

Chapter One: Family is calling

Lucas Castro was running along the Charles River, lungs steady, listening to a finance-podcast he'd discovered the other night. The Esplanade was still half-empty, the city glazed in early sunlight. It was the kind of morning that made Boston feel like a gift. Then his phone buzzed. *Jon Carver.*

He answered mid-stride. "Jon. What's up?"

Jon didn't waste time. "How fast can you be in Zurich?"

Lucas slowed, blood already pulling away from his legs and toward his brain.
"Zurich?"

"There's been a leak," Jon said. "Swiss news outlets got access to internal documents. They're spinning it as tax evasion, claiming I restructured assets to avoid obligations under the revised withholding regime."

Lucas came to a halt. The world didn't. Bikes still whirred past on the path. The river shimmered in the distance, bright and harmless. "Do they have anything criminal?"

"Not even close. But it looks like someone cherry-picked just enough material to imply intent. Which means headlines and regulatory pressure."

"Swiss authorities?"

"Not officially. No subpoenas or frozen assets, just speculation. But the documents are real; partial and out of context, but real. And someone had to leak them."

Lucas rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, eyes narrowing. "So it's not a legal emergency."

"No," Jon said calmly. "It's a reputational one. And reputational storms tend to attract regulators if you don't get ahead of them fast."

Lucas was already turning back, jogging now. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"I want a clean, internal reconstruction of what they saw, and what they didn't. You know the structures. You're not on any boards. And you can still sit in a meeting without people second-guessing your presence."

Lucas's mouth twitched. *Jon's version of trust.* "You think someone did this deliberately."

"I don't believe in accidents," Jon said. "Not ones this well timed."

"I covered EU tax structure last spring," he said quietly. "The exam was a nightmare, my only 90% ever." Lucas exhaled heavily. "What about Singapore? London? Any

spillover?"

"All secure. This is just Switzerland, and for now, just headlines; that's why Ari is needed, too. But I want to know who fed them the story."

Lucas didn't need to hear more, grinning at the thought of Ari, Jon's husband. He'd already pivoted, heading back toward Beacon Street, blood rushing louder in his ears now than any river or city noise. "There's one flight left tonight," he said, pulling it up mid-jog. "Boston to Zurich, nonstop. First class only."

Jon didn't hesitate. "Book it. We'll meet you there."

The line went dead. Lucas slowed just long enough to catch his breath. Not from exhaustion; he hadn't even finished his loop.

This wasn't only about helping family. It was about proving he was useful. A quiet, persistent echo of his sixteen-year-old self, feeling like a stranger at his own dinner table in Oaxaca, surrounded by a loving family he couldn't bring himself to be honest with.

Jon and Ari had given him a place where he didn't have to pretend. Being useful for them wasn't an obligation, it was an anchor, and he was all in. Every analysis, every accurate conclusion was another small down payment on the privilege of his life in Boston; a life lightyears away from the dusty roads of the ranch back home. He would earn Jon's investment in him, line by line.

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Twelve hours later, after an absurdly comfortable flight with more legroom than he knew what to do with, the sliding doors of the Zurich Airport parted with a soft hiss. Cool, filtered air gave way to the warm chaos of Arrivals, flashing signs, luggage wheels, snippets of multilingual chatter, and there they were.

Jon and Ari. They stood close, as always.

Jon's arm draped casually around Ari's waist, his posture calm, almost unreadable.

Ari, by contrast, had that unmistakable flush in his ears; already halfway to a grin that bloomed the second he spotted Lucas. Something in his whole frame leaned forward, like he couldn't help it.

Lucas felt his chest tighten, briefly, then firmly. A familiar weight settled in his chest, not anxiety, more like attachment. He walked toward them without hesitation, suitcase trailing behind.

Jon pulled him into a solid, wordless hug. It was brief but deliberate.

Then Ari stepped in; softer, quicker, breath catching as he wrapped his arms around Lucas's shoulders and held on just a second too long.

"Alright, alright—let me breathe," Lucas laughed, voice low, grinning like he couldn't stop it. "My extra dads. You're both ridiculous." He meant it with every fiber of his being. They were the lighthouses that had guided him home to himself.

He could tell Jon had teased Ari beforehand. The body language gave it away; Ari's energy was too electric, too reactive, the kind of thing that only happened when Jon was winding him up minutes before.

Jon cleared his throat; the classic retreat when emotions tried to leak through. "We're so glad you came on such short notice," he said, voice lower than usual.

Lucas rolled the suitcase beside him as they exited into the soft Zurich evening. "Of course I came. Family's in trouble." His tone was casual, but his jaw stayed tight. "I read the articles on the plane. And I did a bit of digging. Honestly, the European market shouldn't have reacted that strongly—not with your profile. It looks like a combination of short-term panic and algorithmic amplification." He exhaled, already shifting gears. "Price corrections started less than an hour after the initial headlines. Most of the hedge movements were reactive, not strategic. If you look at the trading patterns, they mirror 2008 post-Lehman in timing, but not in structure. And there's precedent: remember the Luxembourg incident in 2013? Quiet, but it changed how EU regulators approach transparency thresholds. You're still well within compliance, but the optics..." He glanced sideways. "That's what tanked the confidence. This is not only about the numbers, but about the narrative."

Jon kept pace, nodding occasionally, eyes focused.

Ari didn't say much, but Lucas could feel his presence listening.

It wasn't until they were in the taxi, winding through the quiet geometry of Zurich traffic, that Lucas allowed the tension in his shoulders to ease. The interior smelled like leather and lemon wipes. Clean, restrained, clinical, understated. Very Swiss.

"Where are we staying?"

Jon didn't look up from his phone. "Here, for now. A few days until we have a clearer picture. Then we're heading to St. Moritz. Probably a week."

Ari turned toward him, something mischievous tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Maxwell and André land tomorrow."

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "They're coming too?" A little warmth spread across his chest. Not the dramatic kind; just the quiet pleasure of knowing the cavalry had style. The

English lord and the French art lover were honorary uncles by now, and never arrived anywhere without flair. Sometimes a bit too much flair, but Lucas couldn't wait to see them.

Jon gave a short laugh. "Maxwell called yesterday. He saw my name on the list of affected investors and offered to help: which, in Maxwell terms, means he's quietly protecting his own exposure while pretending to be magnanimous. Also, he wants to see how I pull my ass out of the line of fire."

"And André," Ari added, "shows up wherever chaos reigns. Right now, that's here."

Lucas nodded. "Yeah. It's bad. Who else is caught up in it?"

