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Flying death

“High above the clouds,
his charm hides a chilling secret.
Every layover is his playground.
Every city, another victim.”

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FLYING DEATH

“As a former flight attendant with 15,000 flying hours and 15 years in the skies, I’ve seen, heard, and experienced moments that linger long after landing. From the confined cabin of an aircraft—where the boundary between the ordinary and the unexplainable feels razor-thin—to the vibrant and mysterious layovers around the globe, every journey holds its own story. While this series is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from the many faces, places, and whispers I’ve encountered throughout my years of flight.”



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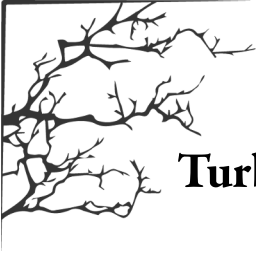
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Chapter 1:



Turbulence Beneath the Surface



ETHAN'S ALARM BUZZED at precisely 7:00 a.m., a soft vibration rather than an intrusive jingle. He slid out of bed, his movements fluid and deliberate. The minimalist decor of the Manhattan hotel room reflected his personality—sleek, sharp, and devoid of clutter. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the city, alive with motion even at this early hour. He stared out at the skyline, a faint smirk twitching at the corner of his mouth.

His first task was order. He smoothed the bedspread, aligning the edges with meticulous precision, as if disarray anywhere could crack the mask he so carefully constructed. He moved to the small desk near the window, retrieving his vintage pilot's watch. The worn leather strap and faintly ticking mechanism were relics of a life he'd long compartmentalized but never forgotten. He ran a thumb over the scratched casing before strapping it onto his wrist. A sense of rhythm, of time marching steadily forward, settled his thoughts.

In the bathroom, the ritual continued. A razor glided effortlessly over his jaw, leaving a trail of perfect skin behind. Each motion was slow, calculated. He gazed at his reflection, studying the face the world trusted—a composed and polished first officer, with eyes that hinted at depth but revealed nothing. He allowed himself one fleeting moment

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of curiosity: How many saw this face as charming? As trustworthy? How many had mistaken it for safe?

A faint trace of perfume interrupted his thoughts. The scent—cloying and familiar—seemed to seep from the edges of his mind. He paused, inhaling deeply. Laughter echoed faintly in his memory, a distorted soundtrack to his childhood. Ethan blinked hard and reached for his shirt, the memory buried as quickly as it had surfaced.

The TV in the corner played softly, a muted newscaster gesturing at an image of a missing woman. Ethan tilted his head, considering the face briefly before returning to his tie. The knot tightened perfectly under his collar. He didn't need to hear the report to know they were still searching, still clueless. The smirk returned, faint but sure.

The coffee maker hissed as he sat at the desk. He stared at the city beyond the glass, sipping the bitter liquid and planning the day ahead. Time, once again, was his ally.



ETHAN STOOD BY THE window, sipping his black coffee as the muted television flickered in the corner of the room. The morning news anchor's voice droned on, her tone forcedly neutral, a stark contrast to the bold red headline at the bottom of the screen: *Unsolved Mystery Grips the City: Police Still Searching for Clues in Midtown Murder.*

The screen switched to footage of a crime scene—yellow tape fluttering in the wind, a somber officer briefing reporters. Ethan's lips curled, ever so slightly. "Still chasing shadows," he murmured, setting the cup down on the pristine white counter.

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The camera panned to the reporter on-site. “Authorities are appealing for any witnesses to come forward. The Midtown area remains on high alert as the investigation continues.”

Ethan walked over and turned up the volume briefly. His last victim had been in the wrong place, wrong time—or perhaps, exactly the right time for his purpose. The details remained vague, just as he had intended. He watched for another moment, waiting to catch a glimpse of something—anything—that might hint at a misstep. But the story offered no surprises.

Satisfied, Ethan picked up the remote and clicked the screen off. The smirk vanished, replaced by the calculated calm of a man who never left loose ends. He adjusted the cufflinks on his crisply ironed shirt, the metal catching the morning light. The TV’s black screen reflected his image back at him—sharp, composed, untouchable.

As he moved toward the door, a faint scent of something sweet wafted past him. He paused, turning his head as if searching for a source. There was nothing but the antiseptic perfection of his hotel room. Still, the smell lingered, unwelcome and intrusive.

For a fleeting moment, Ethan thought of her—his mother. Cheap perfume. Smoky laughter. A darkened doorway he was never allowed to cross.

He tightened his grip on the handle and pushed the door open. The past could wait. Tonight was about the future.

The café was quiet, a stark contrast to the bustling chaos of New York’s morning rush. Ethan leaned back in his chair, fingers tracing the rim of his porcelain cup as he stared out the window. Pedestrians moved in waves, their faces flushed with urgency or distraction. He envied their simplicity.

The rich bitterness of the coffee grounded him as he allowed his thoughts to drift. The woman last week—her laugh, her perfume—had stayed with him longer than most. Not because she mattered. None of

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them did. But she'd fought, clawing at his arms in a way that still left phantom bruises on his skin. It was exhilarating.

Yet now, in the stillness of the morning, a whisper of doubt brushed against him. He felt it creep along the edges of his mind like an unwelcome draft. Was it possible he'd missed something? A hair? A smudge?

Ethan shook his head slightly. Impossible. He was methodical, precise, flawless. It was why they'd never caught him, and why they never would.

The door jingled as a man entered, shuffling awkwardly as he balanced a briefcase and coffee order. Ethan watched him with faint disdain. There were those who moved with intention, and those who stumbled through life, oblivious. His victims often fell into the latter category, drawn in by his charm and polished veneer.

The thought brought him back to the dating app he'd skimmed the night before. Profiles blending together in curated perfection, smiles bright but hollow. He'd picked a few potentials, but none had struck him. Not yet.

He set the cup down and straightened his tie. Tonight, he'd try again. The perfect mark was out there. It always was. All he had to do was wait.

In the distance, a police siren wailed, fading into the hum of the city. Ethan closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the anticipation curling in his chest. The night was coming. And with it, the hunt.

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Ethan pressed the coffee mug to his lips, but the bitterness of the brew only sharpened the edge of a memory he could never shake. The faint echo of laughter filled his ears—light, airy, but hollow, like a brittle promise about to break.

He closed his eyes, and the Manhattan skyline melted away. He was back in that dingy apartment, the one where faded wallpaper peeled in the corners, revealing years of neglect hidden beneath cheap patterns. The place always smelled of stale cigarettes and perfume—the kind that clung too long and spoke too loudly.

A man's laugh boomed from the other room, too familiar for a stranger, too casual for a guest. Ethan, no older than ten, sat cross-legged on the worn carpet, his hands wrapped tightly around a plastic model airplane. It was the only thing his father had left behind—a relic of a life that had slipped away in pieces.

"Ethan, stay in your room," came her sharp voice from the other side of the thin wall. It wasn't a request. It was a command, cold and final.

He heard her laugh then, sweet and practiced, a performance tailored to an audience of one. That laugh wasn't for him; it never had been. His hands tightened around the plane, the cheap plastic biting into his palms. Something inside him burned—rage, resentment, or maybe something worse. The sound of footsteps, low murmurs, and the clink of glasses blurred together. But that laugh—it sliced through everything, a blade dulled by repetition but still sharp enough to cut.

The memory shifted. He was older now, standing in the doorway, watching her smooth her dress, her lipstick smeared slightly at the corner. She glanced at him briefly, her eyes unreadable, before turning back to the man waiting on the couch.

"You'll understand when you're older," she'd said, her tone dismissive, as if her choices were as inevitable as the sun setting.

Ethan's eyes snapped open. The sounds of the present rushed back—the hum of the city below, the faint creak of the hotel air

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conditioner. His grip on the coffee mug was white-knuckled, his reflection in the glass hard and cold.

The laughter faded, but the sting remained, fueling the fire that had burned since that day.



ETHAN ADJUSTED THE cuffs of his shirt as he stepped out of the hotel lobby and onto the bustling Manhattan street. The crisp fall air wrapped around him, carrying the scent of roasted chestnuts from a nearby cart and the faint tang of gasoline. A yellow cab honked aggressively as it swerved to avoid a group of jaywalking tourists, their laughter rising above the chaos.

He moved effortlessly through the crowd, his tailored appearance blending in with the sea of professionals, tourists, and locals. Every step was deliberate, every glance calculated. To the world, he was just another face in the city, a polished man with no story worth noticing.

Times Square loomed ahead, its giant screens flashing advertisements that painted the crowd in ever-changing hues. Ethan avoided the tourist traps, steering toward quieter streets. The rhythm of his polished shoes on the pavement became a steady metronome, grounding him as he let the city's pulse guide him.

At Bryant Park, he paused. The sprawling green space was alive with activity—vendors setting up stalls, couples sipping coffee on the steps, children chasing pigeons with gleeful abandon. He leaned against a wrought-iron fence, his gaze scanning the crowd. Not for a target, not yet. This was reconnaissance, a quiet moment to absorb the city's energy and let it feed the controlled chaos inside him.

A young woman brushed past, her laughter trailing behind her like a ribbon caught in the wind. His jaw tightened. The sound was too

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close to a memory he didn't want to revisit, but he forced his expression to remain neutral. His control was flawless, unshakable.

The sun began to dip below the skyscrapers, casting long shadows across the streets. Ethan pushed off the fence and resumed his walk. He'd seen enough for now. Tonight, Manhattan would provide, as it always did. For now, the city was a stage, and he was the man in the wings, waiting for his cue.



ETHAN LEANED AGAINST a sleek, modern bench in Bryant Park, his phone cradled in his hand. The dating app's interface glowed faintly in the early evening light, a digital hunting ground with endless possibilities. He scrolled methodically, his thumb moving at an unhurried pace. Each profile revealed a face, a name, and a curated list of interests designed to intrigue strangers. To Ethan, they were stories waiting to end.

A young woman's profile appeared on the screen, her smile wide and disarmingly genuine. Her name was Rachel. Her bio spoke of a love for jazz, old movies, and rooftop gardens—an artistic type, full of charm and sensitivity. Ethan's lips curled into a faint smile. He swiped right.

The notification was almost immediate. A match.

Rachel's profile picture faded into the chat screen, and a pre-written message from her flashed: "Hey there! What brings you to this app?"

He typed quickly, his words effortlessly tailored to her interests.

"Looking to meet someone who can show me the best jazz spots in the city. Any recommendations?"

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She replied within seconds. “Jazz, huh? You’ve got good taste. There’s a place downtown that’s like stepping into a 1920s speakeasy. Ever been?”

Ethan’s fingers hovered over the keyboard. He glanced around, the sounds of Manhattan dimming as his focus sharpened.

“Sounds like the perfect spot,” he typed. “Would you be my guide?”

Her reply carried an air of excitement. “How can I say no to someone with good taste? Tonight?”

He smiled faintly. It was always easier than it should have been. The app, the banter, the charm—it was a formula that never failed.

“Tonight works perfectly. Text me the details,” he responded, adding his number without hesitation.

Rachel sent the address almost immediately—a trendy lounge in the Lower East Side. Ethan committed the details to memory, then locked his phone. As the city continued to bustle around him, he allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction.



THE LOUNGE BUZZED WITH a sophisticated energy, the dim lighting casting a warm glow over leather booths and polished wood surfaces. A jazz trio played softly in the corner, their melodies weaving through the low hum of conversation. Ethan stepped inside, adjusting his cufflinks as his eyes scanned the room.

Rachel was already there, seated at the bar. She was smaller than her profile suggested, with a delicate frame wrapped in a sleek black dress. Her hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders, and a bright smile lit up her face when she saw him approach.

“You must be Ethan,” she said, her voice warm and inviting.

“And you must be Rachel,” he replied, offering a polite nod as he slid onto the stool beside her.

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The bartender approached, wiping his hands on a towel. "What can I get you?"

Ethan gestured toward Rachel. "I'll have whatever she's having."

"A Negroni," she said, raising her glass slightly. "It's my go-to."

"Classic," Ethan remarked. "You strike me as someone who appreciates timeless things."

Rachel laughed softly, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. "Is that your way of saying I'm predictable?"

"Not at all," Ethan replied. "It's refreshing to meet someone who knows what they like."

The conversation flowed effortlessly. Ethan steered the dialogue with precision, mirroring her interests and letting her talk just enough to feel comfortable. He laughed at her jokes, nodded at her stories, and leaned in at the right moments, giving her his undivided attention.

Rachel tilted her head, studying him with a curious smile. "So, what do you do, Ethan? You don't seem like the usual finance or tech guy."

"I'm a pilot," he said simply. "It's not as glamorous as it sounds, but it keeps life interesting."

"Wow, a pilot," she said, her eyes widening. "That's definitely not boring."

Ethan offered a modest smile, letting the intrigue work in his favor. He could see the spark in her expression, the subtle shift in her body language. She was leaning closer now, her guard lowering with every passing second.

He glanced at the clock above the bar. The night was just beginning, and everything was falling into place.



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RACHEL LEANED BACK slightly, her head tilted as she studied him. “So, a pilot. That must be exciting. Do you have a favorite destination?”

Ethan swirled the amber liquid in his glass, his expression thoughtful. “Every place has its charm,” he said, his tone measured. “But the people make it memorable. Like this—being here with you tonight.”

She flushed slightly, a genuine smile tugging at her lips. “Careful, Ethan. You’re making it hard to believe you don’t say that to everyone.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the bar. “Would it matter if it were true?”

The comment hung in the air, weighted yet light enough to invite laughter. Rachel chuckled softly, taking another sip of her drink. “You’re good,” she admitted, her eyes narrowing playfully. “I’ll give you that.”

“It’s easy when the company’s worth it,” he countered, his voice dipping just enough to convey sincerity.

The jazz trio shifted into a livelier tune, and Rachel’s foot tapped to the rhythm. Ethan noticed but didn’t comment, his attention wholly absorbed by her. The conversation turned to lighter topics—movies, favorite books, the places they’d both been. Ethan guided the exchange deftly, weaving in pieces of his fabricated persona while learning more about her.

“Do you ever feel like certain people are meant to meet?” she asked suddenly, her gaze searching his.

Ethan paused, holding her gaze for a beat longer than necessary. “I think timing plays a bigger role than we give it credit for,” he said. “Sometimes, it’s just... right.”

Rachel seemed to consider this, her expression softening. She laughed again, a little softer this time, and touched his arm briefly. “Well, tonight definitely feels right.”

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Ethan smiled, a gesture that didn't quite reach his eyes. "It does," he agreed. His mind, however, was already calculating the next move. Each gesture, each word, was a step forward, the plan unfolding as seamlessly as he'd envisioned.

The connection was set, her trust solidified. The next step would be critical, and he was ready.



THE LOUNGE DISSOLVED into the dimly lit walls of a childhood memory. Ethan was ten again, sitting cross-legged on the thin carpet of his bedroom. The muffled hum of voices and laughter seeped through the thin walls, rising and falling like waves. His mother's laughter pierced the air, high and carefree, a sound he'd grown to resent.

The scent of cheap cologne and stale cigarette smoke wafted under the door. Ethan's hands tightened around the tattered comic book he was pretending to read, his jaw clenched. He glanced toward the door, knowing better than to go out, but the curiosity gnawed at him.

"Stay put," she'd snapped earlier, her eyes wild, lips painted crimson. "You don't need to be out there."

The voices in the living room grew louder, a mix of flirtation and something darker. Ethan stood, his small frame tense, and edged toward the door. He pressed his ear against it, his breath shallow. A stranger's voice rumbled, low and teasing, followed by his mother's laughter—a sound so alien in its joy it felt like a betrayal.

The door handle was cold under his fingers, but he didn't open it. Instead, he backed away, retreating to the safety of his bed. The anger simmered, tangled with confusion and hurt.

Back in the present, Ethan's grip on his glass tightened. Rachel's voice pulled him back, her laughter slicing through the memory like a knife. She was mid-story, recounting an anecdote about her childhood,

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her words brimming with lightness. Ethan forced a smile, masking the storm churning beneath his calm exterior.



RACHEL SWIRLED THE last of her drink, leaning forward with a conspiratorial grin. “This place is great, but I know somewhere even better. Want to check it out?”

Ethan tilted his head, feigning hesitation. “I’d hate to intrude on your plans.”

“Please,” she said, her tone playful. “You’re the most interesting person I’ve met in weeks. Consider it a favor to me.”

He allowed a slight laugh, his fingers tracing the rim of his glass. “How can I say no to that?”

Rachel slid off the barstool, her confidence radiating as she adjusted her purse. Ethan followed, his movements precise, calculated. She led the way through the lounge, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor.

They stepped into the cool night air, the city alive with neon lights and the buzz of passing taxis. Rachel glanced over her shoulder, her smile warm and inviting. “It’s just a few blocks away. You don’t mind walking, do you?”

“Not at all,” Ethan replied, matching her stride. His mind worked swiftly, cataloging the streets and alleyways they passed. Each step brought them closer to isolation, closer to the moment he’d been preparing for.

Rachel laughed again, her voice cutting through the city’s noise like a melody. “You’re quieter than I expected. Thinking about something?”

“Just taking it all in,” Ethan said smoothly, his voice steady. “New York has a way of making you feel like anything’s possible.”

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Her laughter echoed, carefree and unguarded. Ethan's lips curved into a faint smile, though his mind was elsewhere. Each gesture, each word, was another thread in the web he was weaving, a web that would soon ensnare her completely.



THE STREETS OF MANHATTAN stretched before them, illuminated by a kaleidoscope of neon lights and bustling activity. Rachel walked ahead, her heels clicking rhythmically on the pavement, her energy vibrant and carefree. Ethan followed half a step behind, his presence calm and composed, like a shadow merging seamlessly with the night.

“You know, there’s something magical about this city,” Rachel said, glancing over her shoulder with a smile. “You could walk for hours and still find something new.”

Ethan offered a small nod, his gaze sweeping the surroundings. “It’s alive in a way most places aren’t.”

She turned back, gesturing toward the glowing skyline in the distance. “And yet, it can feel so lonely. Don’t you think?”

Ethan’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “Loneliness depends on perspective. Some people find it comforting.”

Rachel laughed lightly, the sound unguarded. “Spoken like someone who’s comfortable being alone. Let me guess—traveling a lot for work does that to you?”

Ethan shrugged, his eyes narrowing as they passed a quiet alley. He committed the details to memory: the shadows pooling in corners, the lack of pedestrians, the faint hum of a streetlamp on the verge of dying. A mental map began to form, a tapestry of possibilities.

Rachel’s laughter rang out again, drawing him back to her. “I bet you’ve seen it all, haven’t you?”

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"I've seen enough," he replied, his voice smooth but detached. His gaze lingered on her for a moment, noting the ease in her posture, the trust she'd extended so effortlessly. He matched her pace, their steps falling into sync.

As they turned a corner, the city noise dulled, the streets quieter here, more intimate. Rachel tilted her head toward a nearby park, its wrought-iron gates partially open, inviting. "There's a spot up ahead that's perfect for late-night walks. You'll love it."

Ethan's hand brushed his jacket pocket, his movements deliberate. "Lead the way."



THE PARK UNFOLDED BEFORE them, a tranquil oasis in the city's chaos. Rows of benches lined the paved paths, their wood worn and familiar, while clusters of trees loomed like silent sentinels. The dim glow of scattered lampposts painted soft halos against the night, leaving pockets of shadow in between.

Rachel strolled ahead, her heels muffled now by the gravel path. "I used to come here all the time," she said, her voice softer in the stillness. "It's one of the few places in the city where you can breathe."

Ethan nodded absently, his attention split between her words and his surroundings. He noted the secluded corners, the strategic placement of each lamppost, the faint rustle of leaves as a breeze whispered through the trees. Every detail became a piece of a larger puzzle.

"You're quiet again," Rachel teased, slowing her pace to match his. "Let me guess—soaking it all in?"

"Something like that," Ethan replied, his tone light but devoid of true engagement. His mind raced, assessing and calculating. The path ahead split into two directions: one led deeper into the park, toward a

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darker, less traveled area, while the other circled back toward the city's glow.

Rachel pointed toward the darker path. "This way's my favorite. It feels like you're stepping out of the city and into another world."

"Sounds perfect," Ethan said, falling into step beside her. He shifted his weight slightly, adjusting his posture, preparing. The quiet around them thickened, the distance from the bustling streets creating an almost tangible separation.

Rachel glanced up at him, her smile warm, oblivious. "Thanks for coming along. It's been a while since I've had company for one of these walks."

Ethan's hand rested casually in his pocket, his fingertips brushing against the smooth metal of a concealed object. "It's my pleasure," he said, his voice steady, his expression unreadable.

His plan was clear now, each step and action meticulously rehearsed in his mind. The night stretched before him, brimming with opportunity, the shadows concealing his true intentions.



THE SOUND OF RACHEL'S laughter pierced the quiet night, light and carefree. Ethan paused mid-step, his chest tightening as the memory surged unbidden. It was like a wave, crashing over him with cruel precision. He blinked, and suddenly he wasn't in the park anymore.

The dim glow of their dingy apartment's single lightbulb replaced the soft lamplight. The laughter, once Rachel's, became his mother's—a hollow, flirtatious melody meant for the stranger seated on their worn-out couch. The man's cologne, sharp and invasive, mingled with the faint mustiness of the room. Ethan, a boy of eight, sat rigid in the shadows of his bedroom doorway, his small hands clenched into fists.

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“You don’t need to sit there all night,” his mother called out over her shoulder, her tone dismissive, almost amused. She didn’t even glance his way.

The stranger laughed, low and grating. “He’s just curious, aren’t you, kid?”

Ethan didn’t answer. The humiliation burned, but worse was the neglect—the feeling of being invisible in his own home, his presence a nuisance rather than a concern. The man’s hand grazed his mother’s knee, and she leaned in closer, her focus entirely on her guest. Ethan’s heart pounded, his breath shallow.

In the present, his fingers curled around the cool metal in his pocket. The weight of it grounded him, pulling him back to the park. The faint sound of Rachel’s voice replaced the haunting echoes of the past.

“Ethan?” she asked, her brow furrowing. She stopped walking, turning to face him. “You okay?”

He forced a smile, but his mask slipped for a fraction of a second. “I’m fine. Just... a lot on my mind.”

Her expression softened. “You seem like someone who carries the world on his shoulders.”

He gave a small nod, pushing the memory down, far enough that it wouldn’t surface again. Not tonight.



RACHEL TILTED HER HEAD toward a quiet, dimly lit bench nestled under a canopy of trees. “Let’s sit for a minute,” she suggested, her voice carrying a casual warmth. “This spot’s perfect to take it all in.”

Ethan hesitated but followed her lead. He settled beside her, his body angled just enough to observe the surrounding paths. His

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composure returned, like a mask snapping neatly into place. He was in control again.

“Tell me something,” Rachel began, her tone playful. “If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would it be?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Right here.”

She laughed, the sound light and genuine. “That’s smooth.”

“Just honest,” he replied, matching her tone. His gaze shifted, scanning the faint glow of a lamppost in the distance, the nearby bushes rustling softly with the breeze. Every sound, every shadow, was cataloged and assessed.

Rachel leaned back, resting her elbows on the bench’s edge. “It’s funny, you know. You seem so polished, but there’s something... deeper. Like you’ve got stories you’ll never tell.”

Ethan’s lips curved faintly. “Everyone has their secrets.”

She turned her head, studying him for a moment. “Well, here’s to secrets,” she said, lifting an imaginary glass. “They make life interesting.”

He nodded, his fingers brushing the object in his pocket. The plan was set, each step rehearsed and perfected. Yet, for a fleeting moment, he wondered what it might feel like to simply let the night end without incident. To let her walk away.

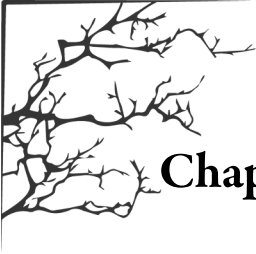
But the pull was too strong, the memory of his mother’s laughter too vivid, too corrosive. His resolve solidified, cold and unyielding.

Rachel stood, brushing her hands together. “We should head back. It’s getting late.”

Ethan rose, his expression smooth, unbothered. “Of course.”

They walked toward the path leading to the park’s edge, the distant hum of the city growing louder. The night was far from over, but Ethan’s mask remained firmly in place, the predator hidden behind a polished facade.

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Chapter 2: Shadows Over Tokyo

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The plane's engines hummed softly as the aircraft taxied toward the gate at Narita International Airport. Ethan adjusted his tie in the reflection of the cockpit window, his face an impenetrable mask of calm. His hands moved with practiced precision, flipping switches and jotting down final notes in the flight log. To the other crew members, he was the picture of professionalism. Inside, a storm churned.

"Smooth landing," the captain said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Passengers won't stop raving about it."

Ethan nodded, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Teamwork makes it happen," he replied, his tone warm but distant. He leaned back slightly as the captain moved past, avoiding the lingering contact.

The airport terminal buzzed with the energy of travelers—families reuniting, businesspeople checking their watches, and the rhythmic clatter of rolling suitcases. Ethan moved through the crowd, his polished shoes clicking against the polished floor. Each step was deliberate, his rolling suitcase trailing behind him like an obedient pet.

A child clutching a worn-out teddy bear caught his attention. The boy's eyes were wide, darting nervously around as if searching for someone. Ethan's gaze lingered a second too long, the sight clawing at the edges of a memory he didn't want to confront.

In his mind, another small hand reached out, trembling, seeking comfort that never came. Ethan blinked, the image dissipating like smoke. His jaw tightened as he redirected his focus to the task at hand.

The customs officer barely glanced at his passport. Ethan's clean-cut appearance and tailored uniform were a shield, rendering him invisible to suspicion. He exchanged polite words, offered a fleeting smile, and passed through the checkpoint unchallenged.

Outside the terminal, the neon lights of Tokyo glowed in the distance, their vibrant hues bleeding into the night sky. The city hummed with life, a symphony of sounds that rose and fell like waves

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against the shoreline. Ethan hailed a cab with a raised hand, sliding into the backseat and reciting the name of his hotel in flawless Japanese.

As the cab weaved through the labyrinthine streets, he leaned back against the leather seat, his expression unchanging. But inside, he cataloged every detail—the density of the crowd, the placement of CCTV cameras, the subtle rhythm of the city’s pulse. Tokyo wasn’t just a layover; it was his next hunting ground.

The boy’s image flickered again in his mind. Ethan stared out the window, the glow of the city lights dancing in his eyes. He exhaled slowly, his hands resting on his lap, fingers twitching slightly as if they still held onto something.

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The crew bus glided to a halt outside the towering Shinjuku hotel, its glass facade shimmering under the soft glow of Tokyo's neon lights. Ethan followed the line of uniformed flight attendants and pilots into the lobby, his wheeled suitcase trailing silently behind him. The scent of polished wood and sakura air freshener filled the space, clashing against the buzzing energy of the bustling city outside.

