



# Virtual Trap

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## Chapter 1: An Ordinary Life

The muffled hum of the city wove its way through the partially open shutters, mingling with the melodious song of early birds. The first rays of sunlight, still soft and timid, caressed Amélie's sleeping face. A smile lit up her lips as she stretched languidly, savoring the tranquility of these moments stolen from the tumult of the day.

Outside, Paris was slowly awakening, but inside her small apartment nestled in the heart of the 15th arrondissement, an atmosphere of calm and serenity reigned. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, blending with the delicate scent of lilies that Amélie had received the day before for her birthday.

Thirty-five years old. A milestone reached with newfound serenity. She felt good about herself, fulfilled in her professional and romantic life. After years of hard work, she had climbed the ladder of her company, a reputable audit firm, to become one of the most respected accounting clerks. Her keen eye for detail, her rigor, and her unfailing professionalism had earned her the esteem of her peers and the trust of her superiors.

Marc, her husband of five years, was her rock, her confidant, her passionate lover. Together, they formed a united, complicit couple, vibrating in unison. Their love, forged in tenderness and mutual respect, was a haven of peace in an often chaotic world.

Amélie reached for her phone on the bedside table, its screen illuminating with a blue glow. A Facebook notification appeared: "Happy birthday Amélie! I hope you have an extraordinary day surrounded by those you love." The message was accompanied by a photo of her and her friends, taken during their last weekend at the seaside. A nostalgic smile lit up her face. They had laughed, danced, shared secrets under the starry sky. Precious memories that Amélie cherished like treasures.

She scrolled through the other congratulatory messages, warm words from her family, amusing wishes from her colleagues, touching attentions from distant acquaintances. Social networks were for her a window open to the world, a way to stay connected to the people she loved, to share moments of life, reflections, passions.

On Instagram, she posted a photo of her breakfast: perfectly golden croissants, a steaming cup of coffee, a bouquet of vibrant lilies. "Thank you all for your lovely birthday messages! I feel incredibly spoiled and loved. Ready to attack this new year with a smile!"

Amélie put away her phone, her heart light. Everything was perfect, harmonious. She couldn't have imagined a more beautiful day to celebrate her birthday. The future looked bright, filled with promise and happiness.

She didn't know yet that in the shadows, a gaze was scrutinizing her, analyzing every detail of her virtual life, every shared confidence, every published photo. A cold, calculating gaze, animated by an unhealthy gleam. A predator lurking in the meanders of the web, ready to pounce on its prey.

Amélie left the softness of her sheets, her heart light and her spirit cheerful. The day promised to be beautiful, bathed in a promising summer light. From her open window, she let the familiar tumult of the capital tickle her ears. The incessant ballet of cars, the snippets of animated conversations, the shrill cry of a siren in the distance, composed an urban symphony to which she was accustomed.

Her reflection in the mirror returned the image of a radiant woman. Her hazel eyes, sparkling with mischief, reflected a communicative joie de vivre. Her brown hair, a rebellious cascade that she tamed every morning into an elegant chignon, framed a delicate face with fine features.

After an invigorating shower, she slipped into a light dress that accentuated her slender figure. One last glance in the mirror, a touch of lipstick to illuminate her smile, and Amélie was ready to face her birthday.

Marc had already left for work, leaving a hastily scribbled note on the kitchen counter: "Happy birthday my love! Be on time for our romantic dinner tonight. I love you. Marc." A radiant smile illuminated Amélie's face. Marc always knew how to touch her, to shower her with happiness.

She savored her breakfast, each bite a delight to her senses. The coffee, full-bodied and aromatic, gently awakened her, while the croissant, crispy to perfection, melted on her tongue.

As she left her apartment, her phone vibrated in her purse. A new message. This time, it wasn't a congratulatory message. The sender was unknown, the number masked. The message, short and enigmatic, sent a chill down her spine: "I see you."

A shiver ran down her spine. She looked up, scanning the street for an insistent gaze, a suspicious presence. But there was nothing. Around her, Parisian life went on, indifferent to her sudden unease.

"It's probably a stupid joke," she thought, trying to chase away her growing apprehension. "A bad prankster who enjoys scaring people."

Yet, the message haunted her. She couldn't help but think back to those few sibylline words, to that "I see you" that echoed in her mind like a veiled threat.

She tried to reason with herself. She had no enemies, to her knowledge. Her life was a long, calm river, without waves or ripples. So why this feeling of anxiety that suddenly gripped her?

Arriving at work, she tried to focus on her files, to banish this disturbing message from her mind. But the shadow of the unknown hung over her, gnawing at her from the inside.

As the hours passed, the message continued to haunt her, creeping into her thoughts like a haunting melody. She tried to convince herself that it was just a bad joke, but doubt had crept into her, lingering like a dull ache.

She found herself observing her colleagues, watching for a fleeting glance, a sly smile that would betray the author of the message. But there was nothing. Around her, everything seemed normal, mundane. Was she becoming paranoid?

That evening, as she joined Marc at the restaurant, she tried to relax, to enjoy this birthday evening that he had concocted with so much love. But the unease persisted, lurking beneath the surface of her apparent serenity.

Marc, attentive and considerate as usual, noticed her tension. "Something's bothering you, my love? You seem distant tonight."

She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should tell him about the message. Was it ridiculous to worry about so little? Wouldn't she risk looking like an anxious woman, easy prey for pranksters?

"No, it's nothing serious," she finally lied. "Just a little tired. It's been a busy day at the office."

The dinner unfolded in a pleasant atmosphere, though Amélie struggled to banish her dark thoughts. The champagne, typically sparkling and festive, tasted bland, each sip tinged with bitterness. Marc's loving gaze, usually so reassuring, failed to dispel the cloud of anxiety that darkened her heart.

"Are you sure everything is alright?" asked Marc, his voice laced with a hint of worry. "You seem distant tonight. It's like you're wearing a mask."

Amélie hesitated, torn between her desire to confide in him and the fear of appearing ridiculous. Could she really share her anxieties with Marc, risk tarnishing this evening he had so carefully planned?

"It's just... a message I received this morning," she finally confessed, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Marc's face instantly hardened. "A message? From whom?"

"I don't know. The number was masked." She took a shaky breath before continuing. "It just said: 'I see you'."

A heavy silence descended upon the table, amplifying the feeling of dread that gripped Amélie. She searched Marc's face, seeking an ounce of solace in his eyes, but found only disbelief mixed with annoyance.

"It's a prank, that's all," he finally said, shrugging. "Don't worry yourself about it. There are plenty of idiots out there who get their kicks sending anonymous messages to scare people."

Amélie tried to cling to his reassuring words, but an inner voice whispered that it wasn't that simple. This message, however brief, had sown within her a seed of unease that was inexorably germinating.

"I hope you're right," she murmured, attempting a reassuring smile. "Maybe I'm just being a little paranoid lately."

Marc took her hand, his warm and comforting palm against hers. "Listen, if it'll make you feel better, I'll take a look at your phone. We'll find out who's hiding behind this number."

Amélie hesitated. On one hand, she appreciated Marc's protective gesture, his desire to reassure her. On the other, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of apprehension. Marc, despite his obvious love, could sometimes be a little possessive, a little too protective.

"Don't bother," she said, forcing a smile. "I'm sure it's nothing serious. Let's just forget about it, shall we? It's my birthday, after all!"

Marc returned her smile, but Amélie sensed he wasn't fooled. The shadow of the anonymous message still lingered over them, invisible yet tangible, insidiously contaminating their evening.

Back at their apartment, Amélie tried to take her mind off things by flipping through a decorating magazine, but the lines danced before her eyes, blurred by her anxious thoughts. The message, "I see you," echoed in her mind, each repetition amplifying her unease.

"Everything okay?" asked Marc, emerging from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

Amélie slammed the magazine shut. "No, everything is not okay. I can't stop thinking about that message. I feel like someone is watching me, Marc."

Marc approached her, his eyes locked on hers. "Amélie, stop letting your imagination run wild. It's just some prankster. You're letting this get to you."

"But..."

"No 'buts'," Marc cut her off, placing a finger on her lips. "Forget about the message. Focus on us, on our love. That's all that matters, alright?"

Amélie nodded, unable to articulate her fears. Marc's intense gaze, usually so reassuring, now sent shivers down her spine. Was she going crazy?



That night, nestled against Marc in their bed, Amélie tried to banish her anxieties, to convince herself that it was all just a bad dream. But sleep was slow to come, haunted by menacing shadows and unseen gazes.

The next morning, as she reached for her phone on the bedside table, she was horrified to discover a new message. Same unknown sender, same masked number. This time, however, the message was accompanied by a photo.

The picture, blurry but recognizable, showed Amélie, sitting at her desk, her face illuminated by the pale glow of her computer screen.

The message was short, chilling: "I told you. I see you."