Jon's expression darkened; barely, but Lucas noticed. "Pretty much every major player in Europe. And I despise them all. Power-hungry old men with wives half their age and the emotional intelligence of an ashtray." He shuddered slightly. "Still not letting them ruin my vacation." He reached for Ari and pulled him closer.

Ari turned toward him with an incredulous look. "Vacation? Carver, this financial scandal is hanging over your head like a sword of Damocles, your European holdings are under public fire, and you're calling this a *vacation*?"

Jon pulled him closer. "Absolutely," he said gently. "We're together." Ari melted into the embrace. "The money—almost—doesn't matter to me. Everything I need is right here, in my arms."

Ari flushed. "Fucking romantic," he whispered, resting his head against Jon's shoulder.

Up front, Lucas pretended not to have heard a word of it - but quietly, he couldn't help smiling.

Chapter Two: Influence

They were staying at the Dolder Grand. Even the hotel's driveway was impressive: a long, winding road lined with manicured greenery and quiet forest, making Lucas feel like he was arriving at a private estate, not a hotel. The lobby, an interplay of dark wood, modern design, art installations, and historical details, radiated a quiet kind of wealth that sent a chill down Lucas's spine.

After handing his luggage to a bellboy who appeared out of nowhere (and disappeared just as discreetly) and checking in, not at a counter but at an individual desk, he followed Jon and Ari into the elevator, on their way up to the suite.

The suite was absurd: mountain views, designer furniture, fresh orchids, and a coffee table already laid out with Swiss chocolate and mineral water.

Ari sat down on one of the cream-colored sofas and had reclaimed his corporate-fixer grin: the one that had once closed billion-dollar deals in boardrooms full of men who underestimated him.

Lucas dropped into the armchair opposite. "Have you talked to the guy responsible for your accounts here yet? Elias, right?"

Jon nudged a cardboard box with his foot. It was overflowing with reports and printouts. "He sent everything he could. Tried to make it sound helpful. Mostly he's just terrified. Also: he's dying to meet you."

Lucas wrinkled his nose. "So not my type. I can smell the neediness through the spreadsheets." To avoid further talk of Elias, he grabbed the top layer of documents and skimmed. The numbers came easily, so did the patterns. "This reaction doesn't track. Even with the law change. A month ago, none of this would've raised a single flag." He looked up. "Someone's engineering this."

Jon nodded, eyes dark. "I've come to the same conclusion."

Lucas didn't stop. "Which outlet broke it first? Who published the documents? Who *benefits* from this becoming public?"

Ari was already on it. "And how long until it spirals? Are we looking at an actual inquiry yet or just headlines? Who in Switzerland still owes us favors?"

Jon started answering point by point, but midway through, he pulled out his phone. "Elias," he said curtly. Lucas could faintly hear Elias' obsequious tone through the speaker. "Yes, Lucas landed safely," Jon said after a moment, grinning sideways at him.

"*Jon! Keep that guy away from me!*" Lucas mouthed in Jon's direction, eyes wide.

“How far are the lawyers?” Jon asked into the phone. He listened for a moment.
“Good. Then publish it today.” And with that, he ended the call.

Meanwhile, Ari had been busy looking up journalists. “Ready to see me in action, Carver?” he said, teasing.

Lucas tilted his head and watched as Ari began his first call, then a second. When the topics got tough, he rolled up his sleeves, never breaking his charm. In fact, he had so much of it that Lucas was amazed the phone didn’t explode.

Eventually, Ari hit gold. “Madeleine Marceau,” he purred into the receiver. Jon’s eyebrows pulled together as he glanced at his husband with a mixture of admiration and mild concern. Ari leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and although Madeleine couldn’t see him, his body language translated directly into his voice. She never stood a chance. “Madeleine, my husband—” he said, his eyes locking with Jon’s in a way that needed no explanation. Lucas didn’t look away; but he didn’t need to understand it, either.

“—is right in the middle of this mess. And word has it, *you’re* the best-informed voice in town.” Ari leaned back in his seat. “So, how does it all fit together?” Lucas and Jon could only sit in silence as Ari squeezed information out of Madeleine like the last bit of toothpaste from a tube, with only the occasional *hmm* or *aha* punctuating the flow.

Eventually, Lucas tore himself away and returned to the documents.

When Ari finally ended the call with a crisp, “Talk soon, Madeleine,” he looked slightly breathless. “Damn, she can talk. No wonder I ended up with her.” He ran a hand through his short blond hair. “So, the law went into effect about ten days ago, and as a result, every major player in the region got audited. Your name came up early, but you’re far from the only one. Curran, Richter, and Zeiss are also on the list.”

At the name *Richter*, something flickered across Jon’s face.

Ari caught it. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“I said ‘Richter,’ and you flinched.”

Lucas leaned forward slightly. His pulse had kicked up; not with suspicion, exactly, but with curiosity.

Jon hesitated. “I know him.”

“How well?”

Jon let out a sharp exhale. “Well enough. Saul Richter was... my mentor. About ten years ago. After the inheritance, when I was still in my twenties and convinced I needed to

prove myself.” He paused, and his whole demeanor changed; his jaw tensed and his voice, usually controlled, got quieter. “I invested here. In Switzerland. Saul helped structure the first deals. Took me under his wing, like he did with a whole cohort of young investors. For a while, I thought he’d saved me.”

“And then?” Ari asked.

Jon looked away. “And then the money disappeared.” Silence. Lucas didn’t move. “Not all of it,” Jon said. “But enough. My financial team stopped answering calls. I logged in one morning and saw seven digits vanish. I was furious, young, reckless. But I got strategic. I rallied the others and built alliances. Some people Saul had burned before. Together, we forced a reversal. I got most of it back, while Saul didn’t.”

Ari leaned closer. “Jon… you were, what? Twenty-six?”

“Twenty-five,” Jon muttered.

“That’s insane. You don’t owe anyone guilt for being taken advantage of. Saul screwed you. End of story.”

Jon said nothing, just sank lower into the couch.

Lucas watched him closely. He’d known Jon for five years. Never seen him hesitate like this. Never seen him *flinch*.

“There’s more,” Jon said at last. “Things I haven’t talked about. About Saul. His wife; don’t get me started. And the kid… poor thing.”

“Saul has a kid?” Lucas asked.

Jon nodded. “Bençe. He would’ve been eight or nine. Strange name, even for Switzerland. Saul and Flora wanted something unforgettable. So they named their heir like a brand.” He rubbed his eyes. “Enough Richter talk. Where’s Maxwell with his Scotch when you need him?”

