important as coming to terms with the cost of her personal happiness. The reflection on this deeper, more painful loss brought her clarity, reminding her that fame and success are often traded for the things that really matter—real, unfiltered love and acceptance, both of herself and others.

As Evelyn continued to grapple with her emotions and her past, she began to recognize that true fulfillment couldn't be measured by a golden statue or the accolades of the world. Instead, it was found in understanding who she had become and in finally embracing the woman she was beneath the glitter and glamour. For Evelyn, this chapter wasn't just about what happened at the Oscars—it was about the quiet revelations that came in the aftermath, the realization that despite all her public achievements, she had to make peace with herself and with the people she loved. In doing so, she could finally step into the next chapter of her life, not defined by the awards she won, but by the love and authenticity she had the courage to reclaim.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 begins in Evelyn's foyer, where she and the narrator prepare for the next stage of their journey together. Evelyn, ever the enigma, is calm and poised, while the narrator is caught in a whirlwind of emotions, grappling with how to balance personal ambition with the task ahead. The idea of this project, writing Evelyn’s biography, feels both thrilling and daunting. The narrator knows the importance of what they are about to undertake—capturing the life of a woman who has lived in the spotlight for decades, yet behind that public persona lies a story that’s been hidden, until now. This is their chance to unearth those truths, but it comes with its own set of challenges, as Evelyn is not the easiest person to read.

As the narrator takes a moment to gather themselves, they are reminded of their past, the memories of their family and the lessons they’ve learned. A specific memory stands out—the narrator’s father teaching them how to breathe through moments of discomfort. The memory of those simple yet meaningful moments is etched in the narrator’s mind. It serves as a reminder of the strength found in those seemingly ordinary interactions that shaped their character. These memories are a stark contrast to the complicated, often chaotic present that the narrator is facing now, trying to navigate the delicate balance of their professional and personal life.

The narrator then dials Frankie, a colleague who is likely waiting for updates, though the conversation quickly reveals a divide between them. Frankie is eager for results, asking if Evelyn will be willing to discuss more than just the superficial topics of her life, particularly the details about her gowns. But the narrator, knowing the fragile nature of their relationship with Evelyn, plays the part, promising that everything is progressing. The line between what’s real and what’s expected is becoming increasingly blurry. The narrator understands the stakes involved—they must keep Evelyn's trust if they are to get closer to the truth, but it also requires careful

maneuvering and, sometimes, bending the truth. This interaction highlights the pressure mounting on the narrator to deliver what is expected while dealing with the complexities of their subject.

The scene shifts as the narrator follows Grace through the house, ultimately reaching Evelyn's study—a space that reflects Evelyn’s personal tastes and serves as the backdrop for some of their most important conversations. The study, with its muted colors and elegant furniture, feels like a sanctuary, a place where Evelyn can control the narrative of her life. This setting contrasts with the stark vulnerability Evelyn exhibits in their conversation. As Evelyn begins to recount her past, the narrative takes on a more personal and poignant tone. She speaks about her childhood with a frankness that is unexpected. She reveals the raw truth of her upbringing, the struggles with her father, and the emotional scars that shaped her.

Evelyn’s story is filled with moments of stark clarity, like when she recalls her mother’s death and how it shook her world. It’s a painful memory, one that Evelyn hasn’t fully confronted until now. The complexity of Evelyn’s relationship with her parents, particularly her father, comes through as she recounts the difficult circumstances of her early life. As Evelyn reveals more, the narrator starts to see a clearer picture of the woman behind the public image. The strength Evelyn exudes is tempered by the vulnerability she allows only a select few to see. It’s in these moments that Evelyn becomes more than just a famous actress; she is a woman who has fought for everything she has.

As Evelyn opens up about her past, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of the weight of their responsibility in telling this story. They are not just transcribing words—they are piecing together the intricate puzzle of a life that has been carefully curated for public consumption. Evelyn’s honesty, however, is the key to unlocking the truth, and the narrator is determined to help her find that release. But with every revelation comes a new layer of complexity. Evelyn’s journey is one of triumph, heartbreak, and the quest for self-identity, and the narrator knows that telling it will require more than just facts—it will require understanding, empathy, and trust.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with Monique fully committing herself to the task of researching Evelyn Hugo, a woman whose legendary status in Hollywood has been shrouded in mystery and rumors. Although Monique had never been drawn to classic cinema or the stars that defined it, she is quickly captivated by Evelyn’s life. What started as a simple assignment soon turns into a deep dive into Evelyn's tumultuous past—her early marriage at just eighteen, the allegations of abuse from her marriage to Don Adler, and the famous love affair with Harry Cameron. With each layer that Monique uncovers, she realizes how much more there is to Evelyn's life than anyone outside the industry could have imagined. Evelyn’s world seems full of passion, betrayal, scandal, and the relentless pursuit of fame—a combination of elements that gives the impression of a life lived under constant public scrutiny.

Monique, who had been working late into the evening, finally arrives home well after dark. She walks into her tiny, almost claustrophobic apartment—a space that now feels even smaller and emptier in the wake of her breakup with David. It’s been five weeks since he left, and she still hasn’t quite figured out how to deal with the lingering gaps he left behind, like the coffee table that once held sentimental value. The sadness of it all hits her in waves—wondering if David left because of the new job in San Francisco or if it was her refusal to join him that really made him go. It stings to think that, no matter the reasoning, he’s gone. Despite her best efforts to push the painful thoughts away, she finds herself drifting back to the same nagging conclusion: David chose to leave, and the weight of that decision continues to haunt her.

