

The Uncanny World of Amadeus

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Introduction

The advancement of **modern civilization** through **science and technology** is unstoppable, with knowledge increasing exponentially. Even so, the world retains many things that are simply myths, hard to explain even with our most amazing scientific tools. Though these unexplained elements are often set aside and forgotten over time, the indelible impressions of popular myths—the legacies of legendary places and figures—are **encrypted** in our minds, remembered and relevant to this day.

Chapter 1

The Family Background and Beginnings

Present-day Romania.

The hour hand had just struck nine in **Belefalva**, a historic Romanian county characterized by its remarkably pleasant and peaceful life. Here, the day quickly ceded to the night; true quietude began as early as seven o'clock. The streets were cleared of any activity, leaving no person to be seen loitering—only the figures of laborers returning home, their long day finally done.

The pathways were sparsely lit by **flickering post lamps**, their yellowish glow too weak to penetrate the shadows, serving mainly as beacons for clouds of **hovering leeches and moths**. In the deep silence of the village, the only sound to truly define the night was the **persistent, chirping noise of the cicadas** echoing from the dark fields.

At that moment, a **gold-brown sedan** halted by the gate of a dilapidated, two-story house. From the back seat, a man clumsily unfolded himself. He was a sight:

his polo shirt was **crinkled and hanging out**, his trousers were a mass of wrinkles, and his whole appearance suggested a rough night.

He stumbled on his exit, almost catching his foot on the threshold as he awkwardly maneuvered onto the curb. He then moved with the **heavy, weaving stagger of someone thoroughly intoxicated**.

“See you tomorrow, **Amadeus!**” a voice shouted from the sedan.

“Go to work early, and have a sweet dream, **Amadeus!**” his companion added, the sarcasm dripping from his voice. Amadeus (also known as Dude) looked far older than his age, his face hollowed and his eyes perpetually murky, reflecting a life of bad habits. As usual, his 64-year-old mother would be waiting to reprimand him for his excesses.

His 68-year-old father was a silent witness to these conflicts. Paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair for years, his calloused hands shook, preventing him from holding anything steady. He would remain speechless whenever a heated argument erupted. Amadeus's health wasn't good since his last stroke, but when he felt

normal, he quickly forgot the potential consequences of his destructive lifestyle.

Nancy, Amadeus's 28-year-old sister, also lived with the family but was frequently out of town due to her job assignments.

Amadeus's inability to hold a job was a direct result of his hard drinking. Inevitably, his heavy habit forced him to either lose his position or resign under stress. As a consequence of this repeated failure, the home's fragile peace was again broken by his mother's reiterated and exhausted accusations.

"Don't think for a minute you'll manage to get up early tomorrow smelling like that. You'll just lose this job the way you lost all the others!" "I said, don't worry about it. I'll be early today."

Amadeus, despite being in his early thirties, was fundamentally **fickle-minded** and emotionally volatile. Yet, he possessed a natural charm, being a genuine **extrovert** and a true "ladies' man." His girlfriend, **Sarah**, was a lovely and unusually **mature-minded** young woman, only one year his junior, and she was serious about settling down. However, Amadeus's

chronic failures—his inability to commit to a job or a future—were largely obstacles of his own making, stemming directly from his destructive **negative attitude and misconduct**. His magnetism and social ease were constantly undermined by his profound emotional instability.

Though she appeared mature, Sarah was clearly uneasy—even insecure—when Amadeus struck up amiable conversations with other girls. Yet, she consistently swallowed her feelings, avoiding confrontation and remaining both civil and highly understanding. She clung to the single hope that her maturity and patience would eventually inspire him to change his ways for the better.

In essence, Sarah had accepted Amadeus for who he was. Her saving grace was her own responsible and decent nature. During their moments of connection, she often found subtle ways to introduce her own personal concerns.

“We’re not getting any younger, you know. Do we have to wait until we're chasing after lost time?” Sarah finally asked, turning the conversation toward their future.

"No, it's more complicated than that. We need to be fully prepared before we take such a big step, otherwise, we'll crash. And you know perfectly well that my financial state is just one of many issues I have," he insisted, justifying the delay.

"You'll never be financially prepared unless a miracle happens," Sarah stated flatly. "The decision is yours, Amadeus. We can't afford to wait to see what lies ahead."

“Just give me enough time to save some money for us.”

“You'll never save money, not with your friends and your drinking habits consuming every spare cent.”

“That's not true. Believe me, I am saving some now for our future.”

“Really? After all this time, how can I possibly believe you?”

“Just give me enough time to save some money for us.”

“You'll never save money, not with your friends and your drinking habits consuming every spare cent.”

“That's not true. Believe me, I am saving some now for our future.”

“Really? After all this time, how can I possibly believe you?”

Amadeus shifted uncomfortably. “I'll show you my bank account later. I promise.”

“A promise?” Sarah challenged, her tone sharp with doubt. “Why don't you just borrow some from your brother anyway? He's clearly rich and still single, so it's not as if he needs the money,” she suggested pointedly, highlighting the stark difference between the siblings.

“That's where you're mistaken. He's funding a girl's education. The problem is he refuses to commit to her right now,” he explained.

“Wait, he's supporting a student? Who is this girl?”

“His girlfriend, naturally. The strange thing is, we've never met her or even seen a picture.” “Why would he keep her hidden?” Sarah asked.

“Honestly, I don't know the reason, and I don't intend to **meddle** in his private business,” he replied defensively.

Ignoring his dismissal, Sarah pushed ahead. “Leaving that aside for now, **where are we going to settle** after we get married?” she inquired directly.

Amadeus sighed heavily. “Can we just put a pin in that for now? We’ll **cross the bridge when we get there.**”

“ It will be more convenient if you and your wife stay with Mom now. She’s alone and needs someone to live with.” Red urged Amadeus.

In his late forties, **Red** had established himself as a successful **trader**. Yet, his personal life was nontraditional: he chose to maintain an **affair** with a woman who was legally separated and raising two children, deliberately avoiding marriage. Red lived alone in a **newly acquired mansion** in a quiet, **plush village**—only a short distance from the family, yet a world away in terms of lifestyle.

“Yeah, that's fine. I'd just be a lot more **confident** if I could count on **Sarah helping Mom** out with the chores while I'm working.”

A well-prepared and stable marriage seemed impossible, yet the couple wed anyway, thanks to the quiet support of **Red**, Dude's elder brother. Red, who was fully aware of Dude's financial and personal grievances, stepped in to fund the event. Dude was stunned: he never expected that a dazzling and somewhat **glamorous wedding day** would actually arrive. There he stood, finding himself and **Sarah** in front of the altar for a wedding ceremony he hadn't fully earned.

Both **Sarah** and **Dude's family** were relieved, thinking a **miracle** had finally inspired a sudden, positive change in Dude's behavior.

"I believe you'll certainly get busier now that you're going to be a **father**, seven months from now," Sarah remarked, her voice a mix of warning and hope.

"Seriously? Yes, that makes me **genuinely happy**," Amadeus responded.

The arrival of their **baby boy** became the catalyst for change, driving a visible improvement in Dude's attitude toward his job. Not to be outdone, **Sarah** took responsibility

a step further, securing an **income-generating position** herself. The care of their child was handled jointly by Sarah's mother and a trusted babysitter.

During a **family occasion**, **Red** extended a highly generous offer to Amadeus: the position of **caretaker for his estate** in the exclusive village. Their parents strongly encouraged Amadeus to accept, as the timing was perfect—their **younger sister was getting married**, meaning the family home would soon be emptier, and Amadeus needed the stability.

"You'd find it very convenient, especially since I'm often **away on business**," Red reasoned. "There's more than enough room for me, Nancy, and her future husband back at the main house."

"It's the perfect solution," Nancy affirmed. "**We can all pitch in to look after Mom and Dad**," she said, appealing to their sense of duty.

"Your brother is right, **Amadeus**," his **Mom** agreed, offering her full support. "It's much more convenient for you to live there as a family until you can acquire a property of your own."

“I only wish I could have a house and a piece of land of my own one day,” he admitted, revealing his ambition.

“Why not?” **Red** countered immediately. “You can certainly achieve that too if you **strive hard**.”

Here are a few ways to rewrite and improve that dialogue, making it more natural and better capturing the family dynamic of gentle prodding:

“Why not, Bro? Aren’t you ever going to get married?” **Nancy** asked, sounding surprised.

“Not right now, no,” **Red** replied simply.

“We truly don’t want to meddle in your personal life, Red,” his **Mom** interjected gently, “but we would like to know: are you at least getting serious with a girl?”

Red paused, maintaining a quiet smile. “Not at this point, Mom. Maybe later.”

"We truly don't care if she isn't **wealthy**," his mother added, pressing her point. "As long as she is **educated**, **decent**, and, of course, available for marriage."

"I know, I know, Mom," Red replied, waving off her list. **"Your ideal girl.** Come what may," he added with a hint of resignation.

"We sincerely hope to see that day, Red," she said, letting her wish hang in the air.

Amadeus wasn't genuinely concerned about **Red's personal affairs**; his philosophy was strictly "to each his own." For him, the real prize was the huge privilege of living alone in Red's **well-furnished dream house**.

However, the distant threat of Red actually getting married presented a distressing problem: it would mean the sudden loss of their newfound comfort. Suddenly motivated by this potential deprivation, **Amadeus and Sarah** began seriously plotting ways to **generate and save more income** while the opportunity lasted.

"The idea of **working abroad** makes me feel we'd be absolutely certain to finally make some real money," he suggested, excitement coloring his voice.

"But wouldn't you find it difficult to **find another job** when we eventually come back?" Sarah countered, concerned about the long-term risk.

“Nobody knows what tomorrow brings. Nothing is impossible to those who **persevere**.”

“I need more than a motto. **Assure me** that we'll be secure,” she insisted.

Chapter 2

Grief and Heartache in Father's Passing

A Troubling Return of Red Amidst Sadness

Months after their father's passing, their sister Nancy's wedding was tinged with sorrow. Red had invited his girlfriend to the ceremony, but in the shadow of their recent loss, he didn't make a point to introduce her to the family. The joy of the occasion felt muted, as no one was aware she was part of their circle. In the midst of exchanging uneasy pleasantries, Amadeus, trying to find a spark of hope, spoke of his plans to leave for abroad, unaware of the heavy hearts gathered around him.

"Who's going to stay with them?" Red continued.

"Her sister and a house helper for the kid," Amadeus said, trying to sound reassuring, though the uncertainty lingered in their conversation.

Red raised an eyebrow. "You think that will be enough? With everything going on?"

Amadeus nodded, though he felt a twinge of doubt. “I have to believe it will. It’s tough, but Sarah needs to understand the bigger picture. We’re making sacrifices for a better future.”

Red sighed, glancing around at the family gathered, still processing their grief. “I just hope it all works out for you both.”

“It will,” Amadeus said, although the weight of the moment made it difficult to sound fully convinced. “We just need to stay strong and supportive, no matter how hard it gets.”

“Don’t you think it’s time to consider settling down and getting married? You’re not getting any younger, Bro. Your son deserves to see you in a loving relationship and witness the joy of a family,” Amadeus pressed, his brow furrowed with concern.

“I understand your point, and I do feel the weight of time. However, I believe that there is a right moment for everything. At the moment, my business demands my full attention and dedication,” Red replied, determination in his eyes as he glanced at the bustling office around them.

Amadeus approached the table with a friendly smile, making sure to greet the older woman first. “Good afternoon! I’m Amadeus, how are you all today?”

The lady in the green-checkered polo looked up and smiled back. “We’re doing well, thank you! Just here to spend some time with my sister and the kids.”

“Great to hear! And how are you two?” he asked, turning his attention to the children.

The little girl with pigtails piped up, “We’re having fun! We just played a game!”

“That sounds exciting! Do you have a favorite game?” Amadeus encouraged them, settling into a light conversation, hoping to put them at ease.

As the children chatted about their favorite games, Amadeus kept an eye on Red, who was deep in discussion with another client. He could see how dedicated Red was, but he also couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe there was more to life than just work.

While the party was in full swing, Amadeus and Sarah made their way closer to Nancy and her husband, who were engaged in light conversation with Red’s visitors.

“Meet my friends, Sophia and her sister,” Red introduced with a warm gesture.

“Nice to meet you!” Amadeus smiled, his friendly demeanor evident.

“Great to meet you, too! And it looks like you're doing well, Dude,” Sophia replied, her eyes sparkling as she smiled back at him.

Amadeus chuckled, feeling the friendliness in the air. “Just trying to keep up with everyone else!” he said, easing into the conversation with a lighthearted tone.

“I understand you’re the younger one who got married and now has a son, whom Red was telling me,” she continued.

“Yes, it has been two years now,” he replied.

“Oh, I see, you’re the ones occupying his house in the village?” she asked.

“Yes, how did you know that?” Amadeus inquired, curiosity piqued.

“He’s been my friend, and his client is my cousin who told me about his property. How fortunate you are for having

such a great brother, he-he,” she sighed, a smile playing at her lips.

Amadeus felt a warmth spread through him at her words. “I really am lucky. Red’s been an incredible support for us,” he said, reflecting on his brother's unwavering presence in his life.

“Absolutely, I’m all in for that!” she replied, her eyes lighting up at the suggestion.

Amadeus nodded in agreement. “Sounds perfect. A good meal and drinks will definitely lighten the mood.”

Red led the way to a nearby table, the atmosphere filled with laughter and chatter as they seated themselves. The scent of delicious food wafted through the air, making everyone's stomachs rumble in anticipation.

As they browsed the menu, Amadeus couldn't help but feel grateful for this moment—surrounded by family and friends, sharing stories and laughter. It was these simple times that made everything worthwhile.

After a couple of months, Amadeus left for Tirana. Life would never be the same again in the comfort of their brother’s house, where laughter echoed through the halls.

Now, he would find himself in a Muslim accommodation, a space filled with unfamiliar faces and customs. Despite the warmth of the new community, he couldn't shake the feeling of loneliness that settled in.

Gone were the nights filled with stories and camaraderie; instead, there were quiet evenings spent reflecting on the transition. He tried to embrace the new culture, mingling with his neighbors and learning about their traditions, but it was a slow process.

In those moments of solitude, he often reminisced about the gatherings with family and friends, the joy of shared meals and laughter. Each memory reminded him of the importance of those simple connections. Though the thrill of adventure called to him, he also knew that navigating this new life would take time and patience. He held on to hope that eventually, he would create a sense of belonging in this foreign place.

“Life is a struggle, and whoever can bear it would succeed in life,” his colleague said.

“I know, but life is also a stage where one should adjust gradually in a changing environment,” Amadeus replied.

“We’ll make it here. Just relax,” his colleague urged.

Amadeus nodded, though the weight of the unfamiliar still lingered. It was comforting to hear his colleague’s optimism, a reminder that he wasn’t alone in this journey. They shared a few more words about their plans for the week, discussing ways to explore the city together. Amadeus felt a flicker of hope—maybe with time, these conversations would weave a new fabric of connection in his life. Adapting wouldn’t be easy, but perhaps it would lead him to unexpected friendships and experiences that would make this place feel like home after all.

“Yes, you’re right. We’ll both make it here,” he replied, feeling a bit of confidence.

“Are you a family man?” Dick asked, curiosity evident in his tone.

“Yes, I have two kids,” Dick said with a smile.

“How about you?” he inquired further.

“One boy. Fortunately, my wife is a working mom,” he replied, feeling proud of their shared responsibilities.

The conversation shifted to their families, and Amadeus felt the warmth of the moment. Discussing their children and the challenges of balancing work and family brought a sense of camaraderie that made the unfamiliar surroundings feel a little more welcoming.

"Yes, you're absolutely right. We'll both find our way here," he replied, feeling a newfound sense of confidence as he spoke.

"Are you a family man?" Dick asked, his tone reflecting genuine curiosity.

"Yes, I have two kids—a boy and a girl," he responded, a smile spreading across his face as he thought about their antics.

"How about you?" he inquired further, eager to connect on this shared topic.

"I have one boy," Dick replied, his eyes lighting up with pride. "Fortunately, my wife balances work and family exceptionally well, which makes it easier for both of us to share responsibilities."

As their conversation shifted to the joys and challenges of parenthood, Amadeus felt a warm camaraderie developing

between them. Discussing their children's milestones, the joys of playdates, and the struggles of juggling work-life balance brought a sense of connection that made the unfamiliar surroundings feel more inviting and comfortable. The warmth of shared experiences transformed the space around them, creating a deeper bond between two men navigating their paths in a new environment.

The conversation highlighted a deeper connection between two individuals, centered around the topic of family and parenthood. One participant expressed a sense of confidence while discussing personal experiences. When asked if he was a family man, he shared that he has two children, a boy and a girl, which brought a smile to his face as he reflected on their fun experiences.

His conversation partner, Dick, shared that he has one son and expressed pride in balancing parental responsibilities with his wife. He mentioned that his wife's ability to manage both work and family life significantly contributed to their effective partnership in parenting.

As they exchanged stories about their children's achievements, playdates, and the challenges of balancing work with family commitments, a sense of camaraderie

developed between them. This dialogue not only fostered mutual understanding but also transformed their surroundings, making the environment more welcoming and comfortable as they navigated their shared experiences of fatherhood.

The discussion revealed a profound connection between two individuals, centering on the themes of family and parenthood. One participant articulated a sense of confidence while recounting personal experiences. When inquired about his identity as a family man, he proudly disclosed that he has two children, a son and a daughter, which prompted a smile as he reminisced about their enjoyable experiences together.

The conversation partner, Dick, shared that he has one son and expressed his pride in successfully balancing parental responsibilities alongside his wife. He highlighted that his wife's capacity to manage both professional obligations and family life significantly enhances their cooperative approach to parenting.

As they exchanged narratives regarding their children's accomplishments, playdates, and the challenges inherent in balancing work and family commitments, a sense of

camaraderie developed between them. This dialogue not only fostered mutual understanding but also transformed their surroundings, creating a more inviting and comfortable atmosphere as they navigated their shared experiences of fatherhood.

In the wake of his father's passing, emotions ran high as relatives and friends offered their condolences. His eagerness and longing for his loved ones were evident when he spontaneously hugged Sarah and his son, Bob, a gesture filled with comfort, deep longing, and affection.

“I was just told I have one week to stay here,” he said.

“We should be grateful you were allowed to come home,” Sarah replied.

“How is it going there?” she insinuated.

“Well, I really have to be patient and insistent to overcome things. I will make it there. Trust me.” He added.

Red walked up to them while Sophia and her cousin lingered just behind the other guests.

“How’s it going, man? Did you enjoy working abroad?” Red asked.

“Yeah, it was good. But I need to head back right after Dad’s burial,” he replied.

“Why not stay and work here? You could earn a decent living and be with your family if you find a good job. I bet you made some good money in Tirana,” Red suggested.

“No way, man. I want to earn enough so we can save and invest in the short term,” he answered.

“ But could you cope with the stress and emotional burden?” Red asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“ Of course, I could. I had made it already, why not now? We just can’t think we’re staying in your house indefinitely when we could purchase our own. You might be using your house in the near future, and we don’t want to be a burden to you when that time comes,” he explained.

"No, it is perfectly acceptable for your family to stay there until you are able to afford your own place," Red replied.

"I see that you have guests—the same woman I encountered previously," he noted.

"Sophia and her cousin, yes. They are providing me with companionship," Red said.

"Is she not planning to live in your house in the future?"
he inquired.

"Not really. She has two children and is somewhat ambiguously separated. How could I accommodate that?"
Red responded.

"Honestly, Mom and Nancy won't be pleased with her. They will turn her away."

"Then why not choose someone who's truly worth it and readily available? There are plenty of qualified candidates you've met already," he suggested.

"Sophia isn't my girlfriend; she's just a close friend. I genuinely want to help her out during this tough time. I got to know her through her cousin, who happens to be my client. I'm sorry, man, but I don't have a good feeling about her. She might still be married. Don't get too invested; it could lead to trouble down the line. I'm just looking out for you," Amadeus exclaimed.

"I understand what I'm doing. Don't worry about me, bro. I can handle my personal matters," Red replied confidently. "t," he clarified.

Amadeus reluctantly left after a week, feeling compelled to focus on his career and pursue his ambitions. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, Red was often visiting Sophia and her children at what he claimed was their home.

“How long are we going to live like this?” Sophia inquired.

“Why? Aren’t you satisfied with the support I’m providing?” Red responded.

“I’m not. We can’t truly be considered a family if we’re not fully committed to each other,” she insisted.

“How can we be, when you have kids and your marriage still exists?” he asked.

“I’ve told you before—he has been missing for over ten long years. This situation gives me the legal right to marry. We’ve been together for seven wonderful years, yet we find ourselves stuck in this state of limbo. Is it fair that we continue to live like this, without a clear path forward?”

“They won’t accept you because you have two kids and are married. Our family has strict norms that must be upheld, or I risk being ostracized and despised for the rest of

my life. They want me to find an ideal partner, and that could pose a serious problem for us.”

Sophia frowned, worry etched on her face. “I thought you loved me and my kids?”

“Of course I do,” he replied, “but only to a certain extent—mainly in terms of providing support without any long-term commitments. Aren’t you grateful that I’m here for you and your children?”

“Yes, but we can’t go on like this indefinitely. We’re getting older; what about our future?”

“And what else?” he responded, with a hint of challenge.

“With whom will you be leaving your property? I hope you don’t mind me asking,” she said directly.

“That’s a separate issue, Sophia. I’ll decide who I want to leave it to. It’s not your place to question that,” Red explained.

“This only signifies that you lack any real trust in me,” she said, her voice trembling with a mix of hurt and indignation. “Are you truly suggesting that we cannot be part of your plans, your future? If that’s how you feel, then

perhaps it would be best for us to go our separate ways. This—this conversation—means nothing! After all these years together, to be met with such selfish and despairing remarks?” Her eyes flashed with intensity, the weight of their shared history hanging heavily in the air as she spoke, each word “No, Sophia. That’s not what I’m trying to imply at all,” he said, his voice steady but tinged with exasperation. “I simply want to express that this isn’t the appropriate moment for us to delve into those topics. My thoughts are tangled, and I’m feeling quite overwhelmed.”

“But when will we have the chance to discuss it?” she pressed, her voice rising with urgency.

“I need time to process it. Please don’t pressure me,” he replied, his tone softening as he tried to convey the weight of his turmoil.

Red stood frozen, his eyes locked onto Sophia, whose face was ablaze with anger and bitterness, reflecting the turmoil of a woman scorned, stripped of the joys she felt entitled to. The stark contrast of her fury against her previous warmth struck him hard.

“I’m serious, Red. You can’t just walk away from me,” she declared, her voice quaking with emotion. “My love for you is

deeper than you realize; it extends to our children, too. They are part of this bond.”

Red, still grappling with the intensity of her emotions, replied earnestly, “Do you honestly think I don’t love you? You’ve been my family and a cornerstone of my life for so long. It’s not that simple.”

He could see the conflict in her eyes, a mix of love and di Red found himself heavily influenced by Sophia's compelling desires and profound affection. By his nature, he demonstrated qualities of kindness, forgiveness, and a gentle disposition. Unbeknownst to him, Sophia and her cousin were burdened by a tumultuous family history rooted in their remote hometown.

“When you inquired about his estate, what was his response?” her assertive cousin, Linda, asked.

“He appeared indecisive; however, I am committed to ensuring that he concedes to our request for a share,” Sophia replied. stress, and it pained him to witness her like this.

Sophia felt a pang of jealousy as the realization sank in. “I can’t believe he would even consider someone else,” she said,

her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought we had something special.”

Linda leaned in closer, her expression serious. “You need to act fast, Sophia. If he’s being swayed by someone else, you can’t just sit back and hope for the best. You need to remind him what he stands to lose.”

Sophia nodded, determination creeping into her voice. “You’re right. I won’t let another girl take him away from me. He may be indecisive now, but I’ll make sure he sees how much I care. I won’t give up easily.”

“Good,” Linda replied, a satisfied smile forming on her lips. “Now let’s come up with a plan. We can’t let this chance slip through our fingers.”

“Really? He can’t just walk away from me like this. We’ve spent countless hours together, sharing our dreams and building memories, only to discover that he’s been involved with someone else. He swore he wouldn’t seek a replacement for me,” she groaned, frustration evident in her voice.

Chapter 3

Stalking on the Subject

Red felt a wave of irritation wash over him. “It’s not true, Sophia. I’m just trying to balance everything. Work has been hectic, and I need some time to myself.”

Sophia crossed her arms, her expression a mix of anger and hurt. “You can’t expect me to believe that. You’re pulling away, and I can see it. If you’re seeing someone else, just say it!”

“Why do you always jump to conclusions? I wish you’d trust me more,” Red replied, frustration brewing in his voice. “I’m not the type to lie about something like that.”

“Maybe you’re not the type, but your actions are speaking louder than your words. It feels like you’re replacing me,” she shot back, her voice rising.

Red sighed, feeling cornered. “I’m not replacing you! I care about you, but I also need space sometimes. Can’t we just talk about this without accusations?”

Her eyes softened for a moment, but the hurt was still evident. "It's hard to believe you when everything seems to be changing."

"Things change, but that doesn't mean I don't value what we have," Red replied, desperately trying to bridge the growing distance between them. "Can we at least agree to give each other a little more understanding?"

Red felt a wave of irritation surge through him like a tempest. "It's not true, Sophia," he said, his voice taut with the weight of unspoken frustrations. "I'm just trying to juggle everything. Work has been a whirlwind, and I truly need some time to recharge."

Sophia stood across from him, arms crossed tightly against her chest, her expression a tumult of anger and deep-seated hurt. "You can't expect me to believe that," she retorted, her voice sharp as a knife. "You're pulling away, and I can see it. If you're seeing someone else, just come out with it!"

"Why do you always jump to conclusions? I wish you'd trust me more," Red shot back, his frustration bubbling just beneath the surface. "I'm not the type to lie about something that means so much."

“Maybe you’re not the type, but your actions are speaking louder than your words. It feels like you’re trying to replace me,” she fired, her voice rising in intensity, raw with emotion.

Red sighed deeply, feeling as though he was backed into a corner, a weary sense of helplessness washing over him. “I’m not replacing you! I care about you, but I also need space sometimes. Can’t we just talk about this without slinging accusations?”

For a fleeting moment, her eyes softened, a flicker of vulnerability breaking through the tension, but the hurt still lingered like a dark cloud. “It’s hard to believe you when everything around us seems to be shifting so drastically.”

“Things change, but that doesn’t mean I don’t value what we have,” Red replied, desperation creeping into his voice as he grasped for a connection that felt increasingly tenuous. “Can we at least agree to be a little more understanding with each other?”

After a month of silence, two robust, moustached men appeared at their ancestral home, their demeanor suggesting a purpose. They seemed to be searching for someone named Red.

“We’re looking for Red. Is he here?” the first man inquired, his tone steady.

“He’s not here at the moment. Is there something we can assist you with? Who exactly are you?” Red’s mother responded, her curiosity piqued.

“We are close friends of his and we need to share some important information about him,” the second man stated earnestly.

“He’s been out of town for the past two days, mentioning only that it was a business trip,” she replied, sensing the gravity in their voices.

“When will he be back?” the first man pressed, a hint of urgency in his tone.

“He didn’t specify a return date,” Red’s mother answered, her concern growing.

The atmosphere shifted as a sleek, black-tinted car pulled up to the ancestral home. Red stepped out and immediately spotted the two men waiting near the entrance.

“They’re looking for you,” his mother said, her voice laced with concern.

“Alright, Mom. You can head inside; I’ll talk to them,” Red replied, a calm resolve settling over him.

As his mother stepped back into the house, the two unfamiliar men approached, their imposing figures radiating a mix of urgency and seriousness. They introduced themselves as brothers of Linda, a name that meant nothing to Red.

“You’re Red, right?” one of the men asked, scrutinizing him.

“Yes, that’s me. Why do you ask?” Red returned, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

“Sophia is our cousin,” the second man explained, his tone grave. “If you want to continue living a peaceful life, you need to reconnect with her.”

Red's heart raced as he drove toward Sophia's home, each turn of the tires echoing the urgency in his mind. The men's ominous warning clung to him like a shadow, and he couldn't shake the image of their imposing figures standing at his doorstep.

As he pulled up to the familiar house, the air felt thick, almost electric. He stepped out of the car and glanced

around, half-expecting to see them lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. With a deep breath, he approached the front door, his fists clenched at his sides.

When he knocked, it was as if the entire world paused. Moments later, Sophia swung the door open, a smirk playing on her lips. “I told you, you can’t get away from me,” she said, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Don’t play games, Sophia!” Red shot back, his voice rising. “You don’t own my hard-earned possessions, nor am I afraid of the men you sent!”

Her laughter echoed hollowly, but there was something dangerous in her eyes, a glint that made Red’s skin crawl. “You think you have a choice in this? You’re already in deeper than you realize. They’re not just here for you; they want everything.”

The tension crackled between them, and Red felt the weight of their past pressing down on him. “What do they want?” he demanded, stepping closer, his resolve hardening. “Tell me what’s happening, Sophia!”

She leaned against the door frame, her expression shifting from playful to serious. “You wouldn’t understand,”

she whispered, glancing over her shoulder as if expecting someone to appear at any moment. “They’re dangerous. You’re in over your head—”

“I don’t care!” Red interrupted, his frustration spilling over. “I didn’t come here to argue. I came to find out what’s going on, and you’re going to tell me.”

Suddenly, a low rumble echoed in the distance, and Red’s instincts kicked in. “We’re not alone,” he said, scanning the street for shadows or movement. The threat was palpable, and he sensed danger lurking just beyond the safety of her doorway.