Lucas caught the shift in Jon’s posture instantly; recognized the dodge for what it was. It wasn’t just a change of subject, it was a rare crack in Jon’s otherwise impenetrable façade. And for a split second, Lucas didn’t see the untouchable mentor, but the twenty-five-year-old Jon had mentioned earlier. The young man who’d been betrayed, nearly broken.

Lucas’s protector instinct, his deep, unwavering loyalty to his chosen family, kicked in immediately. The same mind that usually dissected financial data was now scanning the emotional architecture of the moment. Jon didn’t need comfort. Words would’ve been clumsy, intrusive. What he needed was support in rebuilding the wall. The most effective response wasn’t to press, it was to help him quietly close the door on that memory. “Great

idea,” Lucas said quickly, his tone deliberately light. “I’m thirsty too.”

“You’re twenty,” Jon replied flatly.

“We’re in Europe.”

“Fair point,” Ari said, already standing.

Jon gave them both a sharp look. “Seriously? I spill my financial trauma and all you want is alcohol?”

“You brought it up!” Ari threw back, grinning.

Jon groaned. “Fine. Let’s head down. And eat. I need protein if I’m going to talk about Saul Richter again.”

“What do people even eat around here?” Lucas asked as the elevator doors slid shut.

Ari’s eyes lit up, not the color, but the energy behind them. That particular spark that always appeared when food entered the conversation. “Oh, you’re in for a *treat*,” he said, leaning in like they were conspiring. “Think buttery, golden potato fritters. They’re crispy on the outside, soft inside, the perfect base for something rich like sliced veal in a creamy mushroom and white wine sauce. It just melts on your tongue. Or, if you want real comfort food, there’s Alpine-style macaroni and cheese with potatoes, caramelized onions, and a side of stewed apples for that perfect sweet contrast.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow, amused despite himself.

Ari didn’t wait. “And then there’s cheese fondue. But not just any fondue: half Gruyère, half Vacherin. Thick, creamy, just the right amount of sharpness. You dip fresh, crusty bread in it and suddenly forget all your problems.” He threw Jon a playful glance; teasing, but pointed. “Not that we have any problems, of course.”

Lucas smirked. “And dessert?”

Ari’s grin widened. “Swiss chocolate. Obviously. But proper Swiss chocolate: dark, velvety, with just enough bitterness to make it addictive. And if you’re feeling extra fancy, there’s that puff pastry filled with veal in a creamy sauce. That one’s practically a *religious* experience.”

Lucas leaned back in his seat. They’d settled at a small table near the bar, low lighting, just enough ambient noise to feel private. “Alright,” he said, “not quite *tacos al pastor*; but I’m listening.” He turned his glass slowly between his fingers. “What does it do to someone; to grow up like Bençe?” he asked, not looking up.

Across from him, Ari’s hand froze mid-gesture. His mouth, still curved into a half-smile from the food monologue, closed slowly. “Why are you thinking about him?”

Lucas shrugged, but not carelessly. “Saul’s the kind of man who slams people like Jon

into walls just to hear the sound it makes. That kind of cruelty doesn't just hover around; it settles into the structure. If you're raised in it..." He let the thought hang.

Jon's voice was low. "It does something, yeah. You grow up under envy and hollow ambition, you don't walk away clean."

"You almost feel sorry for him," Ari said, more quietly now.

Jon didn't answer at first. He reached for the napkin and traced its edge with his thumb, a motion too precise to be casual. "Almost." The edge in his voice wasn't raised, but it was sharp enough to cut.

A moment passed before Ari changed direction. "When are André and Maxwell landing tomorrow?"

"Midday," Jon said.

"And the plan?"

"We go through the files again, line by line. Anything that makes this less abstract. Then we pick them up."

"Madeleine said she might call again; she hinted at a contact who could be useful."

Jon nodded once. "Good. That gives us something solid before we head to St. Moritz."

Lucas looked up. "St. Moritz?" He blinked. "We're leaving Zurich while this thing is still smoking?"

"This," Jon said, tone sharpening, "is the preliminary fire. The real one's in the mountains."

Lucas didn't press, but the phrase stuck. *The real disaster is waiting for us in the mountains.* He wasn't sure if Jon meant that figuratively. And he wasn't sure he wanted to ask.

Chapter Three: The ‘Journalist’

After dinner, Lucas accompanied Jon and Ari back to their suite, taking the box of documents with him. He wished them both a good night before heading to his own room, flipping open his laptop, and settling in for a long night. Despite his exhaustion, he maintained a razor-sharp focus, meticulously combing through the files, cross-referencing tables, identifying patterns, and making notes.

Hours passed in a blur of numbers and calculations. Without meaning to, he worked straight through the night, only realizing the time when the morning sun cast its first golden rays into his room.

The chance to sleep had come and gone. Lucas stretched, rolling out the stiffness in his shoulders. He would go through everything again later, with Jon, but right now, he needed something else: *coffee*. A smirk tugged at his lips. Even though Jon wasn’t his biological father, Lucas had undeniably inherited his love for strong coffee.

Leaving his suite, he made his way to the lobby bar, ordered a cup, and rubbed his tired face while waiting. His mind was still running at full speed. The coffee helped, but he needed more: *movement*. He decided to benefit from the luxuries of their hotel.

Lucas accepted his coffee and glanced up. “You’ve got a pool, right?”

“We do,” the barista said carefully. “It’s mostly for guests to relax in.”

“But you’ve got a real one too? Long enough to swim?”

“An outdoor pool. Two hundred meters.”

Lucas smiled. “Now we’re talking. How do I get there?”

With the directions in mind, Lucas went back to his suite, grabbed a few things, and set out.

In the early hours, Zurich felt less like a city and more like a system coming online. The lake gleamed like polished glass, trams slid silently through intersections, and the church clocks rang with the kind of punctuality that made you stand straighter without knowing why. The warm June air carried the distant scent of fresh pastries and espresso, and for a moment, Lucas simply enjoyed the walk, letting himself take it in.

The pool was almost empty. A lone swimmer moved through the water with effortless precision, each stroke powerful yet fluid. Lucas slowed his steps, observing. The man’s form was flawless, his technique undeniably professional. This wasn’t casual exercise.

At the end of the lane, the swimmer flipped into a perfectly executed turn, disappearing beneath the surface for a second before continuing his lap. The sunlight

bounced off the water, catching on the smooth lines of his muscles as he moved. There was something mesmerizing about the sheer control in his movements, the way he cut through the water with absolute ease.

Lucas, momentarily forgetting why he was even there, found himself at the edge of the pool, staring. The man reached the end of his lap, surfacing directly in front of him. Pausing, he pulled off his swim goggles, fixing Lucas with an unimpressed gaze.

“Was ist?” he asked flatly.