Trying to shake off these emotions, Monique goes through her familiar routine. After ordering her favorite comfort food, pad Thai, she escapes into the shower. The hot water, almost scalding, becomes a refuge from the rest of her chaotic life, where the simple action of washing away the day provides her with a brief sense of control and

peace. For a moment, she isn't Monique Grant, the woman left behind by her husband. She isn’t a stalled writer waiting for something—anything—to change. She is just a woman in her shower, indulging in the pleasure of warm water and the scent of her shampoo, a small solace amidst her overwhelming circumstances.

Over the following days, Monique devotes herself entirely to researching Evelyn Hugo. She spends hours reading old articles about Evelyn’s marriages and controversial love affairs, becoming increasingly absorbed in the actress’s life. The nights are filled with old movie clips, from Evelyn’s roles in Carolina Sunset and Anna Karenina to her iconic appearance in Boute-en-Train, which Monique watches so often that it replays in her dreams. With each film, Monique's admiration for Evelyn grows; she begins to appreciate the depth and strength in the characters Evelyn portrayed on screen. Through these late-night film marathons, Monique starts to see Evelyn not just as a Hollywood icon, but as a woman whose life, filled with ups and downs, could teach her a thing or two about resilience and reinvention.

As Monique watches Evelyn in one of her most famous roles, she is captivated not just by the actress's beauty, but by the presence Evelyn commands in each scene. The photos she pins to her wall only reinforce this image of an almost otherworldly beauty—sharp features, high cheekbones, and a jawline that seems made for the screen. What strikes Monique most is how timeless Evelyn’s looks are, despite the aging process she’s gone through. There’s a grace in her appearance, enhanced by the images that capture her over the years—from the early 1950s to the later decades, Evelyn’s beauty evolves but remains undeniably striking. As Monique pours over these images, it becomes clear that Evelyn was not just a figurehead in Hollywood; she was a woman who carved out her place in the industry through sheer force of will, using her looks, talent, and cunning to ensure her longevity in the public eye. Each photo, each film clip, further pulls Monique into Evelyn’s world, sparking a curiosity about the woman behind the roles and the facade. The more Monique learns, the more she realizes the story she is about to write may not just be about Evelyn’s public persona, but about the raw, untold truth of a life lived in the spotlight.

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finished it, you were mere days away from making your entrance. You were with me every step of the way.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 starts with an intimate and rather unexpected gesture from Don. On the morning of the first day of rehearsals for *Little Women*, he wakes the protagonist with breakfast in bed—half a grapefruit and a lit cigarette. The simplicity and the thoughtfulness of this gesture make the protagonist feel special, and as Don leaves for the day, he offers words of encouragement, mentioning that today she would show Celia St. James what it truly means to be an actress. The protagonist, feeling both cared for and supported, eats the grapefruit with a smile before moving on with her morning routine. She leaves the tray in bed and heads for the shower, already mentally preparing for the work ahead.

When she exits the shower, the protagonist finds her maid, Paula, already cleaning up the room. Paula is quietly picking up the remains of the cigarette, a reminder of the protagonist’s chaotic, untidy lifestyle. The protagonist is not particularly neat, as evidenced by the scattered clothes, slippers, and towel in the room. Paula, who clearly disapproves of the disorder, has her work cut out for her. The protagonist, in a hurry to get dressed for the set, asks Paula to leave her alone for a moment. Although not truly in a rush, she doesn't want Paula to witness her dressing, especially because of the bruise on her ribs. The bruise is a painful reminder of an incident nine days earlier when Don pushed her down the stairs. Though the protagonist feels a need to defend Don, the reality of the situation remains difficult to deny.

The protagonist, still processing the incident, reflects on the circumstances leading up to her injury. The push was not as severe as it may sound, she tries to convince herself, but the truth is, it caused a painful fall. When she landed, the handle of a drawer had hit her rib cage, leaving a bruise that was slow to heal. Even though Don seemed concerned after the incident, his words felt hollow—his nonchalance in asking if she was alright was jarring. The protagonist, feeling emotionally conflicted, had

convinced herself that she was fine, though the bruising told a different story. When Paula reenters the room moments later, the protagonist's frustration peaks. She had asked Paula to leave, but the intrusion felt even more unbearable because of the personal nature of the pain she was enduring. She felt betrayed by the maid for not reporting Don's actions, especially since Paula seemed intent on focusing on her own story rather than the troubling situation that had taken place.

Two hours later, the protagonist arrives on the set of *Little Women*, where the set has been transformed into a New England cabin complete with snow-covered windows. As she walks in, she is reminded that work must go on despite personal difficulties. Ruby, her co-star, is there, and the two of them quickly bond over their shared resentment of Celia St. James. The newcomer, despite her charm and apparent innocence, is an unwelcome presence for Ruby and the protagonist. Both women see Celia as a threat to their roles in the film, especially considering how the audience tends to favor the actress playing Beth, given the emotional weight of the character. The industry, as they know it, is cutthroat, and no one truly believes that a rising tide lifts all boats—it's a matter of competition, and there's no room for anyone else to overshadow their performances.

When Celia approaches Ruby and the protagonist, she exudes a childlike vulnerability that feels out of place among the competitive nature of their environment. Her soft, girl-next-door appearance—complete with big, innocent blue eyes and long, flowing strawberry-red hair—strikes the protagonist as almost too perfect, too simple. While Celia is the epitome of a fresh, unblemished beauty, the protagonist feels like the type of beauty that is unattainable for most women—a beauty that is difficult to replicate and sets her apart. Men may admire Celia's looks, but for women like the protagonist, there's a sense of isolation in being perceived as something unattainable. The contrast between their looks and personalities reveals the tensions that already exist beneath the surface of their professional relationship. For the protagonist, Celia's entry into their tight-knit world only complicates things further, making the desire to prove herself even stronger.