Sophia’s eyes widened momentarily before she snapped back to her composure. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with,” she murmured. “What they want won’t just put you at risk; it’ll endanger everyone you care about.”

Before Red could respond, the sound of heavy footsteps approached, and the atmosphere shifted ominously. Red’s heart pounded as the porch creaked under the weight of approaching figures. “We need to move—now,” he said urgently, grabbing her arm.

They both turned just as two hulking shadows emerged from the darkness, their features obscured but their intent clear. “Red,” one of the men called, his voice low and menacing. “We weren’t finished with our conversation.”

Red felt a surge of adrenaline as he understood they were no longer just words—this was about survival. He tightened his grip on Sophia, ready for whatever was about to unfold, realizing that this was just the beginning of a much darker game. The night had only just started to reveal its secrets.

“Don’t you ever distract me or give me trouble. I want to be alone.” Red’s voice shook with a mixture of anger and desperation as he faced Sophia, the weight of their history hanging between them.

“Why? Because you’ve found another girl?” she shot back, a teasing grin masking her malice. “No, you can’t just do that to me.”

“Do you think I’m afraid of you?” Red’s voice rose, fueled by a surge of defiance. “I have plenty of friends in authority who could help me fight your men. I know they’re not your brothers. You paid for them to scare me. You are forcing me, Sophia!” His fists clenched at his sides, the tension escalating.

“Then, show me your friends in authority,” she challenged, crossing her arms defiantly, her smirk unfaltering.

“Because of what you did, I’ve lost my trust in you. You’ve just shown your true colors.” The anger in his voice intensified as he leaned closer. “You’re blatantly after my possessions!”

In that moment, the air crackled with confrontation, and the temperature seemed to drop. Outside, the night was becoming ominous, shadows shifting under the streetlights as if mimicking their confrontation. Red’s gaze darted toward the window; the men he had feared slinking around in the darkness might soon make their move.

“Is that really what you think?” Sophia’s tone shifted, dropping the playful facade. “You don’t know the half of it, Red. You have no idea what you’re caught up in.”

As if on cue, a muffled thud echoed from somewhere out on the street, sending a jolt of fear racing through Red’s body. He glanced back at her, the gravity of her words settling over him like a shroud. “What do you mean?” he demanded, urgency spiking in his voice.

“They’ll come for you, and it’s not just about possessions,” she said, her eyes darting to the door. “It’s about power—control. Do you think this is just a game? You’re in deeper than you realize.”

Red felt a knot twisting in his stomach as the weight of her revelation settled in. The sound of footsteps grew louder, relentless. Panic coursed through him. “We need to go! They’re here!”

“Do you really think you can outrun them?” Sophia sneered, but there was a tremor in her voice. “You need me.”

“No way,” Red snapped, shoving past her toward the door. Just as he turned the handle, it swung open with a creak, revealing a dark figure silhouetted against the night. The man’s gaze bore into him; he wasn’t alone.

Red stepped back instinctively, adrenaline surging as more figures emerged from the shadows, their intentions clear. “Red,” one of them growled, stepping forward. “It’s time to settle this once and for all.”

Heart racing, Red squared his shoulders, every survival instinct kicking in. “You want a piece of me? You’ll have to

get through me first!” he spat, ready to defend not just himself but everything he held dear.

Sophia moved closer, her presence both a comfort and a threat. “Trust me, Red. You don’t want this fight. They’ll destroy everything.”

The men advanced, and the tension snapped, sending his pulse racing. He grasped Sophia's arm, ready to pull her away, even as his instincts screamed to confront the men head-on. “You may have the upper hand, but I still have my dignity,” he shouted, preparing to face whatever darkness lay ahead.

As the night closed in around them, Red understood this was not just a battle for his possessions; it was a fight for his very soul. The secrets hidden in the shadows were about to be unveiled, and he was at the heart of it all. The thrill of danger danced in the air, and with every beat of his heart, he braced himself for the storm that was coming.

Red stormed away, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. Yet, as he walked the dimly lit streets, shadows taunted him, whispering doubts that gnawed at his heart. The thought of disturbing his loved ones haunted him relentlessly, a specter that kept him awake through anxious

nights. He longed for peace, but it eluded him, clinging to him like a dark shroud.

As the days passed, a lingering sense of uncertainty festered within him, compelling him to turn back towards Sophia. Their history was tangled with passion and betrayal, but he couldn't shake the feeling that their story wasn't finished yet.

He knocked on her door with a heaviness in his chest. When Sophia appeared, her expression was a mix of surprise and defiance.

"Let's talk about us," Red began, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"Who's destroying our relationship?" she replied, calm yet laced with sarcasm. "Isn't it you, Red? You walked away."

Taking a deep breath, he pushed through the weight of her words. "What you accused me of... about having another girl. It's a blatant lie, Sophia. I was on a business trip. You have to believe me—I could never do that to you."

Sophia's expression shifted, the sarcasm fading as her brow furrowed with scrutiny. "Really? You expect me to take your word for it? After everything?"

Red stepped closer, urgency woven into his tone. “What you’re doubting isn’t just me; it’s what we built together. I need you to understand. What we have isn’t something I want to throw away over rumors. It’s deeper than that.”

She hesitated, the smirk replaced by an uneasy frown. “So, what do you want, Red? To patch things up? Because it won’t be that simple.”

“I’m not asking for everything to go back to how it was,” he replied, his voice softer now, the angry bravado giving way to vulnerability. “I just want a chance to explain. We both know there’s more at stake here than just our feelings. There’s something darker lurking in the shadows, and we can’t face it alone.”

Sophia’s eyes flickered with hesitation, the tension between them palpable. “You think I want to return to the chaos? To the threats? To this endless cycle of mistrust?”

“No,” Red said firmly, gripping her shoulders gently, desperation creeping into his voice. “But if we don’t confront this together, it’ll consume us both. I can’t fight this battle without you.”

As the reality of their situation closed in around them, Sophia's defenses began to lower. She could see the sincerity in his eyes, and for a fleeting moment, she felt the connection reignite. Pain had woven its way through their past, but the prospect of facing a greater darkness together drew them closer, the threads of fate entwining once more.

"Fine," she muttered, determination lacing her tone. "But know this, Red: if you betray me again, there will be consequences. I won't let you drag me into your troubles without a fight."

Red nodded, relief washing over him. "I wouldn't dream of it. We'll face whatever comes next, side by side."

And just like that, the delicate balance of their relationship shifted, born anew from desperation and a glimmer of hope. Together, they would unravel the tangled web of threats encircling them, armed with the understanding that their only chance at survival lay in the strength of their bond.

Sophia took a cautious step toward him, her face illuminated by a warm smile that seemed to chase away the shadows lingering between them. She enveloped him in a hug that felt both comforting and charged with unspoken

emotions. “Who’s accusing you?” she murmured into the fabric of his shirt, her voice barely above a whisper. “Not me, because I have no desire to damage what we have. I just needed to know you’re still with me.”

As she pulled back slightly, her eyes searched his, glimmering with hope and vulnerability. “Now that you’re back, it means we’re still in this together,” she continued, her tone shifting to one laced with seriousness, the underlying tension palpable. The weight of their past loomed over them, but in that moment, an unspoken pact seemed to form—a fragile bridge bridging the chasm of uncertainty that had once separated them.

Her expression flickered between light and gravity, reflecting the complexities of their relationship. “But make no mistake, Red,” she added, her voice steady yet firm, “trust will take time to rebuild. I won’t ignore the shadows that lurk, and I need you to face them with me.” In that quiet exchange, the air thickened with the promise of commitment, binding them together in a delicate dance of hope and caution.

Chapter 4

Shedding Light on the Mystery

Stalking The Suspect

Reconciliation was the only escape Red could think of to avoid the consequences that loomed over him like a thunderstorm threatening to unleash chaos. Meanwhile, Nancy and her mom exchanged hushed whispers, each word laced with secrets about Red's indiscretion with a woman who had become more than a mere distraction.

"I learned from a friend that Red bought a car for Sophia recently," Nancy's mom whispered, her eyes darting around the dimly lit room as if expecting someone to overhear.

"Really? I didn't know that," Nancy replied, surprise washing over her features. The implication hung thick in the air, a palpable tension ready to crack.

"Why not check if he really did?" her mom urged, leaning in closer, her voice tinged with an urgency that made Nancy's stomach knot.

"How could I when I don't even know where she lives?" Nancy countered, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

"Just check it out with my reliable source," her mom replied, an enigmatic glint flickering in her eyes. "I will tell you who in a moment."

With that, her mom moved swiftly to the phone, her fingers trembling slightly as she dialed the number scrawled hastily on a faded note. The weight of their conspiracy pressed down on them, filling the room with a sense of danger and responsibility.

“Ben, will you please come over? We’ll tell you something important,” her mom said, her voice low and conspiratorial.

“Okay, Mom, I’ll get there in five minutes,” Ben responded, his tone casual, unaware of the storm brewing in the shadows.

As the line went dead, Nancy’s heart raced. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place, but what kind of picture would they reveal once assembled? Would Ben’s arrival lead them down a path they couldn’t turn back from?

Each second ticked away ominously, but Nancy knew one thing for certain: the truth was lurking, just beyond their reach, and its revelation could either free them or ensnare them in a web of irrevocable consequences. With every turn of the clock, the atmosphere thickened, the stakes climbing higher and higher, until it felt like they were standing on the edge of a precipice—one misstep could change everything.

After a few tense days that felt more like an eternity, Ben finally returned, his expression a mix of satisfaction and

concern. The moment he stepped through the door, the air thickened with anticipation.

“I have confirmed it,” he announced, leaning against the wall, his eyes darting between Nancy and their mom. “The info is positive.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy pressed, her heart racing. “Did you find her? Is Red really seeing her?”

Ben hesitated, the tension palpable. “Yes. I found Sophia’s house. And there’s definitely a car parked out front—a brand-new sports car, no less. I couldn’t believe it when I saw it.”

“Did anyone see you?” Nancy asked, holding her breath.

“Don’t worry. I was careful,” Ben replied, though the slight tremor in his voice suggested otherwise. “I just drove by and parked a street away. The coast seemed clear, but...” He shifted uncomfortably, “It felt off. You know, like I was being watched.”

“Watched?” Nancy gasped, the implications sinking in. “What do you mean? Did you see anyone?”

“No, but I got this weird feeling,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just as I was leaving, I caught sight of someone standing at the corner, eyes locked on the house. I couldn’t shake the feeling they were waiting or something.”

Nancy exchanged glances with her mom, a chill crawling up her spine. “What do we do now?” she whispered, the stakes rising higher.

Mom’s voice was steady, but the urgency was undeniable. “We need to confront Red. We have to know the truth—if he’s really involved with her and if this is all going to blow up in our faces.”

“But what if he finds out we’ve been digging?” Ben interjected, his brow furrowing with concern.

“Then we make sure he never knows,” Nancy said, a determined glint in her eyes. “If this is going where I think it is, we need to prepare for the worst.”

As they stood there, the room seemed to close in on them, the weight of the decision looming large. Every detail, every whispered secret, had led them to this moment. The clock ticked down, the truth lurking closer than ever, and there was no turning back.

He gave her a brand-new car. Red is financially supporting them, and those details were also confirmed by my reliable source. Sophia and her cousin come from a remote county in Buscony, known in the past for dark sorcery,” he explained, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

Nancy felt a chill creep up her spine, a blend of intrigue and fear pooling in her stomach. “Could she be doing something... wrong with Red, then? Something dangerous?”

Mom’s face hardened, but there was a flicker of unease in her eyes. “It was an old tale in that place. There are real places in this world steeped in shadows, where myths and dark rituals have lingered for generations. Just because it’s a story doesn’t mean it’s not rooted in some truth.”

“But who’s to say they aren’t the remnants of those old rituals? The ones passed down from generations of dark practices?” Nancy murmured, her mind racing with chilling possibilities.

“What I have gathered and told you is reliable, and it’s unfolding right now,” Ben assured them, but his voice trembled.

“Do you think they’re practicing... witchcraft?” Nancy asked, the word slicing through the air like a knife. Every syllable felt heavy with foreboding.

Ben shivered, recalling the unsettling vibe he’d felt outside Sophia’s house. “I don’t know, but it felt like something was watching, waiting. It’s as if the house itself was aware... of us.”

Mom’s gaze darkened as she leaned in closer. “We need to tread carefully. If they’re involved in something sinister,

we might be stepping into a web we cannot escape from. We must confront Red, but we have to be prepared for whatever darkness he might be entwined with.”

Nancy’s heart raced as visions of shadowy figures and whispered incantations flooded her mind. “What if we’re too late? What if he’s already... lost?” The words trembled on her lips as a feeling of dread settled over them like a shroud.

As they stood in the dim light of the room, the air felt thick and charged, every shadow seeming to pulse with an unseen energy. The truth was lurking just out of sight, more sinister than they could have imagined, and they could feel it creeping ever closer. There was no escape from the darkness that loomed ahead.

Ben’s brow furrowed as he considered their options. “I can’t confirm their activities regarding anything sinister. Sophia has two children and has spent most of her life in that house, raising them. How could she possibly engage in something dark when she’s just waiting for Red’s support?”

Nancy’s mind raced, the shadows of doubt swirling around Sophia’s questionable reputation. “Why not investigate her cousin, Linda? She’s always in Red’s ear, acting like a business colleague. If anyone knows the truth about Red’s finances and ties to Sophia, it’s her. She might be the key to uncovering what’s really going on.”

Her mother nodded, her expression grim. “That’s a solid idea. Gathering information about them could help us piece together the truth. But it does raise questions about Red’s infatuation with Sophia. Why does he adore her so fiercely when there’s a qualified, pretty young girl being groomed just for him?”

The air in the room felt electric, thick with tension. The answer could uncover a web of deceit that spiraled far deeper than any of them could have anticipated. Nancy felt the weight of their inquiry pressing down on her, a darkness lurking just out of sight.

“What if Linda knows more than she lets on?” Nancy proposed, her voice low and serious. “What if she’s complicit in whatever Red and Sophia are involved in? We might be digging into something far more dangerous than we realize.”

Her mother's gaze darkened, shadows flickering in her eyes. “We need to be careful. If they’re entangled in something dark, reaching out to Linda could draw us into a perilous game we’re not ready to play.”

Ben shivered, recalling the unsettling energy he felt when near Sophia's home. “If there’s something watchful, something lurking, it might not just be the house itself. There could be forces at play that we can’t fully comprehend.”

As they spoke, an unspoken dread settled over them. The air was thick, and it felt as if the walls themselves were eavesdropping, holding secrets. Visions of hidden agendas and silent, sinister motives swirled in Nancy's mind. "What if it's too late?" she breathed, the words lingering heavily, "What if Red is already lost in this web of shadows?"

The gravity of their situation loomed larger than before, pulling them deeper into a mystery shrouded in uncertainty. They were standing on the precipice of something far darker than they could anticipate, just waiting for the moment to plunge into its depths. The truth lay hidden, cloaked in shadows, and every heartbeat echoed with the fear of what they might discover.

"I will try to check on that, but I can't assure you it will be easy," Ben cautioned, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "It may take some time, and I'll relay any information as I get it."

Mom's eyes narrowed, determination flickering within them. "Time isn't our concern, Ben. What matters is that you can do this. Red might be in real trouble avoiding that woman." Her voice lowered, urgency threading through her words.

“Don’t worry about the compensation,” she continued, leaning in slightly, as if the shadows were listening. “We’ll pay for your services on this job.”

A heavy silence enveloped the room, punctuated only by the distant sound of thunder rumbling outside, mirroring the storm of tension brewing within them. Ben shifted uncomfortably, feeling the weight of their expectations pressing down on him.

“Just remember,” he said, glancing warily at the door as if expecting someone to barge in, “the deeper we dig, the darker it gets. If Red is involved with someone like Sophia, there may be forces at play that we can’t see.” His voice dropped to a whisper, “And those forces might not be pleased with our probing.”

Mom exchanged a quick glance with Nancy, their unspoken fears hanging in the air. “Then we tread carefully,” she replied, her voice steady but laced with an undercurrent of anxiety. “We can’t afford to get caught in their web.”

Ben looked out the window, and the wind howled as if in agreement, sending a chill down his spine. “I’ll do what I can,” he said, though doubt lingered in his eyes. “But we might be stepping into something far more dangerous than any of us anticipated.”

As the storm intensified, so did the feeling of impending danger, weaving a web of suspense around them. What awaited them in the shadows was anyone's guess, but one thing was certain: they were about to uncover truths that could change everything. And perhaps, they were not the only ones searching for answers.

In his free time, Ben found himself shadowing Linda, intent on gathering reliable information about her life. With a sense of urgency gnawing at him, he discovered that she was headed to Buscony for a county visit on her day off. The air crackled with tension as Ben followed her to the train station, his heart pounding in his chest.

As the train screeched to a halt, he caught sight of her sitting alone in a crowded compartment, her gaze wandering out the window. He was desperate for this moment—his chance to get closer, to learn more. He stepped aboard, the hum of voices around him fading into a low murmur as he slipped into a seat just a few paces away from her.

"There she is. Luck is on my side; she got a seat," he muttered to himself, scanning the compartment for any potential threats that might be lurking, his instincts honed and ready.

Moments later, the train checker approached, a stern look on his face. “Ticket, please?” he demanded with a practiced efficiency.

Ben’s heart raced. “Here it is,” he handed over the ticket, but his attention was still anchored on Linda. He needed to appear casual, yet every instinct screamed that he was walking a tightrope.

“Mr. Checker, how long until we reach Buscony?” Ben asked, forcing a nonchalance he didn’t feel.

“More or less one and a half hours from here. Depending on the speed of the train,” the checker replied curtly, before moving on to the next passenger.

“I’ve never been there, that’s why. Thanks!” Ben said, but his mind was far from the polite exchange. He knew that this journey wasn’t just about reaching a destination; it was about the secrets nestled in the shadows around Linda.

As the train lurched forward, Ben’s senses heightened. There was more at stake than simply obtaining information. Shadows flickered across the aisles, ominous in their presence. He studied Linda, noting her uneasy demeanor, a fleeting glance around the compartment as if she sensed something was amiss.

The deeper he inhaled the rush of stale air, the more he felt it—a tension coiling tighter and tighter, echoing the

distant thunder of storm clouds that might be brewing outside.

With every passing minute, he focused on her subtle movements, trying to catch a glimpse of the truths behind her guarded expression, feeling the weight of unseen eyes on him as well. What if she wasn't the only one on the train with a hidden agenda?

The sound of wheels clattering on the tracks intensified, and as the landscape blurred past the window, Ben's thoughts raced. He had to stay ahead—not just of Linda, but of whatever darkness threatened to engulf them both.

Little did he know, the shadows weren't just in his mind. In the back of the compartment, a figure watched, their face obscured, lips curling into a knowing smile. In that moment, Ben understood: this train ride was merely the beginning of a perilous journey into the unknown, where every decision could unravel a web of danger—or worse.

Later, they reached the station at Buscony, a bustling hub teeming with activity. Ben scanned the crowd, his heart racing as he tried to keep Linda in his sights. The throngs of people surged around him, obscuring her figure. Despite his frantic efforts, he felt the distance between them stretching, panic creeping in.

Determined, he rushed to the bus station, weaving through the chaos, his focus unwavering. He spotted the bus that would take them out of this frenetic atmosphere, desperation fueling his every move. As the bus doors opened, he felt a surge of relief only to see Linda slip inside, taking a seat at the rear.

Ben's heart sank for a moment, realizing it would be challenging to board without drawing attention to himself. The bus began to fill with passengers, and he steeled himself, remaining on the edge, his eyes fixed on her. Time felt like it was slipping away, his window of opportunity narrowing with every second.

When the bus finally drew to a stop at the designated area, Ben's resolve solidified. He braced himself for what lay ahead. Linda would be disembarking soon, and he had to seize this chance. He stepped forward, adrenaline surging through him as he prepared to follow her wherever this journey would lead.

What awaited him in the Enchanted Prairie? Ben couldn't shake the sense of foreboding that clung to him, but he knew he had to uncover the truth. With each moment, the stakes grew higher, and he found himself on a perilous quest not just for information about Linda but for the secrets she carried—secrets that could very well change everything.

The place was so rustic, with only a few old, dilapidated houses dotting the landscape, standing in stark contrast to the towering trees and thick shrubs that crowded the pathway. Ben let the bus roll a bit further down the road after Linda stepped off, his instincts tingling. He had no idea that two husky men had also disembarked just moments after her.

As he gathered his bearings, one of the men, with a thick mustache and an imposing figure, spotted Ben and approached him with an almost disarming grin. “Sir, it looks like you’re going somewhere?” His voice was jovial, but there was an edge to it that made Ben’s pulse quicken.

Ben stole a glance back at the bus, feeling the tension coil within him. “Yes. I’m just looking for a large tract of land for my client,” he replied, forcing a casualness he didn’t feel.

“A real estate agent, huh?” the second man said, his tone dripping with curiosity, yet Ben sensed something deeper—a probing interest that felt more menacing than friendly.

“ And it looks like there are lots of ideal lands for conversion in this place?” Ben suggested, trying to steer the conversation in a direction that would afford him a clearer escape route. His mind raced, replaying the image of Linda

just ahead, disappearing into the allure of the Enchanted Prairie.

The men exchanged a knowing glance, and the air thickened with unspoken tension. “Ideal lands, indeed. But you have to be careful around here,” the first man warned, his smile fading. “Not everything is as it seems; some land has, let’s say, certain... complications.”

Ben’s heart pounded in his chest as the words hung in the air. The casual banter he had hoped would offer some reprieve now felt like a trap closing in around him. “Complications? What do you mean?” he asked, attempting to buy time while formulating a plan to distance himself from these two imposing figures.

“Oh, you know, things tend to get a little... rough for those who don’t belong,” the second man replied, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he were sizing Ben up. “Best stay away from those who know the secrets of this land.”

Ben’s instincts screamed that every word dripped with a warning. He took a tentative step back, but the men didn’t move. He felt a surge of urgency. Linda was waiting—if he hesitated, he might not catch up with her. “Thanks for the advice,” he muttered, searching desperately for an opening.

“Careful out there, stranger. The prairie can be unforgiving,” the first man said, a hint of menace creeping into his tone.

With the urgency rising, Ben turned and sprinted away, dodging through the trees, his mind racing with unease. What secrets lay ahead? And what danger had he narrowly avoided? Every instinct told him that in the depths of the Enchanted Prairie, there were more surprises waiting—dark ones that could unravel everything.

However, he lost track of Linda’s path as his attention was caught by the two men, whom Ben did not realize were Linda’s brothers. In the heat of the moment, he offered excuses to avoid following her, hoping to mask his uncertainty.

“I’ll take this route. There might be a pleasant view in that area,” he said, trying to sound confident but feeling the weight of anxiety pressing down on him.

“If you wish, we can lead you to a more viable and ideal location on our way,” the man urged, his tone deceptively friendly.

“C’mon, don’t worry. We’re from this area. We can show you how good this place is,” the other man added, his smile wide but insincere.

Reluctant and increasingly uneasy, Ben felt cornered. He had lost sight of Linda, and a creeping dread settled in as he weighed his options. With no clear path back to her and the feeling of being led astray, he knew he had to follow them—if only to see if there was any chance she was ahead. Yet the underlying sense of danger lingered, reminding him that not everything was as simple or safe as it appeared in the Enchanted Prairie.

They walked for a few tense minutes down the rough, overgrown road, surrounded by towering weeds that blocked the sunlight. A gnawing sense of foreboding grew in Ben's mind as the unkempt surroundings became more ominous, and when they finally pushed through the thickest part of the foliage, two dilapidated houses came into view. They loomed like ghosts beneath the sprawling branches of ancient trees.

"Come, don't worry, this place is safe," one of the men urged, his voice smooth, but it sent a shiver down Ben's spine.

With a heart pounding against his ribs, Ben stepped into the dim interior of one of the houses, the door creaking ominously as it closed behind him. The air was stale, heavy with secrets, and despite the pleasant facade, dread coiled tight in his stomach. He forced a shaky smile. "Your house is

nice, and this place is so refreshing and peaceful,” he said, the words tasting false on his tongue.

“Yes. That’s why we prefer to stay here,” the man replied, but there was an edge to his voice, a hint of something deeper lurking beneath.

“Where are you from?” the second man asked, his eyes glinting with curiosity that felt predatory.

“Belefalva,” Ben replied, mentally calculating his escape routes.

“That’s a distant place from here,” the first man said, his tone too casual, too probing.

“Is this your settlement? Don’t you have families?” Ben pushed cautiously, desperate to steer the conversation away from himself.

“Yes. But our families are not here. We left them in Valcea for our job,” the second man replied, a faint smirk playing on his lips.

“What’s your job?” Ben asked, his curiosity piqued but a nagging hit of alarm pulsing through him.

“We’re freelancers,” the first man said, the word hanging in the air as if it held secrets of its own.

Feeling the walls close in, Ben uttered, “I think I have to go now. Anyway, I’ve seen this place to tell my client. I will

just check in with the Assessor's office of the town's Municipality."

"Just take it easy. Don't worry. Relax and rest for a while," the first man said, handing Ben a glass of water. It glimmered faintly in the dim light, but he hesitated, studying it closely.

A chill washed over him; the friendly demeanor, the wide smiles—they all felt like a deceiving mask hiding sinister intentions. The weight of his uncertainty grew heavier, pushing him toward the exit, but the air in the room thickened, making each breath harder to take. He felt the walls pressing in on him, a looming threat ready to ensnare him in this forsaken place.

Every instinct screamed at him to flee, but where was Linda? As the two men watched him intently, their intentions hidden behind those unnerving smiles, the thrilling rush of danger surged through Ben. He realized he had to act quickly—not just for his safety, but for the very chance of finding Linda again. Time was running out.

When Ben took a sip of water, he glanced through the grimy glass window and spotted the adjacent house. "What's that house for?" he asked, but his heart sank as he saw Linda step out into the fading light.

“That's our mom's house. The woman is our sister,” one of the brothers replied, a strange note in his voice.

Ben's pulse quickened as Linda approached, her smile bright but her eyes scanning the area cautiously. She called out to the two men, who introduced her as their brother. “I didn't know you had a visitor,” Linda said, her tone friendly yet tinged with an underlying tension.

“He was looking for a convertible land for his client along the way. We got him here,” one of the men explained, his words wrapping like a noose around Ben's throat.

“So, you're a real estate man?” Linda asked, her interest piqued. “Where are you from?”

“He's from Belefalva,” one of the brothers answered, a hint of something sinister lurking in his voice.

“That's right, and I've never been here that far,” Ben said, every instinct firing alarms in his mind.

Linda's brow furrowed slightly. “It's where my cousin, Sophia, lives. You should know her; she's popular in most places in Belefalva.”

Ben felt the weight of the moment, realizing the risk of drawing attention to himself. “Belefalva is a vast county. I never heard about her,” he replied, his tone casual but his heart racing.

“Oh, anyway, forget about her,” she said too quickly, waving a hand dismissively that sent a chill skittering down Ben’s spine. “By the way, I’m in the chemical business. I supply certain stores and suppliers there.”

“That sounds like a lucrative business,” he said, trying to match her enthusiasm, but the words felt hollow.

“Come to the house, and I will show you some. You might find it interesting,” she suggested, her smile deepening but lacking warmth, her invitation laced with an unsettling eagerness.

Every nerve in Ben's body screamed at him to refuse, to run, but he felt trapped, caught between a desperate need to reconnect with Linda and the eerie feeling that he was walking deeper into a web of deception.

As the brothers exchanged knowing glances, Ben saw the ornate shadows cast by the dying light flickering in the corners of the dim room, hinting at hidden layers of reality. He felt as if he were standing on the edge of a precipice, where one misstep could send him tumbling into unknown dangers.

“Maybe just for a moment,” Ben said, forcing a smile as he glanced towards the door, his mind racing with plans of escape. The longer he stayed, the closer he felt to losing his chance of finding Linda again, but the captivating façade of

her 'family' was pulling him in, deeper into their dark, twisted world. Time was slipping away, and he had to decide—trust his instincts or risk everything in search of the truth.

Ben felt a creeping anxiety knotting in his stomach as he stood at the entrance of the house. The air was thick with a musty odor that hinted at decay. Shadows seemed to dance along the walls, and an oppressive silence enveloped him, broken only by the occasional creak of the ancient floorboards beneath his feet. Cobwebs clung to the corners like ghostly fingers, and the dust coating every surface had a weight to it, as if time itself had settled here, forgotten and abandoned.

As they ventured inside, the atmosphere turned increasingly heavy. The walls were adorned with peeling wallpaper that whispered tales of the past, while the furniture was draped in dusty sheets, objects frozen in time. Deep within the house, they stumbled upon what appeared to be a century-old laboratory, its air ripe with an unsettling mix of stale chemicals and something more sinister.

Suddenly, from the shadows emerged an old woman, her gaunt frame silhouetted against the dim light. She had wild, unkempt hair that framed a face lined with deep wrinkles, each one a testament to some long-buried secret. Her eyes

sparkled with an unsettling intensity, as if she could see right through Ben, and in her gnarled hands, she clutched a collection of beakers and fragile glass bottles.

"This is where the magic happens," she croaked, her voice rasping like dry leaves skittering across the floor. "Our family has been in this business for generations. We just got here five years ago from Valcea," she continued, her smile revealing teeth that looked too sharp, too eager for secrets best left buried.