Lucas swallowed. The eyes. Lucas had never seen eyes that green before. The kind of green you’d expect to find in a painting, deep and rich, flecked with hints of brown that only added more dimension.

But Lucas wasn’t the type to lose his footing over a pair of striking eyes, or well-defined muscles, for that matter. “Not bad,” he said, offering a casual smile before tossing his towel onto the nearest lounge chair.

The swimmer looked unimpressed, switching to English on a whim. “I don’t need an audience.”

“Yeah, got it. My bad.” For a moment, the other man just stared at him, as if weighing his next move. Then, without another word, he pulled his goggles back on and resumed his training. Lucas didn’t miss the way the swimmer, after reaching the far end of the pool, hesitated and turned slightly, just enough to glance in his direction.

Smirking to himself, Lucas put on a show. He pulled his shirt over his head, deliberately slow, the morning sun catching on his olive-toned skin. His joggers followed in an easy motion, revealing long, lean muscle built from years of running, sharpened by a naturally high metabolism and a healthy Mexican appetite. He knew how he looked. More importantly, he knew how to use it. Then, as if he hadn’t just caught the swimmer’s attention, he walked off toward the showers, took his time rinsing off, and slipped into the pool.

The cold water shocked away the last remnants of exhaustion, the caffeine beginning to kick in. He took his time, gliding through the water in smooth, unhurried strokes. Every now and then, he cast a glance toward the other man, who remained focused, pushing through lap after lap with an intensity that bordered on obsessive.

After twenty minutes, Lucas had enough. He pulled himself out of the water, just as the other man did the same.

They ended up side by side under the outdoor showers, silent but hyper-aware of each other. Their eyes met once, twice. Each time, one of them quickly looked away. It was

almost funny. Almost. Because there was something else in the air, something heavier, more charged.

Finally, Lucas broke the tension. “What’s your name?” he asked, easy, friendly. No response. “Hello?” Lucas tried again.

The swimmer let out a sharp exhale, annoyed, and eventually looked at him. “Was it not clear enough that I didn’t *want* to answer?”

Lucas grinned. *Oh, I love a challenge.* This wasn’t the simple thrill of a flirtation; it was the challenge of a complex system. The man was a walking fortress of contradictions, and Lucas’ mind was already scanning for structural weaknesses in his defenses. This was the kind of problem he lived for.

The other man just stared at him, unimpressed.

“I’m Lucas,” he offered, testing the waters.

The swimmer hesitated. His gaze swept over Lucas again, slow and assessing, but he still said nothing. Then, instead of answering, he asked, flatly, “Are you from Mexico?”

Lucas blinked, caught off guard. “Yeah... why?”

Something shifted in the swimmer’s expression. He went still, just for a moment. Not frozen, but like a wire pulled tight under the skin. Then it was gone. He looked at Lucas one last time, then abruptly grabbed his belongings and turned to leave.

Lucas was faster. He snatched up his things and followed, keeping pace. “How did you know I was from Mexico?” Lucas asked, genuinely curious now. His years at MIT had almost erased his accent, and while his features could hint at his heritage, they weren’t distinct enough to give him away so easily. *So how the hell did this guy know?*

The other man didn’t answer. By now, it was obvious they were heading back to the same hotel.

Lucas wasn’t about to let it go. “Hey!” he called, picking up his pace. “You can’t just say something like that and then not explain yourself.”

Green eyes stared at him, cool and unaffected.

Lucas felt irritation creep in, but he forced himself to exhale slowly, letting his analytical mind take over. “You don’t know *me*,” he said, watching carefully. “So that means you know the people I’m here with.” A beat passed. “Who are you? How do you know Jon Carver?”

Still, the man said nothing. But his ears burned red, betraying him.

Lucas had enough. He stepped into the man’s path, squaring up to him. “How do you know Jon?” he repeated. They were almost the same height—Lucas had a few centimeters

on him at most. Close enough that, despite the other man's rudeness, his smugness, and his damn near unwillingness to speak, Lucas wasn't exactly *bothered* by their proximity.

His skin prickled with something that wasn't quite annoyance, wasn't quite attraction... but something in between. It was a variable he couldn't account for, a data point that didn't fit any model in his head. This man was dismissive, uncooperative, and a potential threat, yet his proximity felt less like a danger and more like a challenge his body was inexplicably eager to accept.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence, but ultimately, the man spoke. "I was supposed to keep an eye on him." That was all he said.

Lucas narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, 'keep an eye on him'? For *who*?"

Again, no answer. Instead, the man took a step back, making an obvious attempt to walk around him. By now, they had nearly reached the hotel's entrance.

Lucas knew he was crossing a line, but he couldn't help himself. The situation was slipping. The stranger was about to vanish, an unresolved variable in his equation. And if there was one thing Lucas couldn't stand, it was watching helplessly as he lost control of an outcome. The impulse came before the thought; an action to restore order, however clumsy.

He reached out, grabbing the other man's wrist before he could slip away. The moment his fingers wrapped around firm, warm skin, the other man's eyes snapped to his, startled. But not pulling away.

And for a fleeting second, Lucas *felt* something, like static, a shock of electricity racing up his arm, scattering across his nerves like a pulse he hadn't predicted. His mind scrambled to process the input; this wasn't standard contact, not even a flagged emotional response. It was data, unstructured and anomalous. And every system he had lit up with the same result: *more*.

Reminding himself that grabbing someone (however absurdly good that skin had felt, so warm, so *present* that it had momentarily overridden every internal protocol) was a breach of every socioethical standard he subscribed to, he let go.

"Sorry," he murmured, rubbing his palm against his jeans.

The other man still didn't speak. But after a breath, he finally exhaled. "I'm a journalist," he admitted. Lucas raised a brow. "The whole of Switzerland is after Jon Carver right now," the man continued. "I did my research beforehand. I knew he was involved with a young man named Lucas. That's obviously you."

Lucas nodded, processing the information. *Bullshit*, was his first instinct. The data

didn't add up. He decided to test the hypothesis. "Wait—if you're a journalist, do you know Madeleine Marceau? One of us—"

The reaction was immediate and to Lucas's analytical mind as telling as a red flag in a data set. A real journalist, catching the scent of a big story, would've seen the name as bait. As a chance to make a connection. He would've asked questions, shown interest. This boy did the exact opposite.

Before Lucas could even finish the sentence, the other had already turned and headed for the hotel entrance. *Flight*. The least logical move for a reporter, but the most logical for someone just caught in a lie.

"How rude," Lucas murmured, more amused than annoyed.