This chapter encapsulates the tension that can arise on set when personal lives are mixed with professional ambitions. The protagonist’s feelings of isolation are underscored by the way Celia’s innocence contrasts with her own hardened persona, honed by years in the industry. The bruises she carries, both physically and emotionally, are part of her internal struggle to reconcile the demands of fame with the reality of her personal life. The women around her, particularly Ruby and Celia, represent different facets of her Hollywood experience: competition, camaraderie, and the potential for both friendship and rivalry. As the protagonist navigates this complex environment, she’s reminded that while beauty and talent are vital, it’s often the relationships behind the scenes that define success in Hollywood. Through her interactions with others, she learns more about herself—how much she’s willing to sacrifice, what she’s willing to endure, and how she can use her experiences to further her career. The challenge, however, is in maintaining her sense of self while climbing the ladder of success.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Ari dropped me from any productions within Sunset and started offering to loan me out to Columbia. After being forced to do two forgettable romantic comedies—both of them so bad that it was a foregone conclusion they would fail spectacularly—the other studios didn't want much of me, either.

Don was on the cover of *Life*, gracefully coming out of the ocean onto the shore, smiling as if it was the best day of his life.

When the 1960 Academy Awards came around, I was officially persona non grata.

"You know that I would take you," Harry said when he called that afternoon to check in on me. "You just say the word, and I'll come pick you up. I'm sure you have a stunning dress you can slip on, and I'll be the envy of everybody with you on my arm."

I was at Celia's apartment, getting ready to leave before her hair and makeup people came over. She was in the kitchen, drinking lemon water, avoiding eating anything so she could fit into her dress.

"I know you would," I said into the phone. "But you and I both know it would only hurt your reputation to be aligned with me right now."

"I do mean it, though," Harry said.

"I know you do," I said. "But you also know I'm too smart to take you up on it."

Harry laughed.

"Do my eyes look puffy?" Celia asked when I got off the phone with Harry. She opened them bigger and stared at me, as if this would help me answer the question.

I saw barely anything out of the ordinary. "They look gorgeous. And anyway, you know Gwen will make you look fabulous. What are you worried about?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Evelyn," Celia said, teasing me. "I think we all know what I'm worried about."

I took her by the waist. She was wearing a thin satin slip, edged in lace. I was wearing a short-sleeved sweater and shorts. Her hair was wet. When Celia's hair was wet, she didn't smell like shampoo. She smelled like clay.

"You're going to win," I said, pulling her toward me. "It isn't even a contest."

"I might not. They might give it to Joy or to Ellen Mattson."

"They would no sooner give it to Ellen Mattson than throw it in the L.A. River. And Joy, bless her heart, is no you."

Celia blushed, put her head in her hands briefly, and then looked back at me. "Am I intolerable?" she said. "Obsessing over this? Making you talk to me about it? When you're . . ."

"On the skids?"

"I was going to say blackballed."

"If you are intolerable, let me be the one to tolerate you," I said, and then I kissed her and tasted the lemon juice on her lips.

I checked my watch, knowing that hair and makeup would be there any moment, and grabbed my keys.

She and I had been taking great pains not to be seen together. It was one thing when we really were just friends, but now that we had something to hide, we had to start hiding it.

"I love you," I said. "I believe in you. Break a leg."

When my hand turned the doorknob, she called to me. "If I don't win," she said, her wet hair dripping onto the spaghetti straps of her slip, "will you still love me?"

I thought she was joking until I looked directly into her eyes.

"You could be a nobody living in a cardboard box, and I'd still love you," I said. I'd never said that before. I'd never meant it before.

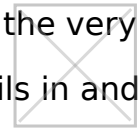
Celia smiled wide. "Me too. The cardboard box and all of it."

Hours later, back at the home I used to share with Don but now could say was entirely my own, I made myself a Cape Codder, sat on the couch, and tuned the TV to NBC, watching all my friends and the woman I loved walk the red carpet at the

Pantages Theatre.

It all seems much more glamorous on-screen. I hate to break it to you, but in person, the theater is smaller, the people are paler, and the stage is less imposing.

It's all curated to make the audience at home feel like outsiders, to make you feel like a fly on the wall of a club you aren't good enough to get into. And I was surprised by how effective it was on me, how easy it was to fall for, even for a person who had just recently been at the very center of it.



I was two cocktails in and drowning in self-pity by the time they announced Best Supporting Actress. But the minute the camera panned to Celia, I swear I sobered up and clasped my hands together as tightly as possible for her, as if the harder I pressed them together, the higher her chances of winning.

"And the award goes to . . . Celia St. James for *Little Women*."

I jumped up out of my seat and shouted for her. And then my eyes got teary as she walked up to the stage.

As she stood there, behind the microphone, holding the statuette, I was mesmerized by her. By her fabulous boatneck dress, her sparkling diamond and sapphire earrings, and that absolutely flawless face of hers.

"Thank you to Ari Sullivan and Harry Cameron. Thank you to my agent, Roger Colton. To my family. And to the amazing cast of women that I felt so lucky to be a part of, to Joy and Ruby. And to Evelyn Hugo. Thank you."

When she said my name, I swelled with pride and joy and love. I was so goddamn happy for her. And then I did something mortifyingly inane. I kissed the television set. I kissed her right on her grayscale face.

