

Prologue

Manhattan, 19 May 1962.

Marilyn Monroe emerged tranquilly from the Carlyle, one of New York's greatest palaces. Although it was early, the sun was beginning to warm up the city. She raised her arm and a taxi immediately stopped in front of her.

"Four forty-four Fifty-Seventh Street," she said, in a soft and charming voice. It was the address of the thirteenth-floor apartment that she occupied when she stayed in the Big Apple.

The driver turned round and stared at her, unable to articulate the traditional greeting. She smiled at him and repeated the address. He stammered a vague acquiescence. His gaze returned to the street and he started the meter with a mechanical gesture.

The taxi pulled away along the avenue, which was practically deserted except for taxis and a single police car that overtook them with its siren howling.

Several times, the driver looked at her in the rear-view mirror in order to convince himself of the reality; he was carrying one of the greatest stars in Hollywood.

Curled up in the seat, Marilyn reconsidered the evening at Madison Square Garden and its prolongation in a suite at the Carlyle. In the first instance, she had participated in a social event intended to reimburse the expenses of the campaign that had seen John Fitzgerald Kennedy accede to the presidency of the United States of America. In the second she had slept with him—too bad for Jackie, the country's first lady! She was a free woman herself, having divorced Arthur Miller more than a year before.

Earlier, the benefit concert had brought together numerous stars who had generously come to sing or sign a check, among them Maria Callas, Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee and Henry Fonda. After having weighed up the pros and cons for some time, Marilyn had finally agreed to take part in it: her, the former mistress of the most powerful man on Earth, the discarded woman, cast aside like a used handkerchief and immediately replaced by someone else.

Two weeks before, John Kennedy's people had literally begged her to make the trip. According to them, John was insistent that she come. She was one of the greatest stars in America, if not the greatest, and her presence at the occasion constituted a plus for the President. Worse than that, if she did not put in an appearance, her absence would be noticed and everyone would wonder whether she had become unapproachable.

Marilyn had no doubt that her former lover had another idea in the back of his mind. She knew him well; he still desired her; and it was precisely that reason that had convinced her to go the ceremony. Then she had to persuade Fox to give her the evening off.

She was presently filming *Something's Got to Give* with Dean Martin and Cyd Charisse for the studio, which was threatening to cancel her contract if she quit the shoot one more time. After several refusals, Bobby Kennedy had personally telephoned Milton S. Gould, the company boss, in order to get him to give her the two days necessary to make the trip. The result had been another refusal.

The young woman was not particularly astonished; the filming was considerably delayed, and it was her fault. She did not like the film; the director, George Cukor, changed the dialogue as he pleased and she had only agreed to do it reluctantly. That was why, when she should be filming scenes, she sometimes felt ill and deserted the set.

She had decided to by-pass the refusal. Nothing and no one could have prevented her from being present on the stage at Madison Square Garden. That evening, she would be the queen, and everyone's eyes would be fixed on her, especially John's.

So, the previous evening, she had acquitted the responsibility of her participation; her pride had even made her sign a considerable, even indecent, check, bigger than those of other participants. She had

chosen a provocative dress composed of thousands of sparkling stones, specially designed for her by the French couturier Jean-Louis, for twelve thousand dollars: a costume comprising twenty layers of silk that she alone could wear, with nothing underneath; eighteen people had worked on it full-time for a week.

Two hours before her entrance, a seamstress had sown it directly on to her bare flesh like a second skin, highlighting her perfect body, about which all men fantasized.

She had rehearsed her speech alone: a pathetic platitudinous homage written by Richard Alder, a Broadway star. She would have liked to write it herself, but met with a refusal. So, before a mirror, she strove to give her *Happy Birthday* the warmest and most erotic tone possible. She employed the full palette of her voice. When young she had taken singing lessons, and, in spite of a limited register, she knew how to get the most out of her voice by singing close to the mike, playing on intimacy and sensuality.

Such was her curse: she was known as an actress she would have preferred to be known as a singer.

In her dressing-room she had waited patiently; her performance would only last a few minutes, sufficient to render it unforgettable.

Finally, her turn arrived.

When Peter Lawford, who as introducing the guests, had announced her name at the mike she had made herself desired, remaining in the wings. She wanted Madison Square Garden to explode when she arrived. Massed on the steps, the President's fifteen thousand fans had waited in a quasi-religious silence, as had the millions of viewers behind their television screens.

Peter had told a joke before howling once again: "Ladies and Gentlemen Marilyn Monroe."