Just before disappearing into the lobby, the boy half-turned and gave the faintest of reluctant grins. It was barely there, almost invisible, but Lucas saw it. And he saw it for what it was. Not a sign of superiority, but an emotional leak. The involuntary crack in a poorly built façade.

Pretty, Lucas thought absently. And then, with the cold, clear certainty of a completed analysis: *And a damn bad liar*.

There was something about the quiet, the secrecy, the sheer lack of words that only made Lucas want to talk to him more. By the time he realized it, they were already standing in front of the elevators.

"Are you stalking me now?" the other man asked, voice low.

"Hell no. I just need to get upstairs, too."

The elevator doors slid open. The man stepped in wordlessly, giving no acknowledgment as the doors shut and swallowed him up. Lucas exhaled, running a hand through his damp hair. Something told him: he was going to be seeing a lot more of that 'journalist'.

Chapter Four: The Cavalry

After the encounter with the mysterious man, Lucas marched straight to Jon and Ari's suite. He knocked, and moments later, Jon opened the door, dripping wet, wearing nothing but a towel slung low around his hips. His annoyed expression said it all.

"Am I interrupting?" Lucas asked cheerfully, brushing past Jon into the suite. "Jon, I didn't sleep all night. And guess what? There's a journalist in the hotel, watching you. Or at least, that's what he claims. But I don't believe him for a second!"

Jon let out a groan and dragged a hand down his face. "Lucas, I'd really like to get dressed before the day officially starts," he muttered, already heading back into the bathroom.

Ari appeared, fully dressed and curious. "Journalist?"

"I was up all night going through the documents," Lucas said, animated, "then I went for a swim. And there was this guy at the pool," he flushed at the memory, "and he recognized me. Asked if I was from Mexico. But he didn't actually know me. He knew *you*, Jon. And once I caught on, he admitted he was supposed to keep an eye on you. Then he just dropped it, saying he was a journalist."

"What did he look like?" Jon asked, now dressed, arms folded across his chest.

"About my height and age. Athletic. Not ridiculously overdone like *you two*," Lucas said, shooting both Jon and Ari a pointed look, which they returned with matching grins. "Brown hair, green eyes."

There was no stopping the heat that rose to Lucas's cheeks as he remembered the swimmer's eyes. But then he pressed on in filing Jon and Ari in about his night shift.

"Okay, so here's the short version: this isn't just noise. Someone's threading a very deliberate narrative, and you're the centerpiece. I mapped out the sequence: anonymous leaks, obscure legal blogs picking it up, then suddenly two mainstream outlets ran 'independent' takes within six hours of each other. Same phrasing, same numbers. That's not coincidence."

By the time he finished his report, they were seated at the breakfast table in the hotel's restaurant. As much as Lucas would've loved to fully indulge in all the Swiss specialties (*Zopf* bread still warm from the oven, slices of *Bündnerfleisch* so thin you could see through them, tiny ramekins of apricot jam, honey from the Alps, soft-boiled eggs with *fleur de sel*, and the dangerously addictive *Nusstorte* squares), he agreed with Jon that they should keep it quick and head back to the suite.

"I'm not giving Maxwell any excuse to say I came unprepared," Jon said, downing his black coffee in one gulp. "But credit where it's due; the coffee here is phenomenal."

Just as they got up to leave, Lucas tugged on Ari's sleeve. "Him," he said simply, nodding toward the man from the pool. He was sitting alone in the farthest corner of the dining room, casually scrolling through his phone, a cup of coffee and a croissant in front of him like he didn't have a care in the world.

Ari let out a low whistle. "That's the guy from the pool?"

Lucas turned crimson again. "Do you *ever* think about anything else?"

"Let's move," Jon cut in. "If he's watching us, I don't want to stick around another second." There was something else behind the restlessness in Jon's eyes, but Lucas didn't press. He cast one last glance at the young man, just in time to see him look up and meet his gaze. Lucas flinched, caught off guard, then turned sharply and disappeared behind Jon and Ari.

Back in the suite, Jon's laptop was open, but it was Lucas who leaned in, scrolling with unnerving speed. The spreadsheet was dense; hundreds of entries, buried in code names and time stamps, but his eyes moved like he was scanning for a heartbeat. Then he stopped. "Here," he said, pointing to a name that hadn't shown up before. "'Greystem Ltd.' This entity made a move two days before the legislation passed. A massive withdrawal."

Jon peered at it, expression hardening. "It's a shell."

Lucas nodded. "And the account number matches the trailing digits on the document that leaked yesterday."

Jon leaned back. "That's it. That's the pressure point. And it leaves me wondering how Saul fits in the picture; if he does at all, actually."

Before Lucas could answer, Ari walked in, slipping his phone into his pocket, voice still sharp from whatever call he'd just ended. "Madeleine gave me a contact," he announced. "A banker. She didn't say much, but I called him directly, and he'd like to meet for coffee."

Jon nodded, clearly impressed. Lucas didn't miss the way Jon looked at Ari, just a second too long. "So," he said, smirking, "you switching to journalism now? Or *detective* work? You'd be good at it."

Ari scoffed. "Way too exhausting. Besides, I can't stand these people. They love digging through your trash and think that somehow gives them power over you."

Jon grunted in agreement, but before he could respond, his phone rang. "Shit. We

forgot about Maxwell." He picked up and put it on speaker.

"Carver," came Maxwell's signature ice-cold British accent, sharp enough to send a mix of shame and amusement down Lucas' spine. "In place of the welcoming committee I was expecting, André and I arrived to find nothing but a gaping void of human absence. How exactly do you plan to explain yourself?"

"Max, I—"

"ARI!" André's sudden, *booming* yell from the other end of the line was loud enough for Ari to glance up in alarm. "The cavalry has arrived! What's this I hear? Drama? Intrigue? Maxwell, when are we getting there?"

Maxwell sighed heavily. "I'm calling, Jon, to inform you that we have been forced, like *peasants*, to take a taxi. A *taxi*. For the first time in my life, I am sitting in a *Volkswagen*. How do you intend to rectify this humiliation?"

Jon burst into laughter. "Maxwell, you grow as a person every time we meet. When are you arriving?"

"Fifteen minutes, max," he replied. "See you shortly." The call ended. Lucas shook his head, smiling. More family was on its way.

Fifteen minutes later, they met them in the lobby. As always, the greeting was warm, though Maxwell leaned in just enough to hiss, clearly audible for Lucas, "*Carver, the matter of the taxi will have consequences.*"

Ari and André embraced for a long moment, and when they pulled back, André's eyes glimmered with something dangerously amused as he took Ari in. "*Chéri*, as stylish as ever."

"You flatter me," Ari replied smoothly.