The clink I heard registered before the pain. And as Celia waved to the crowd and then stepped away from the podium, I realized I'd chipped my tooth.

But I didn't care. I was too happy. Too excited to congratulate her and tell her how proud I was.

I made another cocktail and forced myself to watch the rest of the spectacle. They announced Best Picture, and as the credits rolled, I turned off the TV.

I knew that Harry and Celia would be out all night. So I shut off the lights and went

upstairs to bed. I took off my makeup. I put on cold cream. I turned down the covers. I was lonely, living all alone.

Celia and I had discussed it and come to the conclusion that we could not move in together. She was less convinced of this than I was, but I was steadfast in my resolve. Even though my career was in the gutter, hers was thriving. I couldn't let her risk it. Not for me.

My head was on the pillow, but my eyes were wide open when I heard someone pull into the driveway. I looked out the window to see Celia slipping out of a car and waving good night to her driver. She had an Oscar in her hand.

"You look comfortable," Celia said, once she'd made her way to me in the bedroom.

"Come here," I said to her.

She'd had a glass or three. I loved her drunk. She was herself but happier, so bubbly I sometimes worried she'd float away.

She took a running start and hopped into the bed. I kissed her.

"I'm so proud of you, darling."

"I missed you all night," she said. The Oscar was still in her hand, and I could tell it was heavy; she kept allowing it to tip over onto the mattress. The space for her name was blank.

"I don't know if I was supposed to take this one," she said, smiling. "But I didn't want to give it back."

"Why aren't you out celebrating? You should be at the Sunset party."

"I only wanted to celebrate with you."

I pulled her closer to me. She kicked off her shoes.

"Nothing means anything without you," she said. "Everything that isn't you is a pile of dog shit."

I tossed my head back and laughed.

"What happened to your tooth?" Celia asked.

"Is it that noticeable?"

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 stretched on into the early hours, and I could hardly break free from the captivating grip of Evelyn's story. As I listened to her talk—her voice weaving through moments of triumph, regret, and raw honesty—I found myself less concerned about my own life. In fact, I relished the distraction; being wrapped up in the intensity of her past and the complications she carried meant that I didn't have to confront the dull reality of my own. Her words became a temporary refuge, a safe place from the routine and expectations that loomed in my personal world.

The clock in my room ticked relentlessly past three in the morning, signaling the hours of deep conversation I’d spent in an emotional whirlpool. It was that strange feeling of exhaustion mixed with a sense of satisfaction—like a runner who had crossed the finish line but couldn't yet rest. As I crawled into bed, the buzz of caffeine still lingering in my veins, I thought about how night had shifted into morning and how Evelyn’s life, so vividly laid out before me, had somehow become a temporary sanctuary for my own thoughts. I felt as though I had lived through someone else’s history, learned from it, and perhaps—although I didn't want to admit it—found solace in her struggles.

I tried to focus on sleep, to push the thought of Evelyn’s emotional baggage out of my mind and embrace the quiet. But the more I tried, the harder it became to shut out the thoughts racing through me. Sleep, it seemed, was always more elusive when you needed it the most. It was as though her story had seeped into my own life, filling up the empty spaces, making my personal concerns feel small and insignificant. Eventually, my body gave in, and I drifted into an uneasy slumber, but the weight of the evening still lingered on my thoughts.

The ringing of my phone brought me back to the present, and I could feel the weight of exhaustion still hanging over me as I glanced at the screen. It was my mother—her

cheerful face on the caller ID, the same warmth that always filled her voice when we spoke. But today, her timing couldn't have been worse, and as she greeted me like it was a perfectly normal hour for a chat, I tried to shake off the fog of sleep. The phone call wasn’t an emergency, just a routine check-in, but I couldn't help but wish I had a little more time to adjust to the emotional weight of my night before diving back into normal conversations.

As we talked, she casually mentioned an earthquake back home, her words, for some reason, grounding me in a different way. It was as if the upheaval I felt inside wasn’t just mine, but a reflection of the world at large. She asked me about Evelyn and how things were going, her curiosity unburdened by the complexities of the situation. I found myself recounting the night’s events, including Frankie’s agreement for the promotion and the unexpected success of convincing Evelyn to agree to the cover story. My mother’s voice was warm and supportive, but her lightheartedness didn’t quite match the gravity of what I had been dealing with, and I couldn't quite shake the feeling that I was playing a part in a much larger, more chaotic narrative.

My mind kept drifting back to Evelyn, to the complex dynamics of power and vulnerability that we had navigated in our conversation. How could one woman’s life be so full of contradictions and yet so impactful? As I described my work with Evelyn to my mother, I started to understand that my own life was beginning to mirror that very contradiction—a life that balanced between public appearances and private struggles. Every decision I made, every choice I took in this chaotic dance with Evelyn, was now influencing my own story in ways I had not expected.

Despite the tension of balancing personal ambition with emotional investment, I realized that helping Evelyn, hearing her stories, and aligning with her world was more than just a professional endeavor for me. It had become personal, intertwined with my own desires and fears. And yet, at the same time, I still had to walk the fine line between offering support and retaining my own sense of self. It was a delicate balance—one I wasn’t entirely sure how to manage yet, but something I was beginning to accept as part of the larger journey. As my mother’s voice trailed off, I found myself

grateful for the clarity I had gained through Evelyn’s narrative, even if it was a road filled with potholes and detours.

I had to learn how to juggle these conflicting emotions, how to support Evelyn while not losing myself in her whirlwind. As I put the phone down and tried to settle into my thoughts, I couldn’t help but feel that the next chapter of my own life was already unfolding in unexpected ways, shaped by my encounters with those who had walked through the fire before me. And as my day began, I couldn't escape the thought that Evelyn's story wasn't just hers anymore—it was beginning to intertwine with my own.