A glacial shiver coursed down Amélie's spine. The photo was blurry, taken surreptitiously, but there was no doubt: it was indeed her, hunched over her keyboard, engrossed in her work. The feeling of being watched, spied upon, struck her with full force, plunging her into an abyss of anxiety.

How was this possible? Who could possibly send her such a photo? Her mind raced, scanning the faces of her colleagues, searching for a fleeting glance, an ambiguous smile that might have betrayed the author of this chilling message.

The previous evening, Marc had tried to reassure her, dismissing the sender as a "pathetic loser seeking cheap thrills." But this photo, this irrefutable proof that she was being watched, swept away her husband's comforting words with a single stroke. This was no longer a bad joke, but a very real threat looming over her, insidious and icy.

Amélie felt a knot of anxiety forming in her chest, stealing her breath. She reread the message, each word resonating like a stab in the silence of the room. "I see you." A short, banal sentence, yet it took on a terrifying dimension in this context.

The phone trembled between her fingers, as if to remind her of the reality of the threat. She placed it on the bedside table, unable to bear the contact of this object, suddenly hostile.

A feeling of vulnerability, of powerlessness, washed over her. Her life, so carefully constructed, so perfectly ordered, was crumbling before her eyes, revealing a chaos she could not even begin to comprehend.

She jumped up, her heart pounding in her chest. She had to talk to Marc, show him the photo, make him understand that the situation was far more serious than he thought.

She found him in the kitchen, making coffee, seemingly absorbed in reading the headlines of the newspaper. "Marc," she said in a strained voice, "you have to see this."

Marc looked up, a puzzled frown on his face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Amélie approached him, phone outstretched like a poisoned offering. "I got another message. With a photo."

Marc took the phone, his eyes quickly scanning the message and the photo. Amélie watched his face, scrutinizing every expression, waiting for a reaction, a word that would reassure her. But Marc's face remained impassive, as if frozen in a mask of indifference.

"What's this nonsense?" he finally said, handing the phone back to her with a brusque gesture. "It's a joke, Amélie. That's all. Stop getting worked up over nothing."

Marc's reaction, far from reassuring her, only fueled her anxiety. "A joke? You think this is funny, Marc? Someone is watching me, taking pictures of me without my knowledge, and you're talking about a joke?"

"Listen," Marc said, placing his coffee cup on the counter, "I don't know who's trying to scare you, but I'll find out and deal with them, I promise. But in the meantime, stop panicking over nothing. It's just a stupid game."

A stupid game. Marc's words echoed in Amélie's mind like an insult to her growing anxiety. How could he be so insensitive, so detached from what was happening?

"You don't understand, Marc," she murmured, her voice choked with tears welling up in her eyes. "This is not a game. I'm really scared."

Marc sighed, an exasperated look on his face. "Amélie, stop being paranoid. You're imagining things, that's all. There's no danger, I promise."

But deep down, Amélie knew Marc was wrong. The danger was very real, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. And she, a prisoner of her own nightmare, felt powerless to stop it.

The commute to the office was agonizing. Every furtive glance on the subway, every shadowy figure she passed on the street, fed the demons of paranoia stirring within her. Arriving at work, Amélie sought refuge in the sterile atmosphere of her cubicle, seeking a semblance of security behind her computer screen.

She tried to immerse herself in her files, to find the familiar rhythm of figures and balance sheets, but concentration eluded her. The words of the message, "I see you," danced before her eyes, blurring the columns of numbers, transforming Excel spreadsheets into indecipherable grimoires.

The image from the photo, blurry yet persistent, imposed itself once more on her mind. She saw herself again, seated at her desk, head bent over her keyboard, oblivious to the intrusive gaze scrutinizing her. The banality of the scene, far from reassuring her, only amplified her unease. That was the most terrifying thing: realizing that her daily life, her

habits, her every move, could be spied on, examined, archived by an unknown lurking in the shadows.

She surprised herself by scrutinizing her colleagues, searching each gaze for a glimmer of malice, a flash of guilt. But there was nothing. Around her, office life went on, indifferent to the storm raging within her.

Deep down, Amélie knew she couldn't go on like this. She had to talk to someone, share her anxiety, find a listening ear to help her untangle the threads of this nightmare.

Her gaze settled on Sophie, her cubicle neighbor, a bubbly and warm young woman with whom she had forged a sincere friendship. Sophie, with her infectious smile and unwavering optimism, always had a kind word, a wise piece of advice to boost everyone's morale.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, torn between her desire to confide and the fear of appearing delusional. How could she explain the inexplicable? How could she justify an anxiety fueled by an anonymous message and a stolen photo?

"Sophie, do you have a moment?" she finally asked, her voice barely louder than a murmur.

Sophie looked up from her computer, a smile illuminating her face. "Of course, Amélie. What's going on?"

Amélie took a deep breath, searching for the right words to express the chaos reigning in her mind. "I need to talk to you about something. Something strange is happening to me."

"Something strange? What do you mean?" Sophie swiveled in her chair, her smile gradually fading, replaced by a look of concern.

Amélie hesitated, ill at ease. Words refused to come, trapped behind a dam of doubts and irrational fears. How to explain the inexplicable? How to articulate this chilling feeling of being watched, spied upon, tracked by an invisible shadow?

"It's... complicated to explain," she finally murmured, her cheeks burning with shame. She felt ridiculous, childish, like a frightened child afraid of an imaginary monster.

"At least try," insisted Sophie, her voice soft and soothing. "You know you can trust me."

Amélie took a deep breath, searching for an anchor in her friend's kind gaze. "I've been getting messages," she began, her voice barely audible. "Anonymous messages. Someone is telling me they can see me."

Sophie frowned, perplexed. "Who is sending you these messages? Do you have any idea?"

Amélie shook her head, helpless. "No idea. The number is masked." She took her phone out of her bag, holding it out to Sophie. "Look."

Sophie took the phone, her eyes scanning the messages. Amélie observed every movement of her face, watching for any expression, any judgment in her azure blue eyes.

"It's... creepy," Sophie admitted, handing the phone back to her. "But is it really worth worrying about? Maybe it's just a prankster."

"That's not all," murmured Amélie, her stomach twisting at the thought of revealing the photo. "There's a picture. A photo of me, at my desk."

Sophie's face tightened, betraying her growing concern. "A photo of you? But who could have taken a picture of you without you knowing?"

Amélie felt tears welling up in her eyes, burning and uncontrollable. "I don't know! That's what scares me! I feel like... like someone is watching me, following my every move."

Sophie looked at her for a long moment, her gaze filled with newfound compassion. "Listen, Amélie," she finally said, her voice calm and reassuring, "I understand you're scared. But don't panic. We'll find a solution."

She picked up a sheet of paper and a pen from her desk. "Tell me everything in detail. When did you receive the first message? What exactly did it say? Do you have any idea who might have a grudge against you?"

Amélie, reassured by her friend's apparent calm, launched into a detailed account of the events of the past few days. She recounted the anonymous messages, the stolen photo, her growing anxiety. She talked about Marc, his inability to grasp the seriousness of the situation, her feeling of being alone and misunderstood in the face of this invisible threat.

Sophie listened attentively, without interrupting, taking notes from time to time. Her seriousness, her unexpected professionalism, had a calming effect on Amélie. For the first time since the beginning of this nightmare, she felt a glimmer of hope. She was no longer alone. Sophie was there, by her side, ready to help her face the unknown.

Once her account ended, a heavy silence fell over the cubicle, only disturbed by the clicking of keyboards and the hushed murmurs of their colleagues. Sophie, her face grave, attentively reviewed her notes, tapping her fingertips on the notepad as if trying to extract a miracle solution.

"I understand your worry, Amélie," she finally said, lifting her eyes to meet hers. Her voice, usually so cheerful, had taken on a graver, more composed tone, betraying her concern. "What's happening to you isn't normal. This needs to be taken seriously."

Relief tinged with gratitude washed over Amélie. Finally, someone who took her seriously, who didn't minimize her anxieties! Sophie's words, however simple, acted like a balm on her raw wounds.

"What can I do?" she asked, eager for advice, for solutions to escape this waking nightmare.

Sophie pondered for a moment, biting her lower lip thoughtfully. "The first thing to do is talk to the police," she declared with conviction. "With these messages and this photo, you have tangible evidence of harassment. They won't be able to take you lightly."

The idea of going to the police, of revealing her violated privacy to strangers, was repugnant to Amélie. But deep down, she knew Sophie was right. Alone, she felt powerless, helpless against this invisible threat. She needed help, protection, and the police were probably her only option.

"You're right," Amélie acknowledged with a weary sigh. "I have to file a complaint. But... what if the police don't take me seriously? What if they think it's just some unimportant anonymous messages?"

A flash of anger lit up Sophie's eyes. "They will take you seriously, Amélie. You have rights, and no one has the right to harass you like this. I'll come with you to the police station, if you want. We'll go together."