"Someone in this group has to remind you what a *cadeau* you are to weary eyes," André flirted shamelessly.

Lucas rolled his eyes before offering Maxwell a firm handshake. "Hi, Max. And sorry we forgot about you. We—"

Jon cut him off before he could continue. "We're being watched."

André immediately perked up. "Ooooh, *espionnage!* Where's the popcorn?"

"Take this seriously, you French extra," Jon muttered, though he couldn't keep the laughter out of his voice.

"*Extra?!*" André gasped in mock outrage. "Jon, you—!"

But before he could launch into a dramatic tirade, Jon gave Maxwell a sharp look, discreetly nodding upwards, signaling him to meet them in their suite.

He got the message immediately. Without another word, he grabbed André, who was still mid-complaint, and dragged him toward the reception table to check in.

Ari, Lucas, and Jon stood by the elevators. And just then, as if by pure chance, the young man from breakfast descended the stairs. Lucas didn't react, nor did he look or acknowledge him in any way.

Back in the suite, Ari gave Jon a nudge. "You saw him too, didn't you? And those eyes—" He turned to Lucas. "You must have noticed those eyes."

Lucas let out a long sigh. "I did."

Ari and Jon exchanged a glance, before a distinctly *British* knock summoned Jon to the door. Maxwell entered first, composed as ever, while André practically flew in behind him, radiating excitement.

"What is happening?" he demanded at once. "What is this really about? Ooooh, the drama, *j'adore*." Smirking, Jon gestured for them to sit.

Maxwell immediately switched into business mode, adjusting his cuffs as he settled in, while André perched on the edge of his seat like they were in the middle of a high-stakes thriller. "Honestly, Jon," Maxwell said as he sat down, smoothing the sleeve of his blazer, "one might assume James Bond is about to come crashing through that panoramic window, pursued by a squad of frogmen—"

"There's a Luxembourg-based shell company," Lucas cut in, not waiting for permission. "Withdrawals timed too perfectly to be random. We traced the number to a leak that dropped yesterday, but the company itself is a ghost."

That got Maxwell's full attention. "What's it called?"

"Greystem Ltd.," Jon said, pulling up the file. "No owners listed, but the transfers match the movements of... someone I used to work with." The fractional pause was deliberate, his voice cooling as he went on. "The moment the legislation changed, someone cashed out. It's too clean."

Before Lucas could answer, André leaned in, his sharp green eyes locking onto him. "There's more," he murmured, gaze narrowing. "Undeniably more. I know that look: you're *glowing*. Who did you meet?" And then, as if the pieces had visibly clicked together in his mind, he exhaled, lips curling in triumph. "Who's watching us? It's the same person, isn't it?"

Lucas raised an eyebrow; for all his theatrics, André had one of the sharpest instincts he had ever encountered. His face turned just the faintest shade of red. He recounted his morning: the encounter at the pool, the elegant swimmer, and his lie about him being a

'journalist'. A 'journalist' assigned to watch Jon. Or, more likely, all of them.

André let out a low whistle. "*Merde*. Intriguing! And how does he look?" Maxwell and Jon groaned in unison.

But of course, Ari answered for Lucas, grinning. "*Exquisite*," he declared. "Tall, athletic, gorgeous green eyes—"

"As gorgeous as *mine*?" André interjected smoothly, clearly testing where the room's loyalties lay.

Ari shook his head solemnly. "André... your eyes... they *haunt* me at night."

Before this could escalate into a full-fledged André vs. Mystery Journalist competition, Maxwell stepped in with a sigh. "Who else is involved?" he asked, precise and to the point, wasting no words.

"Short answer? Everyone." Jon flipped open his laptop and pulled up the spreadsheet Lucas and he had spent the morning working on. "Every major player. Anyone stand out to you?"

To Lucas' surprise, a mischievous grin spread across Maxwell's face. "Oh, absolutely. What a delightful sight: our dear Saul Richter floundering."

Ari, Lucas, and Jon exchanged glances. Out of almost a hundred names, Maxwell had picked that one.

"You know him?" Jon asked carefully.

"Know him?" Maxwell echoed, reaching for an imaginary drink and finding nothing. "Jon, Saul Richter is, let's say, an old acquaintance."

Jon raised a brow. "Business?"

Maxwell nodded. "Once. Briefly. We partnered for about three years, during the *second* golden age of private equity." He flicked a piece of lint off his sleeve. "It went well—until it didn't."

Ari chimed in. "Let me guess: Saul tried to gut you."

Maxwell didn't flinch. "With surgical precision. He wanted me out, quietly and cleanly. I caught wind of it just in time."

Lucas leaned forward. "What was the play? Hostile takeover?"

"Not quite," Maxwell said. "He buried a clause in a side agreement. I had my lawyers comb through the filings; found a loophole he didn't expect."

Jon, already typing, glanced up. "You beat him to the exit."

"Pulled my capital, triggered a clause he thought expired. He lost millions."

Maxwell's grin was pure, malicious joy. "The very millions he was planning to steal from

me.”

“So he has a history of using sleight-of-hand to move assets. Sounds... familiar.”, Ari said.

Lucas opened a new tab. “Any chance the shell we’re tracking is tied to that period?”

“No. Greystem Ltd.’s new. But the strategy is identical,” Maxwell said, shaking his head.

Jon leaned back. “Fits the profile. He did the same to me.”

Maxwell blinked. “Wait, *you* worked with Saul?”

“Mentored me,” Jon answered flatly. “Or pretended to. I still don’t know entirely how he’s done it, but he quietly siphoned off capital, then dumped me when it went south.”

Ari rubbed his chin. “That’s how you lost—?”

“—A third of the Carver inheritance,” Jon finished. “I dug in, tracked the trail, and took it back. Froze him out of three other networks in the process.”

Maxwell exhaled, scratching the back of his neck. “Well then. That makes two of us. The man’s consistent, I’ll give him that.”

“So we’re looking at someone who knows how to orchestrate collapses while staying technically clean”, Lucas said while scanning the spreadsheet again.

“Exactly,” Jon said. “At first, we thought he was the one pulling strings behind this legislation. But now he’s flailing like the rest of us.”

Ari nodded. “Madeleine says the banker might know who *actually* moved first. We meet him, we might get our answer.”

“When?” Jon asked.

“Half past four. He insisted on somewhere neutral.”

“I don’t want him up here,” Jon said. “We’re already being watched.”

Lucas leaned back, folding his arms. “Then let him watch us back. Meet him downstairs in the lobby, public place. Controlled visibility. And while you’re talking to the banker...” He smirked. “I’ll keep our ‘journalist’ occupied.”