Reading Group Guide

Readers Club Guide: The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

This reading group guide for *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

Aging and reclusive Hollywood movie icon Evelyn Hugo is finally ready to tell the truth about her glamorous and scandalous life. But when she chooses unknown magazine reporter Monique Grant for the job, no one in the journalism community is more astounded than Monique herself. Why her? Why now?

Monique is not exactly on top of the world. Her husband, David, has left her, and her career has stagnated. Regardless of why Evelyn has chosen her to write her biography, Monique is determined to use this opportunity to jump-start her career.

Summoned to Evelyn’s Upper East Side apartment, Monique listens as Evelyn unfurls her story: from making her way to Los Angeles in the 1950s to her decision to leave show business in the late ’80s, and, of course, the seven husbands along the way. As Evelyn’s life unfolds—revealing a ruthless ambition, an unexpected friendship, and a great forbidden love—Monique begins to feel a very real connection to the actress. But as Evelyn’s story catches up with the present, it becomes clear that her life intersects with Monique’s own in tragic and irreversible ways.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Each husband’s section opens with an illustrative moniker (for example, “Poor Ernie Diaz,” “Goddamn Don Adler,” “Agreeable Robert Jamison”). Discuss the meaning and significance of some of these descriptions. How do they set the tone for the section that follows? Did you read these characterizations as coming from Evelyn, Monique, an omniscient narrator, or someone else?

2. Of the seven husbands, who was your favorite, and why? Who surprised you the most?



3. Monique notes that hearing Evelyn Hugo’s life story has inspired her to carry herself differently than she would have before. In what ways does Monique grow over the course of the novel? Discuss whether Evelyn also changes by the end of her time with Monique, and if so, what spurs this evolution.

4. On page 147, Monique says, "I have to 'Evelyn Hugo' Evelyn Hugo." What does it mean to "Evelyn Hugo"? Can you think of a time when you might be tempted to "Evelyn Hugo"?

5. Did you trust Evelyn to be a reliable narrator as you were reading? Why, or why not? Did your opinion on this change at all by the conclusion, and if so, why?

6. What role do the news, tabloid, and blog articles interspersed throughout the book serve in the narrative? What, if anything, do we learn about Evelyn’s relationship to the outside world from them?

7. At several points in the novel, such as pages 82–83 and 175–82, Evelyn tells her story through the second person, “you.” How does this kind of narration affect the reading experience? Why do you think she chooses these memories to recount in this way?

8. How do you think Evelyn’s understanding and awareness of sexuality were shaped by her relationship with Billy—the boy who works at the five-and-dime store? How does her sensibility evolve from this initial encounter? As she grows older, to what extent is Evelyn’s attitude toward sex influenced by those around her?

9. On page 54, Evelyn uses the saying “all’s well that ends well” as part of her explanation for not regretting her actions. Do you think Evelyn truly believes this? Using examples from later in her life, discuss why or why not. How do you think this idea relates to the similar but more negatively associated phrase “the ends justify the means”?

10. Evelyn offers some firm words of wisdom throughout her recounting of her life, such as “Be wary of men with something to prove” (p. 77), “Never let anyone make you feel ordinary” (p. 208), and “It is OK to grovel for something you really want” (p. 192). What is your favorite piece of advice from Evelyn? Were there any assertions you strongly disagreed with?

11. Several times, Evelyn mentions having cosmetic surgery. What was your reaction to this? How do these decisions jibe with the value system and ethical code that she seems to live by? Why do you think Evelyn continues to dye her hair at the end of her life?

12. Review the scenes on pages 199 and 348, in which Evelyn relays memories of conversing in Spanish after years without speaking it. Discuss the role language plays in her understanding of who she is. In what ways does her relationship to her Cuban identity parallel her experiences with her sexuality, and in what ways does it differ?

13. If you could meet and interview one celebrity at the end of their...

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

I was sent an invitation to see Mick Riva perform at the Hollywood Bowl that fall. I decided to go, not because I cared about seeing Mick Riva but because an evening outside sounded fun. And I wasn't above courting the tabloids.

Celia, Harry, and I decided to go together. I would never have gone with just Celia, not with that many eyes on us. But Harry was a perfect buffer.

That night, the air in L.A. was cooler than I had anticipated. I was wearing capri pants and a short-sleeved sweater. I had just gotten bangs and had started sweeping them to the side. Celia had on a blue shift dress and flats. Harry, dapper as ever, was wearing slacks and a short-sleeved oxford shirt. He held a camel-colored knit cardigan with oversized buttons in his hand, ready for any of us who were too cold.

We sat in the second row with a couple of Harry's producer friends from Paramount. Across the aisle, I saw Ed Baker with a young woman who appeared as if she could be his daughter, but I knew better. I decided not to say hi, not only because he was still a part of the Sunset machine but also because I never liked him.

Mick Riva took the stage, and the women in the crowd started cheering so loudly that Celia actually put her hands over her ears. He was wearing a dark suit with a loose tie. His jet-black hair was combed back but just slightly disheveled. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd had a drink or two backstage. But it didn't seem to slow him down in the slightest.

"I don't get it," Celia said to me as she leaned in to my ear. "What do they see in this guy?"

I shrugged. "That he's handsome, I suppose."

Mick walked up to the microphone, the spotlight following him. He grabbed the mic stand with both passion and softness, as if it were one of the many girls yelling his name.

“And he knows what he’s doing,” I said.