Ben's heart raced as she motioned toward the stairs leading down into a darker abyss of the house. An unsettling chill ran down his spine, and he hesitated, the instinct to flee clawing at him. But curiosity—an insidious beast—urged him forward. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was not just a visitor but an intruder in a world thick with shadows and whispers of past regrets.

"Come, look at our collection," she beckoned, her voice laced with a haunting melody that prickled his skin. She led them down the creaky stairs into a sprawling room that felt like a tomb for secrets. Glass containers lined the shelves, their contents swirling with unnatural colors that seemed to pulse in the dim lighting—potions that promised power but whispered of peril.

The air grew colder, the silence stretching into a tension that made Ben's skin crawl. He had entered a realm where the line between reality and nightmare blurred, and the weight of unseen eyes bore down on him. What had he stumbled into? What unspeakable truths lay wrapped in the shadows of this eerie laboratory?

As the old woman began to elaborate on the family's "work," Ben felt the walls close in on him, a cacophony of whispers echoing in his mind, urging him to leave. But there was no turning back now; he was trapped in a web of deception, and every instinct screamed that the only way out lay through the darkness ahead.

"What are these products, anyway?" Ben asked, his voice barely breaking through the oppressive silence that surrounded them. Shadows flickered ominously, and he felt the weight of the old woman's gaze on him, as if she could peer into his very soul.

"There are different uses for these chemical concoctions," she explained, her voice a low rasp that sent a chill down his spine. "Some of these are herbs used for food aroma and appeal, as well as rubbing oils designed to attract customers—especially for those seeking love and companionship." Her smile was unsettling, revealing teeth that glinted mockingly in the dim light.

“Enchanters?” Ben probed, his heart pounding a rhythm of uncertainty.

“Not really,” Linda replied, her eyes sparkling with a strange intensity. “But they do have good, appealing, and beneficial effects for the users.”

“My two brothers handle the prospects,” she added, gesturing vaguely, as if shrouded in smoke and mystery.

Intrigued, Ben pressed further. “I’m interested in the effect of the charming oil. How does this one work?” He pointed hesitantly at a small bottle, its contents swirling like a living entity.

“That’s terrific and effective,” she said, enthusiasm creeping into her voice. “If you want your woman to stick with you for life, you could rub this oil in her hair or on her legs and arms. After a day or two, you’ll see results.” Her smile widened, but something about it felt predatory.

“Really?” Ben asked, taken aback.

“Should you wish to sell these products, you are most welcome,” she coaxed, her tone honeyed yet menacing.

Skepticism gnawed at him. “What if my girl doesn’t prefer to apply this oil? Is there any way to... persuade her without a struggle?” The question hung in the air, weighted with significance.

At this, Linda's demeanor shifted. She leaned closer, her voice lowering conspiratorially. "You must pay a good price for it." With that, she began to lead him deeper into the labyrinth of shadowy shelves, revealing an assortment of glass beakers and ancient tomes.

"What's that?" Ben asked, stunned as a set of intricate tools caught his eye, each more sinister than the last.

"A ritual," she said, her eyes alight with fervor. "It's essential that a ritual is combined with the oils and herbs to program their mind for you. You simply apply the oils after the ritual, and within hours—or perhaps a day—you will see the difference."

Ben's heart raced, a thrilling mixture of dread and curiosity coursing through him. This reality was blurring into a nightmarish fantasy, and yet he felt inexplicably drawn to it. What lay behind the alluring promise of love and loyalty? What unspeakable truths lurked within the shadows of Linda's world?

As she spoke of the rituals, her voice became a hypnotic incantation, each word wrapping around his mind like a vine. The deeper he delved, the more uneasy he felt; he was teetering on the edge of a moral abyss. Could he really manipulate someone's will? The sinister allure of power

tugged at him, but there was a nagging voice in the back of his mind, warning him of the cost.

“Are you willing to take that step?” Linda asked, her voice dripping with a promise of transformation, yet an undercurrent of danger loomed. The air felt charged, and the shadows danced ever closer. No matter where he turned, escape seemed to slip further from his grasp, leaving only an alluring darkness beckoning him forward.

“We can always provide services for others who need us. We have been operating in Valcea for some time now, and it has proven to be successful,” Linda said with an unsettling calmness. “We’ve also concocted unique beverages in small colored bottles that yield remarkable effects when consumed.”

Ben nodded slowly, feeling the weight of her words. “It sounds like this could be a lucrative business venture,” he remarked, trying to mask the unease creeping up his spine.

“Exactly,” she replied, a glimmer of something unsettling dancing in her eyes. “You should consider joining forces with me in this enterprise. Stay in touch.” She placed a business card in his palm, the card slick and cool against his skin.

As he stepped out of the dimly lit house, Ben felt a surge of anxiety threaten to overwhelm him. He tried to bury the fear deep within, putting on a facade of confidence. Yet, as he

turned to retrace his steps through the familiar grassy paths, a gnawing confusion enveloped him. The once-clear trail seemed distorted, twisting in a way that lost all sense of direction.

He walked, his heart pounding in his chest, but the main road remained elusive. Fields stretched endlessly around him, their beauty now tinged with a sense of disorientation. Each step he took felt heavier, as if the ground beneath him was pulling him deeper into a reality he struggled to comprehend. The shadows seemed to lengthen, closing in like the dark secrets he had unearthed, leaving him with an unsettling question: had he willingly stepped into a trap from which there was no turning back?

Ben stumbled through the familiar paths, only to find himself trapped in an endless loop. Each turn led him back to the same spot, the shadows growing longer and more menacing. The eerie stillness of the fields around him weighed heavily on his chest, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something—maybe even someone—was watching him. His heart raced as panic began to claw at his mind.

Just as despair threatened to swallow him whole, the distant rumble of the bus echoed like a lifeline against the oppression of the dusk. Sweat poured down his back as he struggled to lift his feet from the earth that felt as if it were

trying to pull him down into a dark grave of secrets. The low growl of the approaching vehicle offered a flicker of hope, but Ben couldn't shake the icy grip of fear. What if he wasn't meant to leave?

Finally, as he boarded the bus, the world outside blurred past him, an indistinct smear of twilight hues. The chatter of fellow passengers felt alien, their casual words tinged with an unsettling harmony he could no longer understand. He was acutely aware of his surroundings, his senses heightened to the unmistakable feeling that he'd just escaped something sinister.

Arriving at the train station at sunset, he stepped into a different realm. The golden light pierced through the shadows, yet the fear of what he had experienced lingered in his mind like a haunting refrain. His encounter in the fields now morphed into a chilling abduction of logic—witchcraft and alchemy were no longer relics of ancient lore but living truths in the modern world.

As he leaned against the cool metal of the station bench, he grappled with the reality he had stumbled into. Had he truly been enchanted? The thought sent a shiver down his spine. It was a mystery he dared not unravel, lest it tether him to his newfound fears. Just then, he caught a glimpse of a small figure standing in the distance, cloaked in shadow. A

sense of foreboding washed over him. He turned away, choosing to keep the secrets of that day buried deep within, but the question remained: in trying to escape the enchantment, had he unwittingly walked into a far darker magic?

At first, he considered accepting the offer to sell the products, but a deeper truth unsettled him. The allure of becoming an alchemist—one who could manipulate reality and wield power over others—was tantalizing, yet it filled him with dread. He could envision the devastation that such power could unleash, how it could ruin lives and corrode the very fabric of existence.

With that realization, he dismissed the idea entirely. There was no way he would return to those fields, to that place where shadows whispered of ancient, dark magic. The weight of his encounter lingered, a constant reminder of the thin line between curiosity and ruin. He recognized the gravity of the choice before him, understanding that to embrace this path would mean stepping into a realm where morality was but a fleeting concept.

Instead, he resolved to turn his back on the seductive call of alchemy. The thrill of power could not outweigh the responsibility that came with it. He chose to bury the desires within him, hoping to shield himself from the sinister pull of

temptation. In that decision, he committed to a path of restraint, understanding that true strength lay not in the mastery of dark arts but in the courage to walk away from them. The haunting echoes of his experience served as a stark reminder that some doors, once opened, could never be closed again.

Chapter 5

The Controversial Property of Red

Ben sat down with Nancy and her mother in their cozy living room, the dim light casting flickering shadows that seemed to dance around him. He took a deep breath, drawing the courage to share his harrowing experience from Buscony, a place steeped in the whispers of ancient magic.

As he recounted the eerie atmosphere of the dwelling grounds, where alchemists and witches once prowled in search of knowledge and power, a palpable tension filled the room. His voice trembled with the weight of his words, “It was terrifying. I felt their eyes upon me, a mixture of curiosity and malice. The air itself was thick with enchantments, and I could sense something dark lurking just beneath the surface.”

Nancy’s wide eyes reflected her concern. “But why can’t you help us, Ben? We need you!”

He looked at her, the sorrow evident in his gaze. “I’m afraid I can no longer be part of this, Mom, Nancy. The things I witnessed... they haunt me.” His voice dropped to a whisper, “I believe they’ve been performing rituals on Red.”

The room fell silent, the gravity of his revelation sinking in.

“But how?” Nancy pressed, her voice edged with urgency.
“How can we break this spell and protect Red?”

Her mother chimed in, her face etched with worry,
“We’re not even sure if Red is under some kind of
enchantment or if she’s already lost to it.”

Ben's heart sank further at the mention of Linda, Red's
cousin. “Her family... they have ties to that world. They
engage in alchemy. It feels too close, too dangerous.”

“Linda and Sophia are too intimate with the dark arts,”
Nancy asserted, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and
determination. “If Linda is involved, then we have to act
quickly. She might be helping Sophia.”

Ben stood up abruptly, the weight of their conversation
crashing down on him. “I’m sorry, I have to leave. I can't do
this anymore. I want to live for my family, to protect them
from what lies in those shadows,” he confessed, feeling his
pulse quicken with rising dread.

As he turned to exit, he felt their worried gazes on his
back, the echoes of unfulfilled promises lingering in the air.
Each step away felt like a retreat from something darker, a
faint hope that maybe, just maybe, by abandoning this path,
he could save not just himself, but also those he cared for
from the insidious grip of enchantment. The door creaked
open, and with one last glance, he vanished into the night,

leaving behind a cloud of uncertainty and fear that clung to the room like the remnants of a fading spell.

The revelation remained a tightly held secret between Nancy and her mother, but their worries for Red simmered beneath the surface. They observed him closely, noting the subtle changes in his demeanor.

“He’s restless, and sometimes he’s peevish for no apparent reason,” Mom said, her brow furrowed with concern as she watched Red from across the room.

“What do you think? Is he being enchanted by those alchemists?” Nancy asked, her voice edged with anxiety.

“I just don’t know,” her mother replied, her gaze fixed on Red. “But he seems so oddly pacified at times, almost as if he’s lost in another world.”

“How can we be sure he’s not under their spell?” Nancy pressed, her heart racing at the thought.

“Let’s observe him for a while longer. For now, we should give them the benefit of the doubt,” her mother suggested, though doubt twisted in her stomach.

Meanwhile, in a different corner of their tangled lives, Sophia had cornered Red during a fleeting moment of intimacy, the air thick with unspoken tension. She looked at him with a mix of innocence and intrigue.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking something that might make you a bit uneasy,” she said, her voice sweet as honey, weaving a flicker of unease through his thoughts.

“What about?” Red replied, his curiosity piqued, though he felt a sense of foreboding.

“When will you bring us into the comfort of your beautiful house?” Sophia continued, her eyes gleaming with an intensity that was hard to ignore.

Red shifted uncomfortably. “Let me think it over. My brother’s family is there right now. My mom and I decided they should stay in my house while they prepare to build their own,” he explained, trying to keep the conversation light.

“But will you be willing to bring us home when they’re gone?” Sophia pressed, a hint of something deeper lurking behind her question, as though she knew more than she let on.

The moment hung heavy between them, and Red felt a tightening in his chest. He could sense the unspoken implications in her words, the slight edge that suggested a desire for more than just friendship.

As he met her gaze, the shadows in his mind flickered uncomfortably. Was there more to Sophia’s intentions? Did her fascination with his home extend beyond mere curiosity?

A chill ran down his spine, and he suddenly felt trapped, caught between the safety of his family and the dark allure that surrounded Sophia, drawing him closer to a world he wasn't sure he wanted to enter.

In the distance, the whispers of enchantments loomed ever closer, and the line between friendship and enchantment blurred, leaving Red torn between the warmth of familiarity and the chilling pull of the unknown.

“Yes. But not now. I hope you know that my immediate relatives are opposed to this kind of relationship, and they cannot accept such an arrangement,” Red said, his voice steady despite the turbulence of his thoughts.

Sophia leaned closer, a glimmer of mischief lighting up her eyes. “I know. But they can't do anything if you wish and decide for yourself. You're old enough to choose your own path now. You're on your own.”

Red felt a knot tighten in his stomach. “If it happens, our relationship will never be the same again,” he added, the weight of truth hanging heavily in the air.

“So what? We're in our own space, away from their rules. This is about us, not them,” she hissed, her tone a mix of defiance and temptation.

“Let’s forget about it for now. We’ll come to that issue at the right time,” Red suggested, desperation creeping into his voice.

“Until when?” she pressed, her gaze unwavering, piercing through his defenses.

“I’ll let you know,” he replied, feigning confidence but feeling the ground shift beneath him.

Sophia smiled, a knowing smirk playing on her lips. “I have a feeling that time will come sooner than you think,” she chuckled, a hint of something dangerous dancing in her eyes.

As silence settled between them, the air crackled with unspoken possibilities. Red couldn’t shake the sensation of being ensnared in a web of intrigue, caught between what his heart desired and the looming shadows of consequence. Each moment in Sophia's presence drew him closer to a choice that could change everything, a plunge into the unknown that both thrilled and terrified him.

The Mystery Caller

Meanwhile, in Red’s house at Brumville, a sense of unease hung in the air as Sarah and her son enjoyed their online conversation with Amadeus. The cheerful banter about his upcoming homecoming masked the tension that had started to brew in their surroundings.

“It’s been one and a half years now. I’m scheduled for a vacation next week, so get ready for my homecoming,” Amadeus declared, his voice bright and hopeful.

Bob and I are so happy to hear that, Dude. We’re just thrilled to welcome you home,” Sarah replied, her enthusiasm genuine, but a flicker of worry crept into her mind.

“Okay, Dude, relax and keep up the good work,” she added, unaware that shadowy clouds were forming outside their pleasant little bubble.

After the call, while Sarah and her house helper resumed their chores, the phone rang, slicing through the calm like a knife.

“Is this the house of Red?” the voice on the other end inquired, a chill in her tone that sent a shiver down Sarah's spine.

“Yes. Is there anything I can do?” Sarah asked, an unease settling within her.

“Of course, yes. I learned that Red’s house would be sold,” the caller said, her voice dripping with a peculiar blend of curiosity and malice.

“Who told you that? I have no idea what you’re talking about, nor did Red mention anything to us,” Sarah replied,

the urgency in her voice rising as the weight of the conversation sank in.

“By the way, how much is the asking price for the house?” the caller probed, an unsettling edge creeping into her tone.

“I said I have no idea. I will check on Red when he comes back,” Sarah insisted, irritation mixing with a growing sense of dread.

After ending the call, an unsettling disappointment washed over Sarah. Shadows of doubt loomed larger in her mind. She decided she had to go check on Red—there were too many unanswered questions swirling in the air.

“We have no idea about it?” Nancy asked, her face tightening in confusion as she joined Sarah.

“Red didn’t tell us anything about selling his house. If that’s really his decision... why would he even consider it when he doesn’t need to?” Sarah wondered aloud, her voice laced with concern.

“The caller was asking about the price of the house. I just don’t know where she got that information,” Sarah explained, her mind racing with possibilities.

“Don’t worry, Sis. We’ll talk to Red and clarify things with him,” Nancy offered, trying to soothe the rising tension.

“Maybe someone is just stirring the waters or creating an intrigue around him,” their mother suggested, her brow

furrowed as the implications of the call wrapped around them like a dark cloak.

Yet, deep down, Sarah felt something lurking beneath the surface—a chill that warned her something sinister was at play. As she prepared to confront Red, the looming uncertainty hung heavy in the air, a storm gathering on the horizon, threatening to unravel everything they thought they knew.

As the tension in the room thickened, Red's arrival seemed to shift the atmosphere. His brow furrowed in confusion as Sarah recounted the unsettling phone call.

“No. Someone must be playing a trick on you,” he said firmly. “I am not selling the house, nor did I instruct anyone to.” He paused, looking at Sarah with a blend of concern and determination. “Just go home and don't let it get to you. Tell any prank callers to stop.”

“Thank you for clarifying, Red,” Sarah replied, her voice trembling, tears cascading down her cheeks as the weight of the confrontation took its toll.

When Sarah returned home, her mother and Nancy wasted no time addressing the issue with Red.

“Are you absolutely sure you don't know anything about this?” their mother asked, eyeing him critically.

“Yes, Mom. Why would I even consider selling the house when we agreed they would stay there?” Red responded, a touch of frustration creeping into his tone.

“Do you really think Sophia wouldn’t do something to rattle Sarah?” Nancy questioned, her voice laced with suspicion.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense for her to cause trouble,” Red replied, exhaling heavily as he wrestled with their concerns.

“Red, you know how we feel about Sophia. You’ve never introduced her to us as your girlfriend, let alone a potential partner. We’re open to someone decent and qualified, but not her,” their mother warned, her voice a steely edge.

“We suspect she was behind the call,” Nancy interjected, her eyes narrowing.

“I was just helping her kids out. They’ve been close to me for years. She’s simply a friend because her cousin is my client. I won’t let her act out of line, and neither will they. Why would they do something like that?” Red defended himself, growing agitated as he felt the weight of their accusations.

“Red, assure us that you’re telling the truth, or you might as well forget we’re your family,” their mother said, her words a chilling ultimatum.

Fueled by a need for resolution, Red resolved to confront Sophia about the incident. When he found her, his frustration erupted.

“Are you accusing me of something I never did?” Sophia exclaimed, her eyes wide with indignation.

“Who else could it be? This isn’t a coincidence, Sophia. This was a stupid thing to do,” Red shot back, his voice terse with accusation.

“You can’t prove anything, Red. And I would never do that. We talked about it before!” she retorted, her tone shifting from defensive to insinulative, leaving a lingering question in the air—was there an unspoken motivation behind her actions?

As the shadows of doubt loomed larger, Red couldn’t shake the feeling that something darker was emerging, threading through his life like an insidious whisper. The uneasy tension that hung in the air wasn’t merely a consequence of misunderstandings; it felt like the prelude to a much larger storm looming just on the horizon, ready to unravel everything he thought he knew about the people closest to him.

Red felt the surge of anger rising within him, but he fought to contain it, choosing silence over confrontation. He clinched his jaw, allowing the weight of the accusation to hang in the

air between them like an unspoken truth. With a deliberate effort, he turned away from Sophia, leaving her in a cloud of indignation and confusion.

As he walked away, he wrestled with the turmoil that churned inside him. He knew he needed to project a sense of calm, to maintain an appearance that everything was under control. But inside, he felt as if he were fighting a tempest. The pleasant facade he attempted to convey felt increasingly fragile in the face of the brewing storm. Red was aware that the smiles and reassurances masked deeper issues, and he couldn't shake the feeling that the shadows gathering in his life were just the beginning of a much darker reality, threatening to unravel the very fabric of his relationships.

Chapter 6

The Reunion

Amadeus Is Back Home

As Red stepped out into the bustling street, he spotted Ben rushing past, his tie flapping in the wind like a banner of urgency. "Hey, Red! How's it going?" Ben called, glancing over with a bright smile.

"Good, good! Heading to work?" Red replied, matching Ben's pace as they fell into step together. The camaraderie felt familiar, but as they walked, Red couldn't help but notice how Ben's brisk strides seemed to draw him deeper into a conversation he didn't quite anticipate.

"I heard you got a new car!" Ben chirped, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"My car's three years old and hasn't needed a thing," Red said, surprised by the comment.

Ben's expression shifted slightly. "Oh, sorry, I must've misheard. Just someone poking fun, I guess." He smirked, giving Red a playful shove.

"None whatsoever. I haven't even considered getting a new one," Red insisted, a half-smile playing at the edges of his mouth, though he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

“Hey, Red,” Ben said, suddenly serious, pulling back ever so slightly, “this isn’t meddling, but I have to tell you something strange.”

Red’s curiosity perked. “What’s up?”

“The word’s out about you and Sophia—everyone knows. Not just the family, but basically anyone who’s been paying attention,” Ben continued, his tone laced with intrigue.

Red’s heart raced at the mention of Sophia. “Now that they know, I can’t really deny it anymore. Why does it matter?” he asked, trying to sound nonchalant but feeling a tightening in his chest.

Their conversation wove through the thrumming energy of the street as they edged closer to the office, a current connecting them. Ben leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well, let’s just say some people are talking... and it’s not all good. I’d feel better talking more about this face-to-face.”

Red’s brow furrowed, anxiety clawing at him. “I’d be happier to make an appointment with you for further conversation,” he suggested, trying to mask the urgency rising within him.

“Much better! But I’m swamped in the office right now. I’ll definitely get in touch, or swing by to see you soon,” Ben

promised, the weight of their talk lingering in the air like the scent of rain before a storm.

As they parted ways, Red's mind buzzed with unanswered questions and the peculiar excitement that came with uncertainty. The world around him turned vibrant with possibility, but shadowed by a sense of foreboding that suggested a tempest was brewing in the distance.

Red felt a growing curiosity about Ben's unfinished revelations, particularly because he knew they would involve Sophia's reputation and the criticisms that might swirl around it. For him, grappling with these intrigues was no minor concern; he recognized the stakes were high.

After wrapping up his contract with his employer in Tirana, Amadeus was finally home. Although he shared Red's house, he sensed a deep discontent brewing beneath their current comfort—an urgent need for a new plan and endeavor to earn a living was taking shape.

"We've managed to save some money, but it won't be enough to cover the costs of our own house and lot," Amadeus explained, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Was your employer not interested in renewing your contract?" Sarah asked, looking concerned.

"Only gave a vague promise, but nothing concrete for now. The business is struggling," he replied, the weight of uncertainty clear in his voice. "They'll let me know when things improve."

"What do you plan on doing now?" she pressed, her tone serious.

"Well, I need to put in more effort to find a new job here. Bob is going to school soon," he said, hugging his son tightly. The impending responsibilities loomed large in his mind.

"We can still make ends meet. I have a job and some extra income, too," Sarah reassured him, trying to ease the tension.

"Don't worry; we'll keep saving as I search for a new position," Amadeus promised, determination creeping into his voice.

"By the way, I'm planning to visit Mom for a while," he said, his tone shifting slightly. The weight of family obligations lingered in the air, and a

In his parents' house, Amadeus sensed the atmosphere shift the moment he entered the living room. His mother and Nancy were engaged in a hushed, urgent conversation, and he instinctively felt he was stepping into a web of unspoken concerns.

“What about Red?” he interjected, curiosity getting the better of him.

His mother leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “He’s been caught up in an insistent relationship with Sophia. You know, the one with two kids and a murky marriage situation, her husband missing for years. We’ve been at odds over it because he’s been pressured by his friends to consider someone more qualified in town.”

Nancy nodded, her brow knitted with worry. “We’ve even taken it a step further—hired Ben to get to the bottom of Sophia’s background.”

Amadeus felt his heartbeat quicken. “But why? Isn’t Red old enough to handle his own affairs? He knows what’s right and wrong,” he questioned, a mix of concern and frustration tingeing his voice.

“It’s not just that, Amadeus,” Nancy replied, her tone sharp. “There’s more beneath the surface. We’re worried about Sophia’s family background. Remember Linda? Her cousin? The one with those strange rumors swirling around her? People say she was involved in the dark arts of alchemy.”

“What does that even mean?” Amadeus asked, disbelief evident in his tone. “What could alchemy possibly have to do with our brother?”

His mother's eyes darkened, a veil falling over the conversation's lightness. "There's a sinister possibility—they might be trying to entice Red. Encouraging him to bind himself to Sophia's wishes forever, all while plotting to seize his property."

"Why would they do that?" Amadeus asked, his mind racing with images of betrayal and manipulation.

"Ben is piecing it together," Nancy said, a shiver of anticipation in her voice. "Once he finishes his investigation, we'll know just how deep this all goes. But until then, we have to protect Red from whatever trap they might be setting."

The weight of their concern hung heavily in the air, wrapping around Amadeus and squeezing tighter with each passing moment. What shadows lurked in the corners of Red's life, and how far would he go to uncover the truth? A sense of seriousness settled between them.

Their intimate discussion was abruptly interrupted by the sound of a revving engine. The three of them turned toward the open window, and Amadeus caught a glimpse of a familiar car rolling up.

"It's Red," Mom said, her tone shifting to one of relief.

"We can pick this up again once Ben arrives," Nancy added, glancing at the door.

As the door swung open, Red stepped inside. "Hey, Bro! How's everything going?" he greeted with a casual smile.

"Good, really. But honestly, I'm thinking about settling here for good," Amadeus replied, hoping to convey the seriousness of his intent.

Nancy busied herself in the kitchen, preparing snacks and drinks. Red grabbed a glass of water from the counter, his eyes brightening at the prospect of something more refreshing. Amadeus pulled out a chilled bottle of beer, adding chunks of ice for an extra touch.

"Here, take this," he said, handing Red the beer and a glass filled with ice. "I think you'll really enjoy it."

Red accepted it with a nod, though the weariness in his eyes hinted that he sensed the weight of the conversation that had surfaced before his arrival.

"Thanks, man. I could use a cold one after the day I've had," Red said, cracking the bottle open.

"Just relax for a bit," Amadeus encouraged him, sensing the need for camaraderie. "We'll get to everything soon, but let's enjoy this moment first."

The air shifted subtly as they settled into lighter chatter, but a quiet tension lingered, reminding Amadeus of the shadows that still loomed over them.

Mom emerged from her room as the conversation shifted to a more serious tone, sensing the underlying tension among them. "What's going on?" she asked, concern etching her features.

Amadeus glanced at Red, who appeared momentarily caught off guard. "We were just looking through some pictures from Nancy's wedding," he began, trying to lighten the mood, but the gravity of the discussion hung heavily in the air.

"Red mentioned Sophia," Amadeus interjected, trying to be direct. "And the concerns you all have about her."

Mom's expression tightened, and she took a seat nearby. "We just want what's best for you, Red. It's not an easy situation."

"Yeah, but I can't help how I feel about her," Red replied, frustration creeping into his voice. "We get along, and that's what should matter, right?"

Nancy shook her head, crossing her arms. "It's not just about how you feel. You need to consider everything—her character, her priorities. We've seen how she treats you, and that's a concern."

"Everyone has flaws," Red retorted. "None of us are perfect. You don't have to like her, but I do."

Mom interjected, her tone calm but firm. “We’re not trying to dictate your choices, but we care about you and we want to see you happy and safe. There have been red flags, Red.”

Silence settled over the room as the weight of their words lingered. Amadeus felt the tension, understanding both sides of the argument but unsure how to bridge the gap. “Maybe it would help to talk about those concerns more openly,” he suggested, hoping to steer the conversation toward a resolution.

Red leaned back, contemplating, as the atmosphere shifted once more, turning heavier with unspoken worries and unfiltered emotions.

“It’s not that we don’t want you to settle down, but not with someone like her. You need to understand that she doesn’t come from a family that meets the traditional standards of our clan,” Mom stated, her voice steady but firm. “There’s a suitable woman out there who aligns with our values, yet you refuse to even consider her.”

“Mom, it’s not too late for me to choose my path,” Red countered, frustration rising in his tone. “My connection with her family is temporary, a way for me to lend support to those in need. I’m not looking for a future with them.”

“You’re too compassionate for your own good, Bro,” Amadeus chimed in, his expression serious. “But you need to think about your future—don’t lose sight of what really matters.”

“Don’t worry, I have other plans,” Red reassured them, though uncertainty lingered in his voice.

“What plans?” Nancy asked, crossing her arms as she pressed him for more detail.

Before Red could respond, the doorbell echoed through the tension-filled room, breaking the moment. All eyes turned toward the door, a sense of foreboding settling in the air as they waited for the next interruption. The atmosphere shifted, and unspoken worries hung heavily among them, adding to the seriousness of the situation.

They paused for a moment, peering through the glass window.

“It’s Ben,” Nancy said, her brow slightly furrowed.

“C’mon up here, Ben,” Mom called, her tone welcoming but laced with underlying tension.

“Join us, Ben,” Red added, attempting to lighten the mood.

As Ben entered, Nancy handed him a bottle of beer and some food. “Help yourself, Ben.”

“Okay, thanks,” Ben replied, settling into the room's atmosphere.

Mom gestured, “This is our brother Amadeus, who just returned from Tirana. And this is Ben, our family friend,” she introduced.

“Hi, dude, how are you doing?” Ben asked, his casual demeanor contrasting with the earlier tension.

“Great. I saw you at Nancy’s wedding,” Amadeus responded, shifting in his seat.

“He was here, dude. He was downstairs with other friends,” Mom clarified, taking a moment to assess the situation.

“Now that we’re all together, Ben would like to share something with us,” Mom said, her voice steady.

Ben cleared his throat, feeling the weight of their attention. “Very timely, Red. This feels like the right moment since our last chat along the road to your work.”

“Let’s have our open ears,” Amadeus urged, leaning forward.

“I know you won’t just believe me, especially in this day and age, but I’ve uncovered something while looking into Linda,” Ben began, his tone becoming more serious.

“What about Linda?” Red asked, concern creeping into his voice.

“To be frank, Red, there’s been suspicion that your friend Linda might be involved in your affair with Sophia,” Mom interjected, her expression grave.