At the reception desk, Ethan stood patiently as the crew checked in. He glanced up at the enormous chandelier overhead, its cascading crystals catching the light like frozen rain. A faint memory surfaced—his mother's gaudy rhinestone earrings swinging as she laughed too loudly. He blinked it away, returning his attention to the polished clerk in front of him.

"Welcome, Mr. Sinclair," the receptionist greeted, her practiced smile as pristine as the counters she worked behind. "Your suite is ready. High floor, as requested."

"Perfect," Ethan replied, his tone effortlessly warm. "A view of the skyline is always a bonus."

The key card slid across the counter, and he pocketed it with a faint nod of thanks. As the elevator doors closed around him, cutting off the cheerful din of the lobby, his features fell into their natural state of calm detachment. Alone, the flicker of a smirk appeared. He liked this city—its anonymity, its precision, its illusions.

In his suite, Ethan took a moment to absorb his surroundings. The room was minimalist, with clean lines and neutral tones interrupted only by a single piece of modern art above the bed. Floor-to-ceiling windows revealed the chaotic brilliance of Shinjuku at night—blinking advertisements, endless streams of headlights, and figures moving like clockwork through pedestrian crossings below.

He set his bag on the rack and methodically unpacked. Shoes placed just so. Shirts hung neatly in the wardrobe. His watch, the vintage heirloom from his father, went on the nightstand. Its steady

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ticking filled the quiet room as he stood by the window, surveying the scene.

The red velvet journal emerged last. He flipped through its pages, skimming over neat, precise entries. He paused at the last one, tracing the ink with his finger. A faint crease formed between his brows before he snapped the book shut and stowed it in the desk drawer.

Outside, the city waited. So did she, though she didn't know it yet.

"Time to get to work," he murmured to himself, his voice a low echo against the silent room.



TOKYO'S STREETS BUZZED with energy, a kaleidoscope of neon signs, flashing billboards, and the endless hum of life. Ethan stepped out of the hotel, his polished appearance blending seamlessly with the late-night crowd. His tailored coat shielded him from the crisp autumn air as he slipped into the flow of pedestrians.

He moved with purpose, eyes scanning the chaos around him. A group of businessmen spilled out of a karaoke bar, their laughter cutting through the din. Across the street, a food stall emitted the savory aroma of grilled skewers. Ethan paused briefly, the glow of red lanterns reflected in his icy gaze.

"Fresh takoyaki?" the vendor called, waving a hand.

Ethan declined with a polite nod, his lips curling into a practiced smile. He moved on, weaving through the throng of people. The atmosphere of Shinjuku enveloped him—fast-paced, vibrant, and tinged with an undercurrent of mystery. Each step he took was deliberate, his mind cataloging the details around him. Narrow alleyways, shadowy corners, and unassuming rooftops—he saw not just a city but a canvas.

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He stopped outside a small park tucked between the towering skyscrapers. Its quiet stillness contrasted sharply with the chaos just steps away. A lone woman sat on a bench, engrossed in her phone, the light illuminating her face. Ethan's eyes flickered to her for a moment before he moved on.

He wasn't here for her. Not yet.

The night deepened as he turned onto a quieter street lined with boutique shops. The window displays glimmered under soft lighting, tempting passersby with handmade ceramics and intricate textiles. Ethan's reflection ghosted across the glass, his face devoid of emotion, his posture casual yet calculated.

He reached a crosswalk where a street musician played a haunting melody on a shakuhachi flute. The sound drifted through the air, tugging at something deep within him. Ethan lingered for a moment, his eyes narrowing. Memories brushed against the edge of his consciousness, but he shoved them aside. He had no time for distractions.

As the light changed, he stepped off the curb, melting back into the crowd. Tokyo stretched out before him, vibrant and unknowingly complicit in the game he was about to play.



THE HOTEL ROOM'S MINIMALIST decor was a perfect reflection of Tokyo—pristine, efficient, and detached. Ethan sat at the small desk by the window, the city's glow bathing his features in a soft luminescence. His fingers hovered over his phone, scrolling with precision through a dating app he'd fine-tuned to suit his needs.

Each swipe was a calculated act. Smiling faces appeared on the screen, their profiles offering snippets of lives that felt distant from his own. Ethan's gaze remained cold, his thumb moving rhythmically.

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He paused at a profile. Yumi Tanaka. Twenty-seven. Graphic designer. Her bio was simple, mentioning a love for hidden cafés and quiet rooftop gardens. Her photos were equally understated—candid shots of her laughing with friends, sipping coffee, her hair catching the sunlight.

Ethan leaned back in his chair, studying her face. Something in her smile triggered a faint flicker of recognition. He couldn't place it, but it didn't matter. She fit the profile, and that was enough.

He typed a message, his words carefully chosen to mirror her interests:

"I know a spot with the best view of Tokyo. Care to join me for coffee and a little adventure?"

He hit send and waited, his fingers drumming lightly on the desk. Moments later, the screen lit up with a reply. Her response was enthusiastic, laced with curiosity.

"That sounds amazing. When?"

Ethan's lips twitched into a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He typed back, arranging a meeting for the following afternoon at a café near Shinjuku station. His pulse remained steady, his breathing controlled. This wasn't excitement; it was precision.

Sliding his phone onto the desk, Ethan stood and gazed out the window. The city sprawled beneath him, a living, breathing organism oblivious to the predator in its midst. His reflection stared back at him, faint and ghostly against the glass.

Tomorrow would bring Yumi into his orbit, and the game would begin.



THE FAINT SOUND OF clinking glasses echoed in his memory, growing louder as the past clawed its way to the surface. Ethan sat

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motionless, the sterile quiet of the hotel room suddenly suffocating. His gaze fixed on the ceiling, but his mind was trapped in a dingy apartment from years ago.

He was eight. The walls of his room were bare, the wallpaper peeling at the edges. He'd been given strict instructions to stay put, but the muffled laughter from the living room pulled him like a magnet. He crept toward the door, barefoot on the cold linoleum, and peered through the crack.

His mother sat on the couch, a glass of wine in one hand, her head thrown back in laughter. A man—a stranger—leaned close, his hand resting on her thigh. The scent of cheap cologne mingled with the stale odor of cigarette smoke, burning itself into Ethan's mind. His mother's voice, so carefree, so oblivious, cut through the air.

"Ethan's fine. He's always fine," she said, waving dismissively when the man asked about the child she'd left behind.

Ethan's small hand gripped the edge of the doorframe, trembling. He stepped back into the shadows, retreating to the corner of his room. His stomach churned with a mix of hunger and something he couldn't yet name. Betrayal? Anger? He hugged his knees to his chest, rocking slightly as the laughter continued on the other side of the wall.

The memory dissolved, but its weight lingered. Ethan sat up on the hotel bed, his jaw clenched. His hand reached out instinctively, touching the edge of the bedside table for grounding. The sound of Yumi's laughter from their earlier chat replayed in his mind, fainter now, distorted by memory.

Ethan exhaled sharply, shoving the flashback deep into the recesses of his mind. There was no room for distractions. Tomorrow, the plan would continue.



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THE CAFÉ SAT NESTLED on a quiet corner of Shibuya, its exterior framed by hanging ivy and soft, glowing lanterns. The hum of Tokyo's chaos felt distant here, replaced by the gentle clinking of porcelain cups and murmured conversations. Ethan sat by the window, his polished leather shoes crossed at the ankles, sipping a macchiato. The faint aroma of roasted beans filled the air, mixing with the delicate sweetness of a nearby flower arrangement.

The door jingled, and Yumi stepped inside, her vibrant presence drawing a few curious glances. She scanned the room before locking eyes with Ethan. He stood smoothly, his tailored blazer unwrinkled, and gestured to the chair opposite him.

"Yumi," he greeted, his voice low and warm. "I was hoping you'd look as stunning in person as you do in your profile pictures. I underestimated you."

She laughed, brushing a strand of black hair behind her ear. "Flattery this early? I'll need more coffee to handle it."

Ethan gestured to the barista, who nodded knowingly. A second macchiato arrived moments later.

The conversation flowed effortlessly. Yumi spoke about her work as a graphic designer, her love for finding hidden spots in Tokyo, and her fondness for contemporary art. Ethan mirrored her energy, weaving stories about his travels, each tailored to reflect her interests. When she mentioned her favorite gallery in Roppongi, he leaned forward slightly, eyes sparkling as if genuinely intrigued.

"I have a confession," Ethan said, placing his cup down. "I almost canceled. I thought someone as brilliant as you might find me... underwhelming."

Yumi tilted her head, her playful smile softening. "You? Underwhelming? Now I know you're lying."

Her laughter was light, disarming, and Ethan mirrored it effortlessly. Yet, beneath his composed exterior, every word she spoke was dissected, analyzed. He noted her vulnerabilities, her tells—how

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she touched her necklace when nervous, the way she leaned in when genuinely engaged.

As they left the café, Yumi's demeanor had shifted. Her initial cautiousness gave way to an easy camaraderie. Ethan guided her to the door with a slight hand at the small of her back, the perfect gentleman. The plan was already forming in his mind.



ETHAN WALKED A STEP behind Yumi as they strolled toward her train station, watching how she moved. Each sway of her arm, each tilt of her head was a piece of data he filed away. They paused at a crosswalk, the bright red light casting sharp shadows across their faces.

"I know a place you'd love," Ethan said, his voice calm, almost conspiratorial. "A rooftop garden near here. It's like stepping into another world."

Yumi glanced at him, curiosity flashing in her eyes. "I've never heard of it."

"Most people haven't," he replied, his tone light. "It's quiet, tucked away. Perfect for someone who appreciates hidden gems."

Her laugh was soft, unsure. "Sounds magical."

After parting ways, Ethan turned toward the garden, his steps measured. The narrow staircase leading to the rooftop was dimly lit, the air cooler as he ascended. At the top, the garden opened before him—rows of manicured shrubs, an intricate koi pond reflecting the city lights, and benches arranged with meticulous symmetry.

He walked the perimeter, noting the location of the exit, the limited visibility from nearby buildings, and the faint hum of traffic below. His mind worked like a machine, running through scenarios. He imagined Yumi standing by the pond, her reflection distorted in the rippling water.

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A gardener passed by, nodding politely. Ethan returned the nod, masking the flicker of irritation at the interruption. He needed everything to be flawless.

The air smelled faintly of jasmine and damp earth. Ethan knelt beside the pond, trailing his fingers just above the surface, testing the space's acoustics and layout. In this serene oasis above Tokyo's chaos, he envisioned the transformation of beauty into terror—a masterpiece of contrasts.

His phone buzzed with a message from Yumi. "Thanks for the coffee. I had fun :)"

Ethan straightened, slipping the phone into his pocket. The rooftop garden was perfect. All it needed now was her.



THE ROOFTOP GARDEN blurred before Ethan's eyes as he descended into a memory, a scene etched so deeply in his mind that it emerged unbidden. He was seven, sitting cross-legged on the threadbare carpet of their cramped apartment. The television flickered with static in the corner, but it barely registered over the muffled voices in the next room.

His mother's laughter spilled through the thin walls, too loud, too carefree. It clashed with the rhythmic clinking of glasses and the low rumble of a man's voice—another stranger. Ethan's small fingers gripped a toy airplane, the paint chipped from its wings. He traced the edges compulsively, trying to drown out the noise.

"Ethan, just stay in your room," she had said earlier, brushing off his questions about dinner, homework, anything that would tether her attention to him. "Mommy's busy."

The door creaked open slightly, revealing a sliver of her with the man. Her laughter crescendoed as she leaned into him, her cheap

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perfume wafting into Ethan's room like an uninvited guest. The smell tightened his throat, filling his lungs with something thick and suffocating. He clenched the airplane tighter until the plastic cut into his palm.

His gaze flicked to the empty plate on the floor beside him. She hadn't bothered to feed him. Again.

Her laughter hit a pitch that made his stomach churn. It wasn't the sound of joy. It was something else entirely—hollow, dismissive, like it was meant to bury him in irrelevance.

The man's voice growled something unintelligible. His mother laughed again, sharper this time, her tone slicing through Ethan's small world. The door clicked shut, severing him from whatever life existed beyond it.

Back on the rooftop, the scent of Yumi's floral perfume drifted toward him, snapping him back to the present. His jaw clenched involuntarily. The parallels coiled tightly around his thoughts, squeezing them until they felt like a single thread leading back to that door.

His grip on the railing tightened. He looked at Yumi, her carefree laughter spilling into the night air. Something about it stung, a mocking echo of a time he could never escape.



ETHAN LEANED BACK IN his chair, his posture relaxed but calculated. The café buzzed softly around him, a gentle hum of conversations and the hiss of the espresso machine. Across the table, Yumi's laugh rippled, light and melodic. She tucked a strand of sleek black hair behind her ear, her hazel eyes sparkling with intrigue.

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"You really seem to know this city well," she said, tracing the rim of her coffee cup with her finger. "Most visitors don't bother to explore the quieter spots."

"I like to blend in," Ethan replied smoothly, his gaze steady and warm. "There's something about Tokyo's rhythm that makes you want to disappear into it, don't you think?"

Her eyes widened slightly, and she nodded. "Exactly! It's why I love it here. The energy, the anonymity... it's freeing."

He tilted his head, feigning curiosity. "Do you ever miss the quieter life? Somewhere less... overwhelming?"

Yumi laughed again, shaking her head. "Not at all. I thrive on this chaos."

Perfect, Ethan thought. Thriving on chaos meant she wouldn't notice the calculated edges in his charm.

He let the conversation meander for a few minutes, touching on art, food, and their mutual love for discovering hidden gems in cities. She grew more animated with every passing moment, her shoulders relaxing as she leaned closer. Her trust was building, and Ethan carefully mirrored her enthusiasm, a predator matching the rhythm of his prey.

"Speaking of hidden gems," Ethan said, his voice softening, "there's a place I think you'd love. A rooftop bar with the best view of the city. It's not far from here."

Yumi raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Really? You're holding out on me?"

He laughed, low and disarming. "I wouldn't dare. But I didn't want to overwhelm you with too many recommendations at once."

Her lips curved into a playful smile. "Well, now you have to take me."

Ethan's pulse quickened, though his face remained composed. "I'd be honored. Shall we?"

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Yumi nodded, her curiosity winning out. As they rose to leave, Ethan's mind shifted gears. The rooftop garden he had scouted earlier flashed in his memory—a perfect stage, serene and secluded.

As they stepped into the bustling streets of Shinjuku, Yumi's laughter rang out again. Ethan kept pace beside her, his exterior polished and affable. Inside, his thoughts sharpened, already rehearsing the next move.



THE ROOFTOP GARDEN was every bit as serene as Ethan had remembered. Paper lanterns swayed gently in the breeze, casting soft pools of light across the manicured paths. The skyline of Tokyo stretched out before them, an endless sea of glittering lights.

"This is beautiful," Yumi murmured, stepping closer to the railing. The wind tugged at her hair, framing her face in a way that seemed almost poetic.

Ethan stood a pace behind her, his hands resting lightly on the railing. "It's even better with good company," he said, his voice measured, betraying none of the storm within.

She laughed, turning to face him. "Is that your go-to line?"

He shrugged, a hint of amusement flickering across his face. "Maybe. But I mean it."

Yumi leaned against the railing, her expression softening. "You're full of surprises."

Ethan stepped closer, his movements deliberate. The distant hum of the city filled the silence between them, and for a moment, he allowed himself to study her—her posture, her trust, her obliviousness. A fleeting pang of something unfamiliar—guilt? hesitation?—flashed through him, but he crushed it beneath the weight of his resolve.

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“Yumi,” he said, his voice lowering, “I have to admit, I don’t usually do this. But something about tonight feels... different.”

She tilted her head, intrigued. “Different how?”

Ethan’s smile returned, this time laced with something darker. “I guess you’ll find out.”

Her laugh was light, her trust complete. She turned back to the view, unaware of the predator beside her, masking his intent with effortless charm.



THE ROOFTOP GARDEN stretched out before them, quiet and surreal, a stark contrast to the pulsing neon chaos below. Lanterns bathed the area in soft light, casting long shadows over the koi pond and manicured paths. The faint scent of jasmine and damp earth lingered in the crisp evening air. Yumi walked ahead, her heels clicking softly against the stone path, her silhouette illuminated by the glow of the city skyline.

“This feels like a dream,” she said, her voice hushed as if afraid to break the spell.

Ethan lingered behind, his footsteps deliberately slower, measured. His gaze followed her, analyzing her movements, her body language. She paused at the railing, staring out at the sprawling lights of Tokyo.

“You find places like this often?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“When I need to think,” he replied, his tone warm but distant. He moved closer, the soft thud of his shoes blending with the faint rustle of the breeze. “It clears the noise.”

Yumi smiled, turning back toward the view. “I get that. Sometimes the city feels... overwhelming. It’s nice to find a moment of quiet.”

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Ethan stopped a step behind her, his hands resting on the cool metal of the railing. A flash of memory struck him: his mother's laughter echoing through their apartment, the clink of wine glasses, the cold detachment in her voice as she dismissed his presence. His fingers gripped the railing tighter.

"You alright?" Yumi asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she looked at him.

He forced a smile, the mask sliding back into place effortlessly. "Just distracted by the view."

Yumi chuckled, her posture relaxing again. "You're hard to read, you know. It's like there's always something going on in your head."

"Maybe there is," Ethan said, his voice low, almost conspiratorial. "But isn't a little mystery a good thing?"

She laughed lightly, the sound blending with the gentle hum of the city below. Ethan's stomach twisted at the sound, the familiar pang of guilt creeping in. It clawed at the edges of his thoughts, threatening to derail him.

His jaw tightened as he pushed the feeling down. This wasn't the time for second-guessing. Every moment had been planned, calculated. The steps were already in motion. He just needed to follow through.



ETHAN GESTURED TOWARD the koi pond, his voice smooth and unhurried. "Have you ever noticed how the lights reflect off the water? It's mesmerizing."

Yumi followed his gaze, her expression curious. "I haven't, but now I can't unsee it." She moved closer to the pond, her steps light and confident.

Ethan walked beside her, his presence steady, reassuring. The faint ripple of the water reflected the city's glow, distorting the colors into

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abstract patterns. Yumi crouched slightly, her fingertips brushing the cool stone edge of the pond.

"It's beautiful," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Ethan's mind raced, though his exterior remained composed. He stepped behind her, his shadow blending with hers under the dim light of the lanterns. The weight of the moment pressed against him, heavy and suffocating.

"I knew you'd appreciate it," he murmured.

Yumi turned to look at him, her smile wide and genuine. "Thanks for showing me this. It's—"

The words caught in her throat as Ethan's hands moved swiftly, one gripping her shoulder, the other tilting her balance. Her eyes widened, confusion flashing into panic.

"Ethan, what are you—"

The pond rippled violently as Yumi fell forward, the sound of water splashing breaking the stillness of the garden. She flailed, her limbs thrashing against the surface, her voice muffled by the sudden plunge.

Ethan crouched by the edge, his movements calm and practiced. He pressed her down with a calculated force, his grip firm. The world around him blurred, the hum of the city fading into nothing. All that remained was the sound of the water, the struggle, and his own heartbeat, steady and unyielding.

When the ripples stilled, Ethan sat back on his heels, his breathing controlled. He stared at the pond, the distorted reflection of the lanterns shimmering faintly. The garden returned to its serene state, the stillness almost mocking.

Ethan stood, brushing his hands on his pants, his expression unreadable. He glanced around, ensuring the scene appeared untouched, undisturbed. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a delicate bracelet—Yumi's—and placed it carefully near the edge of the pond, as if it had fallen accidentally.

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The predator vanished into the shadows, the city swallowing him whole.



ETHAN WALKED BRISKLY down the narrow staircase, the cool night air rushing to meet him as he descended from the rooftop garden. His leather shoes clicked against the metal steps, each sound deliberate and measured. He paused at the bottom, glancing back toward the entrance. The garden loomed above, now silent, cloaked in shadows and secrets.

The bustling streets of Shinjuku stretched ahead, a chaotic symphony of lights and sounds. Ethan blended seamlessly into the throngs of people, his tailored coat buttoned tightly against the crisp wind. His face bore no trace of the storm inside, just the calm, detached expression of another man navigating the night.

A street vendor called out, offering takoyaki to passing pedestrians. Ethan stopped briefly, his eyes scanning the crowd. He handed over a few yen, accepting the steaming paper tray. The act was calculated, a layer of normalcy to mask the predator within.

The vendor smiled. "Busy night?"

Ethan nodded, his response casual. "Always."

He continued down the sidewalk, the savory smell of the takoyaki mingling with exhaust fumes and the faint scent of cherry blossoms. Each step carried him farther from the scene above, his mind compartmentalizing every detail, ensuring no misstep would lead back to him. The streets swallowed him whole, an unremarkable figure in the sea of Tokyo's nightlife.

At a crosswalk, Ethan caught his reflection in the glass window of a convenience store. His image stared back, composed and unflinching,

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but the faintest flicker of something haunted the edges of his gaze. He adjusted his collar, breaking the moment, and crossed with the crowd.

The city's rhythm matched his own—fast-paced, relentless. He weaved through the crowd, slipping into the anonymity that Tokyo provided so effortlessly. The hum of the crowd became a shield, every passing face a reminder of the world's indifference. No one looked twice.

Ethan reached the train station, the faint rumble of an approaching train echoing through the underground. He purchased a ticket, slipping into the next departing car. The doors closed, the train jerking forward. He leaned against the window, his reflection distorted by the motion.

The vibrations lulled him into a momentary stillness, but the weight of what had transpired clung to him like smoke. His fingers brushed the edge of his coat pocket where Yumi's bracelet lay. He stared out at the darkened tunnels, his expression blank, yet his thoughts churned.



THE GLOW OF THE TOKYO skyline spilled into the room, painting Ethan in shifting shades of light and shadow. He stood by the window of his hotel suite, his tie loosened, the top buttons of his shirt undone. The city buzzed below, alive and unaware, a stark contrast to the stillness within the room.

The vintage watch on the nightstand ticked softly, each movement slicing through the heavy silence. Ethan's hand rested on the glass, his palm cool against the surface. His gaze fixed on a distant neon sign, the colors blurring into streaks of red and blue.

He reached into his coat pocket, pulling out the delicate bracelet. The metal gleamed faintly, catching the light from the window. His

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thumb traced its intricate design, his jaw tightening as fragments of the evening replayed in his mind. The sound of her laughter. The ripple of the pond. The moment the water stilled.

A knock at the door broke his reverie. He froze, his muscles tensing before he reminded himself of the routine. Housekeeping. He crossed the room, his movements precise, and opened the door to a uniformed attendant holding a tray.

“Your whiskey, sir.”

Ethan nodded, stepping aside to let the attendant place the glass on the small table near the window. As the door clicked shut, he picked up the drink, the ice clinking softly. He took a slow sip, the burn tracing a line down his throat.

The city seemed smaller from this height, its grandeur diminished by the glass barrier. Ethan set the glass down, his reflection in the window overlapping with the skyline. The cracks in his psyche deepened, memories surfacing unbidden.

A child’s hand reaching for comfort. His mother’s laughter, sharp and dismissive. The weight of the door clicking shut as he was left behind.

Ethan turned away from the window, the bracelet still in his hand. He placed it carefully on the desk beside his red velvet journal, the final piece of the night’s puzzle. The ticking of the watch filled the room, steady and unrelenting.

The predator sat in the silence, alone with his ghosts.

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Chapter 3: Tango in the Dark



ETHAN STEPPED OFF THE jet bridge and into the sultry warmth of Buenos Aires, the airport buzzing with life around him. A cacophony of Spanish chatter filled the air as families reunited and travelers hurried toward customs. Ethan adjusted the strap of his flight bag and smiled politely at the stewardess bidding farewell at the door, a mask he wore as effortlessly as his neatly pressed uniform.

Outside, the city greeted him with open arms. The warm evening breeze carried the tantalizing scent of grilled empanadas and the distant hum of tango music. Ethan lingered for a moment, letting the sensory tapestry envelop him, but his mind was already at work. Each detail was filed away—the crowd density, the lighting, the lack of visible cameras.

The driver's friendly chatter broke into his thoughts as he slid into the back of a sleek black sedan.

"Primera vez en Buenos Aires?"

Ethan leaned back, his expression mild. "First time. I hear the city never sleeps."

"Verdad," the driver replied with a chuckle. "You'll love it—especially San Telmo. The best tango clubs, the best food. A place to lose yourself."

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Ethan's lips twitched in a ghost of a smile. Losing oneself. How fitting.

The car wove through the bustling streets, neon signs and graffiti-streaked walls flashing past the window. Ethan's sharp eyes tracked every movement, from street vendors hawking their wares to a group of teenagers laughing on a corner. The city pulsed with life, its vibrancy a stark contrast to the cold void in his chest.

By the time they reached his hotel, a charming boutique nestled in the heart of San Telmo, Ethan had memorized the surrounding streets and alleys. He tipped the driver generously and entered the lobby, his polished demeanor blending seamlessly with the historic charm of the space.

The concierge greeted him with a practiced smile. "Welcome, Mr. Sinclair. We have your suite ready for you. May I recommend some local spots to enjoy the evening?"

Ethan declined with a polite wave. "I'll explore on my own, thank you. It's the best way to experience the city."

Later, as he stood by the window of his room, the view of the cobbled streets below mirrored in the glass, he felt the faint stirrings of anticipation. This city was alive, pulsating with possibility. And somewhere in its labyrinth, his next target awaited.



THE BOUTIQUE HOTEL exuded a charm that felt almost deliberate. Vintage tiles sprawled across the lobby floor, and the walls bore faded murals of gauchos and open plains. Ethan paused to admire the subtle details, the weight of his flight bag barely registering as he scanned the room with a practiced eye.

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“Mr. Sinclair,” the receptionist greeted him, her voice soft yet efficient. “We’ve placed you in one of our executive suites. We hope you enjoy your stay.”

The room was everything Ethan expected: a minimalist design blending rustic wood with sleek, modern lines. Sunlight filtered through floor-to-ceiling windows, casting geometric patterns across the hardwood floor. A small balcony overlooked the winding streets of San Telmo, the heartbeat of the neighborhood almost tangible even from this height.

Ethan dropped his bag on the bed, its surface untouched and pristine. He stood by the window, watching as the city unfolded below. Tango music drifted faintly from somewhere in the distance, mixing with the clinking of dishes from a nearby café.

His hand grazed the cool leather of the chair by the writing desk, where a welcome letter sat neatly folded. He ignored it, instead reaching into his bag to retrieve a slim notebook. The red velvet cover was worn at the edges, and the pages within were filled with his precise handwriting—details, observations, strategies.