Celia shrugged. “I’d take Brick Thomas over him any day.”

I shook my head, cringing. “No, Brick Thomas is a heel. Trust me. If you met him, within five seconds, you’d be gagging.”

Celia laughed. “I think he’s cute.”

“No, you don’t,” I said.

“Well, I think he’s cuter than Mick Riva,” she said. “Harry? Thoughts?”

Harry leaned in from the other side. He whispered so softly I almost didn’t hear him. “I’m embarrassed to admit I have something in common with these shrieking girls,” he said. “I would not kick Mick out of bed for eating crackers.”

Celia laughed.

“You are too much,” I said as I watched Mick walk from one end of the stage to the other, crooning and smoldering. “Where are we eating after this?” I asked them both. “That’s the real question.”

“Don’t we have to go backstage?” Celia asked. “Isn’t that the polite thing to do?”

Mick’s first song ended, and everyone started clapping and cheering. Harry leaned over me as he clapped so Celia could hear him.

“You won an Oscar, Celia,” he said. “You can do whatever the hell you want.”

She threw her head back and laughed as she clapped. “Well, then I want to go get a steak.”

“Steak it is,” I said.

I don’t know whether it was the laughing or the cheering or the clapping. There was so much noise around me, so much chaos from the crowd. But for one fleeting moment, I forgot myself. I forgot where I was. I forgot who I was. I forgot who I was with.

And I grabbed Celia’s hand and held it.

She looked down, surprised. I could feel Harry’s gaze on our hands, too.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with a vivid scene that immediately sets the tone for the deeply personal and intimate nature of the conversation that is about to take place. The sunlight streams into Evelyn’s study, bathing the room in warmth and light, yet it casts a shadow over part of Evelyn’s face, as if to symbolize the complexity of the woman sitting there. She has always been a figure shrouded in mystery, and this physical contrast mirrors the emotional distance she maintains from the world. The moment is charged with anticipation; the narrator realizes that this is no ordinary conversation—it’s the beginning of a significant moment in Evelyn’s life and the start of their collaboration. It’s not just a story Evelyn is about to tell; it’s her life, her truth, the parts of herself that have been hidden away for so long.

As the narrator settles in, taking their seat next to Evelyn, the scene takes on an almost cinematic quality. The placement of their bodies seems to suggest an imbalance in power—Evelyn’s presence is commanding, as she sits comfortably on the couch, while the narrator, seated at her desk, has a somewhat more passive role. There’s an underlying tension, a question of who holds the real power in this relationship. Evelyn has always controlled her public persona, but now, as the biographer, the narrator holds the keys to unlocking her story. The struggle for dominance is subtle, but it’s present, adding an additional layer of intrigue to their interaction. Evelyn’s ability to truly be open and honest is in question—will she finally let go of the carefully curated version of herself that she’s lived with for so long?

When Evelyn speaks, the air seems to shift. She reveals something deeply vulnerable—she is no longer protecting the people she once cared for, as they are all gone, and there is no one left to shield her from the truth. This is a powerful moment, not just for Evelyn, but for the reader as well. For the first time, she acknowledges the weight of the façade she has carried for so many years. In saying that there is no one

left to lie for but herself, she is, in effect, giving herself permission to be real. It’s a monumental shift, one that will allow her to face her past and, perhaps, begin the process of healing from the parts of her life that have been hidden for so long. The desire to reveal her true self is palpable, and in this moment, Evelyn is no longer the untouchable star; she is a woman who is ready to confront the truth about herself.

The narrator, sensing the shift in Evelyn’s demeanor, offers her a chance to truly open up. “Show me the real you, then. And I’ll make sure the world understands,” the narrator says. It’s not just an invitation; it’s a promise. The narrator, who has been waiting for this moment, is ready to help Evelyn reclaim her story, to give her the space to tell it on her own terms. There is an implicit trust between the two of them now, a shared understanding that what Evelyn is about to reveal is not just for her own sake but for the world to see. This is no longer just an interview—it’s a partnership between two people who have recognized the weight of the moment and the importance of what’s about to unfold.

Evelyn, in return, smiles, a brief but telling gesture that shows she has heard what she needed to hear. She is ready. The real Evelyn, the woman behind the glamorous, carefully constructed façade, is about to emerge. And for the first time in her life, she might be willing to trust someone with the truth—her truth. This shift, this willingness to be vulnerable, marks the beginning of something transformative. The narrator has opened the door for Evelyn to step into her real self, and the world is about to get a glimpse of the woman who has spent years hiding behind the image she’s crafted. It’s a moment of reckoning, not just for Evelyn, but for the reader who has been invited into the private world of a woman who has spent her life perfecting a mask.

As the story begins to unfold, the reader can sense that this is just the beginning of a journey into the heart of Evelyn’s past. She is ready to expose the truths that have shaped her, the lies she’s lived with, and the reasons behind her decisions. This conversation is the catalyst, the spark that will set off a series of revelations, each one peeling back another layer of the complex woman who has lived in the spotlight for so long. The narrator, no longer just a passive observer, is now an active participant in

the retelling of Evelyn’s life. Together, they are about to reshape the story of a woman who has always been more than she let on—a woman who has been hiding her true self from the world for far too long.



Chapter 61

Chapter 61 follows Evelyn as she navigates the intense grief that accompanies the loss of her close friend Celia. The funeral takes place in the quiet confines of Forest Lawn in Los Angeles, a location that holds a multitude of memories for Evelyn and those who were closest to Celia. The ceremony is private, away from the prying eyes of the public, but despite the desire for intimacy, word gets out that Evelyn is there. The weight of Celia's passing is palpable, and Evelyn, though surrounded by Robert and Connor, feels a deep sense of isolation as the reality of the situation begins to sink in. She cannot hide her emotions; the grief is overwhelming, and it's clear that she is not only mourning Celia's death but also the end of an era in her own life.