“Linda is my friend and a long-term client in my business,” Red defended, his irritation evident.

“I understand, but it’s important to recognize the possibility. There may be connections we aren’t seeing. Proceed, Ben,” Nancy urged, now fully attentive.

Ben took a deep breath, the seriousness of the moment sinking in deeply. “I’ve noticed patterns, interactions that don’t align. Conversations overheard, text messages that raised red flags—it all pointed towards something more complicated than it appears.”

The air grew thick with tension as everyone absorbed the implications of his words. The familial bond they shared suddenly felt precarious, wrapped in uncertainty and unease.

"You won't believe me, but listen carefully," Ben began, his voice low and steady, drawing everyone in. "I ventured to Linda's house, accompanied by her two husky-moustached brothers. They led me inside a peculiar old Romanian structure nestled in the heart of Buscony. There, I witnessed a bizarre scene: an array of oils and herbs being mixed right before my eyes. On the other side of the room, she displayed

a captivating enchantment—an undeniable hint of the arcane. I realized then, with a shiver, that she’s an alchemist.

As twilight descended, I found myself lost in the prairie, walking in circles, panic creeping in. The sensation was chilling—a disorienting grip on reality. I was scared,” Ben finished, his eyes darting around the room.

Mom leaned in, her voice firm and urgent. “This only suggests that Linda is tied to your tumultuous relationship with Sophia. The influence of her alchemy might be compelling you into a connection you never wanted. You must understand the danger of being entangled like this.”

“Red, it’s not too late,” she continued, her tone growing more intense. “You can escape this. Go somewhere they can’t find you. Cut ties before you’re ensnared in their web of deception and suffer countless torments.”

Nancy added, her voice laced with concern, “You could be vulnerable to the darkness of their alchemy. It’s wise to distance yourself and seek a life free of this chaos.”

But Red shook his head, defiance in his eyes. “It may not be real. We should give them the benefit of the doubt. I don’t believe Sophia would act that way, and surely Linda wouldn’t hurt me.”

Ben’s gaze sharpened, cutting through Red’s denial. “But what if the unseen forces at play are far more potent than

you realize? What if Linda's intentions are cloaked in charm and ulterior motives? The stakes are higher than you think. Protect yourself—before it's too late."

The air grew heavy with tension, the unsettling truth intertwining with the bonds they shared, casting a shadow of uncertainty over them all.

"Ours is just a warning you may or may not heed. It's for your own good," Mom's words, a chill whisper from the past, echoed in **Amadeus's** mind. He'd barely spared them a thought then, blinded by the dazzling light of his success. His insistent endeavor had paid off; he'd landed a job deep in the glass and steel heart of **Alba's financial district**. A fortress of ambition.

"You are so lucky to have found a job in Alba. It is a nice place to work," **Sarah** said, her smile bright enough to chase away any lingering doubt.

"I am thankful that I got this slot despite the close competition among others who were more qualified than I," Amadeus replied, the gratitude genuine. But underneath it was the tight, electric hum of a secret victory.

Sarah was delighted, her hope a tangible, radiant thing as they continued their pleasantries. "We could now move on to the next phase of our plan. However, we should be more

cost-conscious with our spending,” she cautioned, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur.

“Then I should ask you first what to buy and not to buy,” he teased, reaching for her hand.

“No, it doesn’t mean that way. Buy things that are essential for our daily needs,” she explained, her eyes serious.

A sudden flicker of unease crossed her face. “By the way, did I not tell you before you came home about the prank caller?”

“What about?” Amadeus asked, curiosity tinged with an inexplicable spike of dread.

“There was a woman who called and told me that this house was already for sale and she was asking the price,” she continued, her gaze darting to the window as if expecting to see a 'For Sale' sign materialize on their lawn.

“How did she say that?”

“She told me that someone had told her that this was being sold already.”

A muscle twitched in Amadeus’s jaw. “No. Forget about her. Maybe she was just trying to displease you,” he dismissed, perhaps too quickly. The memory of his mother’s *warning* was suddenly very loud.

“I went to the house that day and asked Mom. She told me it was not true. It was a prank call.” Sarah's explanation didn't sound entirely convinced.

“I asked Bro, and he told me it was never true. I asked him if **Sophia** had something to do with it, but he told me nothing. Forget about it,” Amadeus insisted, the frantic rhythm of his heart contradicting his calm words. Why did the caller know this house? Why this specific, unnerving rumor?

Sarah's eyes, usually so full of uncomplicated hope, were now dark with a sudden, unnerving clarity. “Whether something was being insinuated by the prank caller or not... We have to be prepared for our next move, or we may someday be looking for a temporary shelter.”

The truth, a cold, sharp object, settled between them. “You're right,” Amadeus conceded, the weight of his new job suddenly feeling less like a crown and more like a yoke. “We must have a contingency plan for our future, after all, we would move out in due time when Bro would take this for whatever purpose it would serve him.”

He watched her nod, her expression resolute but guarded. The "prank" had become a catalyst, turning their exciting "next phase" into a desperate, hurried scramble. He knew, with a certainty that iced his veins, that the phone call

wasn't just a random disruption—it was the first audible shot in a silent, escalating conflict, one that threatened to shatter not just their future, but the very foundation they stood on.

Who was that caller, and *what* did they really know about Bro's secret plans for the house?

Chapter 7

Everyone is Leaving & the Plot to Oust Dude's Family

A scream ripped through the quiet night: Mother dies as Dude has an Unusual Night Dream.

Amadeus settled back into his ergonomic chair, the faint scent of old paper and lukewarm coffee a familiar comfort. After eight months, the blur of deadlines and training had finally crystallized. He didn't just understand his work; he owned it. He had a precise, almost intimate knowledge of every client file and procedural step—the work he was handling in the office was now his domain. The change was formalized: he was officially a regular employee, his status cemented not just by a new ID badge, but by the substantial, concrete value of the considerable compensatory benefits now reflecting in his paycheck.

Yet, that stability was brutally short-lived. Barely a month after his promotion, a devastating blow struck: his mother suffered a catastrophic stroke. The emergency demanded immediate action, forcing her onto an operating table for urgent, delicate brain surgery.

Red, the dependable anchor—single, financially secure, and resolute—immediately shouldered the entire,

overwhelming financial burden. However, money could not halt the descent. Despite the surgery, their mother remained bedridden. Subsequent, agonizing operations and relentless streams of medication failed to turn the tide. Eventually, the medical specialists delivered the crushing verdict: there were no viable means left for her recovery. Her condition spiraled irrevocably, culminating in a state of critical, terminal illness.

A Day of Mourning

The day of the funeral was a blur of crushing grief—a tableau of tears and whispered condolences. The house was draped in a suffocating mantle of sorrow, as countless friends and distant relatives flowed through to express their sympathy to the bereaved family.

At the burial rites, the atmosphere was thick with unspoken tension. Sophia and Linda stood somberly at the edge of the freshly turned earth. Yet, Nancy and Amadeus were unnervingly silent, their grief internalized, leaving Red to shoulder the weary task of receiving every handshake and accepting every sympathetic gaze.

Nearby, Ben hovered like a shadow. He kept a significant distance, shunning the immediate group, his isolation a stark avoidance driven by the old, unsettling fear tied to Linda. He remained on the periphery, a figure suspended in a lonely,

isolated area, a quiet observer of a pain he couldn't face, even as his own family buried their mother.

Finally, the harrowing ritual was complete: their Mom was laid to rest, a final, irreversible act. In the days that followed, the house did not just feel gloomy; it was shrouded in a heavy, oppressive stillness. Every room felt hollow, every silence deafening, a constant reminder of the profound absence. Yet, beneath that blanket of sorrow, a desperate, unspoken necessity took hold. Each family member moved through their routines, exhausted and heavy-hearted, quietly, painstakingly trying to salvage a semblance of normalcy and recover from the raw, draining stress and the overwhelming depth of their shared grief.

That fragile return to routine was abruptly broken. Unusual for his always-deep sleeping habits, Amadeus was seized by an extraordinary and profoundly unsettling nightmare.

The next morning, the lingering dread of the dream still clung to him as he recounted the experience to Sarah:

“I had such a bad dream last night,” Amadeus admitted, rubbing the tension from his temples. “My sleep was so shallow, I truly can’t tell if it was just in my head or if it was something actually happening in our surroundings.”

Sarah looked up, concern etched on her face. "What did you do? I wasn't even aware when you woke up."

The Sound of the Gong

"It was okay. I just got a glass of water," Amadeus continued, his voice low with residual unease. "But if I'm not mistaken, what woke me was the sound of a stricken gong—a massive one. The echo of it felt like it went right through my very ears, then I just suddenly opened my eyes. I lay there, trying to sense the surroundings, but the deep night was perfectly still."

Sarah's tone was sharp with concern. "What do you think that means? I've never heard you have a nightmare like this, ever."

Amadeus paused, the gravity of his next words measured. "Yes, dreams are unavoidable; they come to anybody. But this wasn't just random static. I believe dreams have interpretations—and I need to figure out what this one is trying to tell me."

The Comfort of Interpretation

"Yes, I believe in dreams and their meanings, too," Sarah confirmed, trying to offer a practical comfort. "There absolutely must be a message in every dream. But right now? I think you just need to rest and relax. It's probably the stress from the job that's playing tricks on you."

"I don't disagree, and I'm not taking it badly," Amadeus countered, though his tone betrayed his fixation. "It's just... this is the first time I've ever had a dream like that." He forced a sigh. "Anyway, you're right. It's my day off, so I will relax. I've had way too much workload in the past few days, that's why."

Sarah gave him a gentle push. "Now stop being so serious. Tomorrow is another day."

"Before I can truly **rest and forget** this dream, I need to go to the house and talk to **Nancy**," Amadeus decided, his focus immediately shifting. "I heard a rumor—is it true that she and **Van are planning to migrate to England**? Did you know anything about that?"

Sarah looked surprised, shaking her head. "**No**. That's completely new to me; I just heard it from you."

"Let me check on that right now." Amadeus stood up, already moving.

"Do you want **us to go with you**?" she offered.

"No, not at all. Thanks," he assured her, gathering his jacket.

"I'll be back soon." He quickly straightened his clothes, the lingering anxiety of the dream propelling his haste, and **proceeded toward the old house.**

Arrival at the House

The familiar, weathered gate of the family home groaned slightly as he simply pushed it open. He stepped into the yard, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and old memories. He took the wooden stairs **slowly**, each creak echoing in the heavy silence of the afternoon.

As he reached the landing, **Nancy** emerged from the living room, her expression guarded. "Dude, **what's up?**" she asked, using his nickname.

Amadeus kept his tone direct. "**Is Van there?**"

"He went to the market," she replied, her gaze steady.

"I heard that you and Van are planning to **migrate to England**," Amadeus pressed, his voice taut with the need for confirmation. "**Is that true?**" He glanced toward the drive. "I saw **Red's car** down there. Is he here now?"

"Yes, he's **in his room, sleeping**," she confirmed, then met Amadeus's gaze squarely. "And **yes**. Van has been processing our embassy papers for a month now. This is all finalized—it's tied to his job **relocation in Edinburgh**, where the company's main office is located."

"Are you planning to stay there **for good?**" Amadeus asked, the weight of the question settling between them.

"**Indefinite**. The job is there," she stated simply.

"Does **Red know** about this?"

"Yes. We just talked about it right before he went to rest," Nancy continued, her expression hardening with the unfortunate finality of the situation. "**He said he cannot do anything but live alone here.**"

"So, **when are you leaving?**" Amadeus asked, the news settling heavily in the silence.

"Perhaps **next week**," Nancy replied, the finality of it sharp. "We're just waiting for the final **visa approval**, which should arrive any day now."

"I'll try to **check on Red** in his room. See if we can talk."

Amadeus stood, and with a mounting sense of concern for his brother, walked slowly toward the back of the house. The door to Red's room was **halfway ajar**, casting a narrow shaft of light across the hall. He peered cautiously inside and froze. Red was lying on the bed, seemingly asleep, but his hand was pressed firmly, almost desperately, against his **forehead**. Amadeus silently withdrew, stepping back toward the receiving room.

"Why?" Nancy asked, immediately picking up on his hesitation.

Amadeus's voice was low, laced with alarm. "He looked like he was sleeping, but he was **clutching his forehead**. Why? **Is he alright?**"

Nancy's eyes widened with sudden worry. "No. Why is he holding his head? A headache? **Let me check.**"

Nancy's body language instantly mirrored Amadeus's tension; she took a nervous glance toward the partially open door and stepped back, her voice tight with immediate alarm. "**Yes, what's wrong with him?**"

"I don't know," Amadeus replied, his own earlier worries about his dream now completely overshadowed by his brother's state. "I've **never seen him like that before.** He's not truly at rest—there's **something wrong.**"

The mystery hanging in the air felt heavy and unresolved. Amadeus, realizing he was intruding on a private moment of potential distress, decided on an abrupt departure. "**Ask him later.** I need to go now. Just promise to tell me the **minute you are leaving.**"

"Okay," Nancy agreed, her eyes still drawn toward Red's door. "I'll **try to find out what's wrong** with Red the second he wakes up. You're right—there must be **something seriously bothering him.**"

Amadeus returned home and recounted the entire unsettling incident with Red to Sarah. A week later, just as anticipated, Nancy called Amadeus to confirm their imminent departure. Together, Amadeus and Sarah visited

the house one last time, hoping to finally understand the source of Red's apparent distress and to say their farewells.

"He told me it was nothing," Nancy reported with a shrug, frustration in her voice. "He insisted he just wasn't feeling well that day, but that he's okay now." The evasiveness did nothing to quell Amadeus's quiet unease.

The Farewell

Putting aside his worry, Amadeus offered a genuine smile. "Alright. Well, Nancy and Van, good luck with your next home in England."

Nancy embraced Sarah warmly. "You two take care. I'll be sure to send a greeting card and keep in touch as soon as we settle in."

"We'll definitely stay in touch online," Sarah confirmed, ensuring the connection wouldn't be lost.

Amadeus turned to Van, a playful hint in his voice. "Van, don't forget to message me. There might be some good things over there—opportunities, maybe," he insinuated.

Van grinned, accepting the challenge. "I will do that, Dude. Just wait for my message."

With that, the goodbyes were finalized, the sense of finality heavy in the air as Nancy and Van walked away toward their new, distant lives.

Moments before Nancy and Van were ready to depart, Red arrived. He strode toward the group, his presence immediately shifting the atmosphere.

"I'll go with you," Red announced, gesturing to Nancy and Van. "Ride with me to the terminal, and I'll drive you back home, Amadeus. It's been a long time since my last visit to your house."

"That would be better, Bro, especially to check on the place," Amadeus agreed, sensing a subtle secondary motive behind the offer.

"I just need to see if the fruit trees are bearing fruit yet," Red implied, giving a slight, knowing smile.

"Yes, they're bearing small fruits now," Sarah confirmed brightly.

At Amadeus and Sarah's house, Red parked his car in the garage and immediately went to the garden. He was in his element there, inspecting the trees and various plants he had lovingly planted a long time ago, leaving their care mostly to Sarah and her house helper.

After a few minutes, Amadeus approached him, his voice dropping to a tone of genuine concern. "Are you feeling well now, Red? I understand you had a headache the other day."

"No. It was just a mild headache caused by stress," Red replied dismissively, his focus still on the thriving green leaves.

Amadeus paused, accepting the excuse for the moment, and shifted the subject. "Are you happy with your job now? I believe this is for good now."

"Yes. I am happy with my job now," Amadeus affirmed.

"Good. Keep it up," Red encouraged, before the inevitable question came.

"How about you, Bro? With Nancy leaving abroad... what now?"

Red straightened up, running a rough hand over a leaf. "Well, I will just live alone in the house," he stated, the finality in his voice cold.

"Any plans of taking a partner?" Amadeus continued, pushing gently, remembering their mother's last wish.

Red offered a weary, almost hollow smile. "Perhaps, not at all at my age. I'm old enough that I wouldn't want to nurture a baby. I am happy with this kind of life."

The Unspoken Past

Amadeus pressed further, digging into history. "There are plenty of young girls around there. I understand one had been... groomed with you?"

Red's face tightened. "Forget about them. A young one might fool me in the future. It would only add to my stress when I am old," he countered, the logic reasonable but the tone defensive.

"You've got a point," Amadeus conceded, then delivered the final, pointed query. "But your future with Sophia is uncertain."

Red's eyes flashed with a final, non-negotiable resolve. "Forget about her. I know what I am doing," he said, shutting down the conversation with an almost physical force.

Disrupted Silence

Their intimate, heavy conversation—laden with worry, stubborn defense, and the ghosts of past relationships—was abruptly and thankfully disrupted when Sarah stepped onto the porch. Her cheerful, domestic voice cut through the tension as she invited the two brothers in for lunch, ending the tense confrontation just as the air became too thick to breathe.

The silence following Nancy and Van's departure for England was absolute; they left no trace, no backward glance, never setting foot in the family house again. Meanwhile, life consumed Amadeus, who was now fully submerged in the endless demands of the office, just as Sarah was consumed by her own increasingly demanding job. The sheer weight of their routines and responsibilities created a wide, dangerous blind spot.

Beyond their knowledge, and shielded by their distraction, Red was insistent.

He had dismissed his brother's advice and their mother's dying wish, yet secretly, relentlessly, Red was pursuing his relationship with Sophia, driven by a deep, possibly desperate, resolve that would soon shatter the quiet rhythm of their separate lives.

This time, Sophia's ambition was cold, calculated, and focused: she planned to systematically drive Amadeus and his family off Red's property entirely, clearing the way for her own exclusive influence.

Leaning forward, her voice low and sharp with intent, Sophia directed the plan to her accomplice. "Devise something valid—something undeniable—that will force them out of his house."

Linda shifted, her gaze evasive as she considered the task. "I will try to execute something different," she replied, her words carefully chosen. "A strategy that may help you push him, gradually, but decisively, out of the house." The vagueness of her promise hinted at a method more insidious than direct confrontation.

Chapter 8

Bizarre Occurrences Begin to Manifest

Dude's Nightmarish Experience

The night was deceptively beautiful. A massive, bright full moon hung like a cold eye in the sky, flooding the windows and illuminating the surrounding areas in a stark, silver light. Amadeus found sleep impossible; he was left alone, sitting restless on the sofa, nursing the quiet unease of the last few days, long after Sarah and his son had finally surrendered to the dark and gone to bed.

He finally stretched and yawned, the quiet snap of his jaw loud in the stillness, before turning off the TV. The silence that rushed in was absolute.

Minutes later, as he drifted toward the edge of deep sleep, his subconscious mind was brutally assaulted. A strange, piercing phenomenon began: the sound of a howling wolf started to reverberate, not from outside, but seemingly from within his very ears, an intimate, terrifying sound that throbbed in his skull.

The hideous howl continued, relentless and primal. Frozen in the darkness, a sliver of terrifying logic cut through the shock: he could hear it. His auditory senses were working perfectly normally. Slowly, with a dreadful certainty, he

forced his eyes open, bracing himself for the terror the night had just delivered.

He initially rationalized the sound, desperately clinging to the thought that the howling was just somewhere around the house. But the sound was too real, too alive, and it propelled him to action. He shot to his feet and rushed to the window, throwing it open to scan the grounds.

The night outside was a devastating contradiction: the tranquility of the surroundings was not secretive; the lawn and street remained perfectly still, yet the howl continued to resonate.

Then, the final, terrifying disruption occurred: all of a sudden, a torrent of harassed bats—a black, fluttering chaos—erupted from the roof directly above where he was standing. The frantic, leathery mass tore into the moonlight, instantly transforming the eerie silence into a moment of pure, heart-stopping terror.

Amadeus was frozen, completely stunned by the sudden, terrifying chaos above him. He knew the house intimately: there had never been bats around the roof before. This night was deeply, chillingly unusual.

Shaken to his core, he retreated from the window and stumbled into the kitchen for a glass of water, the fear still

making his hands tremble. The noise had disturbed Sarah, who now appeared, her face creased with worry.

"Why? What's wrong?" she whispered, her voice tight.

"I heard a howling wolf," Amadeus affirmed, the memory still fresh and terrifying. "A deep, resonating sound of howling that was right here. And then, I saw a bunch of bats—a huge swarm—flying away from the roof, just outside the window."

Sarah grabbed his arm, trying to ground him. "It was just a bad dream, honey. You're stressed. Take some more water."

He pulled away, his eyes wide with a certainty that chilled her. "But what could that be? This is the second time I've had a nightmare that didn't feel like a dream at all. It feels too real."

"Don't think about it!" Sarah insisted, her voice strained with a desperate need for normalcy. "It was maybe a coincidence. Look, your mind is just stressed and uneasy—you're either working too much or you've got problems in the office, right?"

"None. In fact, there are no problems," Amadeus countered, the sheer terror making his logic razor-sharp. He spoke, not of work, but of escape. "We're going on an outing Saturday morning. It's a company trip—employees only."

God, how I wish you could just get along with us." The outing was not a reward, but a desperate flight from the horror.

Sarah looked at his wide, sleepless eyes, her own fear finally bubbling up. "It's okay. Just take it easy," she whispered, her voice a thin thread against the silence. "Just sleep now and forget your bad dream." Her advice sounded hollow, a fragile shield against something she couldn't see, but he knew was horribly real and waiting.

Hot Summer Sea Tragedy

Despite the bright, carefree title, there was a solemn undertone to the season. The company had organized a specialized **team** responsible for planning and executing mandatory **outdoor outings and vacations**. The intention was to mandate enthusiasm: every employee was expected to be **excited and outgoing** to properly enjoy the season's mandated fun.

On Friday, the casual reminders began to feel less like invitations and more like marching orders.

"Hey, Dude, make sure you **don't absent yourself** on Saturday morning. We're finally going on that **outing**," an office colleague stated, the cheer in his voice sounding slightly forced.

"Sure, where are we headed?" **Amadeus** replied, forcing a lightness he didn't feel.

"Somewhere out there," the colleague vaguely answered, a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "**Near the beach.**" The destination, meant to be relaxing, hung in the air with a sense of inescapable obligation.

The Snail Island Crossing

"So, do we go boating?" Amadeus asked, trying to gauge the level of risk involved.

"Yes. We'll be crossing to Snail Island, which is right there in the middle of the seas," his colleague replied, pointing vaguely into the distance.

A different officemate piped up with a more direct concern. "Can you swim?"

"Yes, I can," Amadeus quickly assured them, injecting a bit of personal history. "I practically grew up near the rivers. By the way, how many of us are going in total?"

"Something like eighteen people. It seems mostly the girls are coming," came the casual reply.

Amadeus's brow furrowed, his earlier anxieties returning. "What type of sea craft are we going to use for that many people?" he pressed.

"A big wooden boat," an officemate explained, gesturing the shape. "It has those two wooden braces—or something like long bamboos—on both sides to support the main hull."

"Why not take a bigger, more modern motorboat?" Amadeus questioned, preferring stability over tradition.

"That's exactly what it is," the officemate clarified, a touch of impatience in their voice. "It's a motorboat, but with those outrigger supports. It's actually large enough to accommodate all of us. I think it's the largest and most reliable of all the available boats the beach resort can provide."

A momentary wave of relief passed over Amadeus. "That's much better. Alright then. Keep the ball rolling."

Saturday morning arrived with a misleading sense of brightness. Amadeus was ready precisely on time, dressed in an ensemble that contrasted sharply with the serious atmosphere: white shorts, a yellow collar shirt, and white walking shoes. His preparation was meticulous; he secured his backpack and settled a cap firmly on his head, the picture of mandated enthusiasm.

He turned to his wife. "I will proceed to the office now, that's where our meeting point is. I expect tonight is the latest I'll be home."

"Enjoy your outing," Sarah replied, the phrase sounding less like a wish and more like a necessary formality.

The Journey

Upon arriving at the office, the scene was one of contained impatience: he found his colleagues already waiting near the bus, the vehicle humming, ready for departure. They quickly boarded, and soon, the group was underway, heading to the ominously titled White Sand Beach Resort. The journey itself was a long, slow transition from their urban routine to the distant coast, taking a grinding three hours to finally reach the destination. Each mile traveled seemed to distance Amadeus further from the safety of his home and closer to the Hot Summer Sea Tragedy that awaited.

The sight of enjoyment was everywhere; the deep blue sea, shimmering under the summer sun, captivated both local tourists and seasoned vacationers. Amidst the lively scene, the majestic and imposing view of the so-called Snail Island (previously mentioned as Snail Island, let's keep the name consistent for now, assuming "Snake Island" was a momentary slip or a local variation) dominated the horizon, catching everyone's attention with its irresistible beauty.

"That is exactly where we are heading—that fascinating and imposing beautiful island right there in the middle of the seas," an office colleague announced, pointing toward the distant green mass with palpable excitement.

A different colleague, already fueled by the promise of escape, could barely contain his enthusiasm. "Then, what are we waiting for? Let's get into the boat now!" he exclaimed, urging the group toward the watercraft and the unknown journey ahead.

The skies were relentlessly clear, and the intense heat of the sun was a physical pressure, forcing everyone on the wooden boat to don some form of head covering—hats, towels, or caps—to shield themselves from the blinding glare.

Despite the punishing heat, the mood was aggressively cheerful. A small group of girls began to hum and sing a light melody, while several of the men responded by strumming their guitars, the sound thin and bright over the lap of the water. Amidst this forced revelry, Amadeus remained subtly detached. He was observant, his eyes calmly tracking the frantic energy of the scene: the other boaters slicing through the blue, the blur of the water skiers as they cut arcs across the sea. He was enjoying the view, yes, but with an underlying quiet watchfulness, a silent passenger in a beautiful, dangerous moment.

Unnoticeably—a terrifying failure of perception—a dense, low-slung cluster of dark clouds was being forcefully blown towards their path. This phenomenon was an eerie anomaly,

rushing across the sky in stark contradiction to the relentless clear skies and the ferocious, unchanging heat of the sun.

They were almost halfway to the island when the light began to change. The casual singing was silenced instantly, choked off as every single person on the boat, as if pulled by an invisible string, simultaneously gazed in stunned silence at the approaching storm.

"Hey, look up! It looks like a storm is coming!" Amadeus finally exclaimed, the obvious statement laced with disbelief.

A colleague offered a hollow reassurance. "Don't you worry, it will come to pass."

But the atmosphere had already shattered. "I just caught the first cold drop of rain on my skin," a different guy murmured, his voice tight.

"Yes, look at the hard rain," a lady colleague said, pointing. "It's beginning to drop fast!"

The final warning was infused with panic. "Everybody get ready! The hard rain is coming straight toward us," another lady called out, the cheer of the morning annihilated by the strange, unnatural speed of the tempest.

Amadeus remained perfectly silent, his gaze locked on the approaching weather system—a black, impenetrable mass being driven relentlessly by an unseen, powerful wind. In a terrifying instant, their entire area was engulfed; the sky

above vanished under a suffocating dark cloud, and the wind began to shriek a high-pitched, terrifying whistle.

The storm hit with savage intensity. It was raging so strongly that it immediately churned the sea into massive, violent waves that began to toss freezing water directly into the motorboat.

Then came the mechanical failure: the engine's previously speedy and snarling motor coughed, sputtered, and abruptly halted, the grinding noise of propulsion replaced by the terrifying sound of silence. The ferocious wind now had total control, creating big, monstrous waves that violently shook the large boat.

A wave of collective, primal terror swept through the craft. Every person was shocked and panicky, yet the sheer, immediate magnitude of the danger left the shaken group unnaturally silent—a terrifying quiet before disaster.

"Take something! Anything! To spill out the water, or else, we will sink!" Amadeus finally bellowed, his voice slicing through the panicked silence with the desperate urgency of a man facing imminent doom.

"Yes, I'll use my hat!" a man yelled back, his voice strained by fear and the wind, the desperate, meager nature of the tool highlighting their utter helplessness.

"C'mon! Spill the water out! The waves are getting higher!" another guy screamed, his words barely audible over the roar of the storm and the terrifying slosh of the water filling the hull.

Driven by pure survival instinct, every single person became a panicked, working machine, frantically using anything they could—hats, shoes, cupped hands—to bail the freezing sea out of the boat. The water kept pouring in, a relentless, icy deluge due to the hard rain and the huge, sickeningly high waves that threatened to capsize them with every heave.

In the midst of this chaotic, thrashing fight for life, an unnatural silence prevailed among them all; there was no screaming, only the sound of water and wind. They clung to the very brink of disaster until, with agonizing slowness, the storm gradually passed away.

A Chilling Calm

Then, as suddenly as it began, the suffocating black cloud broke. The terrifying darkness vanished, the clouds dispersed and fled across the sky, and the face of the bright, blinding sun became visible again. The sudden return to

calm and light was chilling, a stark, silent reminder of how close they had just come to being swallowed by the deep.

The immediate danger of the storm had passed. The frantic waves of water began to subside, and the violent shaking of the boat slowly stopped, replaced by a sickening, gentle rocking. The terror, however, was far from over: the motorboat remained utterly inoperative. They were adrift, frustratingly close—only about five minutes away from the shore of the island.

They floated motionlessly, holding their breath and waiting for the machinist to restart the engine, but the attempts were futile. The entire group remained eerily silent and observant; though the surroundings were now pacified and bathed in the bright, returning sun, a profound tension held them captive.

The Shocking Whirlpool

Then, in their astonishment, the sea delivered a new, surreal horror. Right out of the calm, placid water, a huge, dark, and perfectly formed circle of a whirlpool began to appear, silent at first, then growing rapidly, a devastating vortex opening right beneath them.