Jon raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Not a bad plan. And how do you intend to do that?”

Lucas smirk widened. “Let’s just say I have unfinished business with him.” Ari elbowed Jon sharply in the ribs.

Maxwell hummed approvingly. “I’ll make a few calls, see what I can dig up. André, you’re staying here with me.”

“What? *Me*? Condemned to idleness?” André threw his hands in the air. “Of course I

should be at that table when Jon and Ari—”

“André.” Maxwell’s voice was sharp. “As amusing as this all is, this is about a lot of money. Too many people draw attention.”

“*Merde.* Fine. But at least let me have an apéritif while I suffer.”

Maxwell exhaled slowly. Then, dry as ever, he murmured, “That, my dear husband, is an excellent plan.”



Chapter Five: Who Are You?

At 4:30pm, Lucas positioned himself near the staircase, keeping a clear view of all the exits.

Jon and Ari sat right in the center of the lounge, waiting for the banker, though they looked nothing like two men about to meet a potentially critical informant. Lucas watched them closely. Ari laughed, Jon followed, their energy light, effortless. Then Jon reached for Ari's hand, and the way Ari looked at him in response, warm, unguarded, with something raw and glowing beneath the surface, made Lucas glance away, as if he'd intruded on something sacred. It was *this*, more than anything, that had fascinated Lucas about Jon and Ari since the day he met them. It wasn't just attraction: it was something deeper, something that fit together like a lock and key. And somehow, they had managed to keep that connection intact, even strengthen it, over the years.

Movement on the stairs caught Lucas's attention. The swimmer from that morning stepped into the lobby, his sharp green eyes scanning the room, until they landed on Jon and Ari. His gaze widened subtlety and his posture stiffened. He hadn't expected to see them here, at least not so openly.

Lucas approached the 'journalist' with quiet ease while he was distracted, until he stood at an arms reach away.

"What do you want?" the swimmer asked, his voice sharp with irritation when he finally noticed him. "Let me work."

The rejection was so sharp, so final, it hit Lucas's need for control like a whipcrack. He felt the situation slipping from his hands; this boy, this unpredictable variable, was about to vanish, leaving him with an unresolved equation and that unbearable sense of helplessness. He *hated* that feeling. He hated being passive when every part of him was screaming to shape the outcome.

"Oh, hell no," Lucas said; the casual tone in his voice was pure self-defense. Before he even realized what he was doing, he wrapped an arm around the other's shoulders. The muscles beneath tensed instantly, a coiled mix of resistance and restrained energy. And in that touch, Lucas understood the real impulse behind his action.

With a gentle but unmistakable movement, Lucas pushed him down onto the curved bench and slid in right next to him, blocking the exit. He cornered him, not to possess, but to create a space he couldn't run from. A space where he'd *have* to stay.

It was a risk and a massive overstep. But in that moment, it felt like the only honest language either of them could speak.

The muscles under Lucas' palm tightened, but the man didn't pull away. Nor was he relaxing. It felt more like a system booting up.

Lucas registered the hesitation, the suppressed reaction. He knew his analytical approach gave him an edge, a near-arrogant confidence in his ability to read the other's signals correctly. He assumed he understood what was happening beneath the surface and decided to keep going.

The other man stiffened, but allowed himself to be led, probably too shocked by Lucas's audacity to resist properly.

Vivid green eyes burned into him. "What *is* your problem?" the swimmer snapped.

"First off, I want to know your name. No more bullshit."

"That's none of your damn business," the man all but spat.

Lucas studied him, tilting his head slightly. 'Man' might have been a stretch. He was definitely an adult (probably around Lucas's age, maybe a little younger), but his aggression, the way he carried himself, made him seem older. Or at least, like he wanted to be. "You're not a journalist," Lucas said smoothly.

"I am," the other man countered immediately.

"No, you're *not*. If you were, you wouldn't be making such a big deal out of telling me your name. And you wouldn't be this unprofessional. You're watching Jon, sure, but not for journalism. Which means you were sent to keep an eye on him. And that means you're connected to one of his so-called colleagues."

The swimmer's ears burned red. Again. *Gotcha*, Lucas thought.

At that moment, a thin man carrying a large briefcase entered the lounge, walking directly toward Jon and Ari's table.

Lucas and the young man beside him watched as he pulled out a chair and sat down. A moment later, Jon and Ari bent their heads together with the thin man in quiet conversation.

"You're not really Jon's son," the young man murmured beside him.

Lucas tore his gaze from the scene at the table, turning his attention back. "No," he said slowly, sensing that honesty would be the best approach here. "It's... complicated. But he, and Ari, are like a mix between an older brother and a father to me."

Green eyes locked onto his. "What do you *mean* by that?" The question was even quieter than before.

Lucas relaxed slightly. This was going exactly as planned. And, if he was honest, he was starting to enjoy the other man's presence: his sharpness, his guardedness, the way his

mind worked.

Out of nowhere, a scent hit him. It was subtle, expensive cologne, nothing overwhelming. But beneath it was the man's natural scent; clean, crisp, something inherently physical. It struck Lucas like a sudden chill, rolling over his skin in a wave of goosebumps.

He exhaled slowly, steadyng himself. "Well," he continued, regaining focus. "Jon and Ari came to Mexico a few years ago, and my brother met them somewhere, God knows where." Lucas glanced away for a moment, weighing how much he felt like revealing. "They showed up and... stayed," he said eventually. "They're brilliant. And infuriating. And probably the best thing that ever happened to our family."

He left it at that, but in the space behind the words, his mind drifted: to the suffocating silence of his home in Oaxaca, how he'd always sensed that something about him didn't quite line up, but couldn't name what that was. He thought of Jon sitting with him on the porch, patiently listening without pressure, until the words slowly found shape. And of Ari, who had shown him, without trying, that masculinity wasn't a fixed equation, but a system with far more variables than he'd been led to believe. No, he just kept it simple.

The other man stiffened slightly. "You speak so... kindly about them," he noted, and the hard edge in his voice was suddenly gone, replaced by something unreadable and almost wistful. The shift was jarring enough to make Lucas pause.

"Because they are kind," Lucas said simply, before he narrowed his eyes slightly, curiosity stirring. Then, without thinking, he asked, "You don't have many friends, do you?"

"Excuse me?!" The other man snapped, his entire body tensing. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

Lucas didn't flinch. "You're alone here. And about as approachable as a pissed-off porcupine," he said, unimpressed.

To his surprise, the other man's mouth twitched. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was something close. Then, as if catching himself, he straightened, his expression sharpening again.