He opened it to a fresh page and began to write, his movements fluid yet deliberate. Each word was a part of his preparation, a web being spun in his mind before it ensnared its prey. When he was done, he leaned back, tapping the pen against his chin as his gaze returned to the streets below.

The concierge had mentioned tango clubs, a staple of San Telmo’s nightlife. Ethan had no interest in dancing, but he would find himself there soon enough. That was where the city’s heart beat strongest—and where he would find hers.

Tonight, the first moves of the tango would begin.



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ETHAN STEPPED INTO the dimly lit tango club, his polished shoes clicking softly against the worn wooden floor. The air buzzed with energy—couples moved in perfect unison on the dance floor, their bodies entwined in an unspoken rhythm. The rich, mournful strains of the bandoneón wove through the room, punctuated by the deep thrum of the bass.

He paused near the entrance, scanning the room like a predator surveying its terrain. Red lanterns hung low, their light casting shadows that danced across the walls. The scent of leather and perfume mingled with the faint tang of spilled wine. It was intimate and raw, a perfect backdrop for his search.

A waiter approached, gesturing toward the bar. Ethan nodded and followed, blending seamlessly into the crowd. His tailored jacket and calm demeanor marked him as an outsider, but not one who didn't belong. He ordered a glass of Malbec, swirling the deep red liquid absently as he observed.

The dance floor commanded attention. Couples glided effortlessly, the sharp staccato of their heels punctuating the music. Ethan's eyes flicked over them, cataloging each face, each interaction. Most were too polished, their smiles rehearsed, their movements calculated. But he wasn't looking for perfection.

He leaned against the bar, his gaze steady but unobtrusive. A woman nearby, draped in a sequined dress, caught his attention for a moment. Her laughter was loud, forced, her hand clinging to a partner who didn't meet her eyes. She was too desperate, too easy.

The band shifted into a slower melody, and the energy of the room shifted with it. Ethan turned slightly, his body language relaxed, his mind razor-sharp. Somewhere in this crowd, she would reveal herself—a spark of authenticity in a room full of facades.



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THE FIRST THING ETHAN noticed was her confidence. Camila Alvarez moved through the crowd like she owned the room, her every step in perfect time with the music. Her crimson dress hugged her figure, the hem fluttering with each sharp pivot. Unlike the others, she didn't perform for the crowd. She danced for herself, her joy unrestrained and infectious.

Ethan's focus narrowed. Camila's partner struggled to keep up with her movements, his attempts to lead met with subtle resistance. She wasn't being defiant—she was simply better, her presence commanding. Her laughter rang out, rich and genuine, cutting through the hum of the club.

He sipped his wine, the glass cool against his lips. She was perfect. Her confidence wasn't arrogance, her joy not feigned. She radiated a vitality that drew people to her, a stark contrast to the dark void he carried within.

Ethan's grip on the glass tightened, the sharp edges of his memory intruding. He saw his mother, her painted lips curled into a laugh, her gaze fixed on yet another stranger. The sound of clinking glasses, the faint smell of cheap wine. His stomach churned.

Camila's laughter brought him back, grounding him in the present. She was still on the dance floor, her hair catching the dim light as she spun gracefully. The music slowed, and she stepped back, brushing her hair from her face. Her eyes scanned the room, alive with the thrill of the dance.

Ethan stood, his movements unhurried. He had seen enough. Camila Alvarez would not be just another face in the crowd. She was the perfect target, the embodiment of everything he despised yet couldn't resist. The tango of deception had begun.



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THE TANGO CLUB'S RHYTHMIC pulse faded, giving way to the echoes of another time. Ethan leaned against the bar, the glass of Malbec cool in his hand, but the images in his mind burned with the intensity of a nightmare. The music around him seemed to sync with the memory, each note a cruel reminder of laughter that wasn't meant for him.

He was nine, sitting on the edge of a cracked vinyl couch in their dim, smoke-filled apartment. The air reeked of cheap perfume and stale cigarettes, the kind his mother always favored. She was in the next room, her laughter spilling into the space like a tidal wave, drowning out the low rumble of a man's voice.

The door wasn't fully closed. Through the narrow gap, Ethan saw her. His mother leaned into the stranger, her head thrown back in an exaggerated laugh, her glass of wine catching the dim light. She looked radiant, carefree. The man's hand rested on her thigh, his fingers curling possessively. Ethan's stomach churned.

"Go to bed, Ethan," she had told him earlier, her tone clipped and dismissive. "Grown-ups need their space."

He'd lingered anyway, hoping for... something. A glance, a word, a sign that he mattered more than the stranger she barely knew. But she hadn't looked at him once. The man whispered something, and her laughter rose again, sharp and cruel, slicing through the little boy's fragile world.

Back in the present, Ethan's fingers tightened around the glass, his knuckles whitening. The memory clung to him like smoke, stinging his eyes, making his chest ache. He scanned the dance floor, his gaze locking on Camila. Her joy, her confidence—it was the same energy his mother had radiated in that room. Carefree. Oblivious.

Ethan's expression smoothed, his practiced calm returning. He sipped the wine, its bitterness grounding him. Camila wasn't his mother, but the parallel was undeniable. That made her perfect.

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CAMILA'S LAUGHTER DREW Ethan to her like a beacon. She stood at the bar, her cheeks flushed from dancing, her crimson dress still swaying slightly with the rhythm of the room. Her dark curls framed her face, and her eyes sparkled with the kind of life Ethan could never truly understand.

"You have the best energy on the floor," Ethan remarked as he stepped beside her, his voice low but clear, perfectly modulated for the intimate space.

Camila turned, startled at first, then intrigued. "You've been watching me?"

"It's hard not to," he replied with a slight smile, lifting his glass in acknowledgment. "You stand out."

She laughed softly, leaning one elbow on the bar. "And you? Watching from the sidelines—are you a critic or just shy?"

"Neither," Ethan countered. "I'm just here to admire. Buenos Aires has a rhythm you don't find anywhere else."

Camila tilted her head, studying him. "You're not from here."

"Does it show?" His smile widened just enough to appear genuine. "I'm passing through. But if every tango club is like this, I might extend my stay."

She laughed again, the sound musical and effortless. "Well, you picked a good one. San Telmo has the best spots, but this place? It's special."

Ethan glanced around, letting his gaze linger on the lantern-lit space. "I can see why. It has a certain... passion."

Camila raised her glass. "It's tango. If there's no passion, you're doing it wrong."

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Their glasses clinked softly, and the connection was set. Ethan mirrored her enthusiasm, his words perfectly tuned to her energy. With every laugh, every shared smile, the web around Camila tightened.

“You know,” she said after a pause, “it’s not just about watching. You should try dancing. That’s where the real magic is.”

Ethan chuckled, letting a touch of self-deprecation slip through. “I’m not sure I’d survive out there. You’d have to promise not to laugh.”

“Deal,” Camila teased. “But only if you promise to follow my lead.”

Ethan’s gaze held hers for a moment longer than necessary. “I think I can handle that.”



THE RHYTHMIC PULSE of the tango swelled through the club, drawing Camila’s attention back to the dance floor. She turned toward Ethan, her crimson dress swaying lightly with the movement.

“Do you tango?” Her question carried both curiosity and challenge, her smile teasing yet warm.

Ethan glanced toward the crowded floor, his expression calm, calculated. “Not well enough to match your energy.”

Camila laughed, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. “That’s not an answer.”

He leaned slightly closer, mirroring her playful energy. “It’s an admission. But I’ll take the risk if you’re willing.”

She raised an eyebrow, considering him for a beat too long. “Alright, but I lead. No arguments.”

Ethan set his glass down, following her to the edge of the floor where the couples moved as one, their footsteps a language of their own. The music shifted to a slower, more deliberate rhythm, and Camila turned to face him, her expression softening.

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“Relax,” she murmured, sliding her hand into his. “It’s about the connection, not perfection.”

Ethan allowed her to guide him, her hand firm but graceful on his shoulder. He followed her lead, his movements tentative at first, adjusting to the unfamiliarity of the dance. Each step became smoother, more deliberate, as he mirrored her rhythm.

Camila’s laughter rippled as he stumbled slightly. “You’re not so bad. Just trust me.”

Her voice had a disarming quality, a natural warmth that drew those around her. Ethan’s face remained composed, but his mind worked tirelessly, analyzing her movements, the way she tilted her head when she laughed, the subtle squeeze of her hand when she emphasized a step.

“You make it look effortless,” he said as they moved through the crowd, his tone effortlessly admiring.

“It’s not about effort,” she replied. “It’s about letting go.”

Her words hung between them, and for a fleeting moment, Ethan felt the pull of something unfamiliar—a temptation to lose himself in the rhythm. But the memory of his mother’s laughter intruded, sharp and unwanted, anchoring him to his purpose.

As the song ended, Camila stepped back, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling. “Not bad for a first timer.”

Ethan allowed a faint smile to break his stoic facade. “I had an excellent teacher.”



THE CRISP NIGHT AIR greeted them as they stepped out of the club, the lively sounds of San Telmo fading into the background. The cobblestone streets shimmered faintly under the antique streetlights, their glow casting long shadows across the quiet neighborhood.

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Camila wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders, her breath forming faint clouds in the cool air. "You survived your first tango. That deserves a reward."

"Does that mean I passed?" Ethan's voice carried the faintest hint of humor, his hands resting casually in his pockets.

Camila glanced at him, her grin mischievous. "Barely. But I'll give you credit for trying."

He matched her stride, keeping the pace leisurely. "Do you always take your students this seriously?"

"Only the ones who don't quit," she quipped, her laughter breaking the stillness of the night. "But you... you're different. Most people either know how to dance or don't bother."

Ethan tilted his head slightly, his expression thoughtful. "I like to challenge myself. And sometimes, it's worth stepping outside your comfort zone."

Their steps echoed against the cobblestones as they reached a corner where a small café's lights still glowed faintly. Camila hesitated, glancing at him. "Coffee? Or something stronger?"

"Coffee," he replied, his tone even, his eyes steady on hers. "I'd like to know more about my teacher."

Camila's smile widened, and she led him inside. The café was quiet, its wooden tables and vintage decor steeped in the charm of old Buenos Aires. They settled into a corner booth, the hum of conversation from the few other patrons blending with the soft jazz playing in the background.

As they waited for their drinks, Camila leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. "So, what's your story, Ethan? You're not just a tourist, are you?"

Ethan's face remained unreadable, his response practiced yet seemingly spontaneous. "I travel for work. But places like this... they're worth exploring on a personal level."

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“And tango?” Her eyes sparkled with curiosity. “Is that personal too?”

“Tonight, it was,” he admitted, his voice low, calculated to resonate in the quiet space.

Camila laughed softly, shaking her head. “You’re full of surprises.”

Ethan held her gaze, the faintest smile on his lips. “I could say the same about you.”

Their drinks arrived, the aroma of rich espresso mingling with the warmth of the café. Ethan watched as Camila spoke, her passion for dance and the city evident in every word. He nodded at the right moments, asking questions that kept her talking, subtly steering the conversation to deepen her trust.

The cobblestone streets and antique lampposts outside awaited them, but for now, the café became another stage in Ethan’s meticulously crafted performance.



THE WARMTH OF THE CAFÉ wrapped around them like a comforting embrace, a stark contrast to the crisp night air outside. Ethan leaned back in his chair, cradling his cup of espresso as Camila spoke with an energy that seemed boundless. Her hands moved animatedly as she described her first dance performance, her voice carrying the cadence of someone deeply in love with their craft.

“It was terrifying,” she admitted, her eyes sparkling. “But when the music started, everything else disappeared. I could feel every note in my chest, every step like it was part of me. That’s when I knew this was it. Tango wasn’t just a dance—it was my life.”

Ethan tilted his head slightly, his gaze steady and unreadable. “You make it sound almost... spiritual.”

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“Maybe it is,” she replied, her smile softening. “It’s not just about the steps. It’s the connection—the way two people trust each other completely, even if it’s just for a moment.”

He nodded thoughtfully, taking a slow sip of his drink. “That kind of trust is rare.”

Camila studied him for a moment, her playful expression giving way to curiosity. “What about you? You don’t strike me as the type to settle for the ordinary.”

Ethan allowed a faint smile to cross his lips, calculated to appear genuine. “I move around too much to settle. But I’ve always been fascinated by people who can dedicate themselves to something so completely.”

“You’re deflecting,” she teased, leaning forward slightly. “What’s your passion, Ethan?”

His eyes flickered briefly, the question touching a nerve he buried too deeply to show. “Understanding people,” he said after a beat. “What drives them. What makes them tick.”

“That’s a little vague,” she quipped, but there was a warmth in her tone that invited him to continue.

He leaned forward slightly, mirroring her posture. “It’s simple, really. Everyone has a story. It’s just a matter of listening for the right details.”

Their conversation continued, each word another thread in the web Ethan was weaving. He asked about her family, her inspirations, the challenges she faced as a dancer. Each answer she gave painted a clearer picture of her world, her vulnerabilities.

Camila leaned back in her chair, her laughter soft but genuine. “You’re good at this, you know. You make it easy to talk.”

Ethan’s expression didn’t waver, though his thoughts churned beneath the surface. “I suppose I’ve had a lot of practice.”

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THE LAUGHTER IN THE café dimmed, replaced by the harsh echoes of another room, another time. Ethan's hand tightened slightly on the edge of the table as the memory took hold, unbidden and sharp.

He was eleven, standing barefoot in the doorway of their tiny apartment. The flickering glow of the television lit the room in uneven flashes, casting long shadows on the peeling wallpaper. His mother stood by the window, her voice sharp and raised.

"You think I owe you anything?" she spat, her tone dripping with disdain. "I gave you everything I could. Isn't that enough?"

Ethan's small hands clenched at his sides, his chest tightening with a mixture of rage and helplessness. Her words weren't directed at him this time—they were for the man in the room, another stranger whose name Ethan hadn't bothered to learn. But the sting cut just as deep.

"You're pathetic," the man retorted, his voice low but menacing. "You'd rather drown in your own misery than admit you're a terrible mother."

The slap that followed echoed like a gunshot. Ethan flinched, his breath catching as he stepped further into the shadows, his presence unnoticed. His mother turned, her expression twisted with fury, but it wasn't anger that hurt the most—it was the indifference in her eyes when they finally met his.

"Go to bed, Ethan," she snapped, her voice cold and final. "This has nothing to do with you."

The memory faded as abruptly as it came, leaving Ethan staring into the dregs of his espresso. Camila's voice broke through the haze, pulling him back to the present.

"You okay?" Her brow furrowed slightly, concern flickering across her face.

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Ethan straightened, his mask slipping effortlessly back into place. “Just lost in thought.”

Her smile returned, hesitant but warm. “Well, you’re a good listener. Maybe a little too good.”

He let the comment hang in the air for a moment, his own smile carefully measured. “It’s easy when the conversation is worth having.”

The memory lingered at the edges of his mind, sharpening his focus. Camila wasn’t just a target anymore. She was a catalyst, a reflection of everything he sought to control and destroy.



THE CAFÉ’S WARMTH GAVE way to the cool embrace of the Buenos Aires night as Ethan held the door open for Camila. Her laugh lingered in the air, soft and unguarded, as if the evening had melted any remnants of hesitation. The cobblestone streets stretched before them, bathed in the golden glow of antique lampposts.

“You weren’t kidding about this neighborhood,” Ethan remarked, his tone carrying an effortless sincerity. “It’s like stepping into another time.”

Camila pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, her curls catching the light as she glanced at him. “San Telmo has a soul, don’t you think? It’s not like the newer parts of the city. Here, you feel the history.”

He matched her stride, his hands resting casually in his pockets. “It’s easy to see why you love it. Every corner feels like a story waiting to be told.”

She slowed her pace, her gaze flitting between the shadowy streets and the man beside her. “There’s a hidden beauty here. Not everyone notices it.”

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Ethan allowed a slight smile to touch his lips, calculated yet disarming. “Sometimes, you just need the right guide.”

Her cheeks flushed faintly, though whether from the cool air or his words, he couldn’t tell. “You’re surprisingly poetic for someone who claims not to dance.”

“I’m full of contradictions,” he replied, his voice smooth. “But tonight’s been... illuminating.”

Camila laughed softly, her footsteps tapping lightly against the uneven stones. “You have a way of making everything sound significant.”

“Maybe it is,” Ethan countered, his tone thoughtful. “Moments like these—walking through a city like this—they don’t come often.”

Her expression softened, her earlier wariness dissipating further. She tilted her head slightly, studying him. “You’re not like most people I meet.”

Ethan’s gaze lingered on her for a beat too long before he gestured toward a quieter path that curved away from the main street. “Care to show me more? Something only a local would know?”

Camila hesitated, her fingers toying with the edge of her shawl. “It’s late,” she murmured, though her voice lacked conviction.

“Only if you want to,” Ethan added, his tone light, unpressured. “I just feel like there’s more to discover.”

She smiled then, a quiet trust blooming in her eyes. “Alright, but just a little further.”

As they turned onto the deserted path, the hum of the city faded, replaced by the faint rustling of leaves in the breeze. The lampposts cast long, distorted shadows, and the air carried a stillness that felt almost anticipatory.



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THE PATH NARROWED AS the cobblestones gave way to uneven brick, the shadows deepening with each step. Camila glanced around, her voice light but curious. "I don't think I've ever taken anyone this way before."

Ethan walked a step behind her, his gaze fixed on the way her figure moved against the shifting light. "I'm honored," he said, his tone soft, almost reverent.

The alley opened into a secluded corner, framed by the high walls of old buildings. A single lamppost stood sentinel, its dim glow casting a pale circle of light on the ground. Camila stopped, her breath visible in the cool air, and turned to face him.

"This spot feels like a secret," she mused, her voice quieter now. "Not many people know it exists."

Ethan took a measured step closer, his movements deliberate. "It's perfect. Quiet, beautiful... like the city distilled into one moment."

Her laughter was softer now, almost shy. "You really do have a way with words."

He reached out, his hand brushing hers lightly, a calculated gesture that drew her gaze. "Maybe it's the company."

Camila tilted her head, her expression open, her defenses completely lowered. "You're full of surprises tonight."

Ethan stepped into the circle of light, his features briefly illuminated. The warmth in his eyes seemed genuine, but beneath it, something darker churned, invisible to her.

"Some things are better left discovered slowly," he murmured, his voice carrying an almost hypnotic quality.

The sounds of the city seemed distant now, the world narrowing to just the two of them in that shadowed corner. Camila took a step closer, her smile lingering as the silence wrapped around them like a cocoon.

Ethan's hand hovered near hers, his mind calculating every possible move. The plan was in motion, every detail falling into place. The

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intimacy of the moment was a façade, but to her, it felt real. That was the point.

Her laughter from earlier echoed faintly in his mind, blending with another memory, one of his mother's cruel, dismissive tone. He pushed it down, focusing entirely on the present.

The shadows stretched around them, the lamppost flickering faintly as if responding to the tension in the air. Ethan's pulse remained steady, his breathing controlled. This was the moment he had prepared for.



THE AIR IN THE SHADOWED corner turned heavy, its stillness pressing against Ethan's chest. He watched Camila step closer, her features soft in the faint glow of the lamppost. The warmth in her eyes, her openness, only sharpened the cold calculation in his mind.

"This place is magical," she whispered, her voice barely rising above the silence. She reached out, her fingers grazing the wall as if to connect with the space.

Ethan moved deliberately, his hand brushing hers. She looked up, her smile shy but curious.

"You make it seem that way," he said, his voice steady, low. "Everything feels different with you."

Her laughter was soft, almost unsure, as she tilted her head. "I think you mean that."

"I do."

He stepped closer, closing the gap between them. His expression remained composed, even tender, as he reached out, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. Camila's breath hitched, but she didn't pull away.

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The moment stretched, charged with an intimacy that wasn't real—at least not to Ethan. His mind worked methodically, dissecting her reactions, timing his next move.

"I feel like I've known you forever," she murmured, her voice laced with nervous excitement.

"Maybe we've been waiting for this," Ethan replied, the lie slipping effortlessly from his lips.

Camila's eyes searched his face, her trust absolute. She leaned in slightly, her guard completely lowered.

Ethan struck with precision. His hand moved swiftly, the grip cold and unrelenting as he pressed against her throat, silencing her gasp before it could escape. Her eyes widened in shock, her hands clawing at his arm in a futile attempt to break free.

The struggle was brief but violent. The serene backdrop of the alley, the gentle hum of distant music, stood in stark contrast to the chaos of the moment. Ethan tightened his hold, his expression cold, detached, as his trauma surged within him like a storm.

Memories of his mother's voice, her laughter, her dismissive tone, filled his mind. He saw her in Camila—in her charm, her confidence—and it fueled his rage. When Camila's body finally went limp, his grip relaxed, and the world fell silent again.

Ethan stepped back, his breathing steady. He glanced down at her lifeless form, tilting his head as if appraising his work. With practiced efficiency, he staged the scene, scattering her belongings to suggest a robbery gone wrong. Her shawl lay discarded, her purse emptied, its contents strewn carelessly across the bricks.

The lamppost flickered, casting an eerie glow over the scene. Ethan adjusted his jacket, smoothing the fabric as he stepped away. His movements were calm, controlled, as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

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THE STREETS OF BUENOS Aires were alive, their vibrancy masking the horror Ethan left behind. He moved through the crowd like a ghost, his expression neutral, his stride purposeful. Couples laughed as they passed him, their joy a sharp contrast to the weight he carried.

A street musician strummed a melancholic tune on his guitar, the notes weaving through the night air. Ethan paused for a fraction of a second, his ears catching the melody before he continued on, disappearing into the throng.

Every detail of his exit had been planned. He avoided the main streets, weaving through alleys and side paths, ensuring he left no discernible trail. The city embraced him, its chaos providing perfect cover.

At a small kiosk, he purchased a bottle of water, his hand steady as he paid the vendor. He opened the bottle, taking a slow sip, his gaze scanning the street. His reflection in the shop's window was faint, almost ghostly. He stared at it for a moment, his own face unfamiliar.

Ethan discarded the bottle in a nearby trash can, his pace never faltering as he headed toward his hotel. The adrenaline that once coursed through him now ebbed, replaced by a chilling calm. He blended seamlessly into the night, another stranger in a city teeming with life.

The sound of distant laughter reached him as he turned the final corner. His shoulders relaxed slightly, the weight of the moment already compartmentalized. To the world, he was just another traveler, his presence unremarkable, his actions hidden beneath a veneer of normalcy.

As he approached the hotel's entrance, the doorman nodded politely. Ethan returned the gesture, stepping inside without hesitation.

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The lobby's warm light and muted chatter wrapped around him, insulating him from the world outside.

By the time he reached his room, the crime felt like a distant memory, another chapter in his meticulous journey. He closed the door behind him, the silence enveloping him once more.



THE HOTEL ROOM ENVELOPED Ethan in its muted warmth, the hum of the city muffled by thick drapes and double-glazed windows. He stood by the window, his silhouette framed against the sprawling expanse of Buenos Aires. The city lights pulsed like a heartbeat, alive with laughter and music, oblivious to the darkness that prowled within its veins.

His fingers traced the edge of the glass, leaving faint smudges. The image of Camila's lifeless form lingered, vivid and unshakable. Her final moments replayed in his mind, the fear in her eyes igniting a strange mix of satisfaction and something else—something he couldn't quite name.

He poured a measure of whiskey into the glass on the desk, the amber liquid catching the soft glow of the bedside lamp. The drink burned as it slid down his throat, a temporary balm for the storm that churned within him.

"It's cleaner this way," he muttered to no one, his voice low and devoid of emotion.

The faint ticking of his wristwatch on the nightstand seemed louder in the silence. He picked it up, running his thumb over the worn leather strap. It was a relic of his father's, a man who had vanished from his life before he'd ever learned what love was supposed to look like.

Ethan set the watch down with deliberate care, turning his attention to the journal tucked into his bag. He opened it, the pages

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filled with meticulous notes, sketches of his plans, and fragmented thoughts. Flipping to a fresh page, he wrote:

Target: Camila Alvarez.

Execution: Successful.

Observations: Trust was easily established through shared cultural interests. Minimal resistance. No witnesses.

He paused, his pen hovering above the paper. A single word lingered in his mind, unwelcome and insistent: *Why?*

A memory surfaced, unbidden and sharp. His mother's laughter, high-pitched and insincere, as she dismissed his pleas for attention. Her perfume lingered in the air, heavy and suffocating, mingling with the smoke of her lover's cigarette. He'd been a child then, powerless and forgotten, his cries swallowed by her indifference.

Ethan closed the journal abruptly, the sound sharp in the quiet room. He leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling as the weight of his actions pressed down on him. The satisfaction he had once anticipated felt hollow now, a fleeting echo of control in a world that had always denied him agency.

The city outside continued to pulse, a constant reminder of the life he moved through but could never truly touch. Ethan reached for the whiskey again, his hand steady as he brought the glass to his lips.

The lights of Buenos Aires blurred in his vision, their vibrancy mocking him with their resilience. Ethan set the glass down and rose, his reflection in the window fragmented by the city lights beyond. The predator within him felt restless, but the man—the broken, scarred man—felt the weight of every step he'd taken.

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Chapter 4: Cape Town's Silent Heights

The airport buzzed with activity as Ethan stepped through the sliding glass doors, the crisp scent of the ocean mingling with jet fuel. Beyond the bustling terminals, the jagged silhouette of Table Mountain stood under a cobalt sky, its peaks cutting sharply into the horizon. He paused, momentarily letting the scenery wash over him before tightening his grip on his leather carry-on.

"Welcome to Cape Town," a taxi dispatcher greeted, motioning toward the line of cabs outside.

Ethan nodded, his expression unreadable, and slid into the backseat of a waiting car. The driver glanced at him through the rearview mirror, attempting small talk.

"First time here?"

"Something like that." His tone, light but clipped, left no room for further questions.

As the cab wove through the city's streets, Ethan's eyes darted from one vibrant scene to the next. Street vendors peddled colorful crafts while buskers filled the air with rhythmic beats. The aroma of spices, fresh seafood, and salty air seeped through the open window, momentarily intoxicating.

A couple walking hand in hand caught his attention. Their laughter cut through the background noise, echoing something distant and unwelcome. He shifted his gaze, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

"Long flight?" the driver pressed again, oblivious to Ethan's silence.

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Ethan leaned back, tapping his fingers rhythmically against his thigh. “Long enough.”

The driver took the hint and let the radio fill the void. A local station played jazz-infused melodies that felt too light for the storm brewing behind Ethan’s calm exterior.

As the cab approached the hotel, his mind began assembling the pieces of his plan. The boutique hotel was perched on the edge of Camps Bay, its white facade gleaming under the relentless sun. From his research, he knew it was a haven for travelers like his next mark—Amara Singh.