Sophie's offer, her reassuring presence by her side, somewhat eased Amélie's anxiety. She was no longer alone facing the unknown. Sophie was there, supportive, ready to shoulder this ordeal with her.

"Thank you, Sophie," murmured Amélie, her throat tight with emotion. "I don't know what I would do without you."

Sophie gave her a warm smile, a gesture of friendship that spoke volumes. "We're friends, aren't we? We support each other through difficult times."

Amélie nodded, her heart heavy but a glimmer of hope flickering in her eyes. Together, they would face this ordeal. Together, they would unmask the person hiding behind these threatening messages. Together, they would take back control of Amélie's life, brick by brick, until the light chased away the shadows that poisoned her.

The decision was made. The time had come to fight back.



## Chapter 2: A Shadow on the Canvas

The police station, cramped and cacophonous, reeked of cheap disinfectant and stale coffee. Behind a chipped Formica counter, a portly policeman with a wispy mustache listlessly tapped on his keyboard, his gaze fixed on a computer screen seemingly plucked from the 1990s. The atmosphere, both oppressive and impersonal, chipped away at what little resolve Amélie had managed to muster before stepping into the precinct.

Sophie, true to her word, stood ramrod straight beside her, her presence the sole comforting element in this dreary tableau. She gripped Amélie's arm with a firm hand, as if to infuse her with some of her Olympian calm. This simple gesture of friendship, charged with unwavering solidarity, prevented Amélie from succumbing to the panic gradually engulfing her.

"Hello," Sophie declared in a clear voice, addressing the officer. "We would like to file a complaint for harassment."

The policeman finally lifted his eyes to meet theirs, his weary gaze sweeping over Sophie first before settling on Amélie. A frown accompanied his inspection, as if the sight of two women, one visibly anxious, was an unwelcome intrusion upon his monotonous afternoon.

"Harassment, you say? And what would that be about exactly? Threats? Assaults?"

His voice, flat and devoid of empathy, had the effect of a cold shower on Amélie. She felt her stomach clench, fear threatening to drown her. Had she been wrong to come? Would the police really take her seriously?

"I've received anonymous threatening messages," Amélie stammered, her voice choked with anxiety. "And... and someone sent me a photo of myself... taken without my knowledge."

The policeman raised his eyebrows, a dubious expression settling on his face. "A photo of you? And where was this photo taken?"

Amélie hesitated, a wave of shame washing over her. Should she really recount the sordid details of this affair to this man who seemed to judge her with his gaze?

Sophie, sensing her hesitation, intervened in a firm tone. "The photo was taken at my friend's workplace, without her knowledge. She has received threatening messages, and she is being followed. It is clearly a case of harassment."

Sophie's categorical tone, her assertiveness in the face of the policeman's casual attitude, had the desired effect. The man sat up slightly in his chair, a semblance of interest replacing the apathy that had hitherto marked his face.

"Well, well," he said, reaching for a notepad and pen. "Tell me everything from the beginning. And give me your name, address, occupation..."

As Amélie began to recite the facts, recounting with difficulty the events of recent days, she couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope. Perhaps this was the beginning of the end of her nightmare. Perhaps the police would take her seriously, perhaps they would find the one who was harassing her, perhaps she would find peace again.

But deep down, an insidious little voice whispered to her that this was only the beginning of a long and arduous battle. A fight to make her voice heard, to have her victim status recognized, to reclaim her stolen life. A fight against the unknown, against fear, against herself.

Amélie's account, initially hesitant and fragmented, gained fluency as she delved deeper into the maelstrom of events. She recounted the first anonymous messages, the insidious fear that had gripped her, the feeling of being watched, hunted. Her voice cracked as she mentioned the photo, irrefutable proof that the unknown individual was intruding into her private life, violating her intimacy with chilling impunity.

The police officer, pen in hand, took notes without much conviction, his impassive face betraying no emotion. He bombarded her with questions, some pertinent, others dismally banal, as if he were trying to fill out a form rather than understand the distress of a victim.

"Do you have any idea who might have a grudge against you? Enemies? Jilted lovers?"

The question, delivered in a neutral tone, struck Amélie like a slap in the face. Was that really the first thing that came to mind? To reduce her to a flighty woman, a victim of her own romantic escapades?

Sophie, outraged by the officer's inappropriate tone, was about to intervene, but Amélie forestalled her, her voice trembling but firm.

"I have no enemies, and I am married. I have no idea who could be doing this to me."

The officer looked up at her, a flicker of skepticism in his eyes. "Are you sure? Do you ever use dating sites? Discussion forums?"

Amélie felt anger rising within her, burning and bitter. Was this a joke? She was being harassed, stalked, and suspected of being responsible for her own misfortune?

"No, I don't use dating sites!" she exclaimed, exasperated. "I don't understand why you're questioning me like this. I came here for help, not to be judged."

The officer shrugged, a gesture of indifference that chilled her to the bone. "You see, Madam, we receive many complaints of harassment, and in most cases, it's a matter of personal conflicts, neighborhood disputes, revenge from love affairs. We have to explore all avenues."

"And in the rare cases where it's not? In the rare cases where the victim is actually being harassed by a stranger? You prefer to ignore the evidence and send her home advising her to change her locks?"

Sophie's voice, icy and sharp as a blade, cut through the heavy atmosphere of the police station. The officer, taken aback by this sudden vehemence, sat up straight in his chair, a flush rising to his cheeks.

"Listen, Miss, I'm doing my job. If you're not satisfied with the way we're handling this case, you're free to file a complaint with my superiors."

"Rest assured, we will," Sophie retorted sharply. "But in the meantime, we would appreciate it if you would take my friend's complaint seriously and do what is necessary to find the perpetrator of this harassment."

The officer, visibly annoyed, sighed heavily before returning to his paperwork.

"Very well," he said wearily. "Leave me your contact information, and we'll contact you if we need any further information."

Amélie, exhausted by this fruitless struggle, felt drained of all energy. Had she really believed that the police would take her seriously, that they would get her out of this hell? She was just another case number, another victim.

The silence that followed his departure was deafening. Amélie, her heart pounding in her chest, felt tears of impotence stinging her eyes. The police station, far from being the refuge she had hoped for, now appeared as a cold and hostile place, permeated with indifference and bureaucracy.

"Don't worry, Amélie," said Sophie softly, squeezing her shoulder. "It's not over. We won't let it go."

Her words, though full of good intention, rang hollow in Amélie's ears. How could Sophie be so optimistic? The police hadn't taken them seriously, treating them like irresponsible children reporting stolen stickers.

"But what can we do?" asked Amélie, her voice choked with a sob she couldn't hold back. "They don't believe us. They don't care."

Sophie took her hand, her steely blue gaze seeming to pierce the armor of despair that threatened to engulf Amélie.

"Listen to me, Amélie," she said in a firm, almost martial tone. "We can only rely on ourselves. The police won't do anything until something serious happens. So, we'll give them what they want. We'll serve them on a silver platter the irrefutable proof that a sick man is harassing you."

Amélie lifted her head towards her, intrigued despite her despondency. "What do you mean? What can we do?"

An enigmatic smile stretched across Sophie's lips. "We're going to conduct our own investigation. We're going to trap this guy. And believe me, when we're done, the police will be forced to take us seriously."

Amélie's gaze clouded with a flicker of defiance tinged with apprehension. The idea of taking charge, of hunting the hunter, both galvanized and terrified her. Yet, faced with the system's inertia, the powerlessness gnawing at her, this audacious proposition became a lifeline.

"We can't do that, Sophie," she objected, her voice hesitant. "We're not cops, we know nothing about this kind of thing."

"Who says we have to play seasoned detectives?" retorted Sophie with a mischievous wink. "We have a significant advantage over the police: we know the victim. And we have a powerful motive: helping you get out of this mess."

The reasoning, however simplistic, hit home. Amélie couldn't deny the obvious: they were the only ones taking her situation seriously, the only ones who grasped the magnitude of the threat hanging over her.

"Fine," she conceded with a resigned sigh. "What do we do then?"

A triumphant smile illuminated Sophie's face. "We start at the beginning: we gather all the information we have, we analyze the messages, the photo, and we try to find a link, a clue that could put us on this creep's trail."

Sophie's boundless energy, her unwavering determination, acted on Amélie like a powerful stimulant. Hope was rekindled, fragile but tenacious, nurtured by the promise of a response, of revenge against this invisible enemy who was poisoning her existence.

They decided to meet that evening at Amélie's, after work, to set their plan in motion. The metro ride was torture for Amélie. Every furtive glance, every sudden movement in the crowd made her jump, fueling the paranoia that was eating away at her. She felt vulnerable, exposed to the eyes of her invisible tormentor, convinced that he was following her, watching her, waiting for the right moment to strike again.

Once she arrived home, the apartment felt strangely silent, empty. Marc's absence, away on a business trip for the week, was cruelly felt. She needed his reassuring presence, his protective arms, to give her back a semblance of security. But Marc was not there, and Amélie had to face her demons alone, supported only by Sophie.