The horror was instantaneous: the dark, spiraling **eye of the whirlpool exactly struck the belly of the**

motorboat. With a sickening, dizzying lurch, the craft was caught, and the large boat **swayed violently around** its center.

A chorus of desperate **clamors and shrieks for help** erupted, instantly swallowed by the roar of the vortex as everyone was **violently cast out of the boat.** It happened in a flash: the heavy boat, impossibly, turned over like a toy, becoming a great, silent, **upside-down turtle.**

The impact threw the passengers in different, terrifying directions. Some found themselves shockingly **suspended at the tips of the wooden bamboo braces,** dangling precariously over the churning water. Others were lucky enough to grab hold of the jagged **edge of the boat,** frantically clinging to the hull, fighting the irresistible pull to haul themselves onto the cold, wet safety of the upturned belly. The ocean had ceased to be a playground; it had become a living, hungry maw.

The Intrepid Fight for Air

Amadeus found himself locked in a desperate, hellish battle. He struggled violently, attempting to secure a hold on the tip of the bamboo brace—a fickle, churning lifeline that violently pitched up and down, relentlessly tossed by the monstrous waves. A brutal moment followed when he was struck hard on the head by the apex of the brace; as he

instinctively ducked his head into the churning water to escape the blow, he was instantly enveloped, the sea seizing him.

His iron will took over. With a surge of raw, fundamental strength, he clung again to the tip of the brace. As a massive, violent wave struck the edge of the overturned boat, the entire hull swayed and rocketed upwards, and the brace, true to its design, drove him up with it. That frantic, split-second lift was his only salvation, enabling him to gasp and catch the vital air to breathe.

Amadeus was locked in a terrifying paradox: he desperately needed to reach the relative safety of the boat's upturned belly, yet he found it impossible to release his grip. He couldn't risk freeing both his arms from the violently moving brace, which was continually swinging along with the massive waves. The calculation was immediate and deadly: releasing his hold meant almost certain death—he would lose his grip entirely, be struck by the flailing brace, and be instantly drowned by the powerful undertow of the whirlpool.

A Symphony of Despair

What followed was a protracted, agonizing nightmare: he was tossed up and down like a rag doll while the massive

boat danced wildly with the waves. Adding to the physical horror was the auditory torment: he could clearly hear the groaning and shrieking of his colleagues, their cries reduced to pleas for sheer mercy to be saved first and to be helped to the hull.

Amidst this raw display of panic, a few courageous and physically strong men—driven either by altruism or a desperate need to act—began the impossible task of trying to rescue the weak, those who were unable to swim or simply too paralyzed by fear to reach the belly of the overturned craft. The shocking realization was that survival was now a matter of brute strength and savage chance.

In the desperate scrum for the overturned boat, Amadeus was left behind. He was frighteningly alone, farther out than anyone else, isolated by the distance and the violence of the waves. Nobody could reach him—and in the chaos, nobody was even looking.

With chilling lucidity, he realized the ultimate, tragic truth: there was no way he could get to the belly of the boat. The relentless, violent waves kept tossing him away with brutal force, each surge a near-fatal choke.

Still in his right senses, even as disaster swirled around him, he made a terrible, solitary calculation: the only path left was to swim for the seashore, which lay a daunting five

hundred meters away. He had to do it. It was his final, solitary idea to survive—a desperate, terrifying gamble for his life, a choice where the chances of surviving were a cold, devastating fifty-fifty.

As he began his desperate, solitary swim away from the doomed boat, Amadeus couldn't escape the horrifying soundtrack of the disaster. Even over the turbulent water, he could still hear the desperate groaning and crying voices of his colleagues—a chilling symphony of defeat.

They were frantically waving their hands, a desperate, collective attempt to catch the attention of the few visible boatmen and water skiers still roaming the area, oblivious to the catastrophe.

"Help! Help!" they continued to cry, their shouts thin and heartbreaking against the immensity of the sea. Amadeus, now a world away, was forced to leave those cries behind, swimming toward his own slim hope of survival while the voices of the drowning faded into the tragic distance.

Just as hope began to fade, several boatmen, who appeared to be coast guard personnel, were observed patrolling the distressed area. Seeing the chaos, they mobilized, and the struggling survivors were finally rescued from the churning sea and dragged to the seashore.

Amadeus, driven by sheer intrepidity, had successfully completed his solitary, grueling swim. He reached the sand but was so profoundly exhausted that his body revolted. Having swallowed too much water, a choking sensation gripped his chest, forcing him into a desperate fit of vomiting to clear his lungs and catch the vital oxygen he needed to breathe well. His individual survival was a brutal act of bravery.

The Cost of Survival

On the seashore, the rescued were immediately given first aid. The scene was chaotic and heartbreaking. Amadeus witnessed a lady—a colleague—being resuscitated by the determined rescue team. Despite the fierce, repeated efforts to save her, she ultimately gave way, the tragedy of the sea claiming its victim.

Soon after, medics arrived swiftly by motorboat and began the grim but necessary work of triage. They gathered all the survivors and transported them to the nearest hospital for comprehensive first aid and critical treatment, marking the end of the disaster and the beginning of the long road to physical and emotional recovery.

Amadeus lay in the hospital, not just recovering from physical exhaustion, but wrestling with the profound

misfortune that had violently crossed his path. He gave deep, agonizing thought to the entire catastrophic event, his mind unable to reconcile the sudden, bizarre confluence of the unnatural storm and the sudden whirlpool.

He could never believe it was happening—the entire experience felt utterly surreal. Yet, he was firmly gripped by confusion about the unusual, terrifying encounter. It remained a cold, baffling enigma, unlike anything he had ever faced in his lifetime.

Beside his bed, Sarah was utterly dismayed by the trauma he endured, but profoundly and tearfully thankful that he survived, her relief a simple, human counterpoint to the terrifying, inexplicable mystery that now haunted her husband.

A palpable grief hung over the next few days. Amadeus and all the office personnel, battered and sobered, attended the wake of the only casualty in the tragic sea incident. It was a mournful ceremony that cemented the sheer, devastating reality of their near-death experience.

From that day forward, they silently agreed: the date of the disaster would forever be a haunting mark in their lives.

Yet, amid the shared trauma, a deeper intrigue began to form. As Amadeus gradually confided his bizarre, unexplained premonitions and the almost supernatural

strangeness of the storm and the whirlpool, his office colleagues became utterly interested and fascinated by his unsettling revelations, realizing that the tragedy might contain a chilling secret beyond mere chance.

Chapter 9

Searching the Causes and Origins of Phenomenal Occurrences

psychic Tests as the Medium

During a quiet, shared moment of their free time, one of Amadeus's female colleagues—a woman known to be a professed visionary and a dedicated fanatic in phenomenal occurrences—took control. Her expression was solemn as she laid out a precise arrangement: ten small glasses placed carefully on top of a table.

Amidst the hushed conversations of the office, one of Amadeus's female colleagues—a figure known less for her spreadsheets and more for her deep conviction as a professed visionary and a fanatic of the paranormal—decided to intervene. The matter, to her, was no longer coincidence; it was a dark mystery.

With a solemn gravity, she took command of a clear workspace and arranged a strange apparatus: ten identical small glasses, which she carefully laid out upon the tabletop.

This was the preparation for what she termed spiritual trances—a bizarre, ancient-seeming ritual intended to

determine a genuinely shocking possibility: whether Amadeus was truly being haunted or enchanted by unseen, enigmatic elements following the tragedy. The entire atmosphere in the room shifted instantly, becoming heavy with the expectation of the bizarre and the unknown, as Amadeus's rational world prepared to collide with her mystical

Around eight individuals participated in the grim session, forced into a ritual silence as they closed their eyes to begin a solemn litany of prayers. The air was thick with expectation, every sound muted as they attempted their spiritual intercession.

Then, the calm was violently annihilated. A sudden, brutal blow of wind—impossible indoors—struck the room, forcing the window pane shudderingly wide.

But the wind was only the prelude. In a display that defied all laws of physics and shattered their composure, the ten small glasses arranged on the table began to instantly billow thick, suffocating smoke, and then blew out simultaneously with a shocking, sharp sound.

Everyone was instantly astounded and terrified. The display was so immediate, so final, that they didn't pause to think; they scampered and ran out of the room in pure, panicked flight. The office—a place of routine and logic—had

been violently violated by an unknown force. Since that day, the group was irrevocably broken from their curiosity, and they never again attempted any spiritual activity or intercessory prayers inside the cursed silence of the office.

The series of bizarre events that had begun to plague Amadeus became the central, devastating enigma of his life. He was consumed by a desperate confusion, unable to grasp a deep understanding of the occurring phenomena—a riddle that urgently demanded an answer.

Despite all his difficult, exhaustive efforts to resolve the mystery for himself—efforts that included consulting several reputable psychics in town—he could not find a single, satisfying explanation. The questions remained an unbearable pressure, an unanswered riddle at the back of his mind. And yet, without any reason or resolution, the relentless series of unfortunate and inexplicable events persisted along his way.

Amadeus, deeply shaken, felt he had no choice but to move on. Red was genuinely stunned by the bizarre events his brother was experiencing, yet—for reasons he couldn't articulate—he couldn't bring himself to blame anyone. Amadeus, however, despite the relentless wave of negative encounters, remained intrinsically strong and courageous,

ultimately resolving to fight to the end and finish the tale this strange life had started.

A moment of weakness betrayed him. "I don't want to suffer anymore. I absolutely do not want to encounter such bizarre occurrences at all," Amadeus cried out, the strain evident in his voice.

"Don't be depressed," Sarah urged, her voice a warm anchor. "Everything will come to pass. Have faith in God and yourself."

She pressed the point, her certainty firm. "Every man has his own trials in life to overcome. Be strong in any given trial you face."

"You're right, but there must be an end to this agony," he moaned, the weariness settling deep in his bones.

"Exactly, and that is what you have to find out," Sarah countered, giving him a direct challenge. "How to resolve your problem. Seek to find the solution."

She gave him one last, powerful piece of advice. "You must be strong in the Lord. Don't give up."

Amadeus took a deep, steadying breath. "Perhaps, you're right. I will try to be strong and seek the remedy to end this riddle."

Amadeus was done with denial. His mind, battered but unbowed, finally processed the devastating truth: the bizarre

encounters—the psychic attacks, the death-defying tragedy, the unsettling dreams—were not random coincidences to be ignored, but a **hard, inexplicable reality**.

He learned, through sheer necessity, to face the terrifying new **scenario that he was determined to repel**. His previous efforts to understand had failed; now, his very **thoughts began to realize that his dilemma was a reality to handle**, not a mystery to solve. He accepted the grim, new terms of his existence and prepared to engage the unseen enemy head-on.

The Call from the Void

One afternoon, during a deceptively sunny day off, Amadeus, Sarah, and their son were walking a familiar route toward the national road. As they happened to pass by an old, defunct beer garden—a place already steeped in neglect—it happened.

Amadeus instantly froze. He heard a chilling, unmistakable sound: an enchanting voice echoing, calling his name. It was a terrifying sound—deep, resonant, and unsettlingly close, as if it were coming from a vast, unseen cave.

“Amadeus! Amadeus! Amadeus, come over here!”

His heart hammered against his ribs. "Huh, what was that?" he gasped, grabbing Sarah's arm. "Did you hear that? The loud, chilling voice was calling me!" he demanded, his eyes wide with fear and certainty.

Sarah, her face paling, nervously scanned the quiet road. "No, I didn't," she replied, her voice trembling. "I can't hear any voice calling you."

The terror doubled: the threat was real, it was direct, and Amadeus was the only one who could hear the haunting summons.

"C'mon, let's go back home," Sarah insisted, her voice tight with fear as she pulled on his arm. "Something is terribly wrong. Don't proceed down this road."

"Yes. It's real," Amadeus agreed, his composure shaken but his steps already retreating. "Let's go back home to be safe. That... that felt like a powerful omen."

As they hurried away, the full weight of the incident settled upon him. Based on the entire narrative—the psychic rituals, the anomalous storm, the boat disaster, and now this invisible, chilling summons—the dark and terrifying thought of witchcraft slammed into his mind, no longer a possibility, but a chilling suspicion that suddenly explained the series of unfortunate events he was experiencing.

This dialogue is the crucial shift where Amadeus names his suspect, setting up the main conflict. To make it intriguing and suspicious, we'll focus on his weary certainty and Sarah's attempt to dismiss the chilling accusation.

The Alchemist's Shadow

Amadeus let out a deep, defeated sigh, his eyes dark with sudden certainty. "There must be an implied message as to why they are doing these things to me. I now believe Linda, with her strange knowledge, being an alchemist, is directly responsible for what I've been experiencing."

"You are not so sure, Dude," Sarah countered, her voice laced with nervous skepticism. "How could you possibly prove that? You can hardly attribute those terrifying events to her works."

Amadeus's gaze turned cold, focusing on a wider conspiracy. "Then who do you think would do these things to me? They want us to abandon this house so it's clear for Sophia's own benefit."

Sarah, desperate to cling to rational explanation, tried to pull him back from the brink of accusation. "No. Forget about alchemy. Just keep praying. Events and trials in life just come along the way, and we must be prepared to solve them. Everyone has their own struggles; it just so happens

that you are being tested to become stronger and more mature."

"I am quite sure," Amadeus insisted, the weariness replaced by an unnerving conviction. "They absolutely have something to do with these strange events. They are actively doing something evil to me."

Every evening became an anxious, solitary patrol for Amadeus. He felt an overwhelming duty to secure the premises, meticulously locking the gates, windows, and every possible point of ingress and egress against not just common thieves, but the unseen intruders that seemed to be wandering the village.

His nervousness drove him to desperate, almost paranoid acts: he took the heavy chain from his mountain bike and secured the front wheel tightly around the pole at the main gate. Before he could rest, he would sneak into the window for one final, tense check, his heart pounding as he strained his eyes to see if the roof was being hovered by devil bats again.

Later, he would finally lie in bed, collapsing into a light, momentary catnap. But the fragile peace never lasted. After only a few anxious moments, his slumber would be suddenly and violently disturbed by another wave of bad dreams,

confirming that the threat outside had burrowed deep inside his mind.

"Why? What's wrong again?" Sarah asked, sitting up in bed, her voice laced with exhaustion and dread.

"I heard a great sound of a smashing door—it was directly inside my deep ears, just moments ago," he moaned, rubbing his temples as if to ward off the memory.

Sarah sighed, forcing herself to get up to fetch him a glass of water, a small act of normalcy against the bizarre terror.

"What could that be? Are you absolutely sure of what you heard?" she pressed, needing to cling to logic.

"Very sure," he insisted, his eyes wide in the dark. "I heard a large wooden oak door heavily slam—it's what violently woke me up."

This is the final escalation of the attacks, moving from psychological assaults (dreams, sounds) to physical, inexplicable intrusions on reality. To be thrillingly scary, we will focus on the chilling atmosphere and the unsettling impossibility of the chain's movement.

Vigil Until Dawn

Sarah was silent, the powerlessness of logic against this escalating terror leaving her with nothing to offer but comfort. She could only hug Amadeus tightly. They abandoned the futile attempt to sleep, opting instead to lean

against the headboard, wide-eyed and terrified, choosing to be intensely vigilant and simply let the time elapse until daybreak.

The Impossible Shift

As the first gray light touched the sky, Amadeus went outside to inspect the property, the exhaustion of the night heavy on him. He walked the grounds, checking the security measures he had so meticulously put in place. His casual inspection instantly evaporated when his attention was violently caught by the chain he had tied to his mountain bike.

"Sarah! Sarah, come here!" he called out, the sound strained with sheer astonishment and horror.

Sarah, already unnerved, rushed to the gate, her heart pounding. "Why? What is it?" she whispered.

Amadeus pointed, his hand trembling, at the bike. "Look at the chain I tied right here, around the front wheel." He looked at her, his eyes wide and reluctant to accept the impossibility. "It's now tied around the rear wheel."

The terror was profound: the chain had not been undone; it had somehow been moved by a hand—or a force—that had infiltrated their deepest security and rearranged reality to send a terrifying, silent message.

"I meticulously tied the front wheel around this pole last night," Amadeus reiterated, his voice shaking with disbelief as he stared at the impossibly shifted chain. "And now it has been transferred to the rear wheel?"

"Really?" Sarah breathed, the single word conveying her stunned fear. "What do we do now?"

Amadeus was overcome by a wave of intense anxiety, becoming instantly more restless. He pressed his hand against his forehead, the feeling of confusion now mixed with a heavy dread. "It's getting worse now. I am completely confused about these weird occurrences plaguing me," he sighed.

His impulse was practical, driven by kinship. "I will go to the house and ask Red and Ben for help," he declared, his mind racing to the known. "We cannot just take these things lightly; we need to take immediate and serious consideration, otherwise, the next move will be more appalling."

Sarah, however, had a different, more spiritual solution to counter the evil she now believed was at work. "No. Let's seek the help of Churchmen instead," she suggested urgently. "Let's see what action they could take about these strange, unholy things."

Spiritual Consultations Sought

Heeding Sarah's desperate advice, they immediately called a Church Pastor and urgently recounted the entire chronicle of enigmatic events surrounding Amadeus—from the boat tragedy and the terrifying dreams to the impossible movement of the bike chain.

The Pastor listened with mounting solemnity, confirming their deepest fears. "I don't think your issue is just an ordinary spiritual matter," the Pastor stated gravely. "The chain, as you described it, is a classic example of the manifestation of evil work."

Amadeus leaned forward, curiosity mixed with cold dread. "Do you think this could be the work of an ordinary person—someone doing black magic, or some sort of what they call alchemy and witchcraft?" he asked, finally voicing the horrifying suspicion that had been haunting him.

"Alchemy? I've honestly never heard of that term in the context of spiritual affliction," the Pastor admitted, a wrinkle forming on his brow. "My knowledge only covers the conventional evil works: things like divination, sorcery, and standard witchcraft."

Amadeus leaned forward, his fear sharpening into focused explanation. "Alchemy," he clarified, his voice quiet but intense, "is what I believe it is—a specific, insidious form

of witchcraft. It is distinguished by the use of different chemicals, specialized oils, and various herbs that are applied or administered to the person who is the subject of their evil work." He paused, his gaze meeting the Pastor's, a chilling implication hanging in the air: someone is actively poisoning me with magic.

"While I have not heard the term alchemy, I strongly believe that something malevolent has truly befallen you," the Pastor conceded, his expression grave but resolute. "But understand this: I still believe implicitly in the power of prayers to repel all evil works."

His counsel was firm and direct. "You must be consistently prayerful and strong in the Lord. The next time these uncanny manifestations occur, you must cast them out immediately in the Name of Jesus. I assure you, if you are resolute and unwavering in your faith, these afflictions will eventually disappear."

"But how do you find yourself right now? I hope you don't mind me asking, and I certainly don't mean to offend you," the Pastor inquired gently, his eyes searching Amadeus's face for signs of mental strain.

"I am perfectly okay, Pastor," Amadeus affirmed, his voice steady. "My mind is clear and my body feels strong. I cannot say I am insane, because an insane person is out of

their right mind. But I know what is going on around me. I know exactly what's happening now. I certainly wouldn't have been capable of reasoning with you and summoning your help if I wasn't in my right senses."

"Good," the Pastor said, a measure of relief in his voice. "Then you must remain vigilant and utilize the power of prayer, just as I instructed you."

A Question of Action

With the spiritual counsel complete, Sarah shifted the conversation back to the immediate, earthly threat. "Pastor, given that this appears to be the work of specific individuals," she asked, her voice hardening with resolve, "shall we take steps against those persons whom we suspect are responsible for this persecution?"

The Pastor immediately shut down the idea of direct confrontation. "No. Not at the moment," he stated firmly, shaking his head. "Taking any legal steps against a specific person is only viable once you have proven and have the available, undeniable evidence. Without that, any accusation will simply be subject to a police jurisdiction that requires hard facts."

Amadeus, still driven by his conviction, offered a potential lead. "But we have a reliable man—a contact—who

might be able to pinpoint the exact place of the alchemist and her precise location."

"Then let the police handle that information discreetly," the Pastor advised, offering a safer alternative. "Why not let the police do it for you? Explain your suspicion about the subject to the authorities, and let them surreptitiously investigate the place."

"I think your suggestion is far better," Sarah quickly agreed, relieved by the idea of involving an official, physical authority rather than continuing to fight the unseen alone.

Driven by the latest, chilling evidence, Amadeus and Sarah went directly to the old house to confront Red and share their overwhelming fears about the persistent, escalating supernatural attacks. They meticulously revealed everything that had been happening to Amadeus—from the boat disaster and the invisible summons to the impossible movement of the bike chain.

Red listened, his face hardening in disbelief. "That's incredible," he finally declared, shaking his head. "I won't believe Sophia or Linda would do that to you."

Amadeus erupted, his voice strained with urgency and frustration. "Still, you don't believe in me and everything Ben has testified to? Shall I just wait for the time that I, and every one of us, gets harmed physically before you act?" He threw

up his hands in disbelief. "I firmly believe that they have everything to do with these events because they are evildoers who want our lives destroyed!"

The desperate confrontation hung heavy in the air, Amadeus's terror and conviction clashing violently with Red's stubborn, frustrating denial.

Amadeus pressed the point, his voice ragged with alarm. **"And not only will I be in trouble, but you will be next, Red. Believe me, they're after your wealth, Bro!"**

Red remained maddeningly calm, the stillness a stark contrast to Amadeus's frantic urgency. **"So, what exactly do you want me to do now?"**

"I need to act, but cautiously," Amadeus replied, outlining his desperate plan. **"I will ask Ben to lead me to the place and affirm the information—find definitive proof—before I take this to the police."**

Red's response was a chilling bucket of cold reality. **"But your action may be drastic and reckless.** They might be involved in alchemy, but nobody—*absolutely nobody*—has proven that the bizarre events are the direct result of their works. **Nobody in this modern world would believe that witchcraft and alchemy still exist today, and I promise you, the police won't believe it either."**

Amadeus stood firm, his voice resolute despite his anxiety. "We can give them the benefit of the doubt only up until the point where we have available material proofs taken or observed at the crime scene itself," he declared, countering Red's skepticism with his own firm logic.

"If we can affirm their evil works through tangible evidence—a chemical, a herb, or a ritual item—then it would suffice to affirm their guilt." He leaned in, his gaze intense. "You should know that evil still exists, Red. And we need to gather the evidence to prove that this isn't chance; it's an attack."

Amadeus pushed his final, desperate argument, his voice ringing with conviction. "We couldn't possibly say that sorcery or witchcraft is an outmoded activity just because we don't see it every day. It could be inherited by the relatives of those who embraced it in the past, existing just under the surface."

Red simply shook his head, retreating from the confrontation. "It's completely up to you to do so," he said, washing his hands of the decision.

Ignoring his brother's apathy, Amadeus announced his plan to gain undeniable proof. "To finally make it clear and affirm that witchcraft still exists today and is targeting me, I will actively seek out a person who truly knows something about it—someone who can explain what I'm facing."

Red's surprise was genuine, mixing alarm with disbelief. "What? Will you actually spend your time doing that? You will get crazy chasing ghosts, Amadeus!"

Amadeus's voice was firm, driven by an absolute conviction born of terror and necessity. "Why not? There are well-known places in this country where sorcery and witchcraft do exist or are still being practiced, and there are certainly persons who know exactly where these practitioners could be found."

The force of Amadeus's resolve finally broke Red's resistance. He let out a sigh of weary acceptance. "I can't hold you back from your decision any longer," Red conceded. "If it's truly for the good and the only path to the resolution of this horrifying problem, then go for it. We—Sarah, your son, and I—we're here to back you."

Driven by a chilling conviction, Amadeus strongly believed that witchcraft was not a myth of the past but a dangerous reality still thriving in modern times. This belief spurred him into action.

He began a desperate, meticulous search for books on the subject—poring through local libraries and visiting specialized shops. His mind, however, was not seeking scholarly texts; it was focused on a terrifying personal question: he suspected that the horrors he had experienced were directly linked to the dark history of old towns and forgotten places—areas known for generations to harbor persons actively practicing witchcraft and sorcery. Amadeus was no longer trying to solve a puzzle; he was searching for the historical lineage of the evil that had invaded his life.

Amadeus's relentless search into the occult paid unexpected dividends. He was able to amass a wealth of specialized knowledge, learning and discovering crucial information pertaining to the history of specific places, the practices of certain persons, and the dark subject of sorcery itself. His mind was now equipped with a professional-grade understanding of the very evil he feared.

However, the knowledge came with a chilling frustration: despite this deep immersion into the arcane, he remained utterly unsuccessful in finding the precise, personal answers to his own devastating problems. He had charted the history of the darkness, but the current attack on his life remained an intensely personal, unsolved enigma.

Chapter 10

Witch Hunting Begins As Omen Occurs

The House of Old Couples

Driven by a desperate, intrepid resolve, Amadeus enlisted Ben to accompany him on a search for answers that felt more like a futile mission than a logical endeavor. This time, he was ready to gamble his safety for the truth, setting out on a journey free of the constraints of logic.

heir search led them deep into the heart of a rural settlement called Beatiz. After hours of determined trekking, they finally located their strange destination: a lone, old Romanian house tucked behind a massive, century-old tree. The site exuded an eerie decay; the bark of the huge, ancient tree had peeled off its dark, decaying body like flayed skin.

Stepping into this silent, unsettling clearing, they found the residents: an old man and an old woman, likely a couple or close relatives, whose presence only added to the house's air of profound, ancient mystery. This was the place where Amadeus hoped to confront the darkness that had haunted his life.

The old man who greeted them was a figure of ancient, unsettling decay. He was remarkably skinny, his face a landscape of deep wrinkles and murky shadows. Though he

stood impressively at more or less six feet, his shoulders were wide, suggesting a past strength now entirely spent, and his face was terrifyingly sunken and wrinkled. His attire—black trousers and a dark suit—was heavily crinkled, as if he'd slept in them for a decade. He could barely walk; only the slow, deliberate aid of a thick wooden cane allowed him to remain upright.

Beside him stood the woman, his unsettling counterpart. Her gray hair was spread in a wild corona around her head, and she was draped entirely in a dark garb. Her eyes were unnervingly dark, yet her body, though wrinkled, appeared less fragile than his; she required no cane and seemed unnaturally younger than she should have been. Compared to the man, she stood noticeably less than six feet tall.

It was the man who finally broke the silence with a single, flimsy-slurred word that held an unexpected, chilling command: "Come on in." The sound was a rusty invitation that tightened the cold knot of fear in Amadeus's stomach.

The eerie invitation was accepted. The old couple silently accompanied Amadeus and Ben inside their home. The interior was a disturbing museum of decay, confirming the house's profound age. They were met by the sight of an old, dusty, antiquated house—every one of the personal

belongings within looked like a genuine product of the forgotten past, untouched by modern time.

The ceiling above was a horrifying ecosystem: it was heavily inhabited by spiders spinning their thick, intricate webs, which draped down like eerie, tangled curtains. In the dark corners, other species of insects were settled, woven tightly into the cobwebs that coated everything in sight.

The old man, without preamble or small talk, settled the score with a chilling proclamation. "I already discerned that you had a serious problem the moment you came to this door," he said, confirming his strange awareness before Amadeus could even speak.

Amadeus wasted no time, diving straight into his desperate theory. His voice, though hushed, carried the weight of his conviction. "I learned that this very town, Beatiz, was once upon a time a settlement of sorcerers and alchemists," he stated, glancing around the dark, cobweb-laden room.

"I believe that the present generation of those witches has somehow left behind a legacy—physical remnants or knowledge—that may now serve as the clues we need to destroy the works of the same kind," Amadeus explained, his question hanging in the air: Did the old man know where those clues were hidden?

Amadeus's voice was strained but serious, driven by desperation. "I have been deeply troubled by the magical powers of an alchemist—a dark influence that keeps relentlessly haunting me at all times of the day." He pleaded, his eyes locked on the ancient man. "I want to know the antidote to escape from this curse or its deadly influence on my life. Can you help me find the answer to this?"

The old man's response was a dry, chilling whisper, confirming the house's dark history. "This place had long been abandoned by the fascinating stories of the past," he rasped, the words echoing in the dusty room, "but those events, my boy, are simply buried and forgotten now."

He did not deny the darkness. "I cannot deny the fact that trouble follows when anyone comes here for help." He paused, his gaze unnervingly steady. "But if you truly want us to give you some aid to destroy its influence on you, I will try to dig for some old tomes in my casket. However," he concluded, a terrifying doubt in his whisper, "I am not at all sure if they still exist."

The old man led Amadeus and Ben to a hollowed part of the house, a shadowed alcove where air seemed to hang still and cold. There, they saw it: an old wooden casket, painted a dark, almost funereal purple color, now entirely masked by thick, undisturbed dust.

Inside, there were two or three mounds of what looked like manuscripts—ancient, fragile books. The old man carefully lifted one, and when Amadeus peered at the brittle and torn pages, he saw chilling illustrations about witchcraft, complete with dark drawings of rituals and practices.

Crucially, these terrifying images were lettered with Latin captions. The sheer obscurity of the contents confirmed the old couple's claim to dark knowledge, as only they possessed the ability to decipher the forbidden texts.

The old man, after meticulously tracing the ancient, brittle script of the forbidden book, looked up with an expression of intense gravity.

"There is no further information relating to an antidote against alchemy written in this tome," he announced, his voice a low, chilling whisper.

"But the text does offer a summary of the only definitive method of neutralizing such power: you can only destroy them when you set them on fire." He paused, letting the severity of the advice sink in. "You must reduce all the tools and paraphernalia associated with witchcraft and alchemy—every herb, oil, and charm—into ashes."