The car came to a stop. Ethan handed over cash, ignoring the driver’s polite “Enjoy your stay,” and strode into the lobby. Marble floors stretched out beneath his polished shoes, reflecting the glow of the midday sun spilling through floor-to-ceiling windows. A staff member, overly eager, approached with a clipboard.

“Welcome, sir. Your room is ready. Allow me to show you the way.”

Ethan followed, his demeanor composed, his mind elsewhere. The elevator doors closed, and for a fleeting moment, his reflection stared back—impeccably dressed, outwardly unshaken. But beneath that polished surface, chaos churned.

When the elevator dinged open, the staff member gestured toward a room with a sweeping ocean view. Ethan stepped inside, scanning his surroundings with calculated efficiency. The minimalist decor and open balcony were inviting, but his attention lingered on the exits and blind spots.

“Anything else you’ll need, sir?”

Ethan turned, offering a faint smile. “No, that’ll be all.”

As the door clicked shut, he let his bag drop onto the bed. The view beyond the balcony was postcard-perfect: turquoise waves crashing against sunlit cliffs. But Ethan wasn’t here to sightsee. The gears in his mind shifted into motion, his focus narrowing on the task ahead.

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For now, the city waited. But soon, its rhythm would align with his own—a harmony destined to end on a discordant note.



THE BOUTIQUE HOTEL rose like a pearl from the sand, its minimalist design framed by swaying palms and the vast Atlantic stretching endlessly beyond. Ethan stepped into the cool lobby, his presence unnoticed among a cluster of guests admiring the ocean-facing windows. The soft murmur of waves hummed beneath the steady rhythm of quiet conversation.

A receptionist, eager and polished, approached with a smile. “Good afternoon. Welcome to Ocean View Boutique. Checking in?”

“Yes,” Ethan replied, sliding his passport across the counter. His voice was measured, disarming.

The receptionist keyed in his details, glancing briefly at the screen. “Ah, Mr. Sinclair. We’ve prepared one of our premier rooms for you. It’s on the top floor, with uninterrupted ocean views. Shall I arrange for your bags to be taken up?”

“I’ll manage.” Ethan’s lips curved faintly, more a practiced motion than a genuine expression. He tucked the keycard into his jacket and made his way to the elevator.

The quiet hum of the elevator carried him upward. When the doors slid open, he stepped into a corridor bathed in natural light. His room was the last door on the left. Perfect. He swiped the keycard, and the lock clicked open.

Inside, the space exuded understated elegance. Neutral tones played against sharp lines, with an open balcony that welcomed the ocean breeze. Ethan’s eyes swept over the details—a ceiling fan casting lazy shadows, a leather chair positioned just so, and floor-length curtains heavy enough to conceal movement.

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He moved with purpose, testing the balcony door and noting the sightlines. The railing stood waist-high, sturdy but easily scaled. He measured the distance from the balcony to the beach path below, committing every angle to memory.

The view was breathtaking, a postcard of white sands and turquoise waves. Tourists dotted the beach in clusters, their laughter carried faintly on the wind. Ethan's gaze lingered on them for a moment before he turned back inside.

The desk held a small tray of complimentary items: a carafe of water, a bowl of fruit, and a note welcoming him to the hotel. He ignored them, focusing instead on the room's exits and potential hiding spots. The bathroom door swung smoothly on its hinges, revealing pristine tile and chrome fixtures. The closet was deep enough to obscure a figure.

Satisfied, Ethan unpacked methodically. Clothes were hung with precision, his shoes lined against the wall. A leather-bound journal found its place in the desk drawer, alongside a pen with an engraving too worn to read.

He stepped onto the balcony once more, the wind tousling his hair. Below, a group of joggers moved in tandem, their footsteps a rhythm against the sand. Ethan rested his hands on the railing, his expression unreadable.

The city spread out before him, vibrant and teeming with life. But to Ethan, it was simply the next stage—a theater where he was both the director and the actor, meticulously scripting every move.



THE STREETS OF CAPE Town pulsed with energy, a kaleidoscope of colors and sounds. Ethan walked through the throng of locals and tourists, his tailored shirt blending into the casual sophistication of

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the crowd. The air was thick with the scent of spices and grilled meat, vendors calling out their wares from makeshift stalls.

A busker strummed a guitar near Greenmarket Square, his voice raw and rich. A small crowd had gathered, their faces lit with quiet joy. Ethan paused at the edge, his hands in his pockets, watching. The musician's lyrics spoke of love and loss, themes that rang hollow in Ethan's ears.

He moved on, slipping into a side street lined with artisan shops. Beaded jewelry glinted in the sun, and handwoven textiles rippled in the breeze. A woman offered him a carved wooden elephant, her pitch warm and persuasive.

"For luck," she said, holding it out.

Ethan's smile was polite but distant. "Not today."

She nodded, retreating into the shade. Ethan continued, his eyes scanning the faces around him. He wasn't searching for anyone in particular, but the process had become instinctual—analyzing movements, noting expressions.

At a corner café, he lingered, taking in the chatter of patrons sipping flat whites. A group of friends laughed over something unseen, their carefree energy a stark contrast to the tight coil within Ethan. He leaned against a lamppost, his gaze drifting.

Across the street, a young woman adjusted the straps of her camera bag, her eyes bright with curiosity. She flipped through a notebook, occasionally looking up to capture the vibrant scene before her. Her confidence was effortless, her movements fluid.

Ethan's attention sharpened. He didn't approach, not yet. Instead, he observed, cataloging every detail. The way she interacted with a nearby vendor, her laugh carrying above the din. She wasn't like the others milling about, her presence more magnetic, more alive.

A horn blared behind him, jolting the moment. Ethan straightened, stepping back into the flow of foot traffic. The city

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sprawled ahead, its rhythm intoxicating. But his focus remained singular.

The pieces were beginning to align, the game shifting into its next phase. Cape Town had offered him its energy, its vibrancy, and now, its perfect foil.



THE WATERFRONT BUZZED with life as the sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the sky streaked with amber and violet. Ethan walked with practiced ease along the promenade, his eyes scanning the crowd. Neon lights from trendy bars spilled onto the cobblestone streets, their music spilling out into the night air.

He stepped into one of the lounges, its decor a blend of modern sleekness and rustic charm. Low-hanging Edison bulbs cast a warm glow over the patrons, their laughter mixing with the sultry notes of live jazz. Ethan slid onto a barstool, his back to the wall, his gaze cool and detached as he scanned the room.

She caught his attention immediately. Amara Singh. Her rich brown skin shimmered under the dim light as she leaned against the bar, her camera slung casually across her shoulder. She laughed, throwing her head back, her dark curls bouncing as though the world existed solely to entertain her.

Ethan's grip on his glass tightened. Her confidence reminded him of someone he'd rather forget. His mother's voice, melodic and careless, echoed in his mind. "Ethan, darling, don't cling to me. Go find something to do." The image of her applying lipstick in a cracked mirror surfaced unbidden, the red staining her mouth as she ignored him completely.

Amara turned, her laugh fading into a thoughtful expression as she examined her notebook. Ethan's interest sharpened. She scribbled

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something quickly, then gestured to the bartender, her body language radiating ease. She was vibrant, magnetic, alive. A contrast he both admired and loathed.

The bartender placed a cocktail in front of her. “On the house,” he murmured with a smile.

Amara raised a brow. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Just a little appreciation for my favorite customer.”

Her laugh was softer this time, tinged with genuine gratitude. “In that case, thank you.”

Ethan’s lips curved slightly. He knew how to use gratitude to his advantage. For now, he waited, watching as she navigated the room with ease, the center of attention without effort.



THE JAZZ BAND’S MELODY receded as Ethan’s mind spiraled into a memory, unbidden and vivid.

He sat on the floor of a small, cluttered apartment, his knees drawn to his chest. The room smelled of cheap wine and cigarette smoke, the air heavy and stagnant. His mother stood in front of the cracked mirror above a chipped dresser, her hips swaying slightly as she hummed a tune. Ethan watched her, his young eyes wide with hope that she might finally turn to him.

“Can we go to the park today?” His voice was timid, barely breaking the silence.

She didn’t answer. Her focus remained on the mirror as she painted her lips a vivid red. The color was too bold, too loud, but it matched her presence. She dabbed the corner of her mouth with a tissue and smiled, not at him but at her reflection.

“Ethan, be a good boy and clean up your toys. I have company coming,” she said, her tone sweet but dismissive.

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“But you promised—”

“Don’t whine,” she snapped, turning sharply. “I don’t have time for this.”

The sound of a knock at the door shifted her mood instantly. She smiled again, this time radiant, and crossed the room to answer it. A man stood there, his laughter loud and grating as he stepped inside. Ethan shrank back into the corner, invisible.

His mother’s perfume filled the room, overpowering even the scent of wine. She leaned close to the man, her voice a melody of flirtation. Ethan’s chest tightened. She had promised. She had promised, and yet here he was, discarded again.

The memory faded, replaced by the present. Ethan’s jaw clenched, his focus snapping back to Amara as she sipped her drink. The bartender returned, his gaze lingering on her for a beat too long. The knot in Ethan’s chest twisted tighter.

He pushed the memory down, burying it deep where it couldn’t touch him. But its echo lingered, sharpening his resolve. Amara’s laugh rang out again, and he forced his expression into calm neutrality.

She didn’t know yet, but her fate had been sealed the moment she reminded him of everything he wished to erase.



ETHAN LINGERED AT THE edge of the lounge, the soft hum of conversation wrapping around him like a net. Amara stood at the bar, flipping through photos on her camera with an intensity that left her oblivious to the eyes following her every move. Ethan adjusted his posture, the casual confidence of a seasoned predator blending seamlessly into the relaxed atmosphere.

“You’ve got quite the eye,” he remarked as he approached her, nodding at the camera.

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Amara glanced up, her dark eyes sharp before they softened. “Comes with the territory. A vlogger’s camera is her best friend.”

Ethan leaned against the bar, feigning curiosity. “Travel vlogger?”

“Guilty as charged.” Her smile widened, warm and inviting. “What about you? Let me guess—businessman looking for an escape?”

He chuckled lightly, as if she’d caught him out. “Close enough. Travel consultant. Helps me know the world inside out.”

Her interest piqued, she swiveled toward him, resting her elbow on the bar. “And what brings you to Cape Town?”

“Work,” Ethan lied smoothly, swirling the whiskey in his glass. “But I always make time to explore. This city has a way of drawing you in, doesn’t it?”

Amara tilted her head, her gaze measuring him. “It does. Especially if you know where to look.”

“Maybe you can show me.” The challenge in his tone was subtle, carefully balanced between playful and intrigued.

She laughed, the sound richer now, like she’d decided he wasn’t just another tourist. “I might, but only if you can keep up.”

“I think I’ll manage,” he replied, matching her confidence. “Besides, I’ve always believed the best stories are found off the beaten path.”

Amara tapped her camera. “Then you’re speaking my language.”

The bartender appeared with a fresh drink for her, interrupting the flow. Ethan waited, his calm presence creating an unspoken rhythm that let her lower her guard without realizing it.

“Tell you what,” she said, raising her glass. “Convince me you’re more than just another guy with a good line, and I’ll think about it.”

“Challenge accepted,” Ethan replied, his expression inscrutable. Inwardly, he cataloged every flicker of emotion across her face, each one a thread in the web he was already weaving.



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AS THE EVENING UNFOLDED, Ethan's charm worked like clockwork, each move calculated but effortless. Amara gestured animatedly as she described her favorite travels, her passion painting vivid pictures of mountains and oceans. Ethan mirrored her enthusiasm, embellishing his fabricated adventures to match hers.

"Ever been to Patagonia?" Amara asked, her eyes alight with excitement.

"Once," Ethan lied, leaning back. "The glaciers there are breathtaking, but the hike to Fitz Roy—unforgettable. What about you?"

She grinned, sipping her drink. "Not yet, but it's on my list. Next stop is Victoria Falls, though. I want to capture the spray in slow motion. Something about that kind of raw power."

Ethan nodded, letting admiration flicker in his expression. "You've got an eye for drama. It suits you."

Amara raised a brow, teasing. "And what does that mean?"

"Nothing bad," Ethan replied smoothly. "It's rare to find someone who sees the world with such intensity. Most people barely scratch the surface."

Her smile softened, and she leaned closer, her guard slipping further. "It's not just about seeing—it's about feeling. Every place has a story, a heartbeat."

"And you're the one who brings it to life," Ethan said, his tone admiring without being overt. He let the moment breathe, knowing silence could be just as powerful.

Amara tilted her head, studying him. "You're either the most genuine person I've met, or the best liar."

"Maybe a bit of both," Ethan offered with a small smile. "But that's what makes life interesting, isn't it?"

Her laugh came easily, and Ethan knew he had her. Trust, after all, wasn't given—it was earned piece by piece. And as the night deepened,

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she began to see him not as a stranger, but as someone who understood her in a way few ever did.



ETHAN'S GAZE DRIFTED to the lounge's open patio as the hum of Cape Town's waterfront buzzed in the background. Amara leaned back in her chair, swirling her wine as their conversation hit a natural lull. Ethan waited, letting the quiet settle just enough to feel organic before sliding his opening across the table.

"Have you ever been to the Ridge Trail on Signal Hill?" His tone was casual, curiosity laced with a hint of intrigue.

Amara tilted her head. "Signal Hill? Sure, but the Ridge Trail doesn't ring a bell. Is it on the tourist maps?"

"Not exactly." Ethan leaned forward, the flicker of a confident smirk playing at his lips. "It's more of a local's secret. Stunning views, a little off the beaten path. Perfect for capturing Cape Town in its rawest form."

Her eyes lit up, the curiosity unmistakable. "And you've been?"

"A few times," he lied smoothly. "It's one of those places that reminds you why you fell in love with travel in the first place. Quiet, untouched... It's almost like the city whispers to you."

"Poetic," she teased, taking another sip. "But I'll admit, you've got my attention. Is this your way of selling me on an impromptu hike?"

Ethan shrugged, keeping his movements measured. "Maybe. Or maybe I thought you'd appreciate something a little different."

Amara set her glass down, her fingers tapping the rim thoughtfully. "Sounds tempting. When?"

"Tomorrow morning, early enough to catch the sunrise." His voice carried a confidence that made refusal seem improbable. "The light is incredible at that time, perfect for someone with your eye."

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She raised a brow, her laugh soft. “Flattery? You’re laying it on thick.”

“Not flattery. Just truth.” He let the weight of his words sink in before adding, “So? What do you say?”

Amara hesitated, but only for a moment. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. But if this trail doesn’t live up to the hype, you owe me coffee.”

Ethan’s smile held a flicker of triumph. “Deal.”



LATER THAT NIGHT, AS Ethan lay in the sterile quiet of his hotel room, Amara’s laughter replayed in his mind like a distant echo. He closed his eyes, but the warmth of her voice transformed into something sharper, colder—a memory that gnawed at the edges of his consciousness.

He was ten, sitting cross-legged on the frayed carpet of his mother’s apartment. The air was thick with the cloying scent of perfume and cheap wine. Her laughter, loud and careless, cut through the muffled voices of the man she’d brought home. Ethan hugged his knees, his gaze fixed on the dim hallway, where shadows flickered like ghosts.

“Ethan, go to bed,” she called, her tone dismissive, almost annoyed.

“But you said we’d watch a movie,” he replied, his voice small and uncertain.

She barely turned, her focus already on the stranger who leaned against the kitchen counter. “Not tonight. Tomorrow, maybe.”

Maybe. The word hung in the air, hollow and meaningless. He stayed rooted to the spot, the ache in his chest growing heavier as her laughter swelled, drowning out everything else.

Now, in the present, Ethan’s hand curled into a fist against the hotel sheets. The memory felt like a splinter lodged in his mind, a constant irritation that refused to heal. Amara’s voice had stirred it, her carefree

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demeanor a mirror to his mother's. It wasn't just the laugh—it was the ease with which she trusted, the unguarded warmth that left her vulnerable.

He opened his eyes, the room bathed in the soft glow of city lights filtering through the curtains. Tomorrow would be the first step. He'd gain her trust completely, but the memory reminded him why he couldn't let himself falter. Vulnerability was a weakness. One he would never allow himself to feel again.



ETHAN ADJUSTED THE strap of his backpack, the crunch of gravel beneath his boots blending with the early morning hush. The air was crisp, carrying a faint scent of salt from the ocean below. Amara walked ahead, her ponytail swaying with each step, her voice lively as she recounted an encounter with a lion cub during her last safari.

"...and the guide was panicking, but honestly, it was the highlight of my entire trip," she said, turning to glance at Ethan, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Sounds like something straight out of National Geographic," Ethan replied, his voice light. His stride was measured, his steps falling effortlessly into rhythm with hers. "You've got a knack for finding adventure."

She laughed, the sound echoing faintly against the rocky cliffs. "It's not about finding adventure. It's about being open to it. That's the trick."

Ethan nodded, his gaze fixed on the path ahead. The terrain grew steeper, forcing their conversation into brief pauses as they navigated the jagged stones. Amara barely seemed to notice, her energy undeterred.

"You're quiet," she said after a moment, glancing back at him.

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“Just taking it all in,” Ethan replied, gesturing to the horizon where the sun cast a golden glow over the city below. “This place has a way of leaving you speechless.”

Amara smiled, the kind of smile that softened the edges of her face. “It does, doesn’t it? Cape Town has this magic to it—like you’re standing at the edge of the world.”

For a fleeting moment, Ethan felt the weight of her words press against the edges of his carefully constructed facade. He looked away, scanning the landscape for their next turn. The trail narrowed ahead, winding toward the secluded viewpoint he’d mentioned.

“Almost there,” he said, his tone brisk. “The best view is just around that bend.”

Amara quickened her pace, her eagerness pulling her forward. Ethan followed, his expression unreadable.



THE PATH OPENED INTO a small clearing, framed by jagged rocks and the expanse of the ocean stretching endlessly into the horizon. Waves crashed against the cliffs below, their sound muted by the height. Amara exhaled sharply, her hands resting on her hips as she took in the view.

“Wow,” she breathed, her voice low with awe. “You weren’t kidding. This is... breathtaking.”

Ethan set his backpack down, watching her. The way she stood—relaxed, at ease—made her look invincible, as though the world couldn’t touch her. Yet, to him, it only underscored her fragility.

“Take your time,” he said, his tone measured. “You don’t see something like this every day.”

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Amara moved closer to the edge, her phone in hand. “I need a picture of this,” she said, crouching slightly for a better angle. “It’s too perfect.”

Ethan stepped forward, his movements deliberate. “Careful,” he murmured. “The rocks can be slippery.”

“I’m fine,” she replied, her tone light. She straightened, turning to face him. “You’ve got to admit, though—this view was worth the hike.”

He smiled faintly, his hands resting in his pockets. “It is.”

The silence between them deepened, broken only by the distant roar of the waves. Amara’s gaze flicked back to the ocean, her profile illuminated by the soft sunlight. Ethan’s mind worked methodically, cataloging every detail, every step that would follow.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” she said, her voice quiet. “I needed this.”

Ethan nodded, though the gesture felt heavy. “It’s good to escape sometimes.”

Her eyes met his briefly, her expression unreadable. Then she turned back to the horizon, unaware of the storm building behind his composed exterior. Ethan took a step closer, the weight of the moment settling into his chest like a stone.



ETHAN’S HAND RESTED on the jagged rock, his eyes scanning the horizon where the ocean melted into the sky. The waves roared below, their power relentless, their depths unfathomable. Amara stood at the edge, her arms outstretched as if she could capture the world in her grasp.

“Isn’t this amazing?” Her voice was carried by the wind, tinged with wonder. “This is why I travel. For moments like this.”

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Ethan's chest tightened, his pulse a steady drumbeat in his ears. He should step forward, close the gap. His plan was set. The precision of it, the inevitability, had always given him control. But now, his feet felt rooted to the ground, as though the weight of the moment was pressing him into the earth.

Amara turned, her face lit with a radiant smile. "You picked the perfect spot."

He nodded, the motion stiff. "It's... breathtaking."

Her gaze softened. "You know, I can't quite figure you out. You're so reserved, like there's this whole world inside you no one else gets to see."

Ethan's lips parted, but no words came. Her eyes held his, unguarded, searching. For an instant, he saw not her, but a child. His younger self, small and forgotten, standing in a doorway while his mother's laughter echoed through the house. She had turned away, dismissing him without a second glance.

"Ethan?" Amara's voice cut through the memory.

He blinked, the image shattering. "Sorry," he murmured. "Just... thinking."

She stepped closer, her expression curious. "About what?"

"About how much we miss while we're chasing something else," he said, his voice quieter than usual.

Her smile returned, softer now. "That's deep. Maybe you're a philosopher under all that stoicism."

Ethan forced a chuckle, though the sound felt hollow. His fingers curled into his palms, nails biting into skin. The hesitation was a luxury he couldn't afford. He took a step forward, his shadow falling over hers.



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ETHAN'S HAND GRIPPED her shoulder, firm but not alarming. Amara glanced at him, her brows lifting in surprise.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her tone light, though a hint of concern crept in.

"Just making sure you don't lose your balance," he replied, his voice steady. He gestured to the edge. "It's a long way down."

She laughed, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "I'm not that clumsy."

Ethan didn't move, his hand remaining in place. The moment stretched, each heartbeat a hammer against his ribs. She stepped closer to the edge, oblivious to the tension radiating from him.

"This is the kind of place you don't forget," she said, her voice tinged with awe. "You're lucky to have found it."

He nodded, his jaw tightening. His hand shifted slightly, the motion subtle, calculated. "Sometimes, the best things come when you're not looking."

She turned to face him fully, her expression open, trusting. "Thanks for sharing this with me. It means a lot."

Ethan's fingers twitched, the finality of the moment pressing down on him like a vice. His chest burned, a war waging between his carefully constructed logic and the flicker of doubt she had ignited. Then, as though a switch had flipped, his muscles tensed.

The motion was swift, almost mechanical. Amara's eyes widened, confusion flashing across her face as the world tilted. Her scream was brief, cut short by the sound of her body meeting the ocean's grasp. The waves consumed her, their roar swallowing everything.

Ethan stood motionless, his breath shallow, his gaze fixed on the water below. The calm returned, a false stillness settling over the scene. He adjusted his jacket, his hands steady once more. Without a backward glance, he turned and retraced his steps along the trail, the sound of the waves fading behind him.

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ETHAN EMERGED FROM the trail, his pace unhurried, his breaths measured. The sunlight had begun to soften, painting the path in hues of gold and shadow. He reached into his jacket pocket, brushing his fingers over the folded map tucked inside. It was a subtle gesture, rehearsed and deliberate, as though he were just another hiker preparing to leave the scenic route behind.

At the trailhead, a group of hikers gathered, their laughter carrying through the crisp air. Ethan adjusted his expression, allowing a faint smile to touch his lips as he approached.

“Beautiful day for it, isn’t it?” A man in a red windbreaker addressed him, his face flushed from exertion.

Ethan nodded, his voice easy. “Couldn’t ask for better weather. The view up there is something else.”

The man chuckled, nodding toward the trail. “First time here?”

“First time,” Ethan replied, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I’d heard about the hike, thought I’d see what the fuss was about.”

Another hiker, a woman with a camera slung over her shoulder, joined the conversation. “Did you go all the way to the edge? That spot with the cliffs?”

Ethan tilted his head, the faint smile never wavering. “I did. Stunning, isn’t it? Makes you feel like you’re on the edge of the world.”

The woman grinned, raising her camera. “Definitely worth the trek.”

Ethan lingered just long enough to seem natural, exchanging pleasantries with the group before making his way to the parking lot. As he reached his car, he glanced back at the trailhead. The group had dispersed, their laughter fading into the distance.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, he adjusted the rearview mirror, his reflection steady and composed. He gripped the steering wheel, his

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knuckles white for a fleeting moment before he released the tension. The engine purred to life, and he merged onto the coastal road, the ocean stretching out beside him. The roar of the waves seemed fainter now, a distant memory swallowed by the hum of the tires against the pavement.



THE BALCONY DOOR STOOD open, allowing the sea breeze to filter into the room. Ethan sat on the edge of the lounge chair, his elbows resting on his knees. The horizon burned with the dying light of the sun, streaks of orange and purple bleeding into the darkening sky.

He reached for the glass on the small table beside him, swirling the amber liquid before taking a slow sip. The whiskey burned as it slid down his throat, its warmth a sharp contrast to the chill settling in his chest.

From below, the sounds of the city drifted upward—voices, laughter, the faint strains of music. Life carried on, unbothered, unaware. He closed his eyes, letting the noise blend into a dull hum.

A flicker of movement on the glass table caught his attention. His reflection stared back at him, distorted by the curve of the surface. The face was familiar, yet foreign. For a moment, he thought of Amara's laughter, bright and unguarded, cutting through the static of his thoughts. It had lingered, much longer than he expected.

He leaned back, resting his head against the chair. The glass trembled in his grip before he set it down with a soft clink. The satisfaction he had always counted on—the cold, clinical relief—felt distant, fleeting. In its place, an unease began to coil, subtle but persistent.

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His gaze returned to the horizon, now swallowed by the night. The city lights flickered below, tiny beacons scattered across the darkness. Ethan exhaled, long and slow, the breath misting in the cool air.

Tomorrow, he would leave. Another destination, another chapter. But for now, he remained seated, the weight of the evening pressing against him, the cracks in his facade stretching just a little wider.

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Chapter 5: Crimson Nights in Rome



ETHAN STEPPED OUT OF the terminal at Leonardo da Vinci Airport, his leather duffel slung over one shoulder. The warm Roman sun brushed his face, a golden hue that seemed to soften even the edges of his thoughts. The air carried a medley of jasmine and exhaust, the kind of chaotic harmony only a city like Rome could conjure.

A line of cabs snaked around the curb, drivers leaning against their vehicles, chatting in rapid Italian. Ethan approached one and tapped the window.

“Piazza Navona,” he instructed, slipping into the back seat.

The driver glanced at him through the rearview mirror, nodding as the car rolled forward.

The ride into the city was a gradual immersion into history and charm. Villas crowned with creeping ivy gave way to cobblestone streets lined with vibrant façades. Street vendors shouted over each other, hawking everything from fresh figs to handmade jewelry. The rush of scooters zipping through narrow lanes punctuated the air.

Ethan watched it all with an analytical eye. Rome unfolded before him like a film reel, every frame brimming with opportunities. The city was perfect, almost too perfect. Its romantic chaos would make it easy to disappear into the crowd when the time came.

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The cab halted at a red light near the Tiber River. A couple strolled hand in hand along the embankment, their laughter carried on the breeze. Ethan's lips pressed into a thin line.

"You enjoy Rome?" The driver's voice broke through the quiet.

"It has its appeal," Ethan replied, his tone measured.

"You're here for business?"

"Something like that." He turned his gaze back to the river, where a small boat drifted lazily under a stone arch.