She had drunk a glass of champagne slowly to collect herself. Then, with an ermine coat on her shoulders, she had got up, aided by two bodyguards, who carried her to the stage.

Suddenly, seams had split. She had had to go back to the dressing-room, where seamstresses repaired the damage in a matter of seconds. She could not present herself naked before puritanical America.

The damage repaired, she had resumed her march, difficult in her folded dress. Proudly, she had advanced toward the spotlights. That evening, she entered smoothly into legend.

Finally, she appeared on the stage in the midst of the lights, more beautiful than ever, to thunderous applause. Behind her, Peter Lawford had uttered some quip that she had not picked up.

She saw herself again walk to the mike, sure of her beauty and her sex-appeal. She could sense the waves of human pleasure reaching her. Everyone only had eyes for her. With a delicate movement she had removed her cape, which had fallen at her feet. Immediately, the glare of the spotlights made the multitudinous pearls of her dress shine, to give her an unreal aura.

Silence had fallen in the Madison: a heavy silence, which she had enjoyed for a few brief seconds. Stopped in front of the mike, she had tapped it with her middle finger, as if to discover whether it was working: a simple, unnecessary gesture—technicians had been checking the apparatus all afternoon—but in the audience, all the spectators had held their breath.

She had understood that she held the audience under her spell. No one dared speak, or even murmur. She possessed absolute power over every participant. But only one was important: the Prez, as she had nicknamed him in the intimacy of their embrace.

She could not see him, but she knew that his eyes were upon her: John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the man America venerated, the man who directed America, the man she still loved, who had rejected her for someone else.

Nothing, and no one, could any longer come between them, especially not that she-devil of a woman who had decided to shun the ceremony when she had learned of her presence. That night, Marilyn had sworn to herself, he would be hers.

For one night only, for he knew that henceforth, she would not be part of his world. Her old dream of becoming the first lady was impossible. She had thought of it, before, when he had made it shine for her...but today, reality had resumed its rights.

She was a vulgar actress, and he was the master of the free world.

But not this evening. This evening was her evening, and she had no intention of letting her chance pass by. To arrive at her goal, she was not going to recite the speech imposed on her by the organizers. No, she was going to wish the Prez happy birthday *her* way.

She had leaned over the mike and had breathed:

“Ha...ppy Birthday...toooo youuuuuuu.”

The classic phrase, repeated a thousand times over, had exploded in the immense hall. Her voice, more sensual than ever, had filled Madison Square Garden, which trembled with desire.

Marilyn had given herself entirely to her public:

“Ha...ppy Birthday...toooo youuuuuuu.”

She always remained the actress who inflamed men, in the cinema as well as real life, she did not hide it. With those simple words, however, she obtained her revenge. Disappeared forever, the slightly plump little girl raised in an orphanage, the young woman who had worked in a factory before disembarking in Hollywood and become a symbol instead of a recognized actress.

She had moved her arms slowly and continued her song:

“Everybody sing with me, Happy Birthday.”

At that precise moment, she had understood that the game was won. All the spectators had stood up to applaud and take up the song in chorus. She was the queen of the event, and no one could steal its stardom from her, not even the Prez.

She knew his penchant for sex. He would bitterly regret having abandoned her. This would be their last night, but she would hold him in her arms, between her legs, one last time, and he would never find as much pleasure in the arms of another woman.

That would be her vengeance.

“We’ve arrived, Ma’am.”

The driver’s voice extracted her from her thoughts. She opened her eyes and came back to reality.

Marilyn looked at the meter, rummaged in her handbag and brought out a fifty dollar bill when she held out through the glass.

“Keep it,” she said, suavely.

The driver took the bill and stammered a thank you. She walked away from the taxi, feeling the weight of his gaze on her back. She knew her power over men, from a simple taxi driver to the President of the U.S.A. None could resist her.

Marilyn opened the door and went up to her apartment. She undressed and, faithful to her legend, got into bed naked, only dressed in her perfume, Chanel no. 5.

The memories of the evening immediately returned to her mind.

Her performance had only lasted a few minutes, but they remained in all memories. No one would forget her passage, the guests or the millions of spectators in front of their television sets. The other artistes, after her, had not existed, mere phantoms brining their obol to the President.

Everyone had come to her dressing-room to compliment her. She had remained modest, contenting herself with thanking them all, replying that all the merit belonged to the President.