The chilling instruction to destroy the tools of witchcraft by fire galvanized Amadeus and Ben into immediate action.

They were in a desperate haste to leave the place, racing against the sun that was already beginning to hide its light behind the setting clouds. Their fear was palpable; the air of the rural town, charged with spooky myths and dark history, now felt acutely threatening. As they scrambled away, their fear was instantly justified: when they risked a final glance back, the two old figures had vanished from their sight, leaving only the dark, silent house.

The Reckless Proposition

Amadeus, fueled by a terrifying new clarity, was resolute. "I have no choice now," he told Ben, his voice low but firm. "You must take me to the very place where Linda lives."

Ben was stunned by the proposal, recognizing the extreme danger. "But, Dude, the place is so dangerous for you to go," he protested. "The fact that it is inherently scary and life-threatening would require you to be courageous, yes, but this is a reckless gamble of your life." He looked around at the growing dusk. "It would be suicidal for us to go without any backing or support."

"Yes, I know it's not that easy," Amadeus conceded, acknowledging the extreme risk. "But I will find no peace of mind and remain disturbed to death without doing anything if this haunting keeps up. I won't wait for that time to come; otherwise, I will do this myself." He paused, his gaze

hardening with resolve. "Just come with me. Let me plan for this."

The Unwavering Denial

Meanwhile, driven by his gnawing concerns and persistent doubts, Red finally succumbed to the pressure and confronted Sophia about the unusual occurrences in Amadeus's life.

Sophia reacted with immediate, furious dismay. She belligerently denied the allegations, her voice sharp with outrage. She fiercely defended her cousin, Linda, dismissing the terrifying accusations as anomalous and completely baseless, refusing to entertain the possibility that they were capable of such evil.

"There you are again, Red. How many times do I have to tell you that we don't know anything about it?" Sophia snapped, her frustration boiling over. "Why should Linda do that when she isn't capable of such things?"

"I was just telling you that Linda has to be involved in some kind of tricks or whatever because she is an alleged alchemist," Red insisted, repeating the core accusation.

Sophia went instantly rigid, her eyes widening in genuine, frightening shock. She leaned in, demanding, "Who told you that? How did you know?" she asked vehemently, the sudden loss of her composure revealing the terror of the truth.

"I won't tell you where I found out," Red declared, holding the secret close. "But it was discovered that Linda is an alchemist—a witch."

Sophia, desperately trying to regain control, suggested, "Why don't you ask her directly so she can answer frankly and honestly?"

Red immediately refused, revealing his conflicted loyalty. "I can't do that because I respect her. I am still giving her the benefit of the doubt, because I have not yet proven it or seen it with my own eyes. However, I am telling this to you now to compel you to show concern for my brother, Amadeus, if indeed she is the one doing it."

Sophia stared intensely at Red, her eyes searching for any sign of deception, but Red remained stubbornly silent, the apparent burden of the situation etched onto his face. Unable to endure her scrutiny, he finally turned and walked away.

The conversation had shattered Red's skepticism. He was now genuinely disturbed by the series of unfortunate events that had befallen his brother, Amadeus. The core of his dread lay in the realization that Amadeus had nothing to do with Linda's or Sophia's personal affairs—meaning the attacks were not retaliation for a past wrong, but a cold, deliberate

act of malice. He could hardly believe this terrifying reality was consuming his brother's life.

On one late occasion, Red was driving along the highway, the road dark and empty as he made his way home. Then, the impossible happened: an old woman materialized from absolutely nowhere, instantly crossing the road directly into his path.

Red reacted on instinct, his body flooded with shock. He slammed on the brakes, desperately trying to reduce his speed, but it was too late. He braced for the impact, yet in the fraction of a second before the collision, the old woman suddenly vanished.

To avoid hitting the now-empty space, Red violently maneuvered and diverted the wheels away from the road, sending his vehicle plunging into the gutter. The terrifying swerve ended in a crushing slam, his car slamming violently against the ground. The brutal silence following the impact was quickly shattered. Motorists passing by immediately noticed the wreckage, drawing their attention to the appalling accident. They furiously called for help, and an ambulance was hurried to the scene.

The site was a mess of metal and earth. After a tense wait, a wrecker arrived and, with straining cables, finally pulled the mangled car out of the slope.

Inside, Red was immobile, trapped by the impact and the shock. He was carefully extricated and rushed to the nearest hospital for urgent first aid and medical treatment. Despite the terrifying violence of the crash—the direct result of the vanishing woman—he was eventually, and miraculously, pronounced safe and in good condition. The danger, however, was no longer just Amadeus's problem; it had violently and undeniably come for Red.

When Amadeus learned of the highway crash, he immediately rushed to the hospital, his heart sinking as he saw his brother. The news from the medical specialist was grave: Red would have to undergo surgery for multiple broken ribs and required immediate, intensive treatment, as doctors feared one or two vital organs could have been critically damaged.

Amadeus was now completely stressed and grief-stricken. The horrific realization struck him with crushing force: the "jinx"—the inexplicable, malignant force that had plagued him—had now violently turned on Red.

He urgently called Nancy to convey the tragic news of Red's sudden predicament. Nancy was distraught, her voice breaking with grief over Red's accident.

"I can't go home, for now," Nancy said over the phone, the distance a terrible, isolating obstacle. "I need to settle things with my employer, but I will come as soon as possible." Her delay left Amadeus alone in his terror, facing the escalating tragedy entirely by himself.

"Okay, I got it," Amadeus replied simply, the immediate demands of reality forcing him to suppress his own terror.

Amadeus instantly took a leave of absence to oversee Red's critical condition. Though Red was conscious and could respond, the medical team confirmed he had to undergo a major operation. Before the procedure, Red was forced to withdraw the necessary amount from his savings, which he reluctantly entrusted to Amadeus.

Red endured a series of brutal operations, but his condition remained unstable even after he was finally sent home. He was weak and required the continuous care of a hired nurse while recuperating.

The necessity was clear and devastating: Amadeus's urgent, life-saving pursuit against the alchemist was completely obstructed for the meantime, sidelined by the immediate, tragic reality of Red's medical predicament. The

witch had struck her second target, and Amadeus was forced to prioritize survival over combat.

Red finally returned home for a lengthy recuperation, but the immediate crisis only morphed into a crippling financial one. His medical expenditures began to climb to a critical level. Amadeus checked on Red's savings, discovering the funds were now dangerously low. To cover the soaring daily expenses, Red was forced to dispose of other assets, selling off his property to generate the needed capital.

Faced with this escalating disaster, Amadeus extended his vacation from work, now more determined than ever to complete his original, life-saving objectives. He urgently instructed Ben to inform the police about the subject—providing the authorities with the vague, chilling information they had about Linda.

With that done, Ben returned to Amadeus, ready to fulfill his promise. The two men prepared to finally tread the dangerous path to Linda's habitat.

The Campaign Against the Hypnotic Culprits Begins

Armed with a pistol, a symbol of their desperate resolve, Amadeus and Ben began their daring and intrepid escapade toward the alchemist's known zone of operation. They trekked through dense, noisy bushes and grassy areas, moving with a necessary caution that felt impossibly slow.

Finally, they managed to sneak into the thick cover of grown-leafy vines. Peering through the foliage, the site was revealed: an antiquated, creepy structure exuding malevolence. The surprise was immediate, ratcheting up the suspense: Linda and her two brothers were actively packing up, preparing to abandon the house.

"Where do you think they are going?" Amadeus whispered, his heart pounding.

"I just don't know. Perhaps they're simply on their way to some business," Ben replied, trying to maintain a logical cover for the unsettling activity.

Amadeus, however, noticed a critical omission. "Hey, you told me there was an old woman, her mother. Right?"

"Yes. Perhaps she is just somewhere nearby," Ben warned, his voice tight. "Let's be extremely careful. She's an old, Maintaining a close watch on Linda and the two men, Amadeus and Ben ducked low and then walked briskly across the open ground, emerging from the tall weeds of the prairie toward the house.

They moved with practiced caution, sneaking toward the entrance. Amadeus carefully peeked into the slit of the door. The atmosphere was thick with a terrifying calm, a tranquility that was abruptly broken by the whistle of a hard

wind blowing across the abandoned structure. This wind created a constant, restrained, creepy sound that emanated from a loose-screwed window pane—a chilling soundtrack to their serious, desperate infiltration, clever witch for sure." The target was shifting, and the true danger might still be lurking unseen.

The silence of the house was its own threat. "Nobody home, but where is the old woman?" Ben whispered, his eyes nervously sweeping the shadows.

"Could she be in the adjacent house?" Amadeus asked, his voice barely a breath.

"Perhaps she is there. Let's be watchful," Ben affirmed.

Ben took the lead, guiding them to the exact location where he distinctly remembered Linda flaunting their alchemic paraphernalia. The sight that greeted Amadeus was genuinely intriguing and horrifying. He was stunned by the eerie place that displayed an array of weird, ritualistic stuff—items he had previously only seen in ancient books. This was his first look at black magic tools in real life.

Following Ben, they descended down the dark basement level of the structure. They walked through shadowy passages and tunnels that fed into what looked like partitioned, hidden rooms.

"This is amazing," Amadeus sighed, the danger temporarily forgotten in the face of this strange discovery. "I've never seen such a kind of tools of witchcraft." They were now deep inside the alchemist's secretive domain.

The room was a treasury of dark knowledge, but Ben was immediately gripped by fear. "Let's be careful not to touch any of this stuff, Amadeus, or the evil influence might befall us," he whispered, his eyes scanning the tables piled high with instruments.

Amadeus, however, seemed unable to resist the lure. His attention was instantly fixed on a collection of ancient-looking tomes piled atop a central table. Ignoring Ben's warning, he reached out, driven by curiosity, and began to touch one book after another, slowly turning the brittle, worn pages. He became utterly engrossed by the bizarre illustrations and cryptic content, a strange combination of fascination and dread washing over him.

Then, his blood ran cold. He found something chillingly personal nestled within the dark pages of one book. "Oh, these are my pictures... pictures of Nancy's wedding!" he exclaimed, the realization hitting him like a physical blow.

Ben was utterly startled, his face instantly turning pale. The sight confirmed the impossible. "Why?" he whispered, fear and relief mingling in his voice. "So, it's real. There is no

doubt now that they are doing something evil to you—they have your personal life bound up in their craft."

"These pictures were given by Brother Red to Sophia," Amadeus whispered, the realization hitting him like a physical blow. "No wonder they're here. This affirms everything. We have to do something right now." He let out a ragged sigh, the gravity of the confirmation pressing down on him.

Suddenly, a terrifying sound broke the silence of the basement: noise upstairs. The thud of movement instantly ratcheted their anxiety to maximum.

"Someone is coming! Let's hide, quickly!" Amadeus hissed, his adrenaline spiking.

They scrambled, hurrying to find a safe place for concealment, pushing themselves into the deep shadow of a corner where they wouldn't be visible. The heavy footsteps sounded closer and closer until they stopped right at the entrance to the alchemy site. The air grew cold as the figure entered: it was the old woman. She moved with an unsettling focus, immediately going to the table and beginning to touch some of the mysterious alchemy solutions. They were trapped, forced to witness the witch at work.

Amadeus and Ben, pinned by fear yet driven by a desperate need for knowledge, became intensely curious

about the concoction the old woman was preparing. Their eyes tracked her every move. They watched as she selected the eerie stuff laid out on the table—the oils, the herbs, and the mysterious powders—and then, with a slow, deliberate movement, she began the rituals.

"We have to know what she is doing right now," Amadeus whispered, the urgency of survival overriding his terror.

"Yes," Ben agreed, his voice barely audible. "That would be the best way to finally know who this old woman really is—the person who is trying to enchant you and place this curse upon us." The silence of the room, broken only by the low scraping sounds of the ritual, stretched the suspense to a near-breaking point.

Their desperate curiosity about the ritual was violently hampered by a renewed, terrifying burst of noise upstairs. The sound was unmistakable: they correctly presumed that Linda and her two brothers had returned.

Amadeus and Ben were now stranded and trapped in their confined hiding spot, forced to wait in agonizing silence for the encroaching figures. The suspense was suffocating.

After a few tense moments, the footsteps descended, and Linda entered the basement, immediately speaking to her mother, the old woman. Their voices were low, and Amadeus and Ben heard the exchange only with frustrating obscurity.

A single, critical piece of information drifted past their hiding spot: Linda mentioned something about Amadeus—a reference that suggested he had missed catching up with some event or deadline.

"Did you hear that?" Ben whispered, his voice tight with apprehension.

"What did she say?" Amadeus asked, straining to piece together the terrifying, veiled threat that had just sealed their fate.

The fragments of the conversation chilled Amadeus and Ben to the bone. "Linda was asking for the pictures of Red," Ben whispered, the realization dawning with horror. "Maybe she was going to give it to her Mom to use."

"Really?" Amadeus whispered back, a deep sigh escaping him. "They're going to do something evil to my brother now." The danger to Red, already recovering from a severe accident, was now immediate and confirmed.

Amadeus's survival instinct was overwhelmed by fraternal panic. "We have to do something now! My brother is in direct danger! They might put him to death!"

Amadeus started to move, but Ben reached out and stopped him with a fierce grip. "Hold on, Dude!"

"Why?"

"We cannot just act in haste," Ben stressed, his voice low and serious. "We have to use our faculties and think clearly in this life-or-death situation, or else, both of us will get killed right here." The urgency demanded action, but the threat demanded strategy.

"What do you think we're going to do?" Amadeus whispered, the panic in his voice barely contained.

"Let us calm down," Ben instructed, his voice a low, steady anchor in the terrifying silence. "We will wait for them to finish their ritual and leave this house."

He leaned in, the plan simple and deadly. "Then, that is our time, okay? We strike after they're gone."

"Much better," Amadeus conceded, accepting the wisdom of patience over a suicidal, immediate attack. They settled back into the shadows, the silence now strained with intense, lethal waiting.

As planned, Linda and her two brothers went to the other house, their activity now focused on the cargo they were busy moving. However, their mother—the old woman—remained in the basement area, just steps away from Amadeus and Ben's hiding spot. The danger had not passed.

"Now that we know their activity down here and we have confirmation that they are absolutely responsible for their evil works," Ben whispered urgently, his eyes wide with fear,

"we need to get the hell out of here." The priority was no longer proof, but immediate survival.

"Why not now? Let us set them on fire!" Amadeus incited, his voice desperate to execute the lethal advice from the old man.

"No!" Ben snapped, pulling Amadeus back. "We cannot do it while they are all here! We'd be immediately killed by those two husky men." Ben rapidly formulated a safer plan. "What we need to do is burn this structure and the other one—destroy their entire operation so they can't use these places anymore."

"Shall we not include them in the fire?" Amadeus asked, the question dripping with cold revenge.

"No," Ben stated emphatically. "It would be better to ensure we don't get entrapped and that they will ultimately be held legally liable." He lowered his voice, delivering a stark lesson in consequence. "If we set them on fire, we would be liable for murder, even if we found them to be criminals. In the eyes of the law, they still have the right to be heard. Understand me?" The priority was destruction and escape, not outright execution.

"But when are we going to do it?" Amadeus asked, the fire of revenge still burning in his voice, but now controlled by logic.

"When we return," Ben whispered, the plan taking shape. "But we have to make sure they're not around when we do it."

"Now I know," Amadeus breathed, the terror of discovery momentarily eclipsing his need for vengeance. "We have to sneak out of here before they catch us."

The next few minutes were agonizing. Every muscle tense, they waited for the smallest opportunity. Then, moving with painstaking, vigilant steps, they slipped out of the structure and away from the immediate danger. Once clear, they briskly walked away, the fear of being seen driving their steps until the creepy house and the alchemist's lair finally disappeared behind the thickening foliage.

The escalating crisis in the old house had barely subsided when Red's condition took a sudden, alarming turn for the worse. His recovery stalled, forcing Amadeus to rush him back to the hospital for immediate treatment.

Distraught, Amadeus urgently called Nancy, pleading with her to finally come home and oversee Red's deteriorating state.

"Not that easy, nor right now, Dude," Nancy said, her voice tight with stress and frustration. "I desperately need to talk to and convince my boss. Our business commitments are

very hectic here, and I'm just hoping he becomes more understanding of my family emergency at this point."

"Please, Nancy, do it with urgency," Amadeus pleaded into the phone, his voice a strained whisper of fear and exhaustion.

"I will do that, Amadeus," she replied, her own voice tight.

A few anxious days later, Nancy finally arrived home. There was no time for pleasantries or reunion; she was restless and utterly exhausted from the journey. After only a few hours of desperate recharging, she rushed to the hospital to see Red.

"How is Red, Doctor?" she asked, her anxiety palpable.

The doctor's response was a chilling escalation of the tragedy. "He's okay for now, but he might take a very long time to recuperate." Then came the devastating blow: The doctor told them that Red might never be able to stand or walk normally again. The crash had caused a severe complication: his liver was severely injured and now posed a long-term threat to his mobility.

The Burden of Guilt

When Sophia learned of Red's grave condition, her initial reaction was dictated not by sympathy, but by self-preservation. She felt she could not visit him for personal reasons, the overwhelming truth being that she knew the entire family—especially Amadeus—hated her and Linda.

"What do we do now, Mom?" Catherine, Sophia's thirteen-year-old daughter, asked soberly, sensing the fear and tension in the air.

"We're not doing anything to see him," Sophia sighed heavily. "Going to the hospital would only create trouble for us."

She reiterated her decision, seeking to calm her daughter. "Let's just forego seeing him until the situation calms down completely."

But Catherine understood the gravity of the situation. "They might put pressure on us because of Red's predicament," she worried aloud. "Or, worse, they might blatantly accuse us and create a public scandal."

Pondering the Consequences

Sophia remained speechless, her gaze distant as she sank into a state of deep pensiveness regarding the severe consequences Red's accident could bring down upon them.

Troubled and anxious, she knew she had to unburden herself and immediately sought out Linda to confide in her.

Linda's Grim Conclusion

Linda listened to the relayed accusations and the details of Red's crash, then offered a chilling piece of information. "Therefore, it was Red's friend whom I dealt with recently about my business," she stated, making a crucial connection. "I presume now that his visit to our place was not coincidental but entirely intentional. He's trying to stalk us."

"Precisely," Sophia said, the confirmation of the threat intensifying her fear. "What do you think we're going to do?"

"We stay, but we must be highly vigilant," Linda commanded, her voice turning cold and serious. "They are quite clearly planning something stupid."

Both Sophia and Linda became intensely anxious, their tension infecting the household. Sophia's daughters were immediately gripped with fright and worries.

"I am afraid that one day they would come back with others to hurt us," Sophia's younger daughter thought, the fear of violent retaliation taking root.

Sophia tried to console her, though her own voice trembled. "Don't worry, my dear, everything will be okay. Calm down." But the lie felt thin; the family now lived under the heavy, serious threat of imminent, violent action.

The threat of their enemies soon manifested into unnerving paranoia. On her way to school one morning, Catherine was approached by a stranger who was unnervingly insistent on talking to her. Gripped by fear, the young girl was too scared to utter a single word, quickly evading the unidentified man. Her relief was momentary: she later saw the same man at the same spot, trying to talk to another girl—just a commercial agent pushing his wares.

However, this small moment of clarity was instantly overshadowed by a more sinister development. Her paranoia became even worse when an unknown man was spotted walking slowly, to and fro, in the immediate vicinity of their house. He moved with a distinct, unnatural rhythm, his head constantly turning, clearly acting as if he was meticulously observing something—or someone. The fear shifted from random sales talk to the chilling, undeniable feeling that they were being actively watched and studied.

The Paranoia Takes Root

"It must be an emissary of Red's relatives who are trying to stalk us," Catherine insinuated, the fear making her leap to the worst possible conclusion.

"Let it go. Don't think about it," Sophia replied, desperate to control the narrative and her daughter's rising panic.

"We're not sure if the man was a stalker at all."

"I am scared they're planning something bad for us, Mom," Catherine insisted, her voice trembling.

"No. Don't think about it. Stop your paranoia, or you'll get sick," Sophia demanded, her attempt at calming her daughter sounding strained.

"What if my thoughts are true?" her daughter challenged, the question hanging heavy with dread.

"They won't," Sophia stated, trying to sound certain. "They won't because they have no proof that we're doing anything bad to Red." The argument, however, sounded hollow, relying on a lack of evidence rather than genuine innocence.

Catherine's Fear Takes Hold

"No, Mom," Catherine insisted, her voice tight with conviction. "I feel that they're going to create trouble for us. We'd better leave this place. I have no peace of mind as long as we're here. We'll never live peacefully and safely at all."

Her gut feeling soon took a frightening step toward reality. In a sudden incident, an unidentified man in a decent suit approached her. This time, she had no chance to avoid him. Instead, driven by a desperate need for answers, she

spontaneously dared to break her fear and confront the stranger.

"What is it that you want?" she demanded, looking him directly in the eye.

The man replied simply, confirming her greatest fears: "I know Sophia, and I am a friend of Red."

"Can I have a few moments to ask you something personal?" the stranger requested, his gaze intent.

"Say it quickly, as I am in a hurry," she countered, her fear now hardening into intrepid resolve.

The man leaned in, his voice dropping to a serious, confidential tone. "Please ask her to see Red in the hospital," he urged. "And more importantly, you must warn her and Linda to stop mesmerizing and bringing Red's family great trouble."

"What trouble? My Mom is not doing anything bad to them," she replied instantly, rushing to her mother's defense despite her own growing doubts.

The stranger, however, offered no argument. He simply and quickly got away, leaving Catherine alone with the man's impossible, damning message.

Silence and Security

Catherine rushed home and immediately told her Mom about the unnerving incident. As she spoke, Sophia remained

utterly silent, her face drawn and meditative as she absorbed the full weight of the new trouble. The direct threat—the explicit accusation of 'mesmerizing'—could no longer be denied or dismissed.

Without a word, Sophia slowly extended her right hand to Catherine's right shoulder. It was a silent, instinctive gesture, a desperate attempt to make her daughter feel secure and ease the crushing weight of her anxiety. But in her mother's profound silence, Catherine found no reassurance, only a deeper, more intriguing sense of complicity and impending doom.

"I am so confused," Sophia sighed, the weight of the situation finally crushing her denial. "I never thought my simple idea would revert to our great sorrow."

"Then stop what you and Linda are doing, Mom," Catherine pleaded desperately. "Let's live a peaceful life."

"It's not me, my dear, but Linda," Sophia confessed, the truth tumbling out. "She's the alchemist and a witch, just like her ancestors."

"Then stop them, Mom!" her daughter cried, grasping at a solution.

"I don't know her current place, and we have no time locating her because she is very unpredictable," Sophia admitted, her frustration turning to panic.

"What do we do, Mom?"

Sophia's mind snapped to a frantic, final solution. "We're on our own, my dear. We'll go back to where we came from—a place that nobody knows, not even Linda, the alchemist," she hissed, the plan for immediate escape overriding everything else.

Chapter 11

Sophia and Daughters Elope while Dude and Ben Spark
the Fire

The Burning of Buscony

The relentless tension finally forced Sophia's hand. In a panicked move to sever all ties to the unfolding tragedy, Sophia and her two daughters eventually made the desperate decision to abandon their place. They vanished to an unknown location, their primary motivation being the need to avoid further trouble and probable retaliation from Red's relatives for his crushing misfortune. More urgently, Sophia needed to buy her daughters peace of mind, hoping to outrun the paranoia and the inescapable threat of the truth. Their sudden disappearance made the area ripe for the final confrontation.

The disappearance of Sophia and her daughters only intensified the resolve of Amadeus and Ben. They found the time they needed and immediately returned to Buscony, this time equipped for annihilation, carrying a can full of flammable chemicals.

Moving with deadly focus, they again carefully concealed themselves behind the thick, grown weeds, setting up their vigil. From their hiding spot, they began observing the movements of the remaining subjects—Linda, her brothers,

and the old woman—in the two houses. For what felt like an eternity, spanning a few minutes and then hours, they waited for Linda and her relatives to emerge.

"It looks like they are still indoors," Amadeus finally whispered, the silence oppressive. "Nobody wants to show up." The waiting was the most serious, nerve-wracking part of the plan.

"Let's be patient for them to show up," Ben whispered, his nerves taut.

Then, Amadeus spotted movement. "Look! The two brothers are coming out, carrying boxes!"

"Where are the other two, Linda and her Mom?" Ben asked, his voice sharp with anxiety.

"For sure, still indoors," Amadeus deduced. The partial departure was their chance. "Let's get nearer so we can definitively determine whether they are still inside."

"C'mon, while the two men are shunning away," Ben urged, and they began their final approach.

They crept closer to the house, every sense heightened, cleverly watching for any suspicious movement. The structure remained unnervingly still. No human movement could be sensed inside; the only sound was the blowing wind, which caught the loose door and window pane, causing them to sway back and forth with a repetitive, creaking sound—a

terrifying, lonely rhythm marking the final seconds before their intrusion.

"It seems nobody is around," Amadeus whispered, the oppressive stillness giving him a surge of reckless courage. "Let's try getting inside."

"First, let's sneak-peek into the door to be absolutely sure," Ben cautioned.

After a tense visual confirmation that the house was indeed empty, they slowly slipped inside. They moved with silent, deliberate steps, making their way down to the lower level—the shadowy basement. The sight that greeted them was a confirmation of their luck: the entire alchemy site remained as they had left it. All the dark stuff, including the tomes of pictures, was still untouched. The stage was set for the destruction.

Amadeus nervously surveyed the ominous basement while Ben readied the can, preparing to spill the flammable chemical across the walls and the surrounding paraphernalia.

"Wait, Ben!" Amadeus whispered sharply, stopping his friend just as he was about to pour. "It looks like there is a dark tunnel going through that area—something we did not notice the last time we were here."

He turned, his eyes fixed on the new shadow. "Shall we take a look at it first? They could be hiding down there."

"No," Ben insisted, refusing to be distracted. "We are running out of time. The surroundings already smell too exposed. We have to light the fire now."

With that, they ignited the flammable chemicals. The whoosh of the flames was instant. They scrambled quickly back up to the main level and ran outside without looking back. The adjacent house remained silent; they sensed no sign of life from it. They threw themselves into the concealment of the tall weeds and grasses, just in time to witness the result of their desperate act.

A terrible blazing inferno began to rage, first consuming the ground level of the structure, then creeping swiftly to the upper floors until the entire structure was set on fire.

"There it is, the burning hell!" Amadeus exclaimed, staring at the destructive beauty.

"Don't you think they're in the other house?" Ben asked, the success of the arson tainted by the possibility of failure.

"None," Amadeus replied firmly. "We did not see anybody go out of either place."

Ben faced the new dilemma, his voice laced with frustration. "How do we catch them when they are not around?"

"It doesn't matter!" Amadeus insisted, watching the flames devour the evidence. "What's truly important is that all those tools have been reduced to ashes! They can't mesmerize anybody now."

"The next thing we should do is get home right now and come back another day to see the aftermath," Amadeus urged, his voice tight with the need for immediate escape.

"But we're not sure whether they were trapped to death inside or not," Ben pointed out, the uncertainty a dark cloud over their victory.

"I am sure they're not," Amadeus replied seriously, the image of the unseen exit clear in his mind. "I saw what looked like a tunnel down there. Wherever that tunnel may be heading, it would have led them to safety and escape from the blaze." The witches had survived, but their power was gone.

The Aftermath of Burning the Witches' Hub

The next day, driven by an intrepid mix of caution and curiosity, Amadeus and Ben returned to the area to spy on the ruins. The destruction was extensive, but the site was not abandoned.

They immediately spotted the two husky brothers working amidst the wreckage, grimly putting out the remaining glowing embers in the rubble.

"They are alive, and nobody was hurt," Amadeus whispered, the realization a mixture of relief and frustration. "But where are Linda and the old woman?" The core targets of the curse had once again evaded them.

"They're not around. They're neither in the house. Anyway, they won't go any farther," Ben insisted, trying to control their search radius.

"I strongly believe they're hiding inside the tunnel," Amadeus countered, his certainty reinforced by the lack of bodies.

"Then where do you think the exit point of the tunnel is?" Ben asked, realizing the depth of the enemy's preparation.

"That is what I don't know. And I won't take the time to find it anymore," Amadeus stated, his goal having shifted. "It's enough that we burned the alchemy and all the stuff inside it." The destruction of the tools was his true victory.

"What about the two brothers, then?" Ben asked, nodding toward the husky men clearing the debris.

"We don't have any evidence against them," Amadeus explained, frustration evident in his voice. "How could we possibly ask the police to arrest them?"

"So, let us leave them alone now before we draw attention and get hurt," Ben concluded, the priority now swinging back to safety. They had achieved their goal: the center of the dark power was reduced to ashes, and they had to accept the escape of the practitioners for now.

Shortly after Amadeus and Ben departed, the fire brigade trucks arrived at the scene and began the systematic process of putting out the remaining embers. The fire was intense but localized.

Eventually, the official result of the investigation was released. Due to the rural location and the speed of the fire's consumption, the cause was determined to be an entirely mundane event: an accidental grass fire that subsequently spread and also burned the wooden structure. The dark, hidden history of the house remained buried beneath the ashes, officially erased by a simple lie of circumstance.

Beyond the knowledge of Amadeus and Ben, Linda and her mother were entirely unscathed, having successfully used their escape route. They emerged from the hidden hole inside the adjacent, unburned house, stepping into the safe darkness while the flames still roared next door.

"Who has done this to us?" Linda demanded, her voice sharp with fury.