Good, Lucas thought. All attention on me. Stay nice and distracted. At the table, the thin man slid some papers toward Jon and Ari, pen in hand, gesturing to a specific section.

The swimmer clearly decided, at that exact moment, to turn the tables. His gaze dropped deliberately over Lucas, dragging over his face, his shoulders, his posture, studying him with a raw intensity that caught Lucas off guard. "Let me go," the man said,

voice low, his eyes flicking to the only path out of the curved bench seat; the one Lucas was currently blocking. "I'll head to my room, and we'll leave it at that."

"Absolutely not." Lucas didn't even have to think about it. A realization struck him. He wasn't just keeping the upper hand here. He wasn't just holding him in place for the sake of control. He enjoyed this, wanted to keep talking to him.

"Fine," the other man said. "You want my name? It's Robert."

Lucas shook his head. "Too easy."

"Blake."

"Too American."

"Steven."

"You're not British."

"Joachim."

Lucas laughed. "You're also not a forty-year-old German."

Something shifted. A flicker of amusement passed over the other man's face, and to Lucas's surprise, he visibly relaxed, just a little. His shoulders lost some of their tension. His expression softened, if only for a second. For a moment, neither of them spoke. "I can't tell you my name. Maybe I would, if things were a little different."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "What would have to be *different*?"

The other man looked away, jaw tightening. He'd said too much, and he knew it. "It's complicated," he muttered.

Lucas felt something stir in him, something frustratingly unfamiliar. Not attraction or curiosity, more of an urge; a quiet, stubborn need to understand this guy, to get past whatever walls he'd thrown up.

And underneath it, recognition, Lucas realized. There was a look in the man's eyes, tight and guarded, already halfway turned away. He knew that look because he'd worn it himself for years. That silent kind of pain he didn't have words for, back then. The look of someone who craved belonging but felt betrayed by the very people who were supposed to be closest.

The one he dressed up in control and cleverness and cold shoulders until someone *finally* saw past it. For him, it had been Jon and Ari. And for reasons he couldn't begin to justify, the idea that no one had done the same for this man made something in him clench. *A protective instinct? For him?* Lucas was almost mad at himself for it. Instead, he kept his voice even. "You look like someone who carries a lot of responsibility."

The other man huffed a laugh. "And you just look like a rich boy."

"I don't have a penny."

"Even worse."

"God, you're exhausting." *And I'm enjoying every damn second of this*, Lucas thought. "If you weren't such a complete idiot, I might actually like you," he said bluntly.

The other man stared at him. Without missing a beat, he shot back, "I wouldn't like you even if you weren't a complete idiot."

Lucas grinned.

And, despite himself, the other man did too. It was barely there at first, a crack in his tightly controlled expression, but then his lips parted, revealing perfect teeth. The hard lines around his eyes softened, his whole posture losing some of its tension.

Lucas had him.

Just as he was about to say something else, the banker at Jon and Ari's table stood up, crossed the lounge, and disappeared outside. They scanned the room, searching for Lucas. It wasn't hard to find him; he was sitting far too close to the mysterious swimmer-turned-'journalist,' who suddenly looked very nervous. They made their way toward them.

"*Scheiße*," the young man muttered under his breath. His entire demeanor changed in an instant. "Let me go now."

"Why?" Lucas asked, watching him closely.

"I can't. Please." There was something raw in his voice, something that made Lucas hesitate. They were seated in a narrow booth, and Lucas was blocking the only way out.

For a second, neither of them moved. Jon and Ari came closer. The charged moment between them was almost tangible; Lucas caught the man's scent again, and it hit him so hard he had to close his eyes for a breath.

He could've held him there. His pride wanted it. His need for control screamed for it. But the raw panic in the other's plea—that unfiltered *please*—punched straight through his defenses. His empathy, that often inconvenient part of him, took over. He stood up, giving the other man the opening he needed.

The other man *bolted*. Not walked or slipped away. He ran, straight past them, head down, shoulders tense, as if the ground might swallow him up.

"He's certainly not too excited to see us," Ari mused as he reached Lucas' table.

"He isn't. I almost had him; I was about to push him a little more, ask a few uncomfortable questions." Lucas' mind was racing. "I don't think he's press. He's got nothing on him: no equipment, no way to record anything. If anything, I think he's

connected to one of the other investors— "

Jon didn't respond. He stood utterly still, his gaze fixed on the space where the young man had vanished. His jaw was set, shoulders rigid; like something had just clicked into place, too fast and too hard. Lucas barely had time to register what was happening before Jon's hand was gripping his wrist, pulling him up from the seat with a force that left no room for argument. His voice, sharp and controlled, carried an authority Lucas had rarely experienced firsthand: something closer to the version of Jon that dealt with the corporate world, the one that made grown men sweat in boardrooms. "To our room. Now."

Lucas blinked. "Alright, alright, what's the—"

"*I said now.*" Jon's voice brooked no discussion.

Ari looked equally lost, but that didn't stop him from following immediately as Jon all but dragged Lucas through the lobby and toward the elevators.

Lucas cast one last glance over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the green-eyed stranger still standing there, but he was gone.

By the time they stepped into the elevator, Jon was practically vibrating with tension. He punched the button for their floor twice and exhaled slowly through his nose, visibly trying to rein in whatever was running through his head.

Lucas frowned. "Jon, seriously, what the hell - "

"Not here." Jon cut him off, ice-blue eyes flicking up to the small security camera in the corner of the elevator. The ride up felt like an eternity. When they reached their floor, Jon stepped out first, scanning the hallway with a wariness that made Lucas' skin prickle. Ari exchanged a look with Lucas - *he doesn't do this unless something's really wrong* - before they both followed.

The moment the suite door closed behind them, Jon turned on Lucas, his expression unreadable but intense. "Repeat what you just told me. Word for word."

Lucas hesitated, taken aback by how serious Jon looked. "What part?"

"All of it."

Lucas exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. I said I don't think he's a journalist. He had no phone, no camera, nothing to record notes. And if he's watching you, he's not doing it professionally. I think he's connected to one of the other investors."

Jon closed his eyes for half a second. When he opened them again, his entire demeanor had shifted - from tightly controlled panic to ice-cold calculation. "That's not just *any* investor, Lucas." His voice was low. "That's Saul Richter's son."

Lucas went very still. He could feel Ari freeze beside him, his breath catching

slightly.

"Bençe," Jon continued. "His name is Bençe Richter."

Lucas' mind reeled. He thought back to the flashes of expression on the young man's face: the wariness, the challenge, the strange, quiet sadness he carried under all that hostility. *"Ay, Díos."* It was all Lucas could think to say.