The car veered into the heart of the city, weaving through streets that grew narrower and older with each turn. As they neared Piazza Navona, the buzz of tourists replaced the hum of traffic. Fountains sparkled under the sun, their marble sculptures frozen in dramatic poses. Artists lined the square, their easels capturing snapshots of the Eternal City's vibrancy.

The cab pulled to a stop in front of a grand hotel, its façade a tapestry of cream and terracotta. Ethan handed the driver a bill, exiting the car without another word.

At the hotel's entrance, a bellhop moved to assist with his luggage. Ethan waved him off, stepping into the cool embrace of the lobby. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the Renaissance-inspired décor.

A receptionist greeted him with a polished smile. "Welcome to Hotel de Russie. Do you have a reservation?"

"Ethan Ashford."

Her fingers danced across the keyboard. "Ah, yes, Mr. Ashford. A suite overlooking the courtyard."

"Perfect."

As she handed him the key card, Ethan allowed a small, disarming smile to surface.

"Enjoy your stay."

"Oh," he replied, his voice smooth, "I intend to."

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With that, he made his way toward the elevator, his steps deliberate. The city awaited him, brimming with charm and possibilities. Behind the polished exterior of this historical haven, Ethan's mind was already constructing a darker narrative, one that Rome would never see coming.

The marble lobby of the Hotel Raphael shimmered under the glow of ornate chandeliers. Renaissance murals adorned the walls, their vibrant hues a testament to Rome's enduring grandeur. Ethan stepped inside, his gaze briefly scanning the opulent surroundings before settling on the polished reception desk.

"Buonasera. Welcome to Hotel Raphael," the receptionist greeted with a practiced smile, her hair swept neatly into a low chignon. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Ethan Ashford," he replied, his tone smooth and deliberate.

Her fingers danced across the keyboard. "Ah, yes, Mr. Ashford. A suite overlooking the Piazza Navona. You'll find the view quite stunning this time of year."

"That's what I'm counting on," Ethan said, his lips curving into a faint smile.

As she handed him the key card, her hand lingered just a moment too long. Ethan met her gaze, his expression unreadable. The faintest flush crept onto her cheeks before she redirected her focus to the screen.

"Our concierge is available for any recommendations," she added quickly, her voice faltering under the weight of his piercing stare.

"I'm sure I'll make my own discoveries," Ethan replied, pocketing the card.

The elevator ride to his suite was silent, save for the soft hum of classical music piped through hidden speakers. Alone, Ethan's demeanor shifted. His polite smile dissolved into something colder,

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more calculating. He reached the suite and slid the card through the lock. The door opened to reveal a room bathed in muted golds and creams, the furnishings a seamless blend of modern luxury and classical elegance.

Ethan moved to the balcony, pushing open the glass doors. The city stretched before him, its terracotta rooftops glowing in the evening light. Below, tourists and locals alike filled the square, their laughter and conversations mingling with the faint strains of a street performer's violin.

He leaned on the railing, watching. A couple at a nearby café leaned into each other, their smiles soft, unguarded. Ethan's eyes narrowed as he turned away, letting the curtain fall back into place.

Inside, he methodically unpacked his belongings. A single suitcase, neatly packed. Everything had its place—two tailored suits, casual wear, and a small black case that he handled with care. He placed the case on the desk, opening it to reveal a collection of tools: gloves, a flashlight, a slim blade, and other items arranged with precision. Satisfied, he locked it and tucked the key into his pocket.

The city outside was alive with possibilities, but Ethan was patient. Tonight was about acclimating. Tomorrow, the hunt would begin.

He poured himself a glass of water from the crystal decanter on the counter, the ice clinking softly. Holding the glass to his lips, he gazed into the mirror above the minibar. The reflection staring back was poised, composed—an image of control. But beneath the surface, the machinery of his mind churned, gears clicking into place.

Rome was his stage now, and he was ready to play his part.



ETHAN STEPPED INTO the cool evening air, his polished oxfords clicking against the cobblestone streets. Rome came alive at night. The

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dim glow of streetlights cast long shadows, and the air hummed with the lively chatter of diners spilling out of trattorias. The scent of garlic, roasted meat, and wine mingled with the faint musk of history embedded in the city's stones.

He moved through the streets with purpose, his posture relaxed but his mind alert. Every corner of Rome held potential, every alley a possible venue. A group of tourists huddled around a guide, their laughter breaking the night's rhythm. Ethan slowed just enough to catch snippets of their conversation before slipping past.

Near the Trevi Fountain, he paused, blending into the crowd. Coins glinted as they arced through the air, splashing into the water below. A couple stood at the edge, their arms wrapped around each other as they made a wish. Ethan's gaze lingered for a moment before shifting to the narrow streets branching off from the square.

He took the quieter path, letting the energy of the city fade as he entered a warren of alleys. A Vespa zipped by, its engine sputtering as the rider waved to a friend leaning out of a café window. Ethan filed away the scene, noting the placement of security cameras and the rhythm of the street.

At a small piazza, a street performer juggled flaming torches, the crowd clapping with every deft catch. Ethan's lips twitched as he watched the performer's fluid precision. It reminded him of his own craft—each move calculated, practiced, flawless.

He continued walking, the sounds of the city ebbing and flowing around him. In the distance, a bell tolled. He found himself near the Pantheon, its grand columns illuminated against the dark sky. The open square was dotted with street vendors and artists sketching portraits under makeshift lights.

Ethan bought a gelato from a nearby cart, the vendor chattering cheerfully as he handed over the cone. Ethan nodded, offering a polite "Grazie" before turning back toward the streets.

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As he walked, the gelato untouched in his hand, Ethan's thoughts turned inward. Rome was beautiful, yes, but its beauty masked vulnerabilities. It was a city of secrets, of narrow alleys and hidden courtyards where anything could happen. Where no one would hear.

He let the gelato drop into a trash bin as he rounded a final corner. His route had been deliberate, his observations methodical. Tomorrow, he would return to the rooftops, to the wine bars. Tonight, he would prepare.

Rome was a city of romance, but Ethan was here to write a far darker story.



THE AIR IN THE TINY apartment reeked of stale wine and cheap perfume. Eight-year-old Ethan sat curled up on the frayed sofa, his knees drawn to his chest. His mother's laughter echoed from the kitchen, a lilting sound that had once brought him comfort but now cut like glass.

"Don't you ever stop with the jokes?" her voice cooed, soft and syrupy. The sound of clinking glasses followed, and Ethan's stomach twisted.

From his vantage point, he could see her leaning against the counter. A man he didn't recognize stood too close, his hand grazing her arm as she poured another drink. Her red lipstick was smudged, the color bleeding into the corners of her mouth. Ethan's small hands clenched into fists.

"You're too much, Carla," the man teased, his voice low and suggestive.

His mother's laughter spilled out again, louder this time. Ethan's chest tightened. "Mom?" His voice was small, barely audible.

She didn't turn. "Go to bed, Ethan. This isn't a time for kids."

FLYING DEATH

“But I’m hungry,” he tried, his tone shaky.

“There’s bread on the table,” she dismissed, her attention still fixed on the man. “You’re a big boy. You can take care of yourself.”

Ethan’s gaze darted to the table. A single, stale slice sat on a chipped plate. The sight made his stomach churn more than the hunger. He forced himself to his feet, dragging his thin frame toward the table. Each step felt heavier than the last.

Behind him, the flirtation continued, their voices a cruel melody of laughter and low murmurs. Ethan grabbed the bread, his fingers trembling. He glanced over his shoulder once more. The man’s hand now rested on his mother’s waist, and she didn’t push it away.

He wanted to shout, to yank her out of the man’s grasp, but his throat felt as though it had closed shut. Instead, he slumped back onto the sofa, clutching the bread without eating it. The world outside the window was dark, a faint siren wailing in the distance.

As he stared at his mother, a sharp realization clawed its way into his young mind. She would always choose someone else. He would always be an afterthought.

The laughter from the kitchen crescendoed, and Ethan’s nails dug into the bread until it crumbled. His lips pressed into a thin line as hot tears spilled silently down his cheeks.



THE TERRACE OVERLOOKED the Colosseum, its ancient silhouette glowing under the amber haze of strategic floodlights. Ethan adjusted his jacket as he stepped into the bar, the soft hum of conversation mingling with the clink of glasses. Candles flickered on small, wrought-iron tables, their light casting delicate patterns on the stone floor.

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He scanned the crowd with practiced ease. Couples leaned into each other, their laughter subdued but genuine. Groups of friends shared animated stories over glasses of red and white. Ethan's gaze stopped when he saw her.

Sophia Ricci sat at a corner table, her posture relaxed but commanding. She held a glass of Chianti, its deep ruby hue catching the light. Her dark hair framed a face that was striking in its confidence, her crimson lips curving upward in a slight, knowing smile. She wore a sleek black dress that accentuated her figure without seeming forced, a statement of effortless elegance.

Ethan approached, weaving through the tables with calculated nonchalance. As he neared, he caught snippets of her conversation with a man seated across from her—a colleague, perhaps. Their exchange was lively, filled with references to varietals and tannins, the language of someone deeply entrenched in the world of wine.

When the man excused himself, leaving his unfinished glass behind, Ethan stepped in.

"Chianti Classico," Ethan observed, nodding toward her glass. "A bold choice for a warm evening."

Sophia glanced up, her brows arching slightly before her expression softened. "It's the house's recommendation. I trust their judgment."

"Good judgment is rare," Ethan replied smoothly, taking the empty seat. "Mind if I join you? It seems your company has left you at the mercy of strangers."

Her laugh was light but sharp, her eyes appraising him. "And what kind of stranger are you? The mysterious type who knows his way around a wine list?"

"Only enough to hold a conversation," Ethan countered. "I'd rather listen to someone who truly knows their craft."

Sophia leaned back, her glass poised between her fingers. "And how do you know I'm worth listening to?"

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“You carry yourself like someone who is,” Ethan replied, his tone warm but measured. “And you didn’t flinch when I named your wine. Most people would’ve corrected me.”

Sophia’s lips curved upward again, her interest piqued. “Alright, stranger. Let’s see if you’re as good at drinking wine as you are at talking about it.”

Ethan raised an imaginary glass in a toast. “To good wine and better company.”

Their conversation flowed, each line of dialogue a dance. Sophia’s laughter grew more frequent, her body language more open. Ethan mirrored her enthusiasm, each story crafted to draw her in. She was vibrant, magnetic—a challenge he was ready to meet head-on.



THE CANDLELIGHT BETWEEN them flickered as the breeze carried fragments of other conversations. Ethan leaned forward, his hands resting lightly on the edge of the table, his attention fixed solely on Sophia.

“Tell me,” she began, tilting her head slightly. “How does someone like you end up in a place like this, alone?”

“I could ask you the same,” he countered, his tone playful. “But if you must know, I’m here chasing stories. I’ve always believed cities are more than places—they’re people, history, moments.”

Sophia took another sip of her wine, her expression one of amused skepticism. “That’s an answer polished enough to be rehearsed.”

“It’s not,” Ethan assured her, leaning back slightly. “But I do find myself captivated by people who live as though every choice they make is deliberate. Like you, for instance.”

Her laughter returned, softer this time. “And what makes you think I’m deliberate?”

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“You’re sitting here alone, savoring a Chianti Classico in one of the most romantic cities in the world,” he said. “Either you’re waiting for someone, or you don’t care who notices you’re not.”

Sophia’s gaze narrowed, her smile lingering. “And which do you think it is?”

He paused for effect, his eyes meeting hers. “I think you’re exactly where you want to be.”

Her silence was brief but loaded, her lips pressing together in thought before curving upward again. “Alright, stranger. Since you’re so perceptive, tell me—what’s the most memorable thing you’ve experienced here in Rome?”

Ethan’s answer came without hesitation. “This conversation.”

Her laugh broke the tension, and for the first time, her posture softened. They spent the next hour exchanging stories—some real, most fabricated on Ethan’s part. He mirrored her passion for culture, recounting adventures in vineyards and ruins, weaving them seamlessly into a tapestry of half-truths. Every laugh, every glance she offered was another step closer to his goal.

As the night deepened, Sophia reached for her glass, her tone lighter now. “You’re full of surprises, you know that?”

“Good wine and good company,” Ethan said, lifting his glass in a mock toast. “That’s all it takes.”

Her eyes sparkled as she met his gaze. “If that’s all it takes, maybe you’ll appreciate a real surprise.”

Ethan’s brows lifted, feigning curiosity. “I’m intrigued.”

Sophia leaned forward, lowering her voice just enough to draw him closer. “How do you feel about exclusive tastings? My family owns a private wine cellar. If you’re free tomorrow...”

Ethan smiled, his heart steady even as his mind raced. “For an invitation like that, I’ll make time.”

FLYING DEATH



THE ROOFTOP BAR HAD emptied slightly, leaving a quieter intimacy that hung between Ethan and Sophia like an unspoken secret. Her wine glass sat half-full, the deep crimson liquid catching the faint glow of the city lights. Ethan allowed a subtle pause in their conversation, letting the silence stretch just enough to create intrigue.

Sophia leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “You talk about wine with the kind of reverence people save for poetry,” she said, her smile edged with curiosity. “But I have to ask—have you ever tasted a vintage so rare it’s practically a piece of history?”

Ethan returned her smile, soft and measured, leaning back in his chair. “I’ve had my fair share of unique experiences. But nothing as dramatic as that sounds.”

She tilted her head, her dark eyes gleaming with a playful challenge. “Then I suppose I should change that.”

Ethan arched a brow. “Are you offering to broaden my horizons?”

“Let’s just say I have access to something special.” Sophia’s voice dropped, adding a conspiratorial edge. “My family has a private cellar—small but exquisite. Not many people get an invitation.”

Ethan allowed his smile to deepen, careful to maintain the balance between curiosity and modesty. “You’re making it sound irresistible.”

“It is,” she said, leaning back with a satisfied smirk. “And since you’ve charmed me with your talk of vineyards and cellars, I suppose I could make an exception. Tomorrow evening?”

His heart quickened, but his tone remained composed. “I’d be honored.”

Sophia’s laugh was soft and melodic as she raised her glass. “To new experiences, then.”

Ethan mirrored her gesture, the faint clink of their glasses punctuating the moment. “To memorable evenings.”

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As the conversation wound down, Sophia's demeanor shifted slightly, the sparkle in her eyes replaced by a quiet contemplation. "You know," she said, her voice softer now, "there's something about Rome. It has a way of making you feel like you're part of something timeless."

Ethan nodded, his gaze fixed on her. "It's not just the city. It's the company."

She met his eyes, her smile faint but genuine. "Tomorrow, then. Don't be late."

Ethan watched as she walked away, her silhouette framed by the glow of the Colosseum in the distance. He waited until she disappeared from view before finishing the last sip of his wine, the taste lingering on his tongue like a promise.



THE STREETS OF ROME seemed quieter under the silver light of the moon, their cobblestones glowing faintly as Ethan and Sophia walked side by side. Her heels clicked against the pavement, the rhythm punctuated by the occasional hum of passing Vespas. The air carried the faint scent of blooming jasmine, mingling with the earthy aroma of old stone.

"This way," Sophia said, gesturing toward a narrower street. "It's not far."

Ethan followed, his steps deliberate as his gaze flicked over the surrounding alleys. The city's charm was deceptive, he thought—its romantic allure masking the shadows that could hide anything.

"You're unusually quiet," Sophia remarked, glancing over her shoulder. "Having second thoughts?"

"Not at all," Ethan replied, his voice smooth. "Just taking it all in. The way the moonlight softens everything here... It's like stepping into a painting."

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Sophia laughed, the sound light and genuine. “You’re either a poet or dangerously good at flattery.”

“Maybe both,” Ethan said, his smile faint. “But I meant it. This city has a way of turning every corner into a story.”

Sophia slowed as they approached a wrought-iron gate tucked between two ivy-covered walls. She produced a small key from her clutch, the faint click of the lock breaking the stillness. “Here we are. I hope you’re ready.”

Ethan’s gaze flicked to the shadows beyond the gate, his pulse steady as he stepped forward. “Always.”

The courtyard beyond was small but elegant, with a stone path leading to an arched wooden door. Sophia unlocked it, pushing it open to reveal a set of narrow stairs descending into the earth. A faint, earthy aroma wafted up, rich with the promise of aged wine.

“Careful on the steps,” she said, descending ahead of him. “It’s a little uneven.”

Ethan followed, his footsteps measured as his mind cataloged every detail—the height of the ceiling, the position of the barrels, the way the light from Sophia’s phone cast long shadows across the stone walls.

As they reached the bottom, Sophia turned, her smile warm. “Welcome to my favorite place in the world.”

Ethan stepped forward, his eyes scanning the room. “It’s perfect.”

Sophia gestured to the rows of barrels, her voice carrying a note of pride. “Each one has a story. Some of these vintages are older than both of us combined.”

Ethan’s gaze lingered on her as she spoke, her passion evident in every word. He allowed himself a fleeting moment of hesitation, the weight of the moment settling over him like a second skin.

“Let’s make tonight one of those stories,” he said, his tone calm and inviting.

Sophia laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Then let’s begin.”

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THE WOODEN DOOR CREAKED open, releasing the earthy aroma of aging oak and fermented grapes into the air. Ethan stepped inside, his eyes adjusting to the dim, flickering light from an antique chandelier above. The room was lined with rows of barrels, each labeled with meticulous care, their glossy surfaces gleaming faintly in the warm glow.

Sophia's heels clicked softly against the stone floor as she walked ahead, her hand gliding over the barrels as if greeting old friends. "My father always said wine has a soul," she began, her voice laced with nostalgia. "Each bottle tells a story. This place was his sanctuary."

Ethan stayed a few steps behind, his gaze sweeping the room. He took in the layout—the distance between the barrels, the single door, the narrow ventilation grates high on the walls. It was perfect.

"Impressive," he said, his tone measured. "You can feel the history here."

Sophia turned to him, her smile soft. "He would have loved to meet someone like you—someone who respects the craft."

Ethan moved closer, his steps deliberate but unhurried. "It's hard not to respect something this timeless. You've done an incredible job keeping it alive."

Her smile faltered slightly, replaced by a flicker of vulnerability. "It hasn't been easy. There were times I thought about selling, but I couldn't bear to let it go. It's all I have left of him."

Ethan reached for a barrel, brushing his fingers over the smooth wood. "That kind of dedication is rare. It's inspiring."

Sophia glanced away, her shoulders relaxing as she allowed herself a moment of pride. "Thank you. That means more than you know."

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SOPHIA RETRIEVED A bottle from a nearby rack, holding it up to the light. “This is one of our oldest vintages,” she said, her voice tinged with reverence. “My father’s favorite.”

Ethan stepped closer, the faint clink of glass catching his attention as she set the bottle on a small table. She pulled out two glasses and began pouring, the crimson liquid swirling elegantly.

“He used to say that wine is like life,” she continued. “Rich, complex, unpredictable.”

“And sometimes bitter,” Ethan added, his tone carrying a quiet edge.

Sophia paused, looking up at him. Her expression softened, curiosity flickering in her eyes. “You’ve been through something, haven’t you? I can tell.”

Ethan tilted his head slightly, allowing a shadow of a smile to play on his lips. “We all carry our burdens.”

She nodded, her gaze dropping to the glass in her hand. “I suppose that’s true. Losing him... it changed me. Made me stronger, I think, but sometimes I wonder if it also made me colder.”

Ethan watched her, his own mask slipping for a fraction of a second. He could see the cracks in her composure, the hidden pain she tried so hard to keep buried. It mirrored something in himself, a reflection he hadn’t expected to find.

“You don’t seem cold to me,” he said, his voice low. “You seem... resilient.”

Sophia smiled faintly, lifting her glass. “To resilience, then.”

Ethan raised his own glass, the gesture deliberate and controlled. “To resilience.”

The glasses clinked softly, the sound lingering in the quiet cellar. Sophia’s shoulders relaxed as she took a sip, her guard lowering further.

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Ethan mirrored her, the wine's sharp, earthy flavor coating his tongue. It was exquisite—too exquisite for the moment he knew was coming.

Sophia set her glass down, turning to face him fully. "Thank you for listening. I didn't realize how much I needed that."

Ethan took a step closer, his movements fluid. "It's easy to listen when someone has something worth saying."

She laughed softly, the sound genuine but fleeting. "You have a way with words, Ethan."

He held her gaze, his expression calm and unyielding. "And you have a way of bringing them out."

For a moment, the space between them seemed to shrink, the air charged with something unspoken. Sophia looked away first, her hand brushing against the table as she turned back to the barrels.

"This place... it's magic," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ethan nodded, his gaze steady. "It is."



SOPHIA TURNED HER BACK to Ethan, carefully pouring another glass of wine from a dusty bottle she had chosen moments before. Her laughter still lingered in the air, light and unguarded, as she recounted a story about her father's eccentric wine-tasting rituals.

Ethan's eyes flicked to the corners of the dimly lit cellar. The shadows seemed alive, creeping closer with each flicker of the candlelight. The weight of the moment pressed against him, sharp and unrelenting. He flexed his fingers, his movements deliberate.

"You know," Sophia said, turning slightly to glance at him over her shoulder, "this was his favorite vintage. He always said it reminded him of summer sunsets in Tuscany."

"It's beautiful," Ethan replied, his voice smooth, almost soothing. "Just like this moment."

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Sophia smiled, her cheeks flushed from the wine. She set the bottle down and gestured toward the table. "Let's toast to the beauty of life, then. And to rare moments like these."

Ethan stepped closer, his hand brushing the edge of the table as he reached for his glass. For a second, the faint tremor in his hand betrayed him. He tightened his grip, the chill of the glass grounding him.

"To beauty," he said softly.

They clinked their glasses, the delicate chime reverberating in the stillness of the room. Sophia took a sip, her gaze lingering on him, warm and trusting. Ethan set his glass down without drinking, his eyes never leaving hers.

"You're different," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "I feel like I've known you for years."

Ethan stepped closer, the proximity disarming. "Sometimes connections happen like that. Effortless."

She smiled again, but before she could respond, he reached out. His movements were swift, calculated. The strike was precise—a sudden push against the heavy barrel beside her. It toppled forward with a deafening crash, the weight of it crushing her against the cold stone floor.

The air filled with the sharp tang of spilled wine, mingling with the heavy silence that followed. Ethan knelt beside her still form, his gloved hands working quickly to arrange the scene. He moved with methodical precision, wiping away any traces of his presence, ensuring the angles and details told the story he intended.

He paused for a moment, his chest heaving, the adrenaline coursing through him like fire. His gaze lingered on Sophia's lifeless form, the warmth that had once lit her eyes extinguished. The room seemed to breathe around him, the weight of the barrels pressing in, the shadows whispering secrets to the silence.

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ETHAN STRAIGHTENED, his movements calm, calculated. He slid the gloves from his hands, folding them neatly before slipping them into his pocket. The soft scuff of his shoes against the floor was the only sound as he stepped away from Sophia's body.

The cellar smelled of spilled wine and faintly of dust. He glanced around, ensuring every detail aligned with the narrative he'd created. The barrel's weight, the angle of the fall, the faint smear of red on the stone floor—it all spoke of a tragic accident. A momentary lapse in judgment.

He moved to the table, careful not to disturb the untouched glass of wine he'd poured earlier. He lifted it and took a single sip, the rich, dark liquid burning its way down his throat. He placed the glass back on the table with deliberate care, its position precise, as if it had been left mid-conversation.

His gaze shifted to the stairs leading out of the cellar. He ascended them slowly, his steps light, his ears attuned to the faint hum of the night above. At the top, he slipped into the shadows, the cellar door creaking softly shut behind him.

The streets of Rome stretched out before him, quiet and empty save for the occasional distant murmur of laughter or the echo of footsteps. He melted into the darkness, his pace measured, his heart finally beginning to steady.

He reached a narrow alley and paused, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his forehead. His reflection caught in a nearby window—calm, composed, almost unrecognizable even to himself.

"Another masterpiece," he muttered under his breath, his voice devoid of emotion.

With a final glance toward the alley's end, he disappeared into the labyrinth of Rome, leaving the cellar—and its secrets—behind.

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ETHAN SANK INTO THE wrought-iron chair of an outdoor café, the buzz of Rome's nightlife unfolding around him. The Pantheon loomed in the background, its ancient pillars bathed in golden light. Laughter drifted from nearby tables, mingling with the clink of glasses and the faint melody of a street performer's violin.

A waiter approached, placing a tiny porcelain cup of espresso on the table. Ethan nodded in silent acknowledgment, lifting the cup to his lips. The bitter heat grounded him, cutting through the residue of adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

Two tables away, a couple leaned toward each other, their conversation punctuated by smiles and quiet laughter. Ethan's gaze lingered on them for a moment, not out of envy, but curiosity. He wondered what it was like to be so exposed, so willingly vulnerable.

He set the cup down, his fingers steady now. The night felt almost normal—mundane, even. If anyone glanced his way, they would see just another traveler, blending effortlessly into the Roman backdrop. That was his gift: to disappear while standing in plain sight.

The violinist shifted to a slower piece, the melancholic notes weaving their way through the square. Ethan leaned back, his mind drifting to the cellar. He replayed the events, every motion, every detail. The way Sophia's voice had softened when she spoke of her father, the trust in her eyes just before the end.

The image of her lifeless body flashed in his mind, but he pushed it aside, burying it under a layer of cold rationality. It wasn't personal—it never was. She had simply been a means to an end, a step in a pattern that had become as familiar as the morning sunrise.

Yet, as he stared into the swirling black depths of his espresso, a flicker of something stirred—a faint unease, like the shadow of a long-forgotten memory. It passed quickly, replaced by the steady

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rhythm of his controlled thoughts. He couldn't afford hesitation. Not now. Not ever.

A gust of wind carried the faint scent of jasmine, mingling with the aroma of freshly baked pastries from a nearby bakery. Ethan's lips twitched into something that resembled a smile. The night was perfect, unblemished by the chaos he had left behind.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small notebook. Flipping through its worn pages, he landed on the next name, the next destination. He tapped the pen against the edge of the table, his mind already piecing together the plan.

The city around him pulsed with life, oblivious to the predator in its midst.



SUNLIGHT SPILLED INTO the hotel room, golden and warm, casting long shadows across the Renaissance-inspired furnishings. Ethan stood by the window, the crisp edges of a local newspaper folded neatly in his hands.

The headline caught his eye: "Tragedy in Historic Wine Cellar—Sommelier Sophia Ricci Found Dead." The accompanying photo showed Sophia in a moment of vibrancy, her smile radiant as she stood in a vineyard. The article painted her as a beloved figure in the community, a beacon of passion and knowledge in the world of wine.

Ethan's eyes scanned the text, absorbing every detail. The police suspected an accident—a tragic misstep that had led to the collapse of a barrel. No foul play, no witnesses, no loose threads. Just as he had intended.