Sophie arrived shortly after, loaded down with a bag filled with various supplies: a whiteboard, colored markers, sticky notes, as if they were about to organize a festive brainstorming session rather than track down a predator. Her enthusiasm, almost childlike, clashed with the heavy, anxious atmosphere that permeated the apartment.

"Right," she declared with a playful tone, placing her loot on the living room table. "Operation 'Unmask the Creep' is officially launched."

"This isn't a spy movie, Sophie," sighed Amélie, despite herself amused by her friend's overflowing enthusiasm.

Ignoring her comment, Sophie was already in motion, transforming the living room into a makeshift investigation headquarters. The whiteboard was hung on the wall with fridge magnets, colored markers lined up like an army of tiny multicolored soldiers. Watching her friend's frenetic ballet, Amélie couldn't help but think that if Sophie devoted as much energy to her accounting job as she did to playing amateur detective, she would undoubtedly be a CFO by now.

"Right," Sophie declared solemnly, finally finishing her staging. "Show me these infamous messages. And the photo too. We're not neglecting any details."

Amélie, her heart pounding in her chest, took her phone out of her bag. Every time she reread those messages, fear washed over her, cold and viscous like an undertow. She handed the device to Sophie, letting her friend delve into the labyrinth of her digital nightmare.

Sophie took the phone, her usually cheerful face taking on a serious, focused air. She scrolled through the messages one by one, her blond eyebrows furrowing with each new line she read. The silence that reigned in the living room was broken only by the faint sound of her fingers gliding across the touch screen.

"I see you," murmured Sophie, as if speaking more to herself than to Amélie. "It's banal, but effective. Vague enough to sow doubt, but precise enough to make it clear that you're not alone, that someone is watching you."

She looked up at Amélie, her steel-blue gaze piercing the veil of anxiety that surrounded her.

"Do you have any idea who might have a grudge against you enough to do this, Amélie? Anyone you might have wronged, even unintentionally?"

Amélie mentally replayed the film of her life, trying to find a face, a name, that might match the profile of her tormentor. But nothing came to mind. Her life was distressingly ordinary, a long, tranquil river where the rapids were as rare as weekdays that were holidays.

"No, no one," she replied in a dull voice, imbued with a desolate certainty. "I really don't see who would want to hurt me."

Sophie narrowed her eyes, her doubtful expression betraying her thoughts. She didn't seem convinced by Amélie's answer, as if she sensed that her friend's life hid darker secrets than she was letting on. But she didn't press the issue, preferring to focus on the tangible elements of the case.

"Well," she continued, picking up the phone again. "Let's talk about this infamous photo. You say it was taken at your office? Any idea when it could have been taken?"

Amélie closed her eyes, striving to visualize the flow of the preceding days, to recall each moment spent at her desk. The photo was sharp, the daylight suggesting it had been taken in the late morning or early afternoon.



"I would say...last Tuesday or Wednesday," she ventured. "I was wearing that blouse," she remembered, her mind returning to the photograph, "the one with the floral patterns that Marc hates."

Sophie jotted down the information on a bright yellow sticky note, attaching it to the whiteboard next to the message "I'm watching you." The act, seemingly insignificant, had the effect of anchoring the threat in reality, transforming it from an elusive shadow into a tangible event, dated, almost palpable.

"Did you notice anything unusual on those days? Anyone staring persistently, a stranger lurking near your desk?"

Amélie delved into her memory, reviewing the familiar faces of her colleagues, the incessant flow of clients, the hurried delivery people, the discreet cleaning staff. Her daily life at the office was reassuringly mundane, punctuated by repetitive tasks and codified professional interactions. It was difficult to discern a hostile face in this anonymous crowd.

"No, nothing in particular," she replied, disappointed by her own inability to furnish the slightest clue. "Or maybe... Perhaps I crossed paths with a man in the hallway on Tuesday afternoon who was staring insistently. He was tall, rather dark-haired, with a few days' worth of stubble. He looked at me with an intensity that made me uncomfortable."

The memory, initially hazy and uncertain, was becoming more precise, as if Amélie's mind, stimulated by the impromptu investigation, was unearthing details buried in the recesses of her memory. She could now clearly recall the stranger's face, his dark eyes that seemed to undress her with their gaze, his sardonic smile that had sent shivers down her spine.

"Do you remember anything else? A particular piece of clothing? A distinguishing physical feature?"

Sophie, like a predator sensing wounded prey, didn't take her eyes off Amélie, as if hoping to capture the smallest detail, the slightest clue that could lead them to the harasser's trail.

"He was wearing...a black leather jacket, I believe," Amélie added, her mind clinging to this sartorial detail like a lifeline. "And...and he had a scar on his left hand, a rather long scar that started from his thumb and went up towards his wrist. I noticed it because he kept fiddling with his phone, as if he was nervous, and the scar stood out against his pale skin with every movement of his hand."

The precision of Amélie's memory, the clarity of the image that formed in her mind, surprised even Sophie. The detail of the scar, seemingly insignificant, took on a new importance within the distressing context of the harassment. Was this a decisive element, a key to identifying the perpetrator? Or a simple coincidence, a banal detail that fear transformed into a crucial clue?

Sophie took her own phone out of her pocket, her agile fingers dancing across the touch screen.

"I'm taking note of all of this," she said without taking her eyes off the screen. "Black leather jacket, tall, brown hair, a few days' worth of beard, scar on his left hand. We've already got the start of a sketch."

Sophie's enthusiasm, her unwavering optimism, were contagious. Amélie, despite the anxiety that tightened its grip on her throat, felt a glimmer of hope reemerge within her. Maybe Sophie was right, maybe this wasn't a lost cause, maybe they could unmask this sick individual and make him pay for the torment he was inflicting upon her.

"We should maybe go see your colleagues," Sophie suggested, her eyes gleaming with a mischievous glint. "Show them the photo of the man with the scar, see if anyone recognizes him. You never know, fortune favors the bold."

The idea of involving her colleagues in this sordid affair was repugnant to Amélie. Already feeling humiliated, sullied by this situation, did she also have to become the laughingstock of the office? But on the other hand, she couldn't deny the potential benefits of the approach. If the man with the scar frequented the area, someone was bound to know him.

"I don't know, Sophie," Amélie hesitated. "I'm afraid it'll get out, that everyone will know about all of this."

"You'd rather let him get away with it without saying a word?" Sophie interrupted, her tone uncharacteristically harsh. "This guy is ruining your life, stealing your privacy, your peace of mind, and you hesitate to ask for help? Amélie, you need to wake up! You're a victim, but you're not powerless. We're going to stop him, this creep, but to do that, we need proof, we need clues. And your colleagues can help us find them."

Sophie's words, brutal but sincere, had the effect of a slap in the face. Amélie knew her friend was right. She couldn't just sit back and wait for the situation to escalate, to hope that the harasser would get bored and move on. She had to act, to fight to regain control of her life.

"You're right," Amélie sighed, her resolve solidifying. "Let's do it. First thing tomorrow morning, we're launching our investigation at the office."

A predatory smile stretched across Sophie's lips. "That's what I wanted to hear," she exclaimed, brandishing her phone like a weapon. "That stalker better watch out, we're coming for him!"

The following morning, Amélie went to work with a knot in her stomach. The enthusiasm Sophie had displayed the previous evening had somewhat evaporated, replaced by a dull, persistent anxiety. The thought of questioning her colleagues, of showing them the photo of the man with the scar, made her uncomfortable. She already imagined the curious looks, the embarrassed whispers, the rumors that would spread like wildfire through the company's corridors.

However, Sophie's determination was contagious, and Amélie found herself hoping, despite everything, that their plan would bear fruit. Perhaps among the anonymous crowd that populated the offices, there was a witness capable of putting a name to the face of her tormentor.

Arriving at her workstation, Amélie turned on her computer with an unusual weariness. The figures that scrolled across her screen, usually familiar and reassuring, seemed strange to her today, devoid of meaning. How could she concentrate on spreadsheets and quarterly reports when her life was plunged into anxiety and uncertainty?

She glanced furtively around her. Her colleagues, absorbed in their morning tasks, seemed oblivious to the silent drama that gnawed at her. Their daily lives had not faltered, they had not received threatening messages, they were not haunted by the shadow of a malicious stranger. Amélie almost envied them for their insouciance, for their ordinary and peaceful lives.

Sophie arrived a few minutes later, a broad smile on her lips and a steaming cup in her hand. She placed the coffee on Amélie's desk with a knowing wink.

"Come on, my dear, a little coffee to set you straight!" she exclaimed in a cheerful voice that contrasted with the studious silence of the office. "We've got work to do today!"

The scalding coffee roused Amélie slightly, offering a semblance of comfort in the maelstrom of anxiety that engulfed her. She took a cautious sip, allowing the liquid heat to spread through her chest, momentarily chasing away the chill that had seemed to inhabit her for days.

