

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.