He set the newspaper down on the desk, smoothing its edges with deliberate care. The fleeting pang of guilt he had felt the night before

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stirred again, but he dismissed it with a practiced ease. Guilt was a luxury he couldn't afford.

He moved to the mirror, straightening the cuffs of his shirt. His reflection stared back, composed and unreadable. The cracks in his psyche, though present, were carefully hidden beneath layers of control and precision.

The hotel phone buzzed softly, signaling his car had arrived. Ethan grabbed his bag, pausing for a final glance around the room. Nothing left behind. No trace of him ever being there.

As he stepped into the hallway, the faint hum of the city filtered through the walls. Another city, another chapter closed. The only sound accompanying him down the corridor was the click of his polished shoes against the marble floor.

In the distance, the city of Rome continued its rhythm, unaware of the darkness that had passed through its streets. Ethan walked toward his next destination, the weight of his actions carefully balanced against the cold logic driving him forward.



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C hapter 6: Mirage of Dubai

The airport buzzed with travelers, their voices merging into a hum of anticipation. Ethan emerged from the arrivals gate alongside the rest of the flight crew, their navy uniforms crisp and coordinated. His polished demeanor matched the team's effortless composure, but his mind was already elsewhere, working ahead like the ticking of a well-wound clock.

The crew bus waited just outside the terminal, its sleek white exterior gleaming under the relentless Dubai sun. The heat pressed down like an invisible hand, though Ethan didn't flinch. He stepped aboard, trailing behind the others, his calm presence blending seamlessly into the group.

Conversations filled the bus as it pulled onto the highway. The captain lounged in the seat across from him, recounting an anecdote about a turbulence-heavy flight to Hong Kong. The co-pilot chimed in with a laugh. Ethan offered a polite nod at the punchline but kept his focus outside the tinted windows, where Dubai's shimmering skyline grew nearer with every mile.

"First time in Dubai, Ethan?" one of the cabin attendants asked from the seat behind him.

"Not quite," he replied without turning, his tone casual. "But it's been a while."

"Ah, well, the city's changed a lot," she said. "Wait until you see the Burj Khalifa up close. It's even more stunning than in pictures."

Ethan tilted his head, acknowledging her comment, but his gaze remained fixed on the horizon. The towering spire of the Burj Khalifa was visible now, cutting through the hazy sky like a shard of glass. Its perfection made his jaw tighten—a monument to control, both awe-inspiring and unnerving.

The bus pulled into the circular driveway of their hotel, a sleek high-rise in the heart of Downtown Dubai. The crew disembarked,

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their chatter subdued by the grandeur of the marble-clad lobby. Ethan trailed behind, taking in the vast expanse of polished floors, shimmering chandeliers, and mirrored walls that reflected the opulence back at itself.

“Room assignments,” the captain announced, handing out key cards with practiced efficiency. When it was Ethan’s turn, the card felt cool and weighty in his palm.

He made his way to the elevator with the others, their reflections multiplying infinitely in the gold-trimmed mirrors. On the 34th floor, he stepped out into the quiet hallway and found his suite. Sliding the card into the lock, he felt a fleeting moment of calm as the door clicked open.

The suite was pristine, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering a perfect view of the Burj Khalifa. Ethan stood motionless for a moment, letting the quiet luxury of the room envelop him. Outside, the city sprawled like a glittering mosaic, every detail meticulously arranged.

He placed his bag beside the bed, smoothing the creases in his uniform before walking to the window. The glass was cool under his fingertips, a stark contrast to the desert heat beyond.

“Order in chaos,” he murmured under his breath, his reflection merging with the city lights. His lips curved into the faintest smile, but his eyes remained cold. Dubai would serve its purpose. It always did.



ETHAN STEPPED INTO the sprawling labyrinth of the Dubai Mall, where the air carried a faint scent of luxury—perfumes, leather, and polished surfaces. The sheer scale of the place was dizzying. Marble floors gleamed under the dazzling lights of designer storefronts, and the hum of conversation mingled with the faint melody of water from the iconic indoor waterfall.

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He adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, walking with unhurried steps that matched the affluent crowd. The throngs of shoppers moved with an air of leisure, pausing to admire opulent window displays or sip coffee from branded cups. Ethan slid effortlessly among them, his polished demeanor making him indistinguishable from the parade of wealth surrounding him.

At the base of the aquarium, he stopped. Massive panes of glass separated him from the aquatic world within, where sleek sharks glided through the water. Their movements were predatory, graceful, and detached, mirroring something within him. His reflection flickered faintly against the glass, overlapping with the creatures behind it, and for a moment, his expression tightened.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” A woman beside him broke his focus. Her accent was distinctly British, her tone casually curious.

Ethan turned his head slightly, offering her a faint smile. “Fascinating. The precision, the way they move—it’s almost hypnotic.”

She nodded, still gazing at the water. “And terrifying in their simplicity. Hunt, survive, repeat. Nothing else matters.”

He chuckled softly, his eyes returning to the sharks. “Sometimes simplicity has its appeal.”

The woman’s attention drifted elsewhere, and Ethan moved on, the moment evaporating like mist. He walked past luxury boutiques and paused briefly at a sprawling display of watches. Rows of dials ticked in unison, small and orderly, an oasis of control amid the chaotic allure of the mall. The sight tugged at something buried deep within him—a memory.

In another life, he had arranged his toys the same way. Brightly colored plastic cars and action figures lined up meticulously on the floor, their symmetry the only reprieve from the clamor of his mother’s parties in the next room. Through the thin walls, laughter had erupted like bursts of static, paired with clinking glasses and muffled music. He hadn’t been invited to that world, only allowed to hear it.

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Ethan's grip tightened on the edge of his jacket as he turned away from the watches. The ache of that moment had dulled with time but never fully disappeared. It was that bitterness, that sense of exclusion, that had carved his path to control.

The murmurs of the crowd pulled him back to the present. He took the escalator up to a terrace overlooking the Dubai Fountain. The sun glinted off the water's surface as jets of liquid began their synchronized dance, climbing higher and higher. He leaned against the railing, surveying the scene with practiced detachment.

The fountain show, the endless parade of shoppers, the pristine order of the mall—it was all a facade, a mirage that concealed the chaos lurking beneath. Ethan allowed a small, unreadable smile to flicker across his lips. The city had given him everything he needed to maintain his own.

For now.



ETHAN'S EYES LINGERED on a cluster of tourists huddled near a high-end watch display. Their chatter and laughter blurred into the background as his mind wandered back to a dimly lit living room. He could almost hear the muffled thud of bass and the clink of glasses—his mother's parties, a chaotic blur of silk dresses, loud laughter, and cigarette smoke.

In the memory, young Ethan sat cross-legged on the cold wooden floor, his small hands meticulously arranging a line of toy cars. The room beyond the door pulsed with music, a world he wasn't welcome in.

"Perfect lines," he whispered, adjusting the cars one more time. Their glossy paint caught the faint glow of a nightlight, the only stable light source in the house. He'd arranged them by size, color, and

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model—a system only he understood. The ritual brought a fleeting sense of control in an environment that offered none.

A loud burst of laughter erupted from the other room, followed by a shrill, drunken voice. Ethan froze, his small fingers curling into fists. He hated that sound, hated how it erased the order he fought so hard to maintain. He craned his neck toward the door left ajar, a sliver of light spilling onto the floor.

Through the gap, he saw his mother draped across the sofa, a glass of wine in one hand and her signature red lipstick smeared on the rim. She laughed at something a man had whispered in her ear. Ethan didn't recognize the man. He never did.

"Ethan!" Her voice pierced through the memory, her tone annoyed. "Go to bed!"

He flinched, his breath catching. She hadn't even looked his way, her attention wholly consumed by her guests. Without a word, he stood and tiptoed to his room, leaving the cars in their perfect formation.

Even then, he understood he would never be part of her world.

Back in the present, Ethan's jaw tightened as he walked past the shimmering fountains outside the Dubai Mall. The memory wasn't just a wound; it was a blueprint. The control he hadn't found then, he seized now.

He adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, the fabric crisp against his wrist. His reflection shimmered in the water, a face as composed as the skyline behind him. But the tension in his chest lingered.

"Order," he muttered under his breath. "It's always about order."



THE WARM NIGHT AIR buzzed with the energy of conversations, clinking glasses, and faint music spilling from speakers hidden among

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the lush greenery. Ethan leaned on the sleek glass railing of the rooftop lounge, his gaze scanning the glittering city below. The Burj Khalifa pierced the sky, its mirrored surface reflecting the golden lights of Dubai.

Ethan took a slow sip of his drink, the liquid smooth and sharp against his tongue. The lounge was a hive of carefully curated chaos—fashionable guests moving between plush seating areas and the bar. Everything about it was designed to exude exclusivity.

Across the room, his eyes landed on her. Layla El-Sayed.

She stood at the bar, dressed in a tailored black jumpsuit that radiated effortless confidence. Her long, dark hair shimmered under the ambient lights as she laughed at something a man beside her said. Her voice carried over, rich and assertive, cutting through the hum of the crowd.

Ethan's lips curved into a calculated smile.

"Quite a view, isn't it?" A voice to his left startled him. A man, older and dressed in a crisp blazer, gestured to the city skyline.

"Breathtaking," Ethan replied without missing a beat. His tone was polite but distant, his eyes returning to Layla. She moved with a deliberate grace, her laughter shifting to a polite smile as she disengaged from her companion at the bar.

The man beside him chuckled. "It's easy to lose yourself here. The city has that effect."

"Doesn't it?" Ethan's response was automatic, his focus unwavering.

Layla moved toward the lounge's edge, her silhouette framed by the golden glow of the city lights. Ethan adjusted his collar, the faint sheen of his watch catching the light. He made his way toward her, his steps measured and confident.

At the edge of the railing, Layla's gaze remained fixed on the horizon. "The skyline never gets old," she remarked as Ethan approached, her voice low but steady.

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“It’s the perfect mix of ambition and elegance,” Ethan replied. He leaned casually on the railing beside her, his tone warm but nonchalant.

She turned her head, her dark eyes studying him for a moment before she smiled. “That’s a new take. Most people just call it flashy.”

“Only if they don’t understand the vision behind it.”

Her laugh was soft but genuine. “And you do?”

“I like to think so.” Ethan tilted his glass slightly. “But I’m more interested in your perspective.”

Layla’s eyebrow arched, her smile lingering. “Bold. I like that.”

Ethan smiled back, his grip on the conversation tightening like a vice.



THE CONVERSATION FLOWED like a carefully choreographed dance. Ethan mirrored Layla’s energy, weaving his fabricated tales of success with precision. He painted himself as an entrepreneur, someone who thrived on ambition and the thrill of taking risks. Layla’s guarded demeanor began to soften, her sharp wit meeting his with a growing ease.

“So, you left it all behind to chase an idea?” she asked, her glass of wine catching the ambient light as she gestured. “That’s gutsy.”

“Calculated,” Ethan corrected, his tone measured. “The best risks are. But you know that, don’t you?”

Her lips twitched into a smile. “What makes you so sure?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Ethan motioned subtly to the skyline beyond the glass. “This city isn’t for the faint of heart. It rewards those who know how to play the game.”

Layla studied him, her gaze steady. “You seem to understand the game pretty well yourself.”

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“It’s about knowing when to push forward and when to pull back,” Ethan said, his words deliberate. “And recognizing those who can do the same.”

A flicker of admiration crossed her face, but she masked it with a sip of her wine. “Fair enough.”

Ethan leaned closer, lowering his voice just enough to add an air of intimacy to the moment. “Tell me, Layla. What’s the most ambitious move you’ve made since coming here?”

Her laugh was soft but genuine. “You first.”

He paused, as if considering, though the answer was already crafted in his mind. “Selling everything I owned to invest in a startup. Everyone thought I was crazy. Maybe they were right. But it worked.”

Her eyes narrowed, curiosity sparking. “And now?”

“Now, I chase what comes next.” He let the words hang, the air between them thick with unspoken intent.

Layla tilted her head, her expression thoughtful. “You’re good, Ethan. I’ll give you that.”

He smiled, the satisfaction of her words settling into place like a perfectly aligned chess piece. “Good enough for you to share your story?”

Layla set her glass down, her smile turning playful. “We’ll see.”



THE ROOFTOP LOUNGE hummed with life as Ethan leaned casually against the polished bar. Layla’s laughter cut through the din, drawing his attention like a beacon. He waited for the perfect moment, a lull in their conversation, then stepped forward with an easy confidence.

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“You strike me as someone who appreciates adventure,” Ethan said, his tone warm and inviting. He tilted his head slightly, his expression tinged with intrigue.

Layla raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a half-smile. “And what makes you say that?”

“It’s the way you talk about this city,” he replied, gesturing subtly to the sprawling skyline behind them. “You’re not just passing through. You’re experiencing it. That’s rare.”

She glanced at him, her interest piqued. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s your idea of adventure?”

Ethan took a sip of his drink, letting the pause hang just long enough to draw her in. “A desert safari. Early morning, before the sun gets too high. Just you, the dunes, and silence so pure it’s almost otherworldly.”

Layla’s smile widened, her posture relaxing as she turned fully toward him. “Sounds poetic. But most tourists go on those group tours, and they’re anything but silent.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Ethan said, his voice dipping slightly. “I’ve found a way around the crowds. A private route. You’ll feel like the only person for miles.”

She considered him for a moment, her fingers idly tracing the rim of her glass. “You’ve done this before?”

“Several times,” he lied smoothly, his expression unwavering. “It’s unforgettable.”

Layla’s gaze lingered on him, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Why do I get the feeling you’re a little too good at this?”

Ethan chuckled, leaning closer. “I believe in making the most of where I am. And I’d hate for you to miss out.”

Her laugh was soft but genuine. “Alright, Ethan. I’ll take you up on it. Let’s see if your private route lives up to the hype.”

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THE NIGHT CAME UNBIDDEN, a memory clawing its way to the surface as Ethan left the rooftop lounge. He walked alone through the quiet streets, the conversation with Layla fading into the background as his mind drifted back to a different door, a different night.

He had been seven, standing barefoot on the cold wooden floor of their tiny apartment. The air smelled of stale perfume and cigarette smoke, a sickly mix that lingered long after her guests had left. Ethan had been too young to understand the full weight of what he was witnessing but old enough to know he shouldn't have been watching.

The door to the living room had been left ajar, a sliver of light cutting through the darkness. His mother sat on the couch, her laughter sharp and brittle as she leaned too close to a man Ethan didn't recognize. Her red lipstick was smudged, her hair a mess of curls that framed her face like a crown of thorns.

He remembered the way she had ignored him earlier that evening, brushing off his timid request for dinner with a dismissive wave. Now, she laughed freely, her voice full of a warmth that had been absent when she'd spoken to him.

"Ethan, go to bed," she had called out when she finally noticed him, her tone clipped and impatient. The man beside her had chuckled, and his mother had laughed again, softer this time, as if sharing a secret Ethan wasn't meant to hear.

He had retreated to his room, the door closing on her laughter but not the knot of anger tightening in his chest. It was the first time he had understood what it meant to be excluded, to be left on the outside looking in.

Now, in the present, that same knot twisted in his gut as he walked back to his hotel. His mind latched onto the memory, reshaping it into something sharp and functional, a weapon he could wield. Layla's

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laughter echoed in his ears, a mirror of his mother's, both reminders of how easily trust could be betrayed.

Ethan's expression hardened as the Burj Khalifa came into view, its glittering lights reflected in his dark eyes. Whatever lingering doubts had shadowed his plans for the morning dissolved into the same cold resolve that had carried him this far.

Trust was a fragile thing, and Layla, like the others, would soon understand that nothing in his world was as it seemed.



THE LAND CRUISER GLEAMED under the morning sun, its metallic surface reflecting the endless blue sky. Ethan leaned casually against the driver's door, his eyes scanning the quiet street outside the hotel as Layla approached. She was dressed for the occasion—light linen trousers and a wide-brimmed hat that framed her radiant smile.

"Perfect day for this," she said, slipping on her sunglasses.

"Couldn't agree more," Ethan replied, opening the passenger door with a practiced gesture. "Let's make it one to remember."

The hum of the engine filled the silence as they left the city behind. Skyscrapers gave way to low, sprawling suburbs, and then to the barren vastness of the desert. The world around them became a canvas of ochre and gold, stretching endlessly under the blazing sun. Layla pressed her hand to the window, her eyes wide with wonder.

"It's like another planet out here," she said.

"Something like that," Ethan murmured, his focus on the road ahead. "There's a purity to it. No noise, no distractions."

The car dipped and rose over the dunes, the tires kicking up fine sprays of sand. Layla laughed as the vehicle tilted slightly, gripping the door handle with mock alarm.

"You've done this before, right?"

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“Plenty of times.” Ethan’s voice was steady, calm. “Trust me, you’re in good hands.”

She settled back into her seat, her gaze fixed on the endless horizon. “This was a great idea. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so disconnected from everything.”

Ethan glanced at her briefly, the corner of his mouth twitching in a semblance of a smile. “Sometimes you need to leave it all behind to see things clearly.”

Layla nodded, her expression contemplative. “Exactly.”

The desert swallowed them as the city faded further into the distance. The tracks behind them were quickly erased by the wind, leaving no trace of their journey. Ethan’s hands tightened on the wheel, the vast emptiness around them mirroring the growing void within him.



THE LAND CRUISER CRESTED a towering dune, its engine rumbling to a halt. Ethan stepped out first, the fine grains of sand shifting under his boots. He opened the passenger door, gesturing for Layla to follow.

“This spot is perfect,” he said, his voice carrying over the gentle whisper of the wind. “You’ll see.”

Layla climbed out, brushing sand from her trousers. She turned slowly, her face lighting up as she took in the panoramic view. The dunes rolled like frozen waves, their shadows stretching long and sharp under the midday sun.

“It’s breathtaking,” she whispered, her voice tinged with awe.

Ethan watched her as she walked to the edge of the dune, her arms outstretched as if to embrace the endless expanse. The wind teased

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her hair, carrying her laughter into the void. His mind raced, each calculated step of his plan snapping into place.

“This is what I meant,” she said, turning to face him. “You were right—there’s something otherworldly about it.”

He nodded, stepping closer. “It’s not something you forget.”

Layla smiled, her guard entirely down. “Thanks for bringing me here. I—”

Her words caught in the wind as Ethan’s hand brushed against her arm, the moment lingering just long enough to disarm her further. She turned back to the view, unaware of the storm brewing behind his composed expression.

Ethan’s heart pounded as he stood beside her, the horizon stretching endlessly before them. The desert felt alive, its silence pressing against his ears, amplifying every calculated thought in his mind. The time was almost right.



THE SUN HUNG LOW IN the sky, casting a fiery glow across the dunes. Layla stood at the edge of the crest, her arms outstretched as if to embrace the vastness of the desert. Her laughter broke the silence, light and carefree, carried away by the warm, dry breeze.

“I can’t believe a place like this exists,” she said, her voice brimming with awe. “It feels endless.”

Ethan stood a few feet behind her, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed on her silhouette. The wind tousled her hair, the soft strands catching the golden light. She had no idea how exposed she truly was.

“It has a way of making you feel small,” Ethan replied, his tone measured, steady. “Like nothing else matters.”

Layla turned to him, her smile warm and genuine. “Thank you for bringing me here. I needed this.”

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Ethan stepped closer, his boots sinking slightly into the shifting sand. “Sometimes it’s good to get away from it all.”

He reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. She didn’t flinch, didn’t pull away. Instead, she looked at him, her expression soft, trusting. Ethan’s heart thudded in his chest, the weight of the moment pressing down on him.

She turned back to the view, her focus on the horizon. “It’s funny,” she said. “I’ve always been so focused on my career, on moving forward. But out here—”

Her words cut off as Ethan’s arm wrapped around her neck in a vice-like grip. The move was swift, practiced. Her body stiffened, her hands clawing at his arm, but the struggle was brief. The desert absorbed the sounds of her gasps, muffling her final breaths.

Ethan held her until the fight drained from her body, until the stillness returned. He released her gently, lowering her lifeless form onto the sand. The golden grains shifted around her, swallowing the evidence of her struggle.

The wind picked up, whipping against his face as if to scold him. Ethan ignored it. He moved quickly, his hands digging into the soft sand. Each scoop felt heavier than the last, the weight of his actions pressing down on him.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, he finished. The sand lay smooth and undisturbed, a blank canvas erasing the life it had just claimed. Ethan stood, brushing the grains from his hands, his gaze lingering on the spot where Layla once lay.

For a moment, he felt the faintest flicker of doubt, a crack in his carefully constructed facade. But he pushed it down, burying it alongside her.



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THE LAND CRUISER RUMBLED to life, its headlights cutting through the growing darkness. Ethan gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white as he navigated the undulating dunes. The tracks behind him disappeared almost instantly, the wind erasing any evidence of his passage.

The silence in the car was oppressive, broken only by the hum of the engine. Ethan's mind replayed every detail of the evening, every calculated move. His breathing was steady, his expression calm, but beneath the surface, his thoughts raced.

He reached for the radio, flipping it on in a rare moment of impulsiveness. A soft melody filled the cabin, incongruous against the backdrop of the vast, empty desert. He let it play, the sound grounding him as he approached the city's outskirts.

The glowing skyline of Dubai came into view, its towering buildings a sharp contrast to the desolation he had just left. Ethan eased the car onto the paved road, the hum of the tires changing pitch as they hit the asphalt. The city lights grew brighter, more blinding, as if mocking his darkness.

By the time he pulled into the hotel parking lot, the weight of the evening had settled into his bones. He turned off the engine, the silence rushing back like a wave. Ethan sat for a moment, his hands still gripping the wheel, his gaze fixed on the distant spire of the Burj Khalifa.

Finally, he exhaled, releasing the tension in his shoulders. He stepped out of the car, brushing a stray grain of sand from his sleeve. To anyone watching, he was just another tourist, returning from a day of adventure. But in his mind, the dunes still whispered her name.



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THE HOT WATER SCALDED Ethan's skin, washing away the grit of the desert. His hands scrubbed at his arms, his neck, his face, but no amount of effort seemed enough. The grains of sand had worked their way into the fibers of his being, stubborn and unyielding. He turned the water off abruptly, the silence of the room returning with an oppressive weight.

He stepped out of the shower and faced the mirror. The face staring back at him was composed, his dark eyes giving away nothing. Yet, deep in his chest, a tension coiled tighter, winding around his lungs. He reached for a towel and dried himself methodically, movements sharp and precise.

The suite beyond the bathroom door was immaculate, its luxury mocking him. The soft glow of the Burj Khalifa's lights spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the marble floors and plush furnishings. Ethan walked to the window, his bare feet soundless against the tiles.

The city shimmered below, a vast expanse of wealth and ambition. It felt far away, detached, like a mirage on the horizon. Ethan pressed his forehead against the cool glass, his breath fogging the surface. For a moment, he let his mind wander to the dune where Layla lay buried. The soft rise and fall of the sand had already begun to erase her presence, but in his mind, she lingered.

A sharp knock at the door startled him, pulling him from his thoughts. Ethan straightened, his heartbeat quickening. He crossed the room, pausing to check his reflection in the gilded mirror. His composure was flawless, every hair in place. He opened the door to find a staff member standing there, holding a silver tray with a bottle of champagne.

"Compliments of the hotel, sir," the man said, his tone warm and professional.

Ethan nodded and stepped aside. The staff member placed the tray on the table, adjusted the angle of the bottle, and offered a polite

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smile before leaving. Ethan stared at the champagne for a long moment before moving to the mini-bar. He pulled out a glass and poured himself a drink, ignoring the bottle's presence entirely.

As he drank, his eyes returned to the cityscape. His mind replayed every detail of the evening, searching for flaws, for missteps. The tire tracks were gone, erased by the desert winds. The sand was smooth, undisturbed. Yet the weight in his chest refused to lift.

Ethan drained the glass and set it down with a sharp clink. He turned away from the window and sat on the edge of the bed. The silence pressed in, heavy and unrelenting, as he stared at the glowing skyline.



THE AROMA OF FRESHLY brewed coffee filled the suite, a brief comfort against the tension knotting Ethan's shoulders. He sipped from the porcelain cup, his gaze fixed on the television screen mounted on the wall. The morning news anchor's voice was calm, detached, as she delivered the headlines.

"Authorities are investigating the disappearance of Layla El-Sayed, a prominent corporate consultant last seen on a desert safari. Her family reported her missing late last night."

Ethan's grip on the cup tightened. A photo of Layla filled the screen, her confident smile frozen in time. It was the same smile she'd worn at the rooftop lounge, the one that had softened as she laughed at his stories.

The report continued, the anchor mentioning the ongoing search efforts and the authorities' request for information. Ethan set the cup down carefully, the faint sound of porcelain meeting marble barely audible over the broadcast.

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His expression remained neutral, but inside, his thoughts raced. The logical part of his mind reassured him—there was no evidence, no witnesses, nothing to tie him to her disappearance. Yet the crackling edge of paranoia refused to quiet. His pulse quickened as he imagined the headlines shifting, the photo replaced with his own.

The anchor moved on to another story, the screen now filled with images of a charity gala. Ethan exhaled, his shoulders relaxing slightly. He reached for the coffee again, the heat grounding him. The photo of Layla lingered in his mind, though, her radiant face refusing to fade.

The shimmering city outside seemed indifferent to his turmoil. Its perfection was unyielding, as though daring him to falter. Ethan finished his coffee and rose, his movements deliberate. He had survived this long by staying meticulous, by controlling every variable. He wouldn't let a fleeting moment of doubt undo him now.

He walked to the window and gazed out at the sprawling skyline. The world below bustled with life, oblivious to the secrets buried beneath the sand. Ethan's reflection stared back at him, composed and impenetrable.

For now, the facade held.



Chapter 7: Shadows of Brussels

Ethan stepped out of the sleek black taxi and onto the cobblestone street, his polished shoes clicking against the uneven stones. The air was brisk, carrying the faint scent of waffles and roasting coffee, mingling with the low hum of conversations spilling from nearby cafés. Brussels had a peculiar charm—old-world elegance laced with whispers of intrigue. It wasn't the bustling grandeur of Dubai, nor the sultry vibrance of Rio. Here, the quiet shadows seemed to stretch longer, the history in the buildings pressing down like a heavy cloak.

Adjusting the lapels of his tailored coat, Ethan paused to take in the scene. A group of students laughed near the entrance of a bookstore, their carefree energy prickling at his nerves. Across the street, an elderly couple huddled together under a streetlamp, their hushed voices lost in the din. The Grand Place loomed in the distance, its gilded facades glowing faintly in the evening light.

Ethan walked briskly, blending seamlessly into the crowd. His carry-on rolled behind him, its muted wheels barely a whisper on the cobblestones. His gaze flicked to reflective windows, his image clean, composed, and precise. Beneath the polished surface, the familiar churn of chaos stirred. Brussels wasn't just another city—it was another stage, another play where his mask had to remain intact.