Sophie, incapable of containment, launched into a hushed monologue, detailing her plan of attack with military precision. She had already identified the colleagues to approach, those who worked near the office entrance and were therefore most likely to have crossed paths with the man with the scar. She had even prepared a well-rehearsed speech, a carefully measured blend of concern and curiosity, so as not to arouse suspicion.

Amélie, though admiring her friend's energy and organization, couldn't shake off a profound sense of unease. She felt like she was playing a role in an absurd play, an agonizing huis clos where reality blurred with the phantoms of her fear.

“What if we don't find anyone?” she asked in a dreary voice, betraying her lack of conviction. “What if this guy is just a ghost, a figment of my imagination?”

Sophie's smile vanished abruptly, replaced by an expression of sadness and understanding. She took Amélie's hand in hers, her touch warm and reassuring, contrasting with the ice that seemed to be invading her friend's body.

“Listen to me, Amélie,” she said in a voice that was both gentle and firm. “I know this is hard, that you're scared, but you can't let yourself go. This guy wants to destroy you, to steal your life, your joy. Don't let him. Fight back. We're going to find him, this bastard, and we're going to make him pay for all the harm he's done to you. I promise.”

Sophie's words, vibrating with sincerity and determination, had the effect of an electric shock on Amélie. She raised her head, her blue eyes, usually so bright, now gleaming with a new light, that of anger and revolt. She was no longer alone; she had Sophie by her side, and together they would face this ordeal and emerge stronger.

The rest of the morning was devoted to the investigation. Sophie, like a seasoned detective, approached Amélie's colleagues under various pretexts, engaging in conversation with disconcerting ease and subtly slipping in the description of the man with the scar amidst innocuous questions about work or the weather. Amélie, despite her initial apprehension, joined the game, observing reactions, watching for the slightest sign of recognition on the faces of her colleagues.

But the hours passed, and Amélie's hopes dwindled as the testimonies proved fruitless. No one seemed to have noticed the man with the scar, or at least, no one wanted to admit it. The atmosphere in the office, initially light and carefree, gradually became tinged with a palpable tension, as if the shadow of the harasser now hovered over them.

As midday approached, signaling the lunch break, Sophie and Amélie found themselves in the hallway, disappointed and discouraged.

“I can't believe it,” sighed Amélie, the disappointment evident in her voice. “No one saw him. It's like he doesn't exist.”

Sophie, her face grim, pondered silently, biting her lower lip in concentration. She refused to give up; she could feel it, they were onto something, they were just missing one element, one detail to crack the case wide open.

“Wait a minute,” she suddenly murmured, her blue eyes lighting up with a new spark. “You said this guy was on his phone when you saw him?”

Amélie, surprised by the sudden question, frowned. “Yes, that's right. He kept looking at it, tapping the screen, as if he was waiting for an important message. Why?”

A triumphant smile lit up Sophie's face. “I think we've got our man, Amélie. Let's go pay a little visit to security.”

## Chapter 3: The First Signs

The corridor leading to the security office was eerily silent, as if the building itself was holding its breath. Amélie gripped Sophie's arm, her nerves on edge. The pallid fluorescent light that illuminated the clinically white walls seemed to heighten her anxiety, transforming the space into a sterile, cold prison corridor.

"Are you sure about this, Soph?" Amélie whispered, her voice barely audible. "What if we're wrong? We don't have any proof."

"We don't have anything to lose, love," Sophie replied, her tone resolutely optimistic, though Amélie detected a flicker of hesitation in her eyes. "Worst case scenario, they'll laugh us out of here. Best case, we find something that puts us on the right track."

They arrived at a grey metal door, a plaque reading "Security" in stark capital letters. Sophie, with a confidence Amélie was far from feeling, rapped sharply on the door.

An interminable silence descended upon them, amplifying the dull thud of Amélie's heart. She imagined surveillance cameras watching them, recording their futile attempt to find answers within this bureaucratic labyrinth.

Finally, the door swung open abruptly, making them both jump. A stocky man, his face weathered and framed by a poorly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, regarded them with a weary expression.

"Yeah, what can I do for you?" he grumbled, his gaze sweeping over the two young women with palpable suspicion.

Sophie stepped forward, her disarming smile barely masking her apprehension. "Hello, sir, we'd like to speak to someone about an incident that occurred last night in the underground parking lot. You know, the power outage."

The guard raised a bushy eyebrow, his impassive expression betraying no emotion. "Power outage? There wasn't any power outage last night, miss."

Amélie felt her stomach clench. Was this a dead end? Would they be forced to turn back, defeated, and return to their powerlessness?

Before Amélie could succumb to despair, Sophie took a step forward, her eyes glinting with determination. "Look, sir, we know it's unusual, but this is really important. My friend witnessed something strange in the parking lot during the outage and..."

She paused, her tone turning grave. "Let's just say she doesn't feel safe. We thought the security cameras might have caught something useful."

The guard observed them for a long moment, his face unreadable. Amélie held her breath, each passing second stretching into an eternity. Finally, he sighed, a weary sound that seemed to emanate from the depths of his being.

"Alright, fine, come in," he said, pulling the door open wider. "But don't expect any miracles. Our cameras, they ain't exactly 'Mission Impossible,' you know."

The office was cramped and dim, lit by the pallid glow of a computer monitor displaying a kaleidoscope of grainy images. Stacks of dusty files teetered precariously on the desk, threatening to spill over onto the empty chairs. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee and disillusionment.

The guard lowered himself onto his swivel chair, his bulky frame sinking into the worn upholstery. He fixed them with a look from his dark, world-weary eyes, waiting for an explanation.



"So, let's have it," he said, his voice raspy with years of cigarettes and disenchantment. "What did your friend see that was so strange in the parking lot?"

Amélie hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. Should she tell him everything? The story of the harassment, the threatening messages, the photo? She glanced at Sophie, seeking guidance in her bright blue eyes.

Sophie offered her an encouraging smile and turned back to the guard. "To be honest, sir, we're not exactly sure what she saw. That's why we need your help. You see, my friend, Amélie, has been the target of some harassment lately, and last night, as she was leaving the office, she thought she saw someone following her in the parking lot."

The guard's brow furrowed, a flicker of interest, or perhaps skepticism, crossing his weathered features. "Harassment, you say? And you think this guy who was following her is connected to that?"

Amélie summoned her courage. "It's a possibility," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "We can't be sure, but we'd rather not take any chances."

She pulled out her phone and showed the guard the photo of the man with the scar. "Would you happen to have seen him lurking around, by any chance?"

The guard took the phone and scrutinized the image, his brows furrowing further as he took in the man's hard features and cold eyes.

"Hold on a minute," he murmured, his eyes glued to the screen. "I know this guy. He was here the other day, hanging around the entrance, asking about some...wait a minute...Amélie."

A shiver of ice ran down Amélie's spine. The name, uttered so casually by the guard, reverberated through the silence of the office like a clap of thunder. Her heart began to pound, her lungs seemingly forgetting how to breathe. She was caught in this nightmare, reality surpassing the most perverse imagination.

Sophie, sensing Amélie's distress, squeezed her arm tightly, a silent gesture of support and encouragement. Her blue eyes, usually sparkling with mischief, were now laden with a newfound gravity, reflecting the growing worry that washed over her.

"Are you sure?" Sophie asked, her voice firm despite the palpable tension in the air. "Are you certain he asked about Amélie? Do you remember anything else?"

The guard, visibly surprised by the reaction of the two young women, placed the phone on the table. His gaze, initially etched with professional indifference, was now tinged with a hint of curiosity. He sat up straighter in his chair, his expression suddenly becoming more attentive.

"Yes, I'm sure," he affirmed, rubbing his grizzled beard thoughtfully. "It was two days ago, I believe. He arrived during Jean-Pierre's shift, and he wanted to know if Amélie worked here, what her hours were, that sort of thing. Jean-Pierre sent him on his way, of course. We're not supposed to give out that kind of information."

He paused, his eyes narrowing in an effort to remember. "The guy was shady, that's for sure. He had a... persistent look about him, as if he wanted to etch Amélie's face into his memory. Jean-Pierre told me about it after he left, we had a good laugh thinking Amélie had a slightly overzealous secret admirer."

A nervous laugh escaped Amélie's lips, a sound incongruous with the tense atmosphere of the office. A secret admirer. If only they knew. If only reality was limited to a clumsy and harmless courtship.

"You wouldn't happen to remember his name, would you?" Sophie inquired, her voice betraying nothing of the inner turmoil that gnawed at her. Every piece of information, however insignificant, could bring them closer to the truth, help them unmask the man hiding behind this mask of terror.

The guard shook his head, a grimace of regret twisting his weathered features. "No, he didn't introduce himself. And Jean-Pierre didn't ask either. He doesn't like people hanging around here without a good reason."

