


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.