At the corner café, a barista called out an order in French. The word “cappuccino” floated through the air, a fragment of normalcy that grated against his dark thoughts. Ethan's lips curved into a faint smile, a muscle memory learned long ago. It was all part of the act. He spotted

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his hotel ahead—a boutique establishment tucked discreetly between two ornate townhouses. The entrance, flanked by wrought-iron lanterns, glowed with understated opulence.

He approached the concierge desk, his footsteps soft against the polished marble floor. The receptionist looked up with a welcoming smile, her uniform crisp, her demeanor practiced.

“Good evening, sir. Welcome to Maison des Étoiles. Do you have a reservation?”

Ethan handed over his passport, his movements deliberate and controlled. “Sinclair. Ethan Sinclair.”

As she typed, he allowed his gaze to wander. The lobby was quiet, the kind of silence that carried weight. A pair of guests sat by the fireplace, their whispers blending with the faint crackle of flames. Ethan’s attention snapped back as the receptionist slid a key card across the counter.

“Suite 204. It’s on the second floor. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to let us know.”

He took the card, his fingers brushing against hers for a fraction of a second. “I’ll be fine, thank you.”

The elevator ride was silent, the mirrored walls reflecting his image back at him. He studied the faint crease in his brow, the steel in his eyes. His reflection held his gaze, daring him to flinch. The door chimed softly, and he stepped out, the plush carpet absorbing his footsteps.

Inside his suite, the room was immaculate, a curated blend of modern luxury and European charm. Heavy drapes framed a view of the city below, the lights twinkling like scattered embers. Ethan set his carry-on by the closet, methodically unpacking his essentials. A glance at his watch told him he had time. Time to prepare, time to calculate.

He moved to the window, his fingers tracing the chilled glass. Outside, the city pulsed with life, oblivious to the storm brewing in its midst. Ethan’s lips curled into a smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. Another city, another stage. And tonight, the act would begin anew.

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ETHAN STEPPED INTO the bar, the polished brass door catching the reflection of the streetlights outside. The hum of jazz melted into the low murmur of conversation, and the air carried a faint blend of aged whiskey and floral perfume. The place was dimly lit, the golden glow from wall sconces casting intricate shadows that danced across the Art Deco patterns. Velvet armchairs, plush and inviting, were scattered across the room, filled with patrons leaning into their drinks and whispered conversations.

He moved to the bar, unhurried, his footsteps swallowed by the thick carpet underfoot. Sliding onto a stool, he gestured to the bartender with a slight nod.

“Whiskey. Neat.”

The bartender’s movements were precise, almost rhythmic, as he poured the amber liquid into a heavy-bottomed glass. Ethan’s gaze drifted across the room, methodical, his expression betraying none of the tension simmering beneath.

His eyes swept past a group of diplomats in a corner, their body language guarded yet animated. A couple by the window leaned into each other, their laughter muted. Near the back, a man in a tailored suit typed furiously on a laptop, ignoring the drink at his elbow. It was a room filled with stories, each one a potential distraction.

The bartender placed the glass in front of him, the faint clink pulling Ethan’s attention momentarily. He lifted it, the whiskey’s warmth brushing his lips before the burn traced its way down his throat. It anchored him, briefly, in the present.

“You look like someone with a lot on his mind,” the bartender said, polishing a glass without looking up.

Ethan smirked faintly, his eyes still scanning the room. “Don’t we all?”

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The bartender shrugged. “Depends on the drink.”

Ethan didn't reply. His gaze landed on an empty table near the back, its velvet chair pulled slightly askew, as if someone had left in haste. He tapped his glass lightly, the soft sound absorbed by the bar's ambiance. The room's shadows seemed to shift with the flicker of the chandelier above, casting fleeting shapes on the wall that vanished as quickly as they appeared.

A pair of women entered the bar, their laughter light but tinged with something performative. He glanced at them briefly before dismissing them. His patience held steady; there was no need to rush. The city itself had taught him that—Brussels moved to its own rhythm, deliberate and unyielding.

Ethan's gaze lingered on the entrance, waiting, his movements deliberate, unhurried. The evening stretched before him like a taut wire, and he relished the anticipation humming beneath his skin. For now, he was a shadow among shadows, watching the room breathe as he calculated his next move.



ETHAN'S GAZE SWEEPED the room again, a practiced scan of details. He registered the slightest movements—the tap of a foot on polished floors, the shift of a velvet chair as someone leaned forward, the quiet scrape of a glass being set down. Nothing stood out. Yet.

He shifted his weight against the bar, leaning back slightly, his whiskey still untouched in his hand. A group of suited professionals at a corner table laughed too loudly at something one of them said. Another woman by the far wall was preoccupied with a cigarette, her eyes tracing patterns in the rising smoke. None of them were her.

Ethan tilted his head, catching his reflection in the gilded mirror behind the bar. For a moment, the shadows cast by the low lighting

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seemed to distort his face, lines etched deeper than they should have been. He clenched his jaw and refocused on the room.

“Anything else, sir?” The bartender’s voice was low, professional, but his glance lingered a moment longer than necessary.

“Not yet,” Ethan replied without looking at him.

Across the room, a waiter wove deftly between tables, balancing a tray of drinks. A half-empty champagne flute caught the light, and for a second, it cast a prism of gold against the wall. Ethan tracked the path instinctively but forced himself to stop. He needed to remain patient. Viktoria would be here—it was too well-calculated a move for her not to show.

The room’s jazz soundtrack shifted to something slower, the languid notes crawling through the air. A couple near the entrance stood to leave, their chairs scraping loudly as they pushed them back. The woman’s laughter carried through the hum of conversation as her partner held her coat. Ethan ignored them.

But something stirred in him—an itch, a faint tension across his shoulders. This waiting wasn’t just a delay; it was a crack forming in the veneer of his control. For a brief second, his mind latched onto an older memory, something he hadn’t summoned willingly: a younger Ethan standing on the outskirts of a room, waiting to be noticed, hoping for an invitation that never came.

He blinked hard, banishing the thought as his attention snapped back to the present. His breathing steadied. He let his grip on the glass loosen, his fingers brushing against the condensation as he set it back down.

Viktoria wasn’t here. Not yet. But she would be.

The night stretched before him, and Ethan leaned into the waiting. He let the low murmur of voices, the music, the shadows lull the room into a rhythm that matched his own. He was still a predator, and she was simply late to the hunt.

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THE FAINT SQUEAK OF the door caught Ethan's ear before he saw her. His gaze flicked to the entrance, and there she was. Viktoria Novak. Her strides were deliberate but unhurried, her posture perfectly aligned. She carried a leather tote bag over one shoulder and a faintly impatient expression on her face, as though she were already considering the work she would return to once this distraction was over.

Ethan felt a subtle shift within himself, a recalibration. She didn't notice him immediately. Her attention darted to a nearby empty table, and she slid into the seat, placing her bag on the floor and pulling out a sleek tablet.

For a moment, Ethan allowed himself to watch. Her sharp features softened slightly as she tapped the screen, her eyes narrowing in concentration. She crossed one leg over the other, her tailored skirt brushing against the chair's plush velvet.

He rose from his stool with practiced ease, the faintest smile forming at the corner of his lips. This was the moment. The approach.

Ethan moved toward her table, his steps measured, and paused just far enough to catch her attention without startling her.

"Late night for work?" His tone was smooth, carrying just enough curiosity to invite a reply.

Viktoria glanced up, momentarily assessing him. "Something like that."

Ethan shifted his weight slightly, his expression open but not overly eager. "Policy documents?" He tilted his head toward her tablet. "Let me guess—EU regulatory reform?"

Her lips twitched, the faintest hint of amusement breaking through her guarded expression. "Close enough. But not quite."

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“Then I’m intrigued,” he said, stepping closer. “Mind if I sit? I could use a break from my own tedious workload.”

She hesitated, her eyes scanning him briefly, but she nodded toward the empty chair. “As long as you’re not here to sell me anything.”

“Only conversation,” Ethan replied, settling into the seat.

Her laugh was quiet, skeptical but not unkind. “That remains to be seen.”

Ethan leaned forward slightly, his posture casual yet attentive. He let the conversation unfold, adjusting his words and tone with each shift in her expression. She was sharp, her replies quick, but he was sharper. Every word was a thread, weaving trust, curiosity, and disarmament.

And just like that, he had her attention. The game had begun.



THE FIRST SIP OF HER cocktail didn’t mask Viktoria’s skepticism. Ethan watched her carefully, the subtle crease of her brow, the way her fingers lingered on the stem of the glass. He adjusted his posture, leaning in slightly but not too much, keeping his presence inviting but unobtrusive.

“Let me guess,” she said, swirling the liquid in her glass. “You’re either a diplomat or a journalist. No one else would guess EU policy reform so quickly.”

He chuckled softly, letting the moment linger. “Not quite. I’ve worked in consulting for years. International logistics, cross-border regulations—unsexy but essential.”

Viktoria raised an eyebrow. “Logistics? That’s a far cry from sipping cocktails in Brussels.”

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“Even logisticians need a break,” Ethan countered, flashing the faintest smile. “But Brussels is special. This city has a pulse unlike anywhere else. Don’t you think?”

She tilted her head, intrigued despite herself. “You seem unusually romantic for a numbers guy.”

He let her words hang in the air, nodding as if weighing them. “Romantic? Perhaps. I’d call it pragmatic curiosity. Brussels is a crossroads—cultures, ideas, power. Everyone here has an agenda, but the beauty is how those agendas overlap. Like yours, I imagine.”

Viktoria set her glass down with a soft clink. “You don’t know anything about my agenda.”

“Not yet,” he said smoothly. “But you don’t strike me as someone who’s just here for the waffles and beer.”

A small laugh escaped her, surprising even her. She leaned back, her guard easing as the conversation stretched between them. Ethan took his time, never pressing, always pulling gently at the threads she offered.

“What about you?” she asked after a moment. “Why Brussels? Surely logistics doesn’t require personal appearances.”

“It doesn’t,” Ethan admitted, adjusting his cufflinks. “But sometimes, a personal touch matters. And let’s be honest, Brussels is better than sitting in a boardroom in Rotterdam or Antwerp.”

Viktoria rolled her eyes. “That’s a low bar.”

“True,” he conceded. “But you’d be amazed how much difference context makes in negotiations. People open up more over good wine and warm conversation.”

“Or clever flattery,” Viktoria said, her lips curving into a faint smile.

“I’m not clever enough for flattery,” Ethan deflected, raising his glass. “But I am interested enough to listen.”

For the first time, Viktoria’s focus shifted entirely to him. Her skepticism softened into genuine curiosity, and her shoulders relaxed. Ethan let the silence breathe between them, creating just enough space for her to speak next.

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“Alright,” she said finally. “If you’re so curious, what do you want to know?”

He leaned forward slightly, his voice lowering as if they shared a secret. “Everything.”



THE BAR'S AMBIENT NOISE faded as a memory crept into Ethan's mind, unbidden and unwelcome. He was sixteen again, awkwardly shifting his weight at the edge of a crowded high school hallway. His hands gripped the straps of his backpack, knuckles white with tension.

Claire Daniels stood just a few feet away, her laugh ringing out like a bell. She was surrounded by friends, effortlessly magnetic, and Ethan, in his naïve hope, thought today might be different.

“Hey, Claire,” he ventured, his voice cracking slightly.

She turned, her smile faltering as she registered his presence. “Oh. Hi.”

Ethan's heart pounded as he fumbled for words. “I, uh... I thought maybe you'd like to—”

“Sorry, Ethan,” she interrupted, her tone light but dismissive. “I'm kind of busy.”

Her friends smirked behind her, their whispered laughter burning into his ears. She turned back to them, her attention already gone. Ethan stood frozen, the humiliation carving itself into his memory.

He didn't try again. Not with her. Not with anyone for a long time. The sting of rejection hardened into something darker, a quiet vow that he would never be dismissed so easily again.

Back in the present, Ethan blinked, forcing the memory away. Viktoria was speaking, her voice pulling him back into the bar. Her words were sharp and deliberate, but he barely registered them.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her tone laced with concern.

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Ethan straightened, masking the brief lapse with a practiced smile. “Just thinking how strange it is that we ended up at the same bar tonight.”

“Strange?” Viktoria’s curiosity deepened. “Or convenient?”

He allowed a faint laugh. “Maybe a bit of both.”

But the memory lingered, and deep inside, a part of Ethan bristled. He wouldn’t falter this time. Not with Viktoria.



THE BAR’S WARM AMBIANCE faded as Viktoria wrapped her scarf around her neck. Ethan gestured toward the door, stepping aside for her to exit first. Outside, the brisk night air carried the faint scent of roasted chestnuts from a nearby cart. The cobblestone streets glistened under the lamplight, remnants of a light drizzle earlier in the evening.

“Brussels really comes alive at night,” Ethan remarked, falling into step beside her.

Viktoria glanced at him, her expression softening. “It does have its charm. Though sometimes, I forget to appreciate it. Work has a way of dulling the magic.”

Ethan chuckled, hands tucked casually into his pockets. “Let me guess, you’re one of those people who spend more time in meetings than actually experiencing the city?”

Her smile turned wry. “Guilty. Though I doubt logistics would be much better.”

“Touché,” he said, matching her pace as they passed a series of ornate shopfronts. “But tonight isn’t about work. It’s about... perspective.”

“Perspective?” She raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite herself.

He nodded, letting a pause stretch just long enough to pique her interest. “Cities like Brussels—there’s always something just beneath

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the surface. History, secrets, stories waiting to be uncovered. You just have to look.”

Viktoria slowed her steps, her gaze flickering to the intricate facades of the buildings lining the street. “I’ve lived here for years, but I never really see it that way.”

“Then you’re overdue,” Ethan said, his tone light but deliberate. “Let me show you a side of the city you might’ve overlooked.”

A soft laugh escaped her. “Alright, Mr. Logistics. Impress me.”

He inclined his head toward a narrow alley branching off the main road. “This way.”

The cobblestones narrowed as they walked deeper into the quiet alley. The hum of the main street faded, replaced by the faint echo of their footsteps. Above them, wrought-iron balconies leaned toward one another, as if sharing whispered secrets.

“Do you always take women down dark alleys on first dates?” Viktoria teased, her voice tinged with curiosity but not fear.

“Only the ones I’m trying to impress,” Ethan replied smoothly, his grin disarming.

They stopped at a small courtyard lit by a single flickering lamp. In the center stood a modest fountain, its water glinting like liquid silver. Viktoria tilted her head, a faint smile playing on her lips.

“Alright, I’ll admit it. This is charming,” she said.

Ethan let the moment breathe, his gaze flicking to the shadows beyond the courtyard. His mind raced, cataloging every detail. The quiet. The isolation. The perfect stage.



THE FOUNTAIN’S SOFT trickle seemed deafening in the silence that followed their shared moment. Viktoria moved closer to examine

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the fountain, her scarf fluttering in the light breeze. Ethan stood a step behind, his chest tightening.

“This is such a hidden gem,” she said, her voice softer now, more vulnerable.

He nodded, his mind calculating every move. The sharp contrast between the ornate surroundings and what he was about to do only heightened the tension within him. The moment stretched, fragile as glass.

“Viktoria,” he began, his tone low, intimate.

She turned to face him, her expression open, unaware of the predator before her.

The silence cracked as a sudden noise—a faint clatter of metal—echoed from somewhere in the alley behind them. Ethan’s pulse spiked, and his carefully rehearsed plan wavered. His gaze darted to the source, finding nothing but shadows.

“Did you hear that?” Viktoria’s voice sharpened, a hint of unease creeping in.

Ethan forced a smile, stepping closer. “Probably just the wind. These old streets have a way of playing tricks.”

She hesitated, her posture shifting. The brief moment of trust they’d built began to fracture. Ethan felt it slipping, the control he needed to maintain. Desperation flared.

Before she could react, his hand shot forward, covering her mouth. Her eyes widened in shock, her muffled cries tearing through the quiet courtyard. His grip tightened, his other hand pressing against her throat with calculated force.

The struggle was brief but chaotic. Her hands clawed at his arms, her strength surprising him. A sharp jab of her elbow caught his ribs, forcing a grunt from him. He adjusted his stance, leveraging his weight to pin her against the fountain’s edge.

Her resistance faded, her movements slowing as the life drained from her body. Ethan’s breath came in ragged gasps, the adrenaline

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coursing through him. He released her limp form, letting her slump to the ground.

The courtyard felt suffocatingly silent now, the fountain's gentle trickle mocking his frayed nerves. He glanced around, his heart pounding as he noticed the faint glint of something metallic on the ground—a button from his coat, torn loose in the struggle.

Panic surged, but he shoved it down, forcing his hands to steady as he staged the scene. Viktoria's scarf was pulled loose, her bag spilled as though she'd been robbed. He grabbed the button, his fingers trembling as he slipped it into his pocket.

Footsteps echoed faintly in the distance. Ethan froze, his breath hitching. He couldn't be seen. Not now. He slipped into the shadows, his mind already spinning with ways to cover his tracks.



THE ALLEY SWALLOWED the echo of Ethan's labored breaths. Viktoria's lifeless body lay crumpled at his feet, her scarf twisted unnaturally around her neck. Ethan's hands trembled as he scanned the narrow passage. Shadows danced across the cobblestones, but no one emerged. He knelt beside her, his mind racing.

"Think, damn it," he muttered, his voice barely audible over the pounding in his ears.

The scarf. He adjusted it to look loose, almost carelessly discarded, before rifling through her bag. He scattered its contents—a phone, a slim notebook, a few euros—onto the ground. The scene had to be messy, chaotic, like a mugging gone wrong. He placed her tablet just out of reach, the screen cracked from an intentional drop.

His fingers brushed against the corner of his coat. His heart froze. The missing button. It had torn loose during the struggle. His eyes darted around, catching a faint glint near the fountain. Panic clawed at

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his chest. He moved quickly, snatching it from the ground and shoving it into his pocket.

A faint sound—a distant laugh, the shuffle of feet—sent him spinning toward the entrance of the alley. He strained to hear, his body taut as a bowstring. Nothing followed, but the moment had already fractured his focus. He wiped his hands on a discarded napkin from her bag, then stuffed it into his pocket along with the button. No prints. No traces.

He checked his watch, forcing calm into his movements. Only six minutes had passed. It felt like an eternity.

Ethan adjusted his collar and took a step back, surveying his work. Viktoria's body leaned unnaturally against the wall, her scarf askew, her hair covering her face. It looked believable enough—if you didn't look too closely.

The moment stretched. One more glance, then he melted into the shadows, footsteps muffled against the cobblestones.



THE BOUTIQUE HOTEL'S entrance loomed like a sanctuary and a trap. Ethan slipped inside, nodding absently at the concierge. The lobby was empty, save for an elderly couple whispering in French near the fireplace. His shoes barely made a sound on the polished floor.

He ascended the stairs instead of taking the elevator. Each step felt heavier, dragging him closer to the safety of his room and the crushing weight of his thoughts.

Inside, he locked the door, threw the latch, and leaned against it. The silence in the suite pressed against him. The city lights filtered through sheer curtains, casting fractured patterns on the hardwood floor.

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Ethan shrugged off his coat, folding it carefully before tossing it onto the chair. He stripped his gloves, staring at the faint imprint of Viktoria's struggle on his skin. His breathing quickened, and his chest tightened as the image of her face flashed in his mind—shock, fear, then stillness.

He stumbled toward the bathroom, turning on the tap. Water splashed over his hands, running red for a moment before fading clear. He scrubbed harder, the faint scent of Viktoria's perfume lingering. No matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't leave him.

In the mirror, his reflection glared back—disheveled hair, flushed skin, wild eyes. Ethan pressed his palms against the counter, his breath fogging the glass. For a fleeting moment, the thought of abandoning the plan crept in. But he shoved it aside.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out the button and the napkin. They sat heavy in his palm, glaring evidence of his carelessness. He tossed the napkin into the toilet, flushing it with deliberate finality. The button, though, he tucked into his suitcase. Not to keep, but to destroy later.

Ethan sat on the edge of the bed, his fingers steepled under his chin. He replayed every detail, searching for missteps. The sound in the alley. The button. The scarf. Each piece of the puzzle gnawed at him, refusing to fit.

The faint hum of a passing car outside drew his gaze to the window. The city seemed indifferent, its grandeur mocking his unraveling mind. For the first time, doubt crept into his thoughts, uninvited and unwelcome.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. He ignored it, letting the vibrations die out. Instead, he lay back against the mattress, eyes fixed on the ceiling. His pulse slowed, but his thoughts didn't. The mistakes he'd made weren't just cracks—they were fissures, threatening to widen.

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The room felt colder now, the walls inching closer. Ethan's grip on control, so meticulously maintained, was starting to slip. And he could feel it.



THE SCENT OF ANTISEPTIC and the faint hum of an old ceiling fan filled the air as young Ethan sat on the edge of the sofa, his knees drawn up to his chest. His mother loomed over him, her face a storm of fury and disdain. A shattered porcelain figurine lay on the floor between them, its delicate hand broken clean off.

"You can't even hold a simple thing without ruining it," she spat, pacing the room. Her heels clacked against the tiles like a metronome of disappointment. "You think you're clever, don't you? But all I see is a clumsy little fool."

Ethan stared at the fragments, his throat tight and dry. He wanted to explain, to say it had slipped from the counter when he'd tried to clean it, but her words boxed him in.

"Do you know how much that cost?" Her voice rose, cracking at the edges. "Your father worked for everything in this house, and you—you just break it like it's nothing."

His silence only stoked her rage. She snatched up the largest piece and waved it in his face. "Clean this up. Every piece. And don't leave a trace, or you'll be sorry."

The memory hit him like a gut punch as he sat in the hotel room, his gaze fixed on the faint imprint of Viktoria's struggle on his hand. The button he'd missed retrieving felt heavier in his mind now. Every word his mother had hurled at him came rushing back, a symphony of inadequacy.

Ethan closed his eyes, gripping the edge of the bed. He could almost hear her voice still, cutting through his thoughts, her

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disappointment clawing at him from the grave. The room felt colder, suffocating, as though her ghost was watching from the corner.

He shook himself, forcing his breathing to steady. He wasn't that boy anymore, fumbling under the weight of her expectations. He was meticulous, deliberate. Except tonight, he hadn't been. The thought gnawed at him like an open wound.

The clock on the nightstand glared back at him, its red digits marching forward. He had no time for doubt. Tomorrow, the news would break, and he needed to stay ahead of the story. Still, the echoes of her scorn lingered, whispering that he'd always fall short.



THE SHARP TRILL OF Ethan's phone shattered the fragile silence. He bolted upright, grabbing it with a trembling hand. The headline blinked across the screen: Policy Advisor Found Dead in Suspected Mugging Near Grand Place.

He clicked the link, his heart hammering in his chest. A photo of Viktoria smiled back at him, her hair framing her face like a halo. The article was brief, a sketch of details: an alley, a robbery gone awry. But one line made his blood run cold.

"Authorities are investigating a piece of fabric found near the scene, believed to be from the suspect."

The scarf. His chest tightened, and the room spun. He replayed the night, trying to remember if he'd touched it after staging the scene. Had he left fibers, a trace he hadn't seen? The certainty he once carried slipped further away, replaced by a gnawing unease.

His mind raced. He couldn't afford mistakes, not now. Viktoria's face stared at him from the screen, her eyes unblinking, almost accusatory. The image felt alive, a silent rebuke for his carelessness.

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His phone buzzed again, the vibrations loud against the nightstand. It was an alert from the same article, now updated: “Authorities Urge Witnesses to Come Forward.”

Ethan’s grip tightened until his knuckles whitened. Witnesses? His gaze darted to the suitcase in the corner. He’d planned to leave tomorrow, but now? He had to accelerate. The city was turning against him. Every shadow outside the window felt like an accusation, every whisper in the hallway a conspiracy.

He leaned back against the headboard, the cool wood pressing into his spine. For the first time, he felt the threads of his control unraveling. A single line in an article, and the world he’d built seemed to teeter on collapse.

Yet, in the stillness, a faint voice whispered from the depths of his mind—not his mother’s this time, but his own. You’ve gotten out before. You’ll do it again.

The thought calmed him, but only slightly. Brussels wasn’t behind him yet, and he knew, deep down, the cracks were only growing wider.



ETHAN SAT HUNCHED OVER at the desk in his dimly lit hotel room, staring at the crumpled news article on his tablet. The words blurred, dissolving into the memories of the night before. Viktoria’s face haunted him, her startled expression frozen in the corner of his mind. He’d told himself it was necessary, but necessity didn’t silence the gnawing unease crawling under his skin.

He clenched his fists, the tremor in his fingers betraying his tightly held composure. The button. It wasn’t there when he left. His breaths came shallow, uneven, as his mother’s voice slithered into his thoughts.

“Careless,” it hissed. “You can’t even finish what you start.”

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Ethan shoved the tablet aside, standing abruptly. The chair scraped against the floor, the sound sharp and grating. He paced the room, his movements quick and uncoordinated. He was methodical. He was meticulous. Yet, Viktoria had been different. Her intelligence had disarmed him, and her laugh had lingered longer than it should have.

His reflection in the window caught his attention. The man staring back looked older, worn. The lines around his mouth deepened, his jaw taut with tension. He smoothed his hair back, straightened his posture, but the eyes remained the same—haunted and hunted.

Ethan muttered under his breath, “You’ve done this before. You’ll do it again. No one’s watching. No one knows.”

The words sounded hollow. The police were closer than ever, combing the alley for traces. The thought sent his heart racing again. He grabbed the suitcase on the bed, yanking open the zipper. Clothes flew into it in haphazard piles, a stark contrast to his usual precision.

A knock at the door made him freeze. His chest tightened as the silence stretched. He edged toward the door, glancing through the peephole. Housekeeping. He let out a sharp breath and stepped back, the pounding in his ears relentless.

Control. He needed control.

He sank onto the bed, his head in his hands, forcing himself to breathe slowly. The button didn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter. But deep down, he knew it wasn’t about the button. It was about the cracks forming in his armor, and he couldn’t stop them from widening.



ETHAN MOVED THROUGH the lobby, his suitcase rolling behind him with a steady rhythm. The early morning crowd bustled around him, their chatter blending into a low hum. He kept his head low,

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avoiding eye contact as he approached the revolving doors. Every step felt heavier, dragging him closer to something he couldn't name.

Outside, the crisp air hit him, biting against his skin. He turned toward the waiting cab, but a figure caught his attention from across the square. A man, tall and broad-shouldered, stood near a fountain, his dark coat blending into the gray morning. He wasn't looking at Ethan, not directly, but his stance felt deliberate.

Ethan hesitated, his fingers tightening around the suitcase handle. The man shifted, glancing in his direction for a fraction of a second. The movement sent a chill down Ethan's spine.