As she had expected, he had joined her in the wings as soon as the spectacle was over, to congratulate her. He had not dared to ask her immediately to spend the rest of the night with him, but his eyes had betrayed his desire.

She had waited sagely, knowing that the moment would come; she knew him so well; he could not resist her. The evening had continued; he had returned to salute the other guests, and Marilyn had chatted with several people while drinking champagne.

An hour later he had come back, accompanied by his brother Bobby.

The gaze of the two brothers had demonstrated the magnitude of her power of attraction. Both desired her. Bobby had also been her lover, but he was not the Prez, just a simple minister of justice.

John had complimented her again and had then drawn her into a corner of the room in order to murmur in her ear that they should terminate the evening together.

She had hesitated, as a matter of principle, offering the pretext of having to accompany the father of her ex-husband, Arthur Miller, to his hotel. Immediately, John had ordered two secret service men to take care of it. Without giving her time to escape, he had taken her to the Carlyle.

In the room, Marilyn had bought out her big game, without stinting on the means. A legend ran around in her regard; her curriculum vitae indicated an expertise in fellatio. She had never sought to deny the rumor.

Several times, in the course of the night, John had asked for mercy, but she had only acceded to his request at first light, when he had collapsed, completely exhausted.

Then, no longer entirely conscious of where he was, or with whom, he had released *the* confidence: a revelation so surprising that Marilyn had looked at him, nonplussed, when he fell silent.

She had frowned, not knowing whether it was the truth or whether the President was boasting—which he did at times. But John had continued speaking for half an hour, as if he could not keep that revelation to himself. She had not dared to interrupt him. When he had finished his story, he had collapsed into a profound sleep.

Beside him, Marilyn had been anxious, not knowing what attitude to adopt.

That night, she had held the President of the United States in her arms, even obliging him to crawl before her. She smiled as she recalled the scene—a smile that was quickly transformed into a grimace when she understood the situation into which she had just been plunged.

She would never have imagined that he would confide such a secret to her.

She picked up the notebook in which she recorded all her exchanges with John or Bobby, not with the objective of keeping evidence of their discussions but to seek information afterwards about various subjects. That way, she did not appear to her various lovers to be a brainless actress, since, when they met again, she could participate in the conversation. She carefully consigned the President's confidence to it, and as she set out the revelation on paper, fear took possession of her.

Abruptly, she realized that her mere presence in the room put her in danger.

She dressed quickly, while her mind continued to reflect.

John was sleeping blissfully—but that would not last.

When he woke up, John Fitzgerald Kennedy would remember the pleasure they had obtained together, but also having confided a story to her that she should never have heard. He would surely curse himself for his carelessness, for having indulged in pillow talk, but Marilyn knew him well; his career came before everything. He would stifle his scruples rapidly. In a fraction of a second he would decide to get rid of her. After all, she was a negligible quantity, a mere actress that he could sacrifice in the name of the nation.

As he never got his hands dirty, he would confide the affair to his brother. Marilyn could easily imagine the sequence of events. Bobby Kennedy would speak to the director of the F.B.I., Hoover, who did not like Hollywood at all, much less her ex-husband Arthur Miller, whom he considered to be a communist.

Hoover would act without asking any questions: eliminate America's enemies, that was his credo. John Fitzgerald Kennedy would continue to direct the country and slake his thirst for fresh flesh; she would be inside the concrete of a building or at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, devoured by the fish. Hollywood would mourn the star for a few days, and a new girl would take her place.

She had fled the room, saluted the secret service men who protected the President. They had watched her leave with eyes empty of any expression, insensible to her charm. She had left the hotel and hailed a taxi.

Now, in her own bed, she had to make a rapid decision. After the President's confidence, her life was only hanging by a thread. For a second, she was tempted to return to her home town—but wherever she went, the F.B.I. would find her sooner or later. No one would ever find her body, and her disappearance would be attributed to the Mafia or drugs. She had to match Hoover for speed, before he sent his killers.

To disappear was the only solution. She had money, enough to live, and men ready to do anything for her.

The idea came to her suddenly: she had to die, in order not to die. Like a cinema death.

Her former life ended on that day in May, and a new, different, one began. She had to draw a definitive line under her career, under her past. Except that she needed one last success: the final act that would mark her rebirth.

As a sole farewell gift, she had the secret that John had confided to her: a secret that she would never share; a secret so enormous that, in any case, no one would believe it.

At that thought, she could not help smiling: a wry smile.

Then she went to sleep.