"I found two men when I rushed into the tunnel, but I didn't see them anymore," her mother replied, confirming their detection of the intruders.

"They thought they had burned us all. They are wrong," Linda hissed, her eyes gleaming with cold malice.

"The bitter thing has yet to come," her mother warned, her voice heavy with the promise of relentless vengeance. The burning of their lair had only intensified their dark resolve.

The alchemists had meticulously designed their operation for both power and survival. The complete set of alchemy's tools and the shrine of witchcraft were not placed randomly but were housed within a sophisticated space built beneath the structure. This covert lair was directly integrated with a system for evasion: the tunnel that Amadeus had spotted was specifically constructed as an escape passage, leading from the heart of their evil domain out to the remote grassy road.

Linda and her relatives were not merely isolated practitioners; they were the committed heirs to a dark legacy. Their actions stemmed from a dark crusade to revive an old tradition of witchcraft that had been passed down through their ancestors. They were actively drafting new followers to preserve this dangerous legacy. Their rituals—including the menacing enchantments aimed at Amadeus and Red—were

not simple magic tricks, but a profound and terrifying form of worship to their devil god.

Red Succumbs to Death

The relentless pressure of the curse finally broke Red. His already critical condition worsened tragically, pushing the family to the brink. With the medical bills soaring, they desperately needed a large, immediate infusion of money to settle the crushing expenses.

The medical bills had become an insurmountable mountain of doom. With Red's condition worsening beyond hope, the desperate need for a large amount of money to settle the crushing expenses drove the family to a final, tragic measure. With a mournful, mutual consent, and the terrible realization that his time was fleeting, Red agreed to have his house auctioned.

he house, once Red's bedrock of security and future, was swiftly put on the block. The auction was a frantic, last-ditch effort, and the property was ultimately sold off at a meager price, far below its true value. This financial sacrifice was immense, tearing away the last piece of Red's independence, yet it was horribly all in vain.

The wicked plot had succeeded. The curse, against which all their efforts were futile, claimed its target. Red succumbed to death, his life stolen by the unseen force of the

alchemists. He left behind his brother, Amadeus, devastated by a grief so profound it became a kind of madness. Amadeus was now consumed by a terrifying, absolute certainty: the alchemists' curse was horrifyingly real, and Red, the final, innocent victim, had paid the ultimate price.

Following the sale of Red's house, Amadeus and his family transferred to their ancestral house, seeking refuge in the familiar walls of their past. A couple of months had now passed since Red succumbed to death, and his passing was the worst incident that had befallen the family since the recent demise of their mother. The grief was not only profound but crippling.

Amadeus, however, was past the point of accepting fate. In his mourning, he concluded that there was nobody to blame for all their misfortune—the accidents, the financial ruin, and the death—but Sophia and Linda, the two women who had maliciously instigated the evil influence of witchcraft against his family. His grief had hardened into a furious, definite conviction of their guilt.

Amadeus is Back to Buschony

Consumed by grief and the burning conviction of guilt, Amadeus urged Ben to return with him to Buscony. This time, however, Ben flatly refused. The risk was too high; he feared they hadn't absolutely exterminated the witches and

their stronghold. Now, the witches might be back, their fury intensified, ready to seek vengeance against both him and Amadeus.

Amadeus quickly dismissed the idea of going to the police; he knew he couldn't show any concrete evidence, and the very arson that flattened the site into ashes would likely be blamed on them.

The Lone Vigil

Driven by his singular, desperate mission, Amadeus went alone to check the site again. The atmosphere was heavy with dread. The lone structure—the neighboring, untouched house—stood silent, but the distinct traces of ashes from the ruins next door were still unnervingly visible.

As usual, Amadeus slipped into the cover of the grown weeds, his heart pounding. He hid and began his lonely, suspenseful vigil, his eyes locked on the house, searching for any sign of life. The stillness felt more like a calculated trap than an absence, leaving him caught in the chilling quiet of the witches' territory.

The Coven Emerges

Amadeus watched, his anxiety tightening, as the house finally released its occupants. First, a group of two men and three women exited, all of them having the grim look of those

involved in the alchemy and witchcraft. They quickly trod their path out to the road, vanishing from sight.

Then, the primary targets emerged. Linda's mother, the old witch, appeared, accompanied by her two robust brothers who were carrying boxes of paraphernalia—tools recovered from the secret tunnel. Lastly, Linda herself stepped out, her movements meticulous as she ensured the door was tightly locked up. Amadeus realized with a sickening certainty that the entire coven was evacuating, taking their evil with them.

When the final group, including Linda and the two brothers, had vanished from the scene, Amadeus cautiously moved nearer to the house. He crept up to the window and glanced at the smoked-glass pane, a desperate curiosity driving him to check what the witches had left behind inside. However, the glass was too opaque and shadowed; he failed to see anything, leaving the interior an impenetrable mystery.

Finding no easy way in, Amadeus was forced to create one. He located a window pane that had lost its securing bolt and, gathering his intrepid resolve, he delivered a focused blow, breaking the glass just enough to gain entry.

He slipped inside the silent house and began to move, his senses on high alert. He walked slowly, hugging the corners, descending immediately to the lower level. His heart pounded with suspense as he finally reached the dark space—the entrance to the tunnel where, he now knew, the actual shrine of alchemy was set. He was now deep inside the enemy's heartland.

Amadeus took a deep breath and began to tread the way into the dark tunnel. This was no ordinary passage; it was illuminated by an unnerving series of glaring red lights positioned roughly every seven meters, casting the path in a perpetual, unsettling crimson.

As he kept moving deeper, the chilling tranquility of the environment was violently broken. From the darkness ahead, the distinct, strange voices of chatting and laughing women began to echo off the walls. Amadeus was instantly astonished and profoundly scared. He realized with absolute certainty that the tunnel was not just an escape route—it was leading him directly into the presence of the coven he thought he had scattered.

Amadeus instantly stopped, trying to pinpoint the origin of the strange sound, but the tunnel was encased in dark, unyielding walls, offering no visual clues. Retreat was unthinkable; the voices might be coming from the main

house now. He forced himself to continue, walking briskly forward while the bizarre, unsettling echo of the women's utterances followed him like a mocking shadow.

He eventually reached an old wooden ladder that led upward. The exit was covered by a square iron plate pierced with holes, allowing a faint, pale light to penetrate the darkness of the manhole. He pushed the cover aside and emerged, finding himself in the open, but utterly concealed by a thick cover of tall, grown grasses.

The sight before him ratcheted the suspense: he wasn't near a road, but a cluster of rudimentary houses made of light materials—a hidden, makeshift village right in the heart of the alchemists' territory.

With a surge of intrepid resolve, Amadeus quietly covered the manhole, sealing his exit, and began to tread cautiously across the grassy area toward the clustered houses. He kept low, hiding among the grown grasses, his eyes scanning the makeshift community.

What he saw confirmed his darkest fears: he spotted several men and women moving about the small village, and among them, he distinctly recognized Linda and her family. This was their secret stronghold. He now had the undeniable, devastating proof: they were all alchemists and

witches, a concentrated group dedicated to their dark practices.

The shock of his discovery was too much. Once the full scope of the coven's activity was revealed, Amadeus stepped back with a burst of anxiety and raw fright, turning immediately to flee. He ran away from the hidden lair, scrambling back toward the concealed manhole.

He tracked his way out and made his way to the highway, where it took him a considerable amount of time to finally hitch a ride and escape the immediate area.

During his frantic journey and subsequent inquiries, he learned a chilling truth about the area: the hidden community was not just a coven but a terrifying mix—a place infested with alchemists and drug addicts, where they conducted joint drug sessions and witchcraft rituals.

The moment he was safe, he urgently called Ben and, with a voice shaking with adrenaline, relayed everything he had discovered.

"You can't fight that surging pandemic in the remote area of Buscony," Ben told Amadeus gravely, the news of the coven proving overwhelming. "It's too vast, too deeply rooted. The only thing you can reasonably do is figure out who has been spellbinding your family. You need to pinpoint the one culprit that keeps haunting you."

Amadeus sighed, the task seeming impossible. "It would be very difficult to find the offender in this situation. I know Brother Red was a victim of witchcraft, but the main suspect, Sophia, has been missing for a long time." He settled on a terrifying conclusion: "She could be the main culprit, which is exactly why she disappeared without leaving a trace."

"Buscony has a deep, chilling historical past of being the dwelling place of witches," Ben explained, his voice taking on a low, serious tone. "You absolutely cannot fight them alone. They haven't just vanished; they've been deployed like agents of sickness to many parts of the adjacent town for a long time now."

Ben leaned into the conversation, his voice dropping to a creepy whisper of warning. "I tell you, the bizarre, miserable events occurring in your life have been the work of a particular person. You can't just rashly blame both Linda and Sophia because, when you're standing in court or facing the police, it's virtually impossible to conclusively determine the single, true culprit."

The Enthralling Evidence

"What about the files of pictures we found beneath the house?" Amadeus countered, holding onto the one tangible

piece of evidence. "Weren't those used in enthralling me and Red?"

Ben sighed, his voice taking on an intriguing, analytical tone. "It would still be a question mark, Amadeus. Remember, your brother was friends with Linda. Linda could have brought those pictures there simply because of Sophia, who might have lent them to her to browse and appreciate the event in the picture."

He paused, emphasizing the need for caution. "We still have to give them the benefit of the doubt legally. After all, we don't actually know how effective alchemy is on a person, or if those pictures were even the direct instrument of the curse."

"Do you mean to say what I have been experiencing was brought about by myself alone? That I have gone mad?" Amadeus asked, his voice filled with frantic disbelief.

"No. You are absolutely what you are now," Ben stressed, his tone firm. "The thing is to know how it came to be and why. Even today, there are lots of things science cannot fully understand and explain—and we just saw something science would laugh at."

"So what do I do now?" Amadeus pleaded, exhaustion turning his panic into a desperate plea for guidance. "Go to a Psychiatrist?"

"I cannot say a word, Amadeus. But it is hard to think about your situation," Ben admitted, his voice heavy with helplessness.

"The last piece of advice I can give you is this: you have to try solving it yourself," Ben stated firmly. "Because this is personal. The origin of this trouble, whether supernatural or psychological, is deeply tied to you and your past. Only you have the knowledge and the reason to see it through."

Amadeus finally left Ben, carrying the crushing weight of a riddle only he could solve. He found himself plunged into a frightening state of isolated sanity—aware of the evil plot, yet utterly alone in his fight against it.

The fear of persisting weird events troubled him incessantly. Red was gone, but the curse felt alive, a contagion threatening to spread. He became consumed by one desperate goal: he had to put an immediate end to this madness before his wife and son got tragically involved. The fight was no longer about vengeance; it was about protecting the only family he had left.

With the legal and rational paths closed off, Amadeus turned to the unthinkable. The last thing on his mind, yet the

only option left, was to consult one of the witches—specifically, one who had alienated relations with his suspected culprits, Sophia and Linda. He needed an enemy of his enemy.

He used his remaining connections and finally got reliable information that a nearby town, Arad, close to Buscony, was known to have a deep history of witchcraft. Driven by desperation, he resolved to go all the way, tracking through the wilderness to the remote, rural, and underdeveloped town of Arad. His new mission was simple: find a witch who could break a witch's curse.

Amadeus in Arad, Buscony

The Crone in the Wilderness

Amadeus's desperate journey into Arad led him to an old man in the area, who, after some persuasion, finally agreed to guide him. The guide led Amadeus deep into the rural isolation, where he was finally introduced to an old woman whose antiquated, solitary house was located deep in the wilderness.

The woman was cloaked in black, but her demeanor was unsettlingly distinct. She did not look like an ordinary witch nor an alchemist like the ones who had destroyed his family in Buscony. Her presence suggested a different, perhaps

older, kind of power. Amadeus was now face-to-face with his last, best hope.

The old woman's appearance was a frightful confirmation of Amadeus's desperate choice. Her face was a map of time, marked by crinkled skin, a long, pointed nose, and deep, murky, dark eyes that seemed to absorb the light. Her mouth held blackened, divided teeth, adding to her awful, unsettling appearance, while her bean-shaped chin completed the subtle, classic profile of a broomstick witch.

"What do you want, Son?" the old woman asked, her voice cutting through the silence of the wilderness with a sharp, clear intonation that belied her age. Amadeus knew he was standing before true power.

"Old woman," Amadeus began, cutting straight to his desperate purpose, "I would like to know if you can defy the works of other witches?" He wasted no time in presenting his offering, pulling out a cloth-made purse that contained a mix of bills and coins and placing it deliberately on top of her worn wooden table.

"Have you been enthralled and troubled?" the crone asked, her murky eyes fixed on him, not the money.

"Exactly. That's why I am here to seek your help," he confirmed, the desperation clear in his voice.

"Do you have with you any picture for identity?" she asked, her sharp tone indicating she required a tool for her work, a piece of the cursed past.

The Shrine of the Witch

Amadeus quickly pulled out some pictures from his backpack that he had held onto. He presented them to the Old Witch. She took the photo—a disturbing relic that included himself, Linda, Sophia, Sarah, and Red—and placed it on top of her dark altar. This was the shrine of the witch, where the light from a melting candle oozed down onto the remains of a dried human skull.

"The two women," Amadeus said, his voice flat with certainty, his finger stabbing at the image. "Linda and Sophia. They are the ones who brought this curse onto my family."

The old woman did not immediately answer. She picked up the photo, her long, pointed finger tracing the image of each person. After a tense silence, she looked up, her dark, murky eyes piercing Amadeus.

"You speak of two, but the power you face has been wielded by one, guided by greed," she declared. "Tell me which of the two had the strongest reason to wish you and your brother harm. Tell me who benefits most from your sorrow and death."

Amadeus pointed his finger, his conviction absolute:
"Linda and Sophia."

The old woman wasted no time. Below her, on a low stool, sat a kettle full of water diluted with strange, colored chemicals. She carefully took the photograph—the relic bearing the faces of the cursed and the suspected—and doused it in the liquid. The picture floated immediately to the surface, bobbing gently on the viscous, colored bath.

The witch became completely motionless, her murky eyes focusing intensely on the floating image. Amadeus stood in absolute silence, the air growing thick and heavy as the ritual began. The only sound was her low, continuous murmur: a stream of Latin prayers that Amadeus could not possibly understand, a dark, foreign language that sought to tear the truth from the spiritual realm.

The Crone's Verdict

After a few minutes of intense silence broken only by her low chanting, the old woman slowly lifted her gaze from the floating photograph. Her voice was sharp and absolute as she delivered her reading.

"You have suffered a long ordeal and repeated encounters with bizarre events in your life, and you are still troubled even now. As I read the currents," she stated, her murky eyes

still holding the image of the group, "your brother has died. Sophia is gone. And listen closely, Amadeus: Linda had nothing to do with your ordeal."

Amadeus was stunned by the exclusion of the key suspect. "What about Sophia?" he asked urgently. "Does she do something with my ordeal?"

The Unidentified Culprit

"Nothing. She has fled to an unspecified location," the old woman replied, dismissing Sophia as the active agent.

"What is happening to me? I'm not insane?" Amadeus exclaimed, his voice a desperate plea for validation against the overwhelming terror.

"Can you please help me find some more clues to know what's happening to me?" he begged, the money lying forgotten on the table.

The crone's murky eyes focused on the liquid, and her voice dropped to a cold, certain drone. "As I see in the hollow... an unidentified woman in her early forties had tied a copper string to your picture at the shrine." She paused, letting the severity of the information sink in. "That copper string is what has been causing you to suffer these unfortunate events."

"What shall I do now? How can I find her place?" Amadeus demanded, the revelation of a new, unknown enemy making him feel helpless again.

"You have to remove the copper string tied around your picture to free yourself from the bondage of her wishes," the old woman instructed, her answer direct and focused on the ritualistic counter-action.

"My findings are limited to what I have seen and read," she admitted. "However, I would ask you to reflect on your life's history—every quarrel, every resentment—to find out who this woman is and what is truly going on with you."

"But what about those unfortunate events that happened to my brother?" Amadeus asked, his voice cracking with the memory of Red's death.

The old woman shook her head, her gaze distant as she looked into the swirling colors of the kettle. "It is beyond our capacity to tell those things that do not belong to us."

She offered a final, chilling dismissal of Red's life: "Perhaps, it was simply his doomed fate that made him suffer the consequences until he died."

It was her final, cold statement to Amadeus. With that, she reached out, took the purse of money from the table, and abruptly turned her back, leaving Amadeus alone to face the

terrifying mystery of the unidentified woman and the copper string.

Amadeus was exhausted, both physically from the journey and mentally from the sheer weight of the revelations. He stood there, alone in the wilderness, pondering the fomenting words of the old woman.

He was forced to look inward, sifting through the years. He desperately began thinking of the previous circumstances in his life—every slight, every rivalry, every forgotten face—that could possibly lead him to the identity of the woman in her early forties. The key to finishing his ordeal, to breaking the copper bondage, lay not in the actions of the witches, but buried deep within his own past.

Chapter 12

Amadeus Ponders His Life's Story

Reminiscing the Past

Amadeus was pondering the chilling puzzle left by the old woman. His thoughts immediately turned to the only physical link he had: how he could get back into the house of the witch in Buscony to break the copper string that was causing his torment.

He realized there was only one stroke of luck he could be thankful for in burning the site: he and Ben did not burn the other house. It was in that adjacent, untouched structure that he believed the true, portable altar of the witch was enshrined, holding the very picture that was now his key to freedom. He needed to return to the source of the evil to end it.

As Amadeus leaned against the armrest and unconsciously dozed on the sofa, his troubled mind found no rest. His subconsciousness traveled far back to the early, forgotten times of his life, searching for the face the witch had described.

He saw himself vividly: a younger man developing a secret affair with Rachel, Linda's sister. Rachel had been utterly and completely in love with Amadeus, to the point

that she had submitted her life to him. Their relationship had been serious; they had been engaged for a long time. What made the memory burn was the context: Red did not know that Amadeus had carried on this intense affair with Rachel before *A Fading Love*

Amadeus traveled a lot for both pleasure and various business opportunities. This extensive movement across regions was the main reason why his meetings with Rachel were seldom. Their engagement stretched out over long absences.

Despite the distance, Amadeus maintained the commitment; he always made sure to see Rachel when visiting Alba, the town where she was living and working. However, the sporadic nature of their relationship suggested a slow drift, a love sustained by duty and habit against the constant pull of Amadeus's wider world. Linda had even become his friend.

The slow drift away from Rachel suddenly accelerated. On one particular occasion, Amadeus met Sarah at a party after being introduced by a mutual friend. For no discernible reason, Amadeus immediately felt something special for Sarah, a feeling that quickly blossomed into deep affection. He fell in love with her.

Sarah, being single and readily available, was easily convinced by Amadeus's persuasive talks. He began to frequent the charming young lady at her house in Arad—the very town near both Buscony and Alba, and the place he had just visited. Sarah quickly trusted him and eventually became Amadeus's girl, starting a new, clandestine relationship that overlapped with his engagement to Rachel.

Amadeus became so engrossed with Sarah that his visits to Rachel, his fiancée, grew increasingly sporadic. His presence at her work and home was drastically reduced, the distance now mental as well as physical.

Rachel became restless and deeply suspicious of Amadeus's sudden coldness and prolonged absences. The anxiety consumed her, and eventually, the strained engagement snapped, and she lost contact with him entirely.

Sarah, his new love, was aware of the traveling nature of Amadeus's job. Yet, in a rare, conscious decision to address the ghost of his past, Amadeus decided to see Rachel one last time.

The Lie of Reunion

The meeting was strained, the air thick with Rachel's pain.

"What happened to you? It's been so long. I didn't even receive a call from you, nor could I contact you at all," Rachel said with a painful mix of surprise and yearning.

Amadeus had his lie prepared. "I am so sorry. I was assigned to a remote Romanian county. My cell phone got lost, and I didn't immediately get a new one," he explained, hoping the elaborate excuse would cover his guilt.

Rachel's gaze was direct, piercing through the falsehoods. "Is it because you already found someone new?" she randomly, yet devastatingly, asked.

"No? You are still the one I love," Amadeus insisted, doubling down on the deceit. "I hope you understand my job. "Really?" Rachel asked, her voice cracking with hope as she instantly began to cling to Amadeus's arms.

"Of course, yes. I missed and enjoyed the time we spent together along the seacoast of white sands," Amadeus recalled, digging into the well of their shared history to make the lie convincing.

"Would you like to have some time with me again along the coast of the white sands?" she asked, a silent plea for their old life.

"Of course, I do," he replied.

Leisure along the beach was the one thing both of them had genuinely shared; they enjoyed boating and walking in the white sands along the seacoast. It was on that very site they had once begun to envision their promising future. Driven by Rachel's yearning—and Amadeus's guilt—they agreed to visit the same old place once more, hoping to reminisce and relive those days that had been cruelly disrupted by the demands of their commitments.

A Promise Under the Fading Sun

They walked along the shoreline, feeling and enjoying the cold breeze from the seas just as the sun began to lose its sparkling lights over the waves of the vast, violent waters.

"I will miss you again," Amadeus said, the lie tasting bitter even to him. "But don't worry, I will get back to you when things permit me." It was a vague, hollow promise.

"I hope you do," Rachel replied, immediately seizing on the future. "By that time, we would talk about going home with you in Belefalva to finally meet your family."

Amadeus just nodded and remained silent. The request hung heavy in the air. He couldn't grasp a wise, or even honest, reply to her suggestion, trapped between the woman who loved him and the new life he was already living with Sarah.

The End of a Mystery Love Affair

Time had elapsed, stretching out the distance between them until the hope of coming back to Rachel for the promised visit completely failed; everything Amadeus had promised devolved into vain hope.

Then came the shattering moment: Rachel discovered his affair with Sarah. The truth hit her like a physical blow. Rachel simply could not accept the fact that Amadeus had been deceiving her for such a long time, their engagement a cruel farce. The confrontation was immediate and volatile. Amadeus had a hard, desperate time explaining things to Rachel, every word he offered only tightening the knot of betrayal, leaving both of them trapped in the tense, destructive wreckage of their relationship.

The Bitter Accusation

"Why did you do this to me? I trusted you, and yet you fooled me?" Rachel's voice was a raw, agonizing sound, the tears finally overflowing and carving clean paths through the makeup on her cheeks. She stood there, her hands clenched into shaking fists, demanding to know the source of the cruel deception that had consumed their future.

Amadeus, frantic, could only offer a pathetic defense, his eyes darting away from her pained gaze. "Sarah is just a close friend of mine. I just don't know who told you about this rumor." The lie was thin, brittle, and immediately broke under the weight of her conviction.

"You cannot hide things from me, Amadeus," Rachel continued, her voice gaining a desperate, cutting edge. "I saw you and Sarah in sweet moments." The memory—a vivid, devastating image of betrayal—was etched into her mind, providing the undeniable proof that rendered all of his excuses meaningless.

Amadeus was dazed by the force of her pain, his mind racing for a defense that didn't exist. He held his lips, trying to utter a word, but the sound failed him. He remained silent, finally realizing that no amount of reasoning or explanation would appease her—all his words would be in vain.

And yet, in a final, weak attempt to calm the storm he had created, he tried to appease her. "I am so sorry, Rachel," Amadeus managed to say, his voice a contritely low whisper.

Rachel's pain had hardened into a furious resolve. "You may go, Amadeus, go with her. Leave me now," she exclaimed, her voice vibrating with the command to finally

end their life together. The relationship, and his guilt, were shattered beyond repair.

Amadeus solemnly looked at her eyes one last time—a gaze heavy with guilt and resignation—and then sadly turned his back on Rachel. With his departure, the last shred of her hope crumbled.

Rachel was immediately plunged into a state of deep sorrow that rendered her restless and inconsolable. In her profound discomfort and wounded feelings, she became utterly overwhelmed and devastated. The betrayal was so complete, the pain so consuming, that the future dissolved before her. In her darkest moment, Rachel truly thought there was no more hope or sense for her to live. The weight of his deceit had crushed her spirit entirely.

Love Turns to Vengeance

The devastating sorrow Rachel felt quickly curdled into a fierce animosity. Her profound love for Amadeus was wholly transformed, replaced by a deep, burning resentment. Amadeus, consumed by his own guilt and relief at having escaped the confrontation, remained oblivious to the dangerous turn in her emotional state—he did not know of her volatile instinct when in a state of hatred.

Wounded and seeking solace, Rachel went to her mother in Buscony. There, within the walls of the secret lair, she poured out her despair, seeking consolation from the woman who dealt in darker forms of comfort. Rachel's grief found a fertile ground, and her mother, the witch, would surely offer her the means to transform that grief into retribution.

The Curse is Woven

"Give me his picture. His lone picture," Rachel's mother demanded, her voice flat and focused on the ritualistic act of vengeance.

Rachel, consumed by desperation, immediately provided the photograph. Her mother took it and pulled out what looked like a copper string chain. With chilling intention, she tied it tightly around Amadeus's photo and placed the cursed artifact directly on top of the shrine.

As she began to work, she uttered a prayer that could not be understood—a dark invocation against the man who had wounded her daughter. The culmination of this act was a series of strange rituals, mimicking those that an indigenous tribe from old places was known to perform, weaving together ancient, malevolent power and Rachel's fresh pain to forge a devastating curse.

Rachel's mother watched the copper-bound picture settle on the altar, the fulfillment of the ritual complete. She turned to her grieving daughter, her voice low but laced with absolute, chilling power.

"He is not going anywhere. His mind and heart will return to you. Remember that," her mother said.

It was not a consolation, but a curse—a binding promise of emotional servitude, fueled by the deepest forces of witchcraft and the raw pain of a broken heart. Amadeus was now tied to Rachel's hatred, his freedom and well-being sacrificed to her mother's dark magic.

Rachel was in mixed emotions and cried, the strange conflict between the vengeful curse her mother wove and the raw pain of betrayal making her sanity feel fragile. She eventually turned away and left the house, escaping the sight of the altar.

Meanwhile, Amadeus was consumed by guilt and a terrifying intuition regarding Rachel's sorrow. He wanted desperately to see her, to undo his damage, but Rachel was nowhere to be found—not at her workplace, nor at her home.

Amadeus grew anxious. He realized there was only one place she would think to go: the seashore, where they used to cherish their quality time and create their future visions. His mind raced to the worst possible conclusion. Amadeus

thought of a dark thing that Rachel would most probably attempt to do, fearing that his betrayal had pushed her past the point of no return.

The Chase to the Deep Blue

Amadeus arrived at the shore in a panic, his worst fears realized. "Rachel! Rachel! Wait! Stop it, Rachel!" he chased and shouted, his voice swallowed by the wind, as he saw her boating alone toward the deep blue sea.

He struggled desperately to reach her, sprinting down the sand, but it was in vain. Rachel got away, pulling the oars with a chilling resolve. She did not care to look back, acting as if she did not hear his frantic cries.

In a desperate, second-effort, Amadeus got a boat and pursued her to the sea. But she was already too far out, well beyond the point where he could reasonably hold her back. Amadeus was disgruntled and felt his energy and courage draining away. His final cries were swallowed by the waves: "Rachel! Rachel!" he shouted, a plea entirely in vain.

Lost to the Sea

Rachel did not hear him, or perhaps chose not to, and continued to ignore Amadeus. Then, in a terrifying, final act, she suddenly leaped into the water. The boat floated empty as she vanished instantly from Amadeus's sight, consumed by the deep blue.

Amadeus quickly jumped into the water and frantically swam toward the spot where she disappeared. The waves tossed him back relentlessly as he dove deeper into the cold, turbulent sea. He desperately searched for Rachel, straining his eyes in the murky depths, but he could not find her until he was utterly exhausted.

Defeated, he eventually sailed back and called for immediate help from the authorities. But the crushing finality was already sealed: it was too late. Rachel, unable to bear the pain of his betrayal, was lost to the sea.

Later, her body was recovered and rushed to the nearest hospital. Amadeus held onto a sliver of desperate hope and wished for her to recover, but the effort to save her life was unfortunately in vain. Rachel succumbed to death.

Amadeus was instantly consumed by guilt and crushing depression. He had an agonizing time struggling to forget the tragic incident involving Rachel and to ease the burden of his failure. To conceal the trauma and relieve his intense distress, Amadeus did not show up to Sarah for some time. The sorrow broke him; he turned to the bottle and became a drunkard, his despair deepening to the point that he even resorted to being suicidal.

The Downward Spiral

The relentless guilt and drinking had devastating consequences. Consequently, Amadeus lost his job and quickly squandered all his savings. He lost all insight and hope for his future.

His inner turmoil soon manifested outwardly. He became profoundly disturbed and began to experience, at times, some truly bizarre occurrences in both his day and night dreams. The psychological torment was so relentless and vivid that he almost slit his wrist just to put an end to his agonizing existence.

His mental breakdown ultimately led to him being confined in a hospital, where he was treated by a mental specialist. Though he was eventually pronounced normal, he stayed on for an intensive period of rehabilitation and therapy until he was fully recovered.

He began a new life and found new hope, but the vice of being a drunkard lingered, though he gradually managed to reduce his reliance on alcohol. With determination, he was able to find a new job.

In a crucial turn, he recalled and renewed his relationship with Sarah. It was revealed that Sarah had stood by his side through his darkest days, remaining by his bedside during his anguish until his recovery. His new life was now

intertwined with the woman for whom he had committed the tragic betrayal against Rachel.

Amadeus woke up from his slumber, his mind now clear. The deep dive into his subconscious had provided the crucial, terrifying insight into his disturbed life. The "unidentified woman in her early forties" was not a stranger, but Rachel's mother, wielding her dark power on behalf of her dead daughter.