As Celia's casket is lowered into the ground, Evelyn's heart feels heavy, and she cannot hold back her tears any longer. The gleaming wood of the casket, the image of Celia being buried, hits her like a wave, and the need to retreat becomes immediate. She steps away from the crowd, leaving Robert and Connor behind, and begins to walk up the winding cemetery roads, trying to find a moment of solitude to process the grief she's holding inside. It's during this walk that she finds herself at the grave of her long-lost friend Harry Cameron. Harry, the man who had been a constant presence in her life and had supported her in more ways than she could count, became the place where Evelyn could let her emotions spill out. She sits by his tombstone, feeling as if the years of pain and loss she has accumulated are finally being released. She doesn't speak, for words seem inadequate after all the silent conversations she's shared with him in her heart over the years. Her grief doesn't need articulation; it only needs an outlet, and Harry's grave offers her that moment of solace. In the solitude of his resting place, Evelyn feels both comforted and empty, as though she is momentarily healed but also reminded of the deep void left by Celia's passing.

As she stands up from Harry’s grave, Evelyn brushes off her skirt, ready to rejoin the world she left behind. However, as she stands, she notices the two paparazzi photographers who have been hiding in the trees, snapping photos of her moment of vulnerability. But Evelyn feels no rage, no sense of humiliation. Instead, she feels indifferent. The media’s obsession with her life, with every private moment she tries to keep to herself, no longer holds any power over her. At this point in her life, she understands that the media’s gaze is relentless, and it takes too much energy to care about it. She walks away, her mind more focused on what she needs to process personally than on what others think or say. The photographers may have captured a fleeting moment of her sorrow, but Evelyn knows that her pain is hers alone to carry, and no photo can truly capture the depth of what she’s experiencing.

Two weeks later, Evelyn is back at her home in Aldiz with Robert, trying to recover from the emotional weight of the funeral and the loss of Celia. But then, a magazine arrives in the mail. It’s an issue featuring a photograph of Evelyn at Harry’s grave, a candid image that had been taken without her consent. Along with the magazine, her daughter Connor has included a note. The note, brief but deeply meaningful, simply reads, “I love you.” The words are simple, yet they carry so much weight for Evelyn. In the midst of the overwhelming grief and the noise of the world, it is this gesture from her daughter that stands out. The paparazzi may have captured her grief on film, but it is her daughter’s quiet love and understanding that truly provides Evelyn with the comfort she needs. Connor’s note, though small, is a reminder that, no matter what the outside world sees, the true love and support that Evelyn needs is within her family. And that is the love that will carry her through the hardest of times.

About the Author

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TAYLOR JENKINS REID lives in Los Angeles and is the acclaimed author of *One True Loves*, *Maybe in Another Life*, *After I Do*, and *Forever, Interrupted*. Her novels have been named best books of summer by People, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, InStyle, Good Housekeeping, USA Today, Us Weekly, Parade, PopSugar, BuzzFeed, Bustle, Brit + Co, Goodreads, and others. To learn more, visit TaylorJenkinsReid.com.

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Evelyn Hugo’s Coming Clean

Evelyn Hugo’s Coming Clean is making waves in the entertainment world, and there’s no shortage of anticipation as her long-awaited revelations approach. This icon of classic Hollywood has been an object of intrigue for decades, and now, after years of silence, she’s ready to share her story. Evelyn, who has lived a life that seems more like a series of epic soap operas than a real biography, is finally opening up about her tumultuous marriages, her rise to fame, and the many personal scandals that have defined her career. For years, the public has speculated about her seven marriages, the intense affairs, and the enigmatic moments in her life, but she has remained tight-lipped, only letting bits of information leak through over the years. Now, as she prepares to give an exclusive interview and auction off her iconic gowns, the world is waiting with bated breath to see what Evelyn will reveal.

In her prime, Evelyn Hugo was considered the epitome of Hollywood glamour—her blonde hair, straight, bold eyebrows, and flawless tan became the very definition of beauty. People couldn’t look away when she appeared on screen or in photos. With her larger-than-life presence and unforgettable allure, Evelyn became an icon whose image was imprinted on the minds of millions. But it wasn’t just her physical attributes that made her stand out—her commanding presence and ability to balance stardom with the complex realities of personal life only added to her mystique. Evelyn’s image was carefully crafted, yet underneath the glitz and glamour, there was a depth to her that few understood. As the years passed, she continued to be a symbol of both beauty and power, and her personal struggles became as much a part of her legacy as her on-screen performances. Evelyn was a woman who didn’t just exist in the spotlight; she created the spotlight itself.

Her story is one of reinvention and resilience, from her early years in Hollywood to her marriages, each one more scandalous and revealing than the last. The press

speculated for years about her relationships—rumors of infidelity, affairs, and heartbreak were constantly swirling around her. Despite the tabloid attention and public scrutiny, Evelyn remained a master of controlling her narrative, offering just enough to keep the public intrigued while keeping the real story close to her chest. For those who have followed her career, it's always been a puzzle—what happened behind the scenes? What was the real Evelyn? Now, with the release of her tell-all interview, she's ready to answer those questions. The revelations about her marriages, her complicated relationships with men, and the people she loved and lost are about to be unveiled, and with them, Evelyn is prepared to show the world the true woman behind the legend.

What has truly fascinated the public over the years is not only Evelyn's beauty and success but also the way she navigated the tricky waters of fame and fortune. She has often been described as a woman who made calculated decisions, both personally and professionally, using her charm, intelligence, and beauty to carve out a career that others could only dream of. Yet, even with all her power, there's always been a sense that she was never fully in control of her own life. As the interview draws closer, fans and critics alike are wondering how much of the real Evelyn will emerge from behind the mask of Hollywood glamour. Will she reveal the darkest corners of her soul? Or will she continue to maintain the air of mystery that has captivated the world for decades?

While many focus on Evelyn's image and personal affairs, it's essential to recognize the profound impact she's had beyond her role as a beauty icon. Over the years, she's contributed to various causes, particularly in the realms of women's rights and LGBTQ+ advocacy, all while continuing to maintain the façade of the glamorous movie star. Evelyn's actions off-screen have made a lasting difference in the lives of many, though this aspect of her life has often been overshadowed by the more publicized parts of her story. Her commitment to philanthropic causes demonstrates a side of her that contrasts with her public image, revealing a woman who, despite her complicated relationships and the scandals surrounding her life, cared deeply about making a difference. Now, as she auctions off her gowns to benefit cancer research, Evelyn is

proving once again that she’s more than just the sum of her famous marriages and screen roles. She’s a complex woman with a legacy that extends beyond her beauty—one built on resilience, power, and, ultimately, a commitment to doing good in the world.

With her upcoming tell-all, Evelyn Hugo’s story is about to be rewritten, and there’s no telling what revelations are in store. But one thing is certain: when it’s all said and done, Evelyn’s legacy will be far more than just the beautiful woman we remember from the silver screen. It will be about the woman who, despite all the odds, overcame personal demons and created a space for herself in a world that demanded conformity. Whether you love her or hate her, there’s no denying that Evelyn Hugo’s life is one that has shaped Hollywood—and, by extension, the entire entertainment industry—in ways that will be felt for generations.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 opens six weeks into the protagonist’s marriage to Don, where their life seems to oscillate between moments of bliss and tension. They are filming a movie titled *One More Day*, a melodramatic story about a wealthy girl, Diane, and her forbidden love affair with Frank, a local boy. The protagonist and Don had initially enjoyed their time together, buying a house in Beverly Hills, hosting lavish pool parties, and enjoying each other's company. Don’s passionate, commanding nature in their intimate moments made the protagonist feel both cherished and empowered, creating a new side of herself that she hadn’t known existed—a side that craved his attention and approval.

However, as the days pass and the stresses of Hollywood begin to creep in, the cracks in their relationship begin to show. Don’s recent film *The Gun at Point Dume* has been a commercial failure, and the negative reviews are clearly bothering him. Critics are quick to point out that Don isn’t cut out for the action hero role, something that threatens his carefully crafted image. The protagonist, who has just been recognized with an award for Best Rising Star, feels a growing tension, realizing that Don’s insecurities are beginning to affect their relationship. As they shoot their final scenes on the beach, Don’s behavior starts to reveal deeper frustrations, making the protagonist feel the weight of her role as his wife in a way that she hadn’t before.

On the morning of a particularly important scene, where Diane and Frank share a poignant kiss, the protagonist tries to prepare Don for the day ahead. However, when Don demands breakfast in a dismissive manner, it signals a shift in the power dynamics of their relationship. He’s angry that she doesn’t know his breakfast preferences the way their maid Paula does, a detail that the protagonist has never paid attention to. This seemingly small moment becomes a reflection of the larger issues in their marriage, where Don’s need for control and validation starts to clash

with the protagonist’s growing independence. The incident serves as a reminder that Don is only kind when things are going well, but when he feels threatened, his true nature emerges.

As they make their way to the set in their rented Corvette, Don’s mood is volatile, and the protagonist is caught in a whirlwind of his emotions. He’s upset about a conversation with his agent, Alan Thomas, who suggests that Don and his wife should be seen as a team, with her name listed alongside his. Don’s frustration over his lack of career progression becomes evident, and he blames the protagonist, questioning why she still goes by Evelyn Hugo instead of adopting their joint name, Adler. This marks the beginning of a deepening rift, where Don’s pride becomes a major source of conflict in their marriage. His desire to be the dominant figure in their relationship is made clear when he tells the protagonist that he wants to focus on starting a family, signaling that he feels sidelined by her success and ambitions.

The tension culminates in a shocking moment when Don strikes the protagonist across the face, an act that leaves her in stunned silence. This is the first time Don has physically harmed her, and the protagonist is left grappling with the humiliation and the emotional fallout. As she steadies herself, preparing to confront the pain both physically and emotionally, she puts on a mask of composure. The chapter paints a complex picture of a marriage where power, pride, and vulnerability intertwine. The protagonist’s strength is tested as she must decide whether to confront the reality of her marriage or continue to bury her pain in favor of preserving their public image.

The chapter also touches on the complexities of Hollywood’s social code, where appearances often overshadow the truth. The protagonist, despite the public accolades, finds herself in a situation that many women in the industry face—managing the public’s perception while suffering in silence. The emotional toll of maintaining her star image, while simultaneously dealing with the strain of her marriage, highlights the paradox of fame and its effect on personal relationships. As Don offers his tearful apology on set, it becomes clear that the cycle of abuse will continue, as the protagonist is left to decide whether she can forgive him or if this will

be the breaking point of their relationship. The chapter captures the painful reality of love, power, and sacrifice in a world where both personal and professional identities are constantly under scrutiny.



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