

MAGALI FONTARGENTE

Eva Forever



novel — free excerpt

Chapter 6

“Claude Gabion”

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Excerpt from the novel Eva Forever, 2026.

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CHAPTER VI

Claude Gabion



I wasn't there! I—who accompanied you all around the world for nearly half a century—wasn't there to stop it... Your son may tell me over and over that no one could have done anything about it, that it couldn't have been foreseen or prevented... I wasn't there, Eva, I wasn't there! I drove that Saxo from one end of the city to the other, and I've shaken off plenty of journalists! Slightly disguised, you'd take the passenger seat and I'd be at the wheel. In the flow of traffic, we probably passed for an old couple in an ordinary little car. No one seemed to suspect your presence—not even Coupechoux's lot. Oh! Nothing could happen to you—nothing should have happened to you! That Saxo was your fortress, and I was its guardian. Now it's become your tomb!

How could something like this have happened to us? Why—why on earth did I let you talk me into taking the night off and 'going to enjoy myself for a while'? Damn it, why? To go and see that stupid Tim Burton blockbuster that had just come out the day before? To stuff myself with popcorn while watching kids wading through chocolate? What could I possibly have had better to do than stay by your side? That's what I'd done my whole life, after all... I had only one mission—just one, but an extraordinary one: to be your guardian angel on the road. And it's the road that kills you!

You gave me an extraordinary life—yes, utterly exceptional, unexpected—and I’ve been living in a nightmare ever since that Bastille Day, since the day our paths parted just as they had first crossed: around a Citroën. You know, I was crazy about mechanics as a kid. I belong to that generation that still marvelled at the De Dion-Bouton and saw those wheezing old turn-of-the-century contraptions as marvellous machines. The first Caravelle jets, steam locomotives—from tiny engines to jet turbines—anything that could propel us forward... that was my thing. I saved every penny I could from my very first paycheck so I could buy myself a proper car. At twenty, in Toulouse, in a tiny room cluttered with my collection of Kit Carson comics, I pictured myself as a modern-day pioneer of the American West, driving one of those extravagant California cruisers across the Sonoran Desert. But until California came calling—I was a waiter at the Café Florida, right on the Place du Capitole.

I remember that winter evening of ’58 perfectly well. I was twenty-three, my eyes fixed on the elegant black Citroën that had been sitting across from the brasserie for a few minutes. Christmas was approaching, and the evening shift looked like it would be a quiet one. Folks in Toulouse weren’t going out much. Autumn had been damp, and the biting cold of early December seemed to be promising an early winter. Two ladies were chattering away over their tea, snickering to themselves. At table 15 they were trading gloomy remarks, running through all the year’s crazy weather—from the storm in Paris to the spring snow, not to mention the floods in the Gard. I had just served Champagne to some cigar smokers who were toasting the General’s health, already celebrating his coming election, when my colleague Paul gave me a nudge in the ribs. With a nod, he pointed out two customers who had just come

in and were settling down a little apart from the others. Nothing remarkable at first glance—just a couple out for a drink in the Belle Époque atmosphere of the place—except for that intense effort to go unnoticed, which ended up drawing everyone’s attention. I must say, they were a stylish pair: he with a neat Clark Gable moustache, small inquisitive eyes, and a carefully styled lock of hair over a rather self-important forehead; she about five foot three, made taller by her heels—slight, with a softly bouncing mane of amber-honey hair and a playful look in her eyes. And it was Paul who murmured your name: “Eva Horus! That’s Eva Horus and her husband!”

Immediately, Gaspard came rushing over, lured by the prospect of a handsome tip. Always on the lookout, Gaspard! The apparition had quickly silenced the rivalry over the weather; the two chatterboxes were now exclaiming in half-whispers, while the men stuck to their smoke-filled politics—though not without sneaking glances towards the celebrities’ table.

As for me, I was only too happy to stay behind the bar, which allowed me to keep admiring the DS—their DS, as it turned out—in front of which passersby kept stopping or craning their necks. Before long it was slowing traffic down, even drawing a small crowd in the street, and that’s when the boss suggested moving it. And who was handed the keys to the DS and entrusted with parking it—according to the boss’s instructions—in the courtyard behind his house? The only waiter with a driver’s license: me, Claude Gabion, just a café waiter who dreamed of being a mechanic!

I’ll never forget the moment I slid behind the wheel of the sedan, under the wide-eyed gaze of the crowd lingering that evening beneath the Arcades. Of all

the vehicles parked on the Place du Capitole, it was the most resplendent, with its long, glossy black hood and its perfectly white steering wheel. I was Brando for a night—an hour, a few minutes—what did it matter! I was living one of those moments that count in your life. Wouldn't be the last!

From the moment I began sharing your life as your driver, I lived every minute of my own intensely. My entire fate was sealed in only a few words, when I brought the DS back to you. As I slowly climbed out of the driver's seat—like a sleeper pulling himself out of the magical depths of a dream—I found myself face to face with your husband, who disdainfully handed me two fifty-franc coins. I thanked him and, unable to let go of my dream, I found myself saying:

“There's a slight knocking at idle. Might be a combustion issue. Might want to check the carburetor—could be getting clogged...”

He sized me up with the look of someone who understood nothing yet never doubted his own superiority. As I opened the door for you, imitating the gallant gestures I'd picked up from the movies, you turned to your husband and exchanged a few words in English. His eyebrows creasing like corrugated iron, he looked me up and down and shrugged without replying. That's when you spoke those miraculous words:

“You're fond of cars, aren't you, young man? You know your way around them, don't you? As it happens, we're looking for a chauffeur...”

Then you went on about a job, about moving to the United States, about... I don't even remember. I must have stammered something inaudible... Everything exploded in my head at once: your voice, your name, your offer. Your beauty.



End of excerpt

The rest of Claude Gabion's story — and the other voices which, one after another, sketch a portrait of Eva — awaits you in the complete novel.

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Magali Fontargente is a writer and translator.

Eva Forever is her second novel.

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Charabia, illustrated book (2019)

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