Amadeus had only one thing consuming his mind now: he had to get back into the other witch's house in Buscony. He knew exactly what he was looking for—the secret shrine where his picture, the focus of the fatal enchantment, lay tied with a copper string. The journey was no longer about vengeance for Red, but a desperate, singular mission for his own survival. He had to break the curse at its source.

The Solo Return

Driven by the terrifying clarity of his past, Amadeus urged Ben to go with him, but his friend was finally broken. Ben was scared and exhausted by their grim witch-hunting crusade. He flatly refused, needing time to rest before he could even think about returning to work, much less to the lair of the coven.

Amadeus had to go alone, bringing only the necessary tools that might be of use in retrieving the cursed photograph. Once more, he journeyed into the wilderness of Buscony, concealing himself to avoid any lingering enemies. His mission now required iron patience. He settled into the tall grass and prepared to wait, knowing he might have to spend the entire day and night monitoring every single element of the area until he found his chance. His freedom, perhaps his sanity, depended on this lonely vigil.

Amadeus was now waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. Just as he had done before, he planned to sneak a peek into the window, but he knew there was no guarantee that the house was empty.

The silence of the environment that had once seemed to be his ally now felt like a terrifying threat. The lack of activity could easily lull him into a false sense of security, jeopardizing his whole mission. He knew that any mistake in this silent, watchful place could lead to the abortion of his purpose and end in a bitter, final catastrophe. He had to wait until he was certain the coast was clear.

A Change of Tactic

Amadeus slipped into the house and immediately made his way to the lower ground level. This time, he completely ignored the familiar tunnel through the manhole, knowing

that path only led to the coven's outer settlement. His attention was fixed on finding a different passage—a hidden way he strongly suspected existed—that would lead directly to the unburned house and the true altar.

He turned toward the darker corners, searching for the hidden route.

Ambush

The silent hunt was shattered. Amadeus never thought that one of Linda's brothers would still be hanging around the house. He was instantly stunned as the man suddenly appeared and yelled directly at him.

"Hey, who are you?! Stop!" the man shouted, the sound echoing sharply in the confined space, locking Amadeus in the beam of his unwanted attention.

Escape into the Sanctuary

Amadeus didn't hesitate; he ran away in a safe direction, scrambling to avoid capture. The man, however, was immediately lethal: he got his gun and fired. The first shot missed him by inches. Other shots followed quickly, echoing in the confined space, until Amadeus was finally able to dump into an area that looked like a ritual center.

The space was dark, illuminated only by an obscurely lighted lamp that was fixed to one of the walls, casting deep shadows everywhere. When he finally confirmed that he was

in the suspected place of the shrine, Amadeus took immediate cover, hiding desperately behind a thick dark curtain. Hiding in the Shrine

The man arrived at the ritual center and immediately began to hunt for Amadeus. Hidden behind the thick, dark curtain, Amadeus cautiously sneaked a peek through a small slit. His eyes darted around the room, finally locking onto the object of his mission: the shrine. There, he clearly saw the skull with a lighted candle, confirming this was the altar.

The footsteps of the gunman approached nearer, moving slowly and deliberately as the man tried to sense any shift in the surroundings. Amadeus instinctively held his breath, terrified that the slightest sound would betray his location. While scanning the floor, he glanced at a wooden stool positioned right beside him.

The Blow and the Inferno

When the gunman paused, Amadeus seized his chance. He slowly shrank down, quietly extending his right arm until his fingers brushed the wooden stool. Just as the gunman was positioned exactly behind the curtain, Amadeus grabbed the stool and, with all his might, slammed it into the man's back. The gunman dropped instantly, falling unconscious without a sound.

Amadeus scrambled out, making a frantic beeline for the shrine. There it was: his old photograph, tied tightly with the damning copper strand. He seized the picture to tear the curse away, but in his haste and confusion, he accidentally smacked the skull that held the lighted candle.

Fire in the Altar

The fall was catastrophic. The skull and its lighted candle tumbled onto the altar table. The flame instantly touched a pool of flammable chemical that must have been a part of the coven's rituals. The liquid ignited with a sharp whoosh, and the fire instantly caught the heavy dark curtain behind which Amadeus had been hiding just moments before. The entire room was suddenly ablaze, the curse he had come to break now feeding a rapidly spreading inferno.

Escape and Collision

In no time, Amadeus scampered from the rapidly burning ritual center and fumbled his way through the dark passages toward the upper level of the structure.

Along the way, he collided violently with a group who were evidently startled by the commotion: the old woman (Rachel's mother), Linda, and his remaining brother.

Amadeus's untidy appearance, covered in soot and shadow from his ordeal, temporarily concealed his real identity. Rushing blindly along the dark, narrow path, he

strongly knocked them off their feet. Linda and the old woman fell hard on the ground, while his brother, a husky man, was merely dropped onto his knee.

Linda was somewhat dizzy, and the old woman—the very witch who had cast the curse—was barely clinging to consciousness, hardly able to stand on her feet. Linda tried desperately to extend her arm for support, but before she could brace her mother, the old woman fell completely unconscious.

The Escape Through Fire

Without looking back, Amadeus ran to the tunnel leading to the manhole, the photograph clenched in his hand. Immediately, the husky man chased him, the sound of gunshots ringing out behind him.

The fire, having started in the ritual room, crept rapidly and began to consume the lower level of the structure as several explosions rocked the building and intensified the blaze.

Amadeus scrambled onto the wooden stairs of the tunnel and quickly pushed open the iron canopy above him. At that same moment, billows of fire violently emerged from the upper level of the structure, and a hard explosion jolted the entire tunnel. The chasing husky man fell to his blazing death in the blast.

Amadeus pulled himself onto the surface, leaving the inferno behind, just as the smoke of death billowed violently from the manhole. The witches' lair, and the source of his torment, was finally destroyed.

The End of the Inferno

Amadeus lay on the grassy ground, covered in growing weeds, gasping for air and safety. The sight behind him was apocalyptic: a burning inferno at nightfall that rose like a malevolent bonfire in the middle of the wilderness.

No one else knew of this cataclysm, this fiery and horrible death that had consumed the last of the family of alchemists. Amadeus, battered and singed, had escaped the flames, leaving the evil that had plagued his life to perish in its own blazing lair.

The Shadow's Edge

The curse clung to him like a shroud. Ben hadn't realized the true cost of crossing those witches; he'd merely dismissed them as a dark footnote to a successful mission. Now, their venomous legacy was taking root. Like Amadeus, the nightmares began subtly, then swelled into a nightly tide of terror. Sleep was no escape—it was a battlefield.

He was haunted by the twin images of two figures: dark men, carved from shadow and malice. They were lean, silent,

and relentlessly focused on one thing: his demise. In the suffocating darkness of his dreams, they stalked him, their presence an icy, inescapable dread.

Every night, the scene was the same, yet the tension ratcheted higher. He would see the metallic glint of the weapons they wielded—sharp, wicked blades that caught the phantom moonlight. They moved with a predator's grace, and the air would hiss as the steel slashed down, aimed for his lifeblood. Ben would wake with a choked gasp, heart hammering against his ribs, the phantom chill of the passing blade lingering on his skin.

But he was a survivor. Even in the chaos of his subconscious, his instincts were honed. Each night, he was able to twist, dodge, and scramble away from the deadly arc of their swings, escaping the final, fatal blow by the thinnest margin.

He would bolt upright in his bed, sweat-drenched, the scent of fear thick in the air. The sheets were tangled ropes around him, and the silence of the room felt louder and heavier than the phantom clash of steel. He got away, yes, but the haunting images—the cold, empty eyes of the dark men and the chilling certainty of their intent—were seared behind his eyelids. The question wasn't if they would catch him, but when. And with each passing day, his grip on reality

began to fray, the line between waking terror and sleeping nightmare growing dangerously thin.

A Private Hell

Ben wrestled with his affliction in silence. He couldn't bring himself to confide in Amadeus, the very man who understood the crushing weight of a curse. Perhaps it was pride, or perhaps a grim fear of confirming the magical poison now seeping into his soul. Instead, he faced the escalating terror with a grim, solitary resolve, determined to overcome this monstrous, personal issue through sheer courage.

But courage wasn't a shield against the supernatural. It was his mother and younger brother who bore witness to his suffering. They were his anchor, offering ceaseless comfort and consolation as they watched his once-steady spirit fray. They saw the dark circles under his eyes deepen, the involuntary tremors that ran through him even when awake. They understood his predicament intimately, yet they were utterly powerless to help.

Their love drove them to desperate measures. They sought out every avenue of aid, a frantic search that began with hushed visits to local psychics—those who claimed to read the shadow-lines of fate—and culminated in pleading

sessions with a solemn priest, who offered prayers and holy water.

Ben went along, a hollow shell of himself, participating in the rituals and listening to the pronouncements of doom and the hollow promises of salvation. But the curse was too potent, too deeply rooted. The incantations of the psychics offered no reprieve, and the blessings of the priest proved futile. The dark men continued their nightly ritual, their blades swinging closer, reminding Ben and his family that this was a darkness no ordinary mortal—or their spiritual allies—could dispel. They were alone against a power that defied the sacred and the profane.

What is Ben's next move, now that every conventional and spiritual avenue for help has failed?

The failed rituals and the tears of his family hardened a resolve in Ben that was both terrifying and absolute. He looked at his distraught mother and brother and spoke the chilling truth that had settled deep in his core: "There's no one but I alone could solve this issue, even to the point of death." The psychics and priests were useless. This was a battle for his soul, and he was the only combatant.

The constant haunting was taking its toll. With every passing hour, Ben was consumed by dark thoughts, his peace of mind utterly annihilated. Sleep offered only the nightly

spectacle of his own murder. Disgruntled and desperate, he could barely resist the encroaching dread, the pressure of the dark men's influence leaching into his waking moments.

In a frantic, ill-conceived instant, he hatched a plan of escape. He would go to a distant place, believing that physical distance might somehow sever the magical tether. He packed only essentials and left in the dead of night, chasing a false dawn of relief.

But the moment he crossed the county line, the truth hit him with brutal clarity. The jinx seemed to have been welded to him—not a geographical problem, but a metaphysical one. The nightmares didn't stop; they merely shifted, the dark men now appearing in unfamiliar rooms, their movements quicker, their blades closer than ever. His journey was in vain. He was dragging his personal hell with him.

Defeated and yet strangely fortified by the futility of his escape, Ben made the only choice left to him. He turned the car around. His destination was home, not for safety, but for the battlefield. He had to go back to face it at any cost, to confront the source of the curse, whatever deadly truth that confrontation might reveal. He was done running. The hunt was over, and Ben was ready to become the quarry who fights back.

The Turning Point

The fight against the curse was a brutal, one-sided war of attrition. During one particularly vicious nocturnal encounter, Ben's defenses finally crumbled. He didn't just wake up; he was thrown back into consciousness by a searing pain, the lingering phantom of a blow he'd barely evaded. The resulting fever and utter exhaustion forced him to finally concede to his body's desperate plea for rest. He lay in a sweat-soaked stupor for two days, the terror of the previous nights replaced by the heavy malaise of illness.

But the reprieve was brief. Lying there, helpless, Ben realized his illness was a side effect, not a solution. The curse hadn't vanished; it was merely waiting.

As the fever broke, a slow, metallic burn started in his veins. It wasn't the return of health, but the furious resurgence of his will. His physical strength gradually returned, fueled by a corrosive blend of anger and desperation. His muscles tensed, his breathing deepened, and the rising tide of adrenaline—the primal surge of a cornered man—wiped away the last vestiges of fear. The moment had come. He would not wait for the shadows to find him again; he would call them out.

He rose from the bed, his body still heavy with fatigue, but his eyes blazing with a dangerous, new clarity. He stalked to the center of the room, throwing open the curtains to let

the weak evening light flood in, a defiance against the darkness that haunted him. He didn't wait for sleep to summon them.

With a roar that was part challenge and part raw anguish, Ben threw his arms wide into the empty space, confronting the unseen forces that had ruined his life.

“Who the hell are you? Why are you disturbing me!” he bellowed, the sound echoing through the house, a gauntlet thrown directly into the face of the curse.

The Voice from the Void

The moment Ben's roar of defiance faded, the air in the room didn't just still—it grew thick, cold, and heavy. The weak light seemed to dim as if a black hole had opened in the very atmosphere.

Then, a sound cut through the silence. It wasn't the metallic hiss of a blade, but a voice—dry, rasping, and utterly devoid of warmth, yet resonating with an undeniable power. The source was indistinct, hovering near the shadowed corner of the room, as if spoken by the darkness itself.

“We've been stalking you and your friend, Amadeus, because you have come to destroy us.”

The words struck Ben like a physical blow, confirming his worst fears: this wasn't random malice; it was retribution. And Amadeus was also targeted.

"Yes, exactly! Because you're destroying my friend, Amadeus, too!" Ben spat back, adrenaline now laced with protective fury. The curse wasn't just on him; it was a targeted act against their partnership, their mission.

The voice continued, its tone chillingly measured, a sound that promised inevitable doom. "We've come to destroy you or come with us in peace."

Ben's mind raced, a terrifying calculation unfolding. Peace? With his tormentors? "Why should I go with you?" he demanded, his voice trembling only slightly, a desperate effort to buy time, to understand the unthinkable offer.

The answer was delivered with a final, crushing finality, a declaration of ownership that left no room for negotiation or hope. "To be one of us. So, you come with us or you'll die."

The offer was a snare: eternal slavery to the darkness he fought, or immediate annihilation. The air crackled with the silent weight of their threat, the void in the corner seeming to grow, ready to swallow him whole. Ben stood poised, facing a choice that sealed his fate, realizing that to take their hand meant becoming a new, terrifying emissary of the very curse he had sworn to defeat.

How does Ben respond to the ultimatum, and what surprising move does he make to break the dark men's grip?

The Silent Struggle

Ben's spirit recoiled from the ultimate betrayal—to join the darkness. His refusal was a battle cry, ringing with the last reserves of his defiance. “No! I will destroy you before you get me!” he screamed, the sound echoing not just in the room, but in the prison of the curse itself.

The response was immediate and terrifying. The shadows condensed. The two dark men materialized, moving with impossible speed and a chilling, predatory focus. They didn't attack with blades this time; they reached for him, their grip intended to seize his very essence.

Ben roared, thrashing wildly. He refused to hold his arms out, struggling with every ounce of physical strength he possessed, desperately trying to break the invisible bonds of their reach. He could feel the icy pressure closing in, the sensation of being grabbed by unseen hands. He fought, he clawed, he strained, yet his flailing fists met only empty air. He couldn't touch them, but they were touching him.

He kept shouting, his voice ragged with terror and fury, a desperate plea for help. But the curse had walled him off. The nurses outside, sensing the sudden, violent chaos erupting within the hospital room, rushed to the door. They

heard the muffled screams, the frantic sounds of a struggle, but when they tried the handle, it was locked, barred by a force beyond their comprehension. They pounded on the wood, their concerned calls muted and futile.

Ben fought until his muscles gave out, until the oxygen burned from his lungs. The struggle was agonizing, hopeless. His body convulsed violently under the dark men's inexorable grip, his resistance fading into a silent shudder.

And then, Ben was silenced.

At that precise, terrifying moment, the lock on the door gave way with a sharp snap. The nurses burst in, their faces pale with alarm. The room was empty of intruders, yet the atmosphere was thick with residual cold and dread. Ben lay on the floor, his body slack, his eyes rolled back, caught in a massive seizure. The dark intruders were gone, their victory momentary, their intention brutally clear.

Shouting his name, the nurses rushed him onto a gurney. He was hurtling down the hallway, the fluorescent lights blurring above him, a desperate race to the Intensive Care Unit—a victim not of a physical ailment, but of a magical assault that had finally ripped through the barrier between his nightmare and the waking world.

The air in the sterile hallway of the Intensive Care Unit remained thick with the phantom cold of the magical

intrusion. The physician, grave-faced and weary, delivered the final, clinical verdict to Ben's frantic family and the silently awaiting Amadeus.

"I am sorry, he's gone," the Physician affirmed, his voice low. "His heart simply seized. A massive coronary event." The medical explanation, though true in fact, was a hollow echo of the terrifying reality: the dark men had succeeded. The curse had claimed its first life.

Amadeus felt the news not as shock, but as a sickening confirmation of dread. Ben, who had fought alone, was gone. The faithful family friend, whose strength Amadeus had so relied upon, was now a casualty in a war most people didn't even know they were fighting.

"Ben was a faithful family friend," Amadeus choked out, the words raw, his gaze distant. "He lost his life for our cause." It was a silent, agonizing vow: Ben's death would not be reduced to a tragic medical incident; it was a sacrifice.

Sarah, standing nearby, placed a firm hand on his rigid shoulder, her own grief sharp but controlled. "Yes. He was a good man, a trusted and reliable shield for all of us," she added, her eyes reflecting the sudden, terrifying elevation of the stakes. The enemies they faced were not content with nightmares; they were killers.

Amadeus slowly looked up, his face etched with a grim, dangerous resolve that replaced the immediate sorrow. The tears had dried, leaving behind a cold, burning clarity. “We will never forget Ben,” he declared, the finality of the statement ringing with the promise of vengeance. “They wanted destruction. Now, they’ll have war. The fight has just become personal.”

A Year of Quiet Recovery

A year had passed, a stretch of time that both dragged and flew by, acting as a balm on the psychic wounds left by Ben's tragic demise. The immediate, suffocating gloom had lifted. Amadeus had slowly, meticulously, pieced his life back together. The constant vigilance and paralyzing fear that had defined the past year began to recede, settling into the background as a grim, dark memory. He was back in the rhythm of his normal life, functioning again alongside his family and colleagues, though the loss of Ben remained an ever-present, silent scar.

The others involved in the recent, messy events had also sought out normalcy and distance.

Nancy had returned to England, finally reunited with her husband, Van, seeking the stability of their established life

far from the strange and deadly currents that had pulled them into the conflict.

Sophia and her two children had also vanished from the immediate scene. The last reliable account placed them in Valcea with her parents. This move was a clear, desperate effort to resume their normal lives, escaping the epicenter of the danger and the horrifying events that had threatened to consume them all.

For a time, it seemed as if the curse, the dark men, and the fear had been confined to the past, allowing those who survived to breathe again, perhaps mistakenly believing the war was over.

The House of the Dead

The final, bureaucratic closure of Ben's life came with the liquidation of his assets. The memory of his home—a place once filled with warmth and, later, the chilling sounds of his private war—was erased by a real estate transaction.

The house of Red (an apparent nickname or previous owner, now merely a property title) was swiftly sold to a foreigner. The proceeds were carved up, a final accounting of his tragedy. A substantial portion was immediately used to settle the enormous hospitalization expenditures—the costs of treating a medical condition that was, in truth, an act of supernatural murder.

The remaining balance, his last material link to the world he fought to protect, was divided between Amadeus and Nancy according to his will.

For Nancy, receiving the funds in England was a stark, financial reminder of the horrors she had escaped and a source of quiet grief over the friend she had lost. It was a tainted inheritance, the ultimate cost of proximity to the war.

For Amadeus, the transaction was a cold, hard summation of Ben's sacrifice. Every cent felt weighted with Ben's blood and the chilling finality of his loss. The money was not wealth; it was a constant, tangible sign that the witches' curse had a devastating, real-world consequence, capable of reaching across continents and tearing lives apart.

The peace Amadeus had established was now revealed as fragile, built on the shifting sand of denial. The money, intended to ease their lives, only served to reignite the grim reality: Ben was gone, and the payment for his death had been received. This quiet inheritance was the down payment on the vengeance Amadeus now knew he must seek.

For Ben's surviving family—his mother and younger brother—the gruesome events were a dark chapter, but one they were fiercely determined to close. They framed the nightmare of the past not as a curse, but as a severe trial of life, one that had to be pondered and faced with courage and

faith. This spiritual and emotional reframing was their defense mechanism, a conscious choice to bury the supernatural terror under layers of stoic, practical necessity.

Life must go on for the benefit of future generations. This became their mantra. The loss of Ben was devastating, but they pushed past the horror to establish a sense of normalcy, protecting the living from the shadow of the dead. They now focused intently on enjoying their wholesome family unit and the fragile peace in life they had managed to reclaim, desperately hoping that their resolve would be enough to keep the darkness from returning. They sought routine, warmth, and the simple comforts of a life unburdened by magic, believing that the darkness would not target those who chose to simply live.

The Respite at the Seacoast

In a conscious effort to anchor his family firmly in the present and keep the shadows of the past at bay, Amadeus orchestrated a period of profound distraction. These were leisurely moments spent together, enjoying quality time at a serene, white sandy seacoast.

This location was intentionally chosen. It was a distant, sun-drenched sanctuary, far removed from the cold, haunted energy of the place where Rachel and the former (likely

referring to Ben, or perhaps another figure tied to the curse's initial incidents) used to find themselves entangled in the early stages of their mission. Amadeus wanted to saturate their senses with life and light.

His goal was simple and desperate: he wanted them to genuinely appreciate the beauty and the pleasant view in tranquil moments—a deep, settling peace that he knew, with chilling certainty, did not exist in all other places in their area. He was creating a temporary, physical barrier against the curse, a pocket of peace to recharge their souls, knowing that the real world back home remained subtly poisoned by the memory and the threat of the dark men. For a fleeting time, under the vast blue sky and beside the rhythmic ocean, Amadeus almost allowed himself to believe the trial was truly over.

The Whistle of the Wind

The scene was the very picture of manufactured tranquility. The only sound to puncture the profound stillness of the seaside was the soft, persistent whistle of the wind, traveling long and far across the open ocean.

Amadeus lay on his foldable beach bed, his arms resting lightly, his entire posture sinking into a rare state of comfort and repose. He drew deep, slow breaths, savoring the salty,

clean scent of the place, a stark contrast to the musty, fear-laced air of his nightmares. Drowsy from the sun and the rhythmic ocean sounds, he drifted into a shallow sleep. He wore a simple coco-leaves-woven hat, its broad brim angled perfectly to conceal his face and shield his eyes from the harsh, glistening light of the sun.

Beneath the shadow of the hat, a momentary peace settled on him. He was guarded, resting, and temporarily oblivious to the world.

But that peaceful whistle of the wind was about to carry a whisper of the past. As Amadeus drifts in this shallow sleep, the tranquility is violently shattered by something tangible, something he cannot dismiss as a mere dream. What is this sign, and what specific detail connects it immediately and chillingly back to the curse and Ben's death?

The Echo in the Silence

The tranquil moment imploded with violent abruptness. Amadeus's shallow sleep was brutally torn apart, his unconscious mind disruptively awakening not to the gentle lapping of waves, but to a sound that scraped against his soul—a chilling familiarity he instantly recognized from the darkest recesses of his recent past.

It was a voice—a raw, sibilant sound that seemed to come from nowhere, yet it was undeniably close, resonating in the

air above him as if the wind itself had learned to speak. It was the same dry, rasping texture of the entity that had tormented Ben in his final moments.

The word was simple, yet it carried the full weight of the curse:

“Dude... Dude.... Dude...”

It was spoken three times, each utterance slow, drawn-out, and laced with an unnatural, mocking intimacy. The use of Ben’s casual, everyday slang was a spike of pure, psychological terror.

Amadeus’s heart hammered a frantic rhythm against the sand, instantly sobered and rigid with terror beneath the straw hat. He didn't need to open his eyes to know the blissful peace was over. The chilling, impossible echo of the word “Dude” was a clear, malevolent message:

The dark men had followed him. They knew where he was. And they were using the voice—or perhaps the very memory—of his deceased friend Ben to announce their return. The curse had not ended with Ben’s death; it had merely been waiting for Amadeus to drop his guard. His quiet haven was now a trap.

What does Amadeus do the moment he tears off his hat, and what does he see or feel that confirms the nature of the supernatural threat?

The Unheard Warning

Amadeus tore the woven hat from his face, his eyes snapping open and scanning the pristine, sun-drenched beach with frantic intensity. The chilling echo of “Dude...” still reverberated in his mind, yet the physical surroundings were untouched, serene, and empty of any visible threat.

He launched himself off the foldable bed, his sudden, violent movement crushing the fragile stillness of the moment. He stood rigid, muscles coiled, utterly baffled by the audible chilling voice that only he seemed to perceive.

Sarah, who had been quietly reading a short distance away, noticed his abrupt distress. She approached him, concern etched on her face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice steady against the sound of the nearby waves.

Amadeus stared at her, his expression a frantic mix of fear and disbelief. He had to know if the curse was external or if his own mind was fracturing.

“Can’t you hear that chilling voice calling me?” he demanded, his voice low and urgent, the question laced with a desperate need for validation.

Sarah paused, listening intently to the natural sounds of the seashore—the wind, the sea, the cry of a distant gull. She shook her head, confusion replacing concern. “No. Why?”

The single, simple word—No—hit Amadeus with the force of a revelation. The curse wasn't broadcasting its return to the world; it was specifically targeting him. The isolation of the attack was more terrifying than a general haunting.

“Really?” he asked again, the word barely a whisper now, the implication sinking in: the dark men were real, they were here, and they had found a way to invade his sanity without anyone else knowing. The peace they had achieved was a lie, and the war for his soul was beginning anew, in the most private, insidious way imaginable.

The Digital Intrusion

Just as Sarah's confusion solidified his terrifying isolation, the silence was shattered again. The air near Amadeus seemed to shimmer, and the dry, chilling whisper returned, inescapable, mocking his desperation:

“Dude....Dude... Dude...”

This time, the sound was even clearer, colder, and more precise—a sound that was not simply an echo in his mind, but a signal with a definitive point of origin.

Amadeus's eyes darted frantically. He was not mad. He felt the gooseflesh rise on his arms as he slowly scratched his eyes, trying to clear the vision, desperate to find the source. His gaze swept across the sun-drenched sand, the colorful towels, and the mundane beach gear.

And then he saw it.

Beneath the metal post of his collapsed beach chair lay a small, black, innocuous object—an electronic gadget. It was unfamiliar, placed there with deliberate malice.

With a rigid, slow precision, Amadeus knelt and picked it up. It was a sleek, miniature recorder or transmitter, cold to the touch, and now completely silent. Sarah stood a few feet away, transfixed by his intense, erratic behavior.

Amadeus held the device, turning it over to catch the light, his jaw tight. The presence of this thing confirmed everything: the voice was real. The intrusion was physical.

He stared at the black device, then out at the impossibly peaceful ocean, his voice a low, dangerous growl, directed at the unseen enemy who had violated his sanctuary.

“What the hell is this? Are you scaring me?” he demanded, the question filled with a chilling mixture of fury and dread. He knew the answer. This wasn't a prank; it was a brazen, terrifying declaration of war. The dark men hadn't

just followed him; they had planted a piece of their evil in his brief

The Cruel Test

Amadeus, his entire body tense, held the electronic gadget—the silent witness to the chilling voice—and looked directly at Sarah. He reached out and gripped her right arm, his eyes locking onto hers, searching for any flicker of deceit, confusion, or lingering fear.

Instead, a strange expression bloomed on her face, and then, inexplicably, Sarah broke into laughter. It was a light, carefree sound that felt jarringly out of place against the backdrop of his terror.

“Yes. I was just joking with you!” Sarah announced, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. “I just wanted to see if you’re healed of your past. Has it faded away?” she asked, her tone shifting to one of pointed, almost probing curiosity.

Amadeus stood motionless, the relief he should have felt at the word 'joke' utterly absent, instantly replaced by a cold, sickening realization. She had done this? She had set up the device and mimicked the voice that haunted him? The betrayal of trust, the calculated cruelty of using Ben's last-heard word as a test, stunned him into silence.

“You’re scaring me? Why?” he finally managed, his voice dangerously low, stripped of all warmth.

The simple, innocent action of the joke had backfired catastrophically. Sarah had intended a test of his mental recovery, but to Amadeus, this moment felt like a far greater confirmation of the darkness: not only was the supernatural threat closing in, but the fragile foundation of trust in his human support system had been deeply shaken. He was truly, utterly alone in this war.

The Dismissal and the Deeper Lie

Amadeus maintained his terrifying composure, masking the shock and fury of her calculated betrayal. He needed to bury the moment, to deny its reality to her, even as the threat of the dark men felt more immediate than ever.

“What past?” he asked, his voice deliberately flat, feigning total ignorance. He forced a smile, letting her believe her “test” had failed—or succeeded, depending on her objective.

Sarah sighed, clearly relieved by his apparent detachment, and decided to push him just slightly further, linking the test to a specific, emotionally charged memory. “Did you not know the incident that happened in a distant place at sea?” She was referencing the dark events tied to Ben, to the mission, and perhaps even to the missing Rachel.

Amadeus responded by doing the absolute last thing she expected: he smiled warmly and pulled her into a tight embrace. The hug was an act of profound suppression, a

silent denial of the chilling voice, the electronic gadget, and the cruelty of her question.

“Yes. Forget about Rachel. Past is past, and things will just remain a memory, and it shall be buried in this place... in the deep blue sea forever. C’mon, let’s go home,” Amadeus sighed, his voice suddenly weary but resolved.

He was speaking a calculated lie. He wasn't dismissing the past; he was shielding it, recognizing that his fight was now a solitary one. The voice was real. The gadget was real. Sarah’s joke, however, served as his painful, final confirmation: he could trust no one with the truth of the curse.

They packed up their belongings, the peaceful scene now a stage for unseen malice. The illusion of a healed life was shattered. Amadeus knew he was going back not to his normal life, but to a renewed, invisible war. The sea would not bury the memory; he would simply carry it, concealed, back into the fray.

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