He walked briskly toward the cab, his pulse quickening. He cast another glance over his shoulder. The man was gone.

"Where to?" the driver asked as Ethan slid into the back seat.

Ethan hesitated, then muttered, "The station."

The cab pulled away, the streets blurring past the window. Ethan leaned back, closing his eyes, but the sense of being watched lingered. Was it real? Or had the weight of the last twenty-four hours finally cracked him?

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, his thumb hovering over the screen. An unknown number flashed across it. His stomach turned, but he answered.

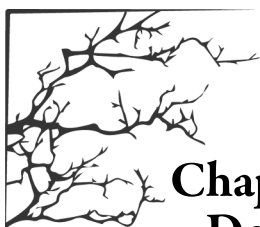
No one spoke on the other end. Just a faint sound—breathing.

"Who is this?" His voice was sharp, defensive.

The line went dead.

Ethan stared at the phone, his grip tightening. The city outside the cab felt colder, darker, its charm now veiled in suspicion. The man by the fountain, the call, the button—all threads in a web tightening around him. For the first time, the predator felt like prey.

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Chapter 8: The Colors of Death in Mexico City

Ethan stepped into the humid warmth of Mexico City's airport, his senses instantly assaulted by the cacophony of overlapping announcements and the vibrant bustle of travelers. The faint aroma of roasted coffee mingled with the sharper tang of cleaning chemicals. He adjusted his leather carry-on, the subtle weight of his pilot's watch pressing into his wrist like a steady pulse. Every step on the polished tile echoed faintly, swallowed by the airport's organized chaos.

Outside, the city unfolded like an electric painting. Neon signs flickered against the dimming twilight, and the rhythmic sounds of mariachi music wove through the background hum of traffic. Ethan paused at the curb, scanning for his ride. The noise and color weren't distracting—they were camouflage.

He slid into the back of a black sedan, the driver nodding a polite greeting. As the car merged into the chaos of Avenida Insurgentes, Ethan let his eyes wander over the sprawling metropolis. Colonial architecture crouched next to gleaming skyscrapers, and vibrant murals stretched across walls, a kaleidoscope of defiance and hope.

"Busy night," the driver ventured, gesturing at the traffic.

Ethan's lips twitched into an amicable curve. "Always is in a city like this."

The driver chuckled, launching into a monologue about street festivals and Dia de los Muertos preparations. Ethan tuned out the words, focusing instead on the patterns of the city. Pedestrian-filled

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intersections, alleyways with half-lit signs, and balconies lined with drying laundry—all potential opportunities.

As they approached his hotel in Coyoacán, the energy shifted. The vibrant chaos softened into cobblestone streets and a quieter rhythm. The hotel loomed ahead, its façade a tasteful blend of colonial charm and modern luxury. Ethan tipped the driver generously before stepping out.

Inside, the air was cooler, carrying a faint trace of citrus and polished wood. Ethan's footsteps muffled on the plush carpet as he approached the front desk. The concierge, a young man with an eager smile, greeted him in practiced English.

"Mr. Sinclair, welcome. We've prepared our best suite for you. Would you like assistance with your bags?"

Ethan shook his head, slipping into his role seamlessly. "Thank you. A quiet room with a good view is all I need."

Once inside his suite, Ethan locked the door, leaning momentarily against the smooth wood. The room was immaculate—white linens, sleek furniture, and a balcony overlooking a courtyard filled with bougainvillea. He set his bag down with precision, moving to the window.

Outside, the city's pulse seemed to sync with his own. A world teeming with life, each person a thread in an intricate web. Yet, amid all that vibrancy, he felt nothing but the cold hum of anticipation.

For now, he waited. The city would reveal its patterns, and in those patterns, he'd find her.



ETHAN APPROACHED THE boutique hotel in the heart of Coyoacán, a district pulsating with history and charm. The building's exterior—a blend of worn colonial stone and minimalist metal

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signage—hinted at a curated balance of the old and the new. As he stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted. The air was cooler, carrying a faint hint of citrus and aged wood. A receptionist greeted him with a practiced smile, her uniform crisp and unassuming.

“Welcome to La Casa de Arte. Are you checking in?”

Ethan nodded, sliding his passport across the desk. “Ethan Sinclair.”

The woman typed quickly, her nails clicking against the keys. “You’ll be in the Azul Suite. It overlooks the courtyard. Breakfast is served from seven to eleven.”

“Perfect.”

The receptionist handed over a brass key on a tassel, gesturing toward the staircase. Ethan bypassed the waiting porter and carried his leather duffle himself. The old wooden steps creaked slightly under his weight, each sound amplifying in the quiet of the corridor.

In the suite, a tall window opened to a view of the courtyard. Bougainvillea spilled over stone walls, their magenta petals vibrant against the muted stone. The faint echo of distant music floated upward, mingling with the rustle of a breeze through the leaves. Ethan set his bag on the bed, methodically unzipping it.

He unpacked in silence, arranging his belongings with clinical precision. His clothes hung neatly in the closet, shoes aligned perfectly below. A leather-bound notebook rested on the desk, its pages meticulously blank.

From the balcony, he scanned the street below. Locals bustled between shops and cafes, their voices a symphony of Spanish phrases punctuated with laughter. The energy was palpable yet distant, a vibrant world he observed but never inhabited.

His phone vibrated on the desk. A local number flashed on the screen—a confirmation text from the driver scheduled for his departure. Ethan deleted it immediately. Efficiency dictated that no trace be left behind.

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He poured himself a glass of water from the crystal carafe on the dresser, staring at his reflection in the beveled mirror. There was no hesitation in the face staring back at him. Not yet.

The vibrancy outside seemed to seep into the room, the colors unnervingly alive. Ethan closed the curtains, letting the muted shadows return. He needed focus. There was no room for distraction.



THE STREETS OF MEXICO City thrummed with a chaotic symphony. Ethan walked briskly, weaving through the dense crowd. Street vendors called out in lively tones, the aroma of sizzling meat and caramelized sugar thick in the air. Stalls overflowed with colorful trinkets, embroidered fabrics, and bright papel picado fluttering in the breeze.

He paused near a towering mural stretching across a brick wall. The image depicted a woman with fiery eyes, her outstretched arms surrounded by blooming marigolds. The vibrancy of the colors was almost garish, each stroke heavy with emotion. It was a celebration and a protest all at once.

The artist's name scrawled in bold letters at the bottom caught his attention: Maria Torres.

Ethan's eyes narrowed. Her work exuded a confidence and rawness that stood in stark contrast to his own calculated world. He traced the lines with his gaze, sensing a story beneath the surface. The chaos of the city blurred as his focus honed in.

Nearby, a group of teenagers posed for photos in front of the mural, their laughter echoing in the narrow alley. Ethan stepped back into the shadows, observing the ebb and flow of the city's life. Every detail etched itself into his mind: the rhythm of the streets, the fleeting glances exchanged by strangers, the stray dog darting between stalls.

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At the end of the alley, he spotted another mural—a different style, equally bold. The streets seemed to pulse with the creativity of its people. Ethan felt a faint stir of unease as if the city itself was watching him.

He moved on, blending into the crowd. Each step brought him closer to his goal, though the vibrancy of his surroundings felt oppressive. The colors, the sounds, the smells—it all clashed against the cold precision of his mind.

The city was alive, teeming with energy, and it would soon bear witness to the shadows he intended to cast.



ETHAN'S STEPS SLOWED as he reached a vibrant plaza framed by towering colonial facades and the hum of daily life. Street vendors peddled churros and handmade jewelry, their voices a constant background to the rhythmic strumming of a guitarist nearby. Amid the chaos, his gaze locked onto a street corner where a mural was coming to life.

The colors struck him first. Bold streaks of red and gold wove around a central figure—a woman with wings of fire stretching toward the heavens. It was magnetic, almost alive. He traced each brushstroke to its source.

Maria Torres stood on a ladder, her hand steady as she added fine details to the woman's expression. Paint streaked her fingers and forearms, smudges of cobalt and ochre contrasting against her olive-toned skin. Her hair was pulled into a loose bun, a few strands sticking to her damp neck under the midday sun.

She exuded energy, her movements precise but unhurried. The mural seemed to flow from her, as if she were merely uncovering an image that had always been there.

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Ethan stepped closer, keeping to the edge of the crowd.

“You see her work?” A man with a thick accent nudged his arm, gesturing at Maria. “She’s a genius. The city’s lucky to have her.”

Ethan smiled faintly but didn’t respond. His focus remained on her—on the way she tilted her head to inspect her progress, the satisfied curve of her lips when a line came out just right.

Maria descended the ladder, wiping her hands on a cloth tucked into her waistband. A little girl ran up to her, pointing at the mural.

“¿Es un ángel?”

“Es un ángel y una guerrera,” Maria answered with a laugh, kneeling to the child’s level. Her voice carried warmth, a contrast to the vibrancy of her colors.

Ethan’s lips pressed into a thin line. She wasn’t just creating art; she was connecting, embedding herself in the lives of those around her.

He lingered long enough to memorize the cadence of her voice, the deliberate yet passionate way she moved. This was her domain, her sanctuary. And soon, it would be his to dismantle.



ETHAN ADJUSTED HIS pace, timing his approach to coincide with Maria stepping away from her mural to a shaded vendor’s cart. She ordered a drink, the vendor pouring a pale green liquid into a plastic cup.

“Beautiful work,” Ethan said as he came to a stop beside her.

Maria turned, her eyes squinting slightly against the light. She looked him over, her expression neutral but polite.

“Thanks,” she replied, sipping her agua fresca.

“The colors are striking. The wings especially—they remind me of something I saw in Barcelona.” His tone was casual, disarming.

Maria’s lips twitched. “Gaudí?”

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“Close. Montjuïc murals. More modern, but the energy feels the same.”

She tilted her head, curiosity softening her stance. “You know art?”

“I appreciate it,” Ethan replied, gesturing at her work. “But nothing like this. This is... alive.”

Maria’s smile broke through, a genuine crack in her earlier wariness. “Alive is the goal. Too many murals are just walls with paint.”

Ethan chuckled, his eyes narrowing as though her words held more weight than intended. “You’ve got a rare talent. Do you always work in the open?”

“It’s where people are,” she said simply, motioning to the mural behind her. “Art belongs to them, not galleries.”

Ethan nodded as if in agreement, though a part of him recoiled at the sentiment. “Mind if I watch for a while?”

Maria shrugged, stepping back toward her ladder. “Just don’t get in the way.”

Ethan lingered at a respectful distance, the corners of his mouth curling faintly as he watched her. The moment was deceptively simple, but the pieces were falling into place.



THE CAFÉ SMELLED OF cinnamon and roasted coffee beans, its walls adorned with sepia-toned photographs of old Mexico City. Maria leaned back in her chair, her hand curled around a clay mug.

“I started with small murals in my neighborhood,” she said, her voice animated. “People called them ‘graffiti,’ but I knew they were more than that.”

Ethan nodded, his face a mask of intrigue. “You’ve turned public spaces into galleries. It’s impressive.”

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Maria's eyes sparkled at the compliment. "Art should be for everyone, not hidden in museums."

He took a sip of his café de olla, the warm, spiced brew grounding him amidst her unrestrained energy. "And you think art can change the world?"

Her lips curved into a smile. "It already does. It's a language everyone understands."

Ethan leaned forward, mirroring her intensity. "But doesn't it get exhausting, pouring yourself into something that might not last? Paint fades, walls crumble."

Maria's gaze didn't waver. "That's the beauty of it. It's alive for as long as it's meant to be."

He smiled faintly, the edges of his mask slipping just enough to conceal the shadow in his thoughts. "You've got a way of looking at things. It's rare."

Her laugh was soft, disarming. "I get that a lot. What about you? What brings you here?"

Ethan's response came easily, each word rehearsed in the mirror of countless interactions. "I'm here on a short break. Work's been... relentless."

Maria tilted her head, her expression curious. "What do you do?"

"Consulting. Numbers, strategies—nothing as inspiring as this." He gestured vaguely to the colorful world outside the café's windows.

Her smile lingered, but her attention shifted back to her drink. The momentary pause gave Ethan time to observe. She was at ease, unguarded.

"You said your neighborhood inspired your work. What was it like?" he asked, redirecting the conversation.

Maria's expression softened. "Loud. Messy. Beautiful. Every wall told a story, even if it wasn't pretty."

FLYING DEATH

Her words danced in the air between them, and Ethan let them settle before speaking again. “You make it sound like a canvas waiting to be filled.”

Maria chuckled. “Exactly. You get it.”

He smiled, letting the illusion of connection solidify. Her passion burned brightly, but it was fragile—something he could extinguish with a single breath.

The sound of Maria’s laugh echoed in Ethan’s mind as he walked back to his hotel, each step heavier than the last. His jaw tightened as a memory surfaced, unbidden.

He was eight, sprawled on the living room floor with crayons scattered around him. The drawing was crude but vivid—a castle surrounded by swirling clouds.

“Ethan, what is this mess?” His mother’s voice cut through the room like a blade.

He scrambled to gather the crayons, his hands trembling. “It’s... it’s a castle. I made it for you.”

She snatched the paper from his hands, her perfectly manicured nails crinkling the edges. “This isn’t art. It’s a waste of time.”

Her disapproval hung in the air, suffocating. She turned, tossing the drawing into the trash without a second glance.

“Clean this up,” she ordered, her heels clicking against the marble floor as she walked away.

Ethan had stared at the trash can, the vibrant colors of his castle crumpled into nothingness.

Now, as he crossed the bustling plaza, the memory twisted in his chest. Maria’s words about art being alive grated against the echo of his mother’s disdain.

For a moment, he wondered what might have been if someone had seen his castle as more than a mess. The thought evaporated as quickly as it came, replaced by a cold certainty.

Maria’s vibrancy wasn’t a beacon—it was a target.

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MARIA WIPE HER PAINT-streaked hands on her jeans, leaving vivid streaks of color against the worn denim. She glanced at Ethan, her expression warm and inviting.

“You really want to see where the magic happens?” she asked, her voice tinged with playful curiosity.

Ethan’s smile was effortless, the charm carefully calibrated. “If you don’t mind sharing your secrets.”

She laughed, the sound genuine and unguarded. “It’s nothing fancy, but it’s mine. I’d love to show you.”

He gestured for her to lead the way. “After you.”

The streets of Mexico City buzzed with life as they walked. Maria pointed out landmarks with enthusiasm, her passion for the city evident in every word.

“That building over there? It used to be a convent. Now it’s a gallery,” she explained, her hands moving as if painting the air itself.

Ethan nodded, his attention seemingly rapt. “It’s incredible how this city balances its history and modern chaos.”

Maria’s face lit up. “Exactly! That’s why I love it here. Every corner has a story.”

He let her words flow, absorbing the rhythm of her voice. Beneath the surface, his thoughts moved like a predator circling its prey.

They turned onto a quieter street, the noise of the city fading into the background. Maria stopped in front of an unassuming door painted in bright yellow.

“This is it,” she said, fishing a key from her pocket.

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t look like much from the outside.”

Maria grinned as she unlocked the door. “That’s the point. Step inside and see for yourself.”

FLYING DEATH



THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN, revealing a riot of color. The small space was alive with energy—unfinished canvases leaned against every wall, paintbrushes lay scattered across a worn wooden table, and the air carried the faint scent of turpentine.

“Welcome to my world,” Maria said, stepping inside and motioning for Ethan to follow.

He stepped over a coiled cable, his gaze sweeping the room. “This is incredible.”

She shrugged, her tone modest. “It’s messy, but it’s where I feel most alive.”

Ethan’s hand brushed against a canvas, his fingers lingering on the textured paint. “Every piece here has a story, doesn’t it?”

Maria nodded, her eyes softening as she looked around. “They’re like snapshots of my soul. Some more finished than others.”

He turned to face her, his expression unreadable. “You’re not afraid of putting yourself out there like this?”

She laughed, her voice echoing in the cramped space. “Afraid? No. Vulnerable? Absolutely. But that’s what art is, right? A leap of faith.”

Ethan tilted his head, as though considering her words. “And you’ve never worried about people misinterpreting it?”

Maria leaned against the table, her arms crossed. “Of course. But once it’s out there, it’s not mine anymore. It belongs to whoever connects with it.”

Her words hung in the air, and for a moment, Ethan felt the weight of her sincerity. Then, like a switch flipping, the shadow returned to his eyes.

“I can see why you’re so passionate about this,” he said, stepping closer.

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Maria smiled, unaware of the storm gathering in his mind. “Thanks. I try to make the world a little brighter, even if it’s just one wall at a time.”

Ethan’s lips curled into a faint smile, but his gaze drifted to the scattered tools and paints. The vibrant chaos of the studio clashed with the meticulous order he craved.

Maria picked up a small, unfinished canvas and held it out to him. “This one’s still a work in progress, but I think you’ll like it.”

He reached for it, his fingers brushing hers. The fleeting contact sent a shiver through him—not of connection, but of anticipation.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, his voice low.

Maria beamed, her guard completely lowered. “You really think so?”

Ethan’s smile tightened. “I do.”



MARIA TURNED HER BACK to Ethan, placing the unfinished canvas on an easel. Her voice carried an effortless warmth as she spoke about the story behind her latest mural, a celebration of Mexico’s vibrant culture.

“You know,” she said, stepping toward her paintbrushes, “art isn’t just about beauty. It’s about resilience, identity. This piece? It’s my way of preserving stories that might otherwise disappear.”

Ethan stood a few steps away, his eyes tracking her movements. The studio’s chaos—splattered paint, scattered brushes, half-finished sketches—contrasted sharply with his calculated mind. Her words were a melody, her trust freely given.

“You’ve captured something unique,” he said.

Maria glanced over her shoulder, a smile breaking across her face. “You think so? That means a lot. Not everyone sees it.”

FLYING DEATH

Ethan's steps were deliberate as he moved closer, his presence darkening the light atmosphere.

"You pour yourself into this," he said, his tone softer. "It must be exhausting."

Maria laughed, the sound light and unguarded. "It is. But it's worth it. Every stroke, every color, it's like breathing life into something bigger than myself."

Ethan reached for the thick-handled utility knife he'd spotted on the table earlier. His fingers curled around it, hidden behind his back.

Maria turned back to the canvas, oblivious. "Sometimes, I wonder if—"

He didn't let her finish. A precise strike, quick and silent, severed her words and stole the air from her lungs. Her body tensed, a fleeting struggle against his grip, before the weight of inevitability overtook her.

The room seemed to hold its breath. Paint-smearing brushes clattered to the floor, and the once-vivid studio felt muted, the life drained from its creator.

Ethan lowered her body gently to the ground, his hands steady, his breathing controlled. His gaze swept the room, cataloging every detail. The vibrant colors around him felt like accusations, each hue a reminder of the life he'd just extinguished.

For a brief moment, he stood motionless, staring at Maria's lifeless form. The contrast was jarring—her vibrant world extinguished by his cold precision.

Then, his mind shifted gears. There was work to be done.



ETHAN WORKED QUICKLY, methodically. He scanned the studio, ensuring every detail fit the narrative he intended to leave behind.

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The knife, now wiped clean, was placed just far enough from Maria's hand to suggest she'd tried to defend herself. An overturned chair added a hint of chaos, a robbery gone wrong.

He grabbed a small box of paints and brushes, tucking it into his jacket. A thief's calling card. The studio had to tell a story, one that would divert suspicion.

But something felt off. His hands faltered as he adjusted a fallen easel. The vibrant splashes of paint on the floor felt like glaring mistakes, too vivid to blend with the narrative.

Ethan took a step back, his chest tightening. The colors seemed louder now, almost mocking. His mind replayed the scene, searching for flaws in his execution.

A smudge of red paint on his wrist caught his eye. For a moment, he froze, the color too close to the shade of blood. He scrubbed it against his jacket, the fabric soaking up the stain.

The sound of distant laughter floated in from the street below.

He stilled, his pulse quickening. Had someone heard? Had someone seen?

Ethan forced himself to breathe, to focus. He adjusted the doorframe as though it had been jimmied open, then stepped back to survey the scene.

It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

With one last glance at Maria's still form, Ethan slipped out of the studio and into the chaos of Mexico City. The vibrant streets swallowed him whole, but the colors seemed sharper, the voices louder.

As he walked, he felt the weight of the box under his jacket, a silent reminder of the life he'd taken. His hands, steady during the act, now trembled faintly at his sides.

For the first time, he doubted his control.



FLYING DEATH

THE CROWDED STREETS of Mexico City pulsed with life, the air thick with the scent of street food and exhaust. Ethan wove through the chaos, his steps brisk, his breath shallow. The echoes of laughter and music ricocheted off the buildings, a cacophony that grated against his frayed nerves.

A mural loomed to his right, its vibrant colors commanding his attention. A woman danced in the painting, her arms extended toward the sky, surrounded by bursts of yellows and reds. The artist's name, "Maria Torres," was signed in flowing letters at the bottom corner. Ethan stopped mid-stride, the familiarity of her style tightening his chest.

He glanced over his shoulder, searching the crowd. No one was looking at him, but the sensation of being watched clung to him like a second skin. The laughter around him seemed sharper, like mocking whispers aimed at the space he occupied.

"You're too tense," a street vendor called out, gesturing toward a cart laden with colorful candies. "Life's sweet. Try one."

Ethan waved him off without a word, the man's voice dissolving into the crowd. The paint-stained box tucked under his arm felt heavier now, as though it were screaming the truth of what he'd done. Each jostle from a passerby sent a jolt of paranoia through his spine.

Another mural caught his eye—this one depicting a pair of hands reaching out, almost touching. The colors bled together, chaotic yet purposeful, and he could feel Maria's touch in every brushstroke.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" A woman had appeared beside him, her arms crossed as she admired the piece. "You don't see passion like this everywhere."

Ethan nodded absently, his focus on the hands in the mural. They seemed to stretch toward him, accusing and pleading at once.

"Do you know her work?" the woman continued. "Maria Torres. She's brilliant."

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"She was," he murmured, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

The woman tilted her head, confused, but Ethan was already moving again. His pace quickened, each step feeling more like a retreat. The vibrant murals blurred as he passed, the colors swirling into a maelstrom of guilt and denial.

By the time he reached a quieter street, his pulse hammered in his ears. The weight of the box under his arm pressed down like a lead anchor. He ducked into a shadowed alley, leaning against the cool brick wall as he tried to steady his breathing.

Above him, a painted face smiled down from another mural, the eyes piercing. Ethan's breath caught, the sensation of being hunted creeping deeper into his bones.



THE SCENT OF TURPENTINE mingled with the sharp tang of anger. Ten-year-old Ethan sat cross-legged on the floor of his childhood home, his crayon in hand, the paper before him alive with color. He had drawn a sprawling tree, its branches twisting toward the sun. A small figure stood beneath it, arms raised in triumph.

His mother's stiletto heels clicked against the hardwood, her presence a stormcloud blotting out his fragile joy.

"What is this mess?" she snapped, snatching the paper from the floor.

Ethan flinched, his gaze darting to the pile of discarded drawings beside him. "I—I made it for you."

"For me?" She laughed, bitter and sharp. "This? This is what you think will impress me? While I'm out working to give you a life worth living, you waste your time on this?"

FLYING DEATH

She tore the drawing in half, the sound slicing through him. The pieces fluttered to the floor like wounded birds, the bright colors muted against the dark wood.

“Grow up, Ethan,” she said, her voice a low snarl. “The world doesn’t care about your little scribbles.”

She turned on her heel, leaving him in the wreckage of his creation. Ethan stared at the torn paper, his small fists curling against his knees. The colors, once vibrant and hopeful, now mocked him with their uselessness.

In the present, Ethan stood in the alley, his breaths shallow and ragged. The memory burned hot in his mind, fueling the cold rationalization that had carried him this far. Maria’s colors, her joy, had been a defiance he couldn’t allow to stand.

He straightened, his hand brushing against the box under his arm. The weight of his actions pressed down on him, but he shoved the guilt aside. He couldn’t afford to falter now.

The world didn’t care about little scribbles. And neither would he.



THE MORNING LIGHT FILTERED through the heavy drapes of Ethan’s hotel room, painting the walls with muted streaks of gold. The TV flickered on the opposite wall, its sound low but persistent. Ethan sat at the edge of the bed, his hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, the earthy scent doing little to settle his churning stomach.

The news anchor’s polished voice broke through his thoughts. “Local artist Maria Torres was found dead last night in her studio. Authorities suspect a robbery gone wrong. Her unfinished mural, meant to debut at the city’s art festival, now stands as a haunting reminder of her vibrant legacy.”

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Ethan's grip on the cup tightened, the ceramic biting into his palms. On the screen, a photo of Maria appeared—a candid shot of her laughing, paint smudged on her cheek. The juxtaposition of her radiant energy and the grim headline below felt like a slap.

The broadcast cut to footage of her mural. Even unfinished, it pulsed with life, the colors seemingly in motion, as if Maria had poured her soul into every stroke. Ethan's breath hitched. The mural's glaring vibrancy clashed with the dark knot tightening in his chest.

"Unfortunate," he muttered, his voice hollow. He reached for the remote, but his hand hovered, reluctant. The news shifted to an interview with Maria's colleagues, their grief palpable.

"She was a force of nature," one of them said, her voice trembling. "Her work wasn't just art—it was a movement. She made us see the world differently."

Ethan turned off the TV with a sharp jab of his finger, the silence in the room deafening. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. Guilt threatened to claw its way to the surface, but he smothered it with cold rationale.

Maria was a name on a list. A necessary step.

And yet, the image of her mural lingered, the colors seared into his mind. It felt as if she had left a mark on him, one he couldn't scrub away.



THE STREETS OF MEXICO City bustled outside the hotel's glass doors, a stark contrast to the turmoil roiling inside Ethan. He adjusted his collar, his reflection in the mirror betraying none of the chaos beneath. His bags sat by the door, ready for the next step.

He stepped into the lobby, the air thick with the scent of polished wood and floral arrangements. The concierge glanced up with a practiced smile, but Ethan avoided eye contact, his gaze fixed ahead.

FLYING DEATH

Outside, the city pressed against him. Vendors called out their wares, children laughed, and the ever-present murals loomed over the streets. Each painted face seemed to watch him, their eyes unblinking, their colors brighter than before. Ethan quickened his pace, weaving through the throng of bodies.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out with a frown. A blocked number. He hesitated, then answered.

“Leaving so soon?” The voice on the other end was unfamiliar, its tone casual but laced with something sharper.

Ethan’s stomach dropped. “Who is this?”

A chuckle. “Just someone who appreciates good art. Maria’s mural—it’s something, isn’t it?”

The line went dead.

Ethan’s grip tightened around the phone, his pulse roaring in his ears. He scanned the crowd, searching for a face, a sign, anything. The painted murals blurred around him, their vibrant colors pressing against the edges of his vision.

He was losing his grip.

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