A heavy silence fell over the room, disturbed only by the dull hum of the computer. The fragile hope that had blossomed in Amélie's heart was extinguished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving behind an icy void. They were back to square one, facing the immensity of their ignorance, the frustration of an investigation that seemed to be going in circles.

Amélie closed her eyes for a moment, desperately trying to calm the whirlwind of thoughts that assailed her. Fear, anger, helplessness, the emotions jostled within her, threatening to drown her. Who was this man? What did he want? And most importantly, how was she going to get out of this nightmare?

"The cameras, you said they filmed the parking lot entrance?" Sophie's voice, calm and collected, broke the silence, bringing Amélie back to reality. She opened her eyes and saw her friend staring intently at the guard, her blue eyes shining with a determined glint. "Would you mind if we took a look at the recordings? Just to see if there's anything of interest."

The guard hesitated for a moment, his gaze flickering between the two young women. He seemed torn between his duty of confidentiality and a budding empathy for Amélie's palpable distress. Finally, he let out a resigned sigh.

"Fine, alright," he conceded, tapping on the keyboard. "But don't get your hopes up. The images aren't great quality, and with the poor lighting in the parking lot, you can't make out much."

On the screen, the grainy images from the surveillance camera flickered by, showing an uninterrupted stream of cars and pedestrians entering and exiting the parking lot. The guard scrolled through the footage quickly, stopping occasionally to zoom in on a face, a license plate, any detail that might prove useful.

The minutes stretched on, turning into an eternity under the anxious gaze of Amélie and Sophie. The silence in the office had become almost unbearable, broken only by the hiss of the speakers and the incessant clicking of the mouse.

Suddenly, Sophie sat up straight, her hand resting on Amélie's arm in a gesture that was meant to be reassuring. "Stop there, please," she said to the guard, her finger pointing at the screen.

The frozen image showed the entrance to the parking lot, shrouded in semi-darkness. In the foreground, a male figure stood motionless, his face partially obscured by the hood of his sweatshirt. He was holding a phone to his ear, his gaze fixed on the camera lens with an unsettling intensity.

"It's him," Amélie whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "I recognize that sweatshirt, and that way of standing..."

A feeling of unease washed over her. This man, her stalker, had been watching them, her and Sophie, without their knowledge. He had recorded their movements, anticipated their actions. He was always one step ahead, pulling the strings of this terrifying puppet show of which she was the helpless victim.

An icy silence descended upon the small office, mirroring Amélie's stifled breath and Sophie's grave expression in the darkened screen. The ghostly image of the man in the sweatshirt, looming like a silent threat, seemed to permeate the air with palpable tension.

"Can you rewind that?" asked Sophie, her voice surprisingly calm despite the apprehension that flickered in her blue eyes.

The guard, his face impassive, manipulated the mouse with methodical slowness. The images reversed, revealing the man in the sweatshirt a few minutes earlier, stationed at the entrance of the parking lot, like a patient predator lying in wait. He scanned the surroundings with methodical attention, his gaze sweeping over every car, every shadowed corner.

"How long has he been there?" whispered Amélie, her voice tight with anxiety.

"Hard to say," replied the guard, rubbing his grizzled beard thoughtfully. "The cameras loop, we can't go back too far. But at a guess, I'd say he's been there for at least an hour before you arrived."

An hour. An hour spent observing her, analyzing her movements, savoring her growing terror. The brutal realization of this truth struck Amélie like a blow to the stomach. This man knew her, he was hunting her, and she had no idea why.

"Can we see the footage from the other cameras?" asked Sophie, her voice betraying nothing of the mounting worry she felt. "The ones filming the interior of the building, for example?"

The guard nodded, his fingers flying across the keyboard. "I can try, but I'm not promising anything. The system isn't exactly cutting edge, and the recordings are automatically erased after 48 hours."

The screen went dark for a moment, then flickered back to life, this time displaying the feed from a camera positioned in the building's lobby. It showed the usual coming and going of employees leaving their offices after a long day's work.

The guard scrolled through the footage slowly, pausing at regular intervals to zoom in on a face, a familiar silhouette. Amélie and Sophie scrutinized the screen with feverish attention, searching for the slightest clue, the smallest detail that could put them on the trail of the man in the sweatshirt.

"There!" Sophie suddenly exclaimed, her hand slamming down on the screen as if to hold the fleeting image captive.

The guard froze the frame. The screen now displayed the image of a man from behind, clad in a black leather jacket, heading towards the exit. His imposing build and swaggering gait left no room for doubt: this was the man Amélie had encountered in the parking lot.

"Do you recognize him?" asked the guard, his gaze settling on Amélie.

Amélie's blood ran cold. She recognized that jacket, that way of carrying himself, that menacing aura that seemed to emanate from him. It was the same man who stared at her on the subway, the man who seemed to haunt her even in her dreams.

"Yes, that's him," she murmured, her voice strangled by fear. "I'm sure it's him."

A wave of nausea washed over her, cold and powerful. This man was not a phantom, a menacing shadow in the night. He was real, he was here, and he was relentlessly hunting her. But why? What did he want?

Sophie, sensing her friend's terror, squeezed her arm tightly, a silent gesture of support and protection. She turned to the guard, her azure blue eyes flashing.

"Can you trace his movements? See where he went in the building?"

The guard hesitated for a moment, aware that he was venturing into dangerous territory. He was no detective, and this story was taking a turn he didn't like. But faced with Amélie's palpable distress and Sophie's fierce determination, he felt unable to stand idly by.

"I can try," he sighed. "But don't expect miracles. The security system isn't exactly designed for playing Sherlock Holmes."

He spent the next few minutes navigating a digital labyrinth of fragmented images and encrypted data, his furrowed brow betraying the intense concentration that gripped him. Amélie, her nerves on edge, observed his every mouse movement, every click, as if her life depended on it. The silence in the small office, broken only by the insistent hum of the computer and Amélie's shallow breaths, amplified the palpable tension that hung in the air.

Suddenly, the guard's head snapped up, a flicker of interest illuminating his weathered features. "Now this is interesting," he murmured, a satisfied smile stretching across his chapped lips.

The image on the screen showed the man in the leather jacket slipping into a deserted corridor, far from the usual offices and thoroughfares. This was not a place one wandered into by chance; it was an area reserved for authorized personnel, a detail that sent a fresh wave of anxiety crashing over Amélie.

"Where is he going?" Sophie asked, her voice tight with growing apprehension.

"That's the corridor that leads to the archives and the server room," the guard replied, his fingers dancing across the keyboard as he entered a new command. "He's got no business being there without special authorization."

On the screen, the man in the leather jacket reached a gray metal door, identical to the others lining the austere hallway. He pulled something from his pocket, a glinting object the camera couldn't quite make out, and pressed it against the badge reader. A faint click echoed, then the door swung open silently, swallowing him into the darkness.

Amélie felt an icy shiver run down her spine. This man had access to the secure areas of the building, areas where sensitive data, confidential information was stored. What was he looking for? And how had he obtained authorization to enter such a sensitive location?

"He used a badge?" Sophie asked, incredulous. "But who would give him a badge?"

The guard shrugged, a perplexed frown etching its way across his face. "No idea, miss. There are a lot of badges in circulation, and the system isn't perfect. It's possible he stole a badge from a careless employee, or found a way to forge one."

He paused, his gaze drifting into the distance as if trying to piece together a puzzle with missing pieces. "But one thing's for sure, he's got no business being in there. I'm going to have to report this incident to management."

Amélie felt a sliver of hope amidst the maelstrom of fear that threatened to drown her. If management was made aware of the situation, perhaps they would take it seriously? Perhaps they would finally do something to protect her from this menacing man?

"Are you going to call the police?" she asked, her voice a mixture of hope and apprehension.

The guard hesitated for a moment, his eyes searching Amélie's face as if gauging her reaction. "Listen, miss, I don't want to alarm you, but right now, we have no evidence of a crime. This man may have a perfectly legitimate reason for being in that part of the building, we just don't know it yet."

He paused again, choosing his words carefully. "Of course, if you have any reason to believe your safety is being threatened, don't hesitate to file a report with the police. They will take your statement seriously, I'm sure."



The guard's words, though tinged with a certain kindness, had the effect of a cold shower on Amélie. No evidence, no crime, no protection. She was on her own, facing a danger she knew all too well but couldn't quite name.

Sophie, sensing her friend's growing despair, squeezed her arm tightly. "Don't worry, Amélie," she said, her voice firm and reassuring. "We're not going to leave it at that. We're going to find out who this man is and why he's after you."

She turned to the guard, her azure blue eyes flashing. "Thank you for your help, sir. We'll keep you updated on any developments."

The guard escorted them to the door, a somber expression settling over his face. "Take care of yourselves, ladies," he murmured, closing the door behind them. "And don't hesitate to contact me if you have even the slightest suspicion, the smallest piece of information."

Amélie and Sophie walked down the deserted corridor, the heavy, menacing silence that surrounded them seeming to echo like a bad omen. They had questions, suspicions, but no answers, no certainties. Only the chilling conviction that the nightmare was just beginning.

The hallway, typically bustling with the chatter and laughter of employees, struck them as eerily sinister, as if the very walls had overheard their conversation and were now holding their breath. Lost in thought, Amélie fixed her gaze on the clinically white tiled floor, unable to shake the image of the man in the leather jacket from her mind.

"What now?" Sophie's voice, laced with an unfamiliar anxiety, drew Amélie from her thoughts.

"I... I don't know," confessed Amélie, her voice barely a whisper. Fear, insidious and creeping, began to gnaw at the edges of her resolve. Who was this man? Why was he

interested in her? And above all, how had he gained access to the secured areas of the building?

"We can't leave it at that," insisted Sophie, her usual determination flashing in her azure blue eyes. "We have to find out who this guy is and what he's after."

Their progress through the labyrinth of impersonal corridors was punctuated by the click of Sophie's heels on the tiled floor and the heavy silence that had settled between them. Each shadowy corner, each fleeting reflection in the wall mirrors, transformed the banal journey into an agonizing ordeal, fueling Amélie's growing paranoia.

Reaching her office, Amélie collapsed onto her chair, drained by the weight of the unknown. The unusual disorder of her workspace, once a haven of peace and meticulous organization, struck her like a blow. Files were scattered across her desk, pens littered the floor, as if someone had rummaged through her belongings.

"Do you think he came in here?" Sophie asked, her voice barely a murmur in the silence of the office.

Amélie sprang to her feet, her heart pounding. The possibility, however small, that he could have penetrated her personal sanctuary, touched her belongings, filled her with a chilling dread. She scanned the room, searching for any clue, any trace of his presence.

"I... I don't know," she stammered, her voice choked with anxiety. "But we have to find a way to know who he is, Sophie. We can't live with this sword of Damocles hanging over our heads."

Sophie, her face grave, approached the desk and began to examine the scattered files, her fingers gliding over the loose sheets with methodical care. "Do you have any idea what he might be looking for? A specific document? A project you're working on?"

Amélie rubbed her temples, trying to gather her thoughts amidst the chaos that reigned in her head. "No, nothing specific," she finally replied, her voice filled with uncertainty. "I'm working on several cases at the same time, but none of them are really confidential or sensitive."

She paused, her gaze falling on a picture frame on her desk. The photo showed her smiling, alongside Marc, during their last vacation in Rome. A feeling of sadness, mixed with a touch of anger, washed over her. This man, whoever he was, was destroying her life, her career, her relationship.

"He's playing with me," she murmured, more to herself than to Sophie. "He wants to scare me, drive me crazy."

Sophie straightened up, her face hardening like a prison gate. "We're not going to let him do that, Amélie," she said in a cold, determined voice. "We're going to find this bastard, and we're going to make him pay for all the harm he's doing to you."

She took a deep breath, as if to give herself courage. "Listen to me, Amélie. We need a plan. We can't fight him in the shadows. We have to force him out into the open."

A heavy silence fell over the office, broken only by the distant hum of the air conditioning. Amélie, her nerves on edge, felt her heart pounding in her chest. She was trapped in a nightmare from which she could see no escape, prey hunted by an invisible predator.

A strange glint flickered across Sophie's azure blue eyes, a blend of determination and mischief that rarely left her for long. "A plan? But I love plans! We'll set a trap for this sly fox. We'll flush him out like a rat..."

Despite the anxiety gnawing at her, Amélie couldn't help but manage a faint smile at her friend's contagious enthusiasm. Sophie's presence, her boundless energy and unwavering

optimism, always had a way of reassuring her, of giving her the strength to face any hardship.

"A trap? But how? We don't even know who he is, this guy," sighed Amélie, a shaky breath escaping her lips. The weight of the unknown, the feeling of being watched, spied upon, washed over her once more.

"Let me think," replied Sophie, her index finger tapping an irregular rhythm against her rosy lips. She began to pace around the office with a brisk step, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor like an improvised melody. Her keen gaze scanned the room, lingering on every detail, every object, as if searching for inspiration in the apparent disorder that surrounded them.

After a few minutes of silent contemplation, Sophie stopped dead in her tracks, a triumphant smile illuminating her face. "I've got it! We'll use his own medicine against him. We'll trap him with technology."

Intrigued, Amélie sat up straight in her chair, a flicker of hope returning to her dulled blue eyes. "Technology? But how?"

Sophie's eyes sparkled with excitement, betraying the enthusiasm she felt for crafting schemes, for outwitting adversaries with cunning and ingenuity. "We'll leave him bait, a message he won't be able to ignore," she explained with a knowing wink. "A message that will allow us to locate him, to discover who hides behind this mask of terror."

A glimmer of worry pierced through Amélie's curiosity. "A message? But what if he takes it the wrong way, if he feels provoked?"

"Don't worry, we'll do it intelligently," reassured Sophie, giving her a confident smile. "We'll set a trap he won't be able to escape."

## Chapter 4: The Descent into Hell

Amélie's office, once a peaceful haven where she found solace in the precision of numbers and the rigor of balance sheets, now seemed alien, hostile. Every creak of the floorboards, every fleeting shadow in the hallway, revived the fear that had gripped her since her encounter with the security guard.

Sophie, who had stayed by her side, had set about transforming the workspace into a veritable amateur detective's headquarters. Multicolored sticky notes now covered the whiteboard, forming a confusing web of notes, dates, and names. Amidst this organized chaos sat a laptop, its screen emanating a bluish glow that reflected in Sophie's bright eyes.

"We need an irresistible bait," Sophie murmured, more to herself than to Amélie. "A digital lure that will force him out of the shadows."

Seated at her desk, Amélie observed her friend with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. Sophie's enthusiasm, her boundless energy in the face of adversity, had always been a source of comfort. But this time, the stakes were different, more personal, more menacing.

"What if we used FaceLink?" Sophie suggested, her face lighting up with a mischievous smile. "Imagine an enigmatic message, posted from your profile, which is addressed only to him."

Amélie felt a glacial shiver run down her spine. The thought of returning to social media, that virtual space that had been the stage for her public humiliation, terrified her. It was like venturing back into a dark and threatening forest, haunted by the ghosts of her past.

"No, Sophie, impossible. I can't. Not FaceLink." Her voice was barely audible, stifled by the anguish that constricted her throat.

Sophie jumped up, approaching Amélie with unusual gentleness. She placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, her azure blue eyes reflecting sincere empathy.

"I understand your fear, Amélie. But we're not talking about a grand return, just a small message, targeted, precise. We'll create a fake profile, a digital decoy, and use it to lure him into a trap."

The idea, as crazy as it seemed, began to take root in Amélie's mind. Fear was still present, lurking in the shadows, but it was now counterbalanced by a growing desire for justice, a visceral need to unmask the one who hid behind this mask of terror.

"And how do you intend to do that?" Amélie asked, a glimmer of hope returning to her dull blue eyes. "How to reach a single person with a fake profile?"

Sophie gave a knowing smile, her fingers brushing the laptop keyboard with disconcerting dexterity. "Let me introduce you to the wonderful world of behavioral targeting..."

While Sophie busied herself creating the digital profile that would serve as their bait, Amélie let her mind wander through the labyrinth of her memories. Who could possibly have such a grudge against her? Who harbored such hatred towards her?

Faces flashed before her eyes: envious former colleagues, forgotten acquaintances, spurned lovers. But none of these profiles matched the image she had of her harasser. The latter was methodical, patient, cruelly ingenious. He was weaving his web in the shadows, distilling fear and doubt with surgical precision.

The memory of Vincent, her ex-boyfriend, suddenly surfaced in her mind, as vivid and painful as a burn. Vincent, with his piercing black eyes, his charming smile, and his toxic hold. Vincent, who showered her with extravagant gifts one day, only to belittle and threaten her the next.

Amélie had broken up with him after months of tumultuous relationship, enduring his fits of morbid jealousy and attempts at control. She still remembered the cold fury that had animated him when she left him, his veiled threats and promises of revenge.

No, impossible, she thought, shaking her head. Vincent was just a bad memory, relegated to the confines of her past. He would never have dared to take it out on her like this.

Yet, doubt, like a weed, had crept into her mind. What if she was wrong? What if Vincent, driven by a tenacious grudge, had decided to punish her for leaving him?

"Amélie, it's done! The trap is set!"

Sophie's cheerful voice pulled her from her thoughts. On the computer screen, the profile of a certain "Claire Martin" was displayed, with her profile picture - a young brunette woman with a friendly smile - and a carefully crafted biography.

"Who is Claire Martin?" Amélie asked, intrigued.

"Our bait," Sophie replied with a knowing wink. "A young woman, new in town, passionate about art and literature. The kind of profile that is sure to catch the eye of our friend."

As Sophie skillfully navigated the digital realm, her fingers danced across the keyboard with the agility of a virtuoso pianist. "It's where things become interesting, my dear Amélie," she said with a knowing smile, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "We'll leave a trail of cleverly orchestrated digital breadcrumbs that our dear Vincent won't be able to resist following."

On the screen, the profile of "Claire Martin" sprang to life as Sophie, a true digital sorceress, animated it with effortless ease. She joined online book clubs frequented by

men of Vincent's age and socio-economic background, expressed admiration for artists he appreciated on Facebook, and commented on online articles by subtly echoing opinions he had previously shared on social media.

Amélie watched her friend's digital machinations with a mixture of admiration and trepidation. The ease with which Sophie manipulated the virtual world, creating an entirely credible and chilling identity from scratch, sent shivers down Amélie's spine.

"We mustn't forget the bait," Sophie whispered, a mischievous glint dancing in her blue eyes. She opened a fake account on a dating site, using "Claire Martin's" photo and description that perfectly matched Vincent's supposed tastes.

"And there we have it, the trap is set," Sophie announced, sitting back in her chair with a triumphant smile. "Now, all we need to do is wait for the fish to bite."

The days that followed were a torture for Amélie. Every notification on her phone, every unsolicited email, and every furtive glance from a stranger reinforced her growing anxiety. The silence of her harasser was more oppressive than his relentless attacks. It was as if he lurked in the shadows, watching her every move, waiting for the perfect moment to strike again.

Sophie, true to form, tried to distract Amélie with stories of her romantic conquests and fashion misadventures. But beneath her carefree exterior, Amélie sensed her friend's growing unease.

A week later, as Amélie prepared to leave the office, her phone vibrated. It was Sophie.

"He bit," she exclaimed breathlessly. "Claire received a message on the dating site."



A shiver ran down Amélie's spine. The moment she had both dreaded and longed for had finally arrived.

"Who is it?" she managed to stammer, her dry throat barely audible.

"I'm sending you the screenshot right now," Sophie replied before hanging up.

A few seconds later, Amélie's phone vibrated again. It was another message from Sophie, accompanied by a captured image.

Amélie's heart skipped a beat as she gazed at the screen.

The sender of the message was anonymous, but the profile photo accompanying it left no doubt.

It was Vincent.

Amélie's blood ran cold in her veins. Every muscle in her body tensed, as if a jolt of electricity had just coursed through her. The face of Vincent, frozen into a mocking smile on the screen of his phone, locked onto hers with an icy intensity. It was him, she was certain of it. The years may have etched a few lines on his angular face, added a few strands of silver to his once-black hair, but his black eyes, trained on her like two lasers, had lost none of their unnerving potency.

A torrent of conflicting emotions overwhelmed her: fear, visceral and paralyzing, but also anger, a simmering fury that rose in her like a dark tide. How dared he? How could he, after all these years, resurface in her life, playing with her like a cruel puppeteer manipulating his puppets?

"Amélie? Are you there?" Sophie's voice, laced with genuine concern, pierced the fog of stupefaction that enveloped her.

"Yes, yes, I'm here," she murmured, her voice distant and unreal to her own ears.

She took a deep breath, trying to shake off the nausea rising in her throat. She had to snap out of it, for herself, for Sophie, to face this new threat looming over her like a dark corbeau.

"What does the message say?" she asked, her voice trembling with anxiety.

"Not too bad yet," replied Sophie, her tone hesitant. "He introduces himself as 'Marc,' an alias, of course, and says he was charmed by the profile of 'Claire.' He proposes meeting up for a drink."

A nervous laugh escaped Amélie. "Marc," naturally. Vincent had always liked to hide behind masks, create fake identities to manipulate his surroundings.

"He hasn't wasted any time, has he?" she murmured, an acid smile spreading across her lips.

"What do we do now?" asked Sophie, her tone conveying a mix of excitement and trepidation.

Amélie took another breath, trying to think clearly. She wouldn't let herself be intimidated this time around. She had been Vincent's prey in the past, but she had learned from her mistakes, hardened herself. This time, she would be ready to fight him back, to expose him once and for all.

"We keep going," she declared, her voice regaining its firmness. "We play along. We'll give him a meeting."

Sophie's gaze brightened with a mix of admiration and concern. "Are you sure, Amélie? It's risky. He could be dangerous."

"I know," replied Amélie, her eyes hard as steel. "But it's our only chance to stop him. We have to catch him off guard, get some proof of his harassment. And for that, we need to meet up with him."

A heavy silence fell over the room, only broken by the steady hum of the computer. The sun set outside, casting long, ominous shadows on the walls. The air grew thick with an almost palpable tension, foreshadowing an inevitable confrontation.

"Fine," Sophie finally said, her voice rough with apprehension. "We'll give him a meeting. But we won't do it alone."

Amélie nodded, a mix of gratitude and terror washing over her. She wasn't alone. She had Sophie, her rock, her ally in this impending war. Together, they would face Vincent, expose him, and bring him to justice. That was a promise, a vow sealed in the crucible of fear and determination.

The trap was set. The prey was about to become the predator.

Amélie spent a restless night, haunted by confused dreams where Vincent's face blended with nightmarish images of her past. Sleep, once a peaceful refuge, had become a battlefield where she relentlessly relived her worst fears.

As dawn broke, the morning sun, filtering through the blinds, illuminated the room with a pale, unreal light. Amélie rose with the sensation of an immense weight on her chest, the memory of Vincent's message etched in her mind like a burning scar.

The day at the office was agonizing. Every sound, every movement, every furtive glance made her jump. She felt watched, spied upon, as if Vincent were there, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the opportune moment to strike again.

Sophie, detecting her growing anxiety, had insisted on accompanying her to work. She had transformed her office into a veritable bunker, double-locking the door and placing a chair as a makeshift barricade.

"We're not taking any chances," she declared in a martial tone, her azure blue eyes sparkling with fierce determination.

Despite the reassuring presence of her friend, Amélie could not concentrate. Numbers danced before her eyes, words blurred in her mind. Fear, like an insidious poison, invaded her thoughts, paralyzing her mind and body.

"We need to find help," she suddenly blurted out, her voice choked with anguish. "We can't face Vincent alone."

Sophie nodded, her expression grave. "You're right. We need an ally, someone trustworthy, who knows the workings of the law and can protect us."

"But who?" murmured Amélie, a feeling of helplessness washing over her.

A heavy silence fell over the room, only the incessant ticking of the wall clock punctuating their thoughts.

Suddenly, Sophie's eyes lit up. "I have an idea!" she exclaimed, a glimmer of hope shining in her eyes. "Léonard!"

"Léonard?" repeated Amélie, perplexed. The name meant nothing to her.

"Léonard Dufour," explained Sophie. "A former classmate from college. He became a private investigator. We used to call him 'Sherlock' back then, he was always one step ahead of everyone else. He's brilliant, intuitive, and has an extraordinary sense of observation. If anyone can help us, it's him."

Amélie, though hesitant about involving a stranger in this affair, saw no other solution. She needed help, and fast.

"Do you think he'll agree to help us?" she asked, a glimmer of hope returning to her dull blue eyes.

"He owes me one," Sophie replied with an enigmatic smile. "Let's just say he owes me a little favor..."

Without further ado, Sophie took out her phone and dialed a number.

"Hello Léonard? It's Sophie," she introduced herself in a cheerful voice. "Tell me, are you still as good at solving mysteries? Perfect, because I need your detective skills... and a good coffee. We're on our way."

An hour later, Amélie and Sophie found themselves in a discreet little café in the Marais district. Léonard Dufour, true to Sophie's description, was a tall, thin man with unruly brown hair and piercing black eyes that seemed to peer into your soul.

He greeted them with a warm smile and a knowing wink at Sophie.

"So, my beauties, what brings you to my humble abode? Tales of broken hearts? Unfaithful husbands? Or something a little more... intense?"

Amélie, initially intimidated by Léonard's magnetic charisma, felt a sense of comfort wash over her. She had a feeling she could trust him, that this man, with his casual air and sharp intelligence, would be able to help them.

Sophie, taking the lead, told Léonard Amélie's story, omitting nothing: the online harassment, the doctored photos, the false accusations, and finally, Vincent's reappearance.

Léonard listened attentively, without interrupting, his impassive face betraying no emotion. From time to time, his black eyes would flash brightly, betraying his growing interest in the case.

When Sophie had finished her story, Léonard leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Interesting," he murmured, a sly smile playing on his lips. "Your Vincent sounds like quite a character. A blackmailer, a manipulator, a true predator."

"He's dangerous," Amélie blurted out, her trembling voice betraying the fear that gripped her. "I know him, he's capable of anything."

"Don't worry, Amélie," Léonard reassured her in a calm and steady tone. "I'm going to help you. Together, we're going to unmask this bastard and bring him to justice."

A feeling of gratitude mixed with apprehension washed over Amélie. She had finally found an ