

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with Monique fully committing herself to the task of researching Evelyn Hugo, a woman whose legendary status in Hollywood has been shrouded in mystery and rumors. Although Monique had never been drawn to classic cinema or the stars that defined it, she is quickly captivated by Evelyn's life. What started as a simple assignment soon turns into a deep dive into Evelyn's tumultuous past—her early marriage at just eighteen, the allegations of abuse from her marriage to Don Adler, and the famous love affair with Harry Cameron. With each layer that Monique uncovers, she realizes how much more there is to Evelyn's life than anyone outside the industry could have imagined. Evelyn's world seems full of passion, betrayal, scandal, and the relentless pursuit of fame—a combination of elements that gives the impression of a life lived under constant public scrutiny.

Monique, who had been working late into the evening, finally arrives home well after dark. She walks into her tiny, almost claustrophobic apartment—a space that now feels even smaller and emptier in the wake of her breakup with David. It's been five weeks since he left, and she still hasn't quite figured out how to deal with the lingering gaps he left behind, like the coffee table that once held sentimental value. The sadness of it all hits her in waves—wondering if David left because of the new job in San Francisco or if it was her refusal to join him that really made him go. It stings to think that, no matter the reasoning, he's gone. Despite her best efforts to push the painful thoughts away, she finds herself drifting back to the same nagging conclusion: David chose to leave, and the weight of that decision continues to haunt her.

Trying to shake off these emotions, Monique goes through her familiar routine. After ordering her favorite comfort food, pad Thai, she escapes into the shower. The hot water, almost scalding, becomes a refuge from the rest of her chaotic life, where the simple action of washing away the day provides her with a brief sense of control and

peace. For a moment, she isn't Monique Grant, the woman left behind by her husband. She isn't a stalled writer waiting for something—anything—to change. She is just a woman in her shower, indulging in the pleasure of warm water and the scent of her shampoo, a small solace amidst her overwhelming circumstances.

Over the following days, Monique devotes herself entirely to researching Evelyn Hugo. She spends hours reading old articles about Evelyn's marriages and controversial love affairs, becoming increasingly absorbed in the actress's life. The nights are filled with old movie clips, from Evelyn's roles in *Carolina Sunset* and *Anna Karenina* to her iconic appearance in *Boute-en-Train*, which Monique watches so often that it replays in her dreams. With each film, Monique's admiration for Evelyn grows; she begins to appreciate the depth and strength in the characters Evelyn portrayed on screen. Through these late-night film marathons, Monique starts to see Evelyn not just as a Hollywood icon, but as a woman whose life, filled with ups and downs, could teach her a thing or two about resilience and reinvention.

As Monique watches Evelyn in one of her most famous roles, she is captivated not just by the actress's beauty, but by the presence Evelyn commands in each scene. The photos she pins to her wall only reinforce this image of an almost otherworldly beauty—sharp features, high cheekbones, and a jawline that seems made for the screen. What strikes Monique most is how timeless Evelyn's looks are, despite the aging process she's gone through. There's a grace in her appearance, enhanced by the images that capture her over the years—from the early 1950s to the later decades, Evelyn's beauty evolves but remains undeniably striking. As Monique pours over these images, it becomes clear that Evelyn was not just a figurehead in Hollywood; she was a woman who carved out her place in the industry through sheer force of will, using her looks, talent, and cunning to ensure her longevity in the public eye. Each photo, each film clip, further pulls Monique into Evelyn's world, sparking a curiosity about the woman behind the roles and the facade. The more Monique learns, the more she realizes the story she is about to write may not just be about Evelyn's public persona, but about the raw, untold truth of a life lived in the spotlight.