

Chapter 24

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

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

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

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

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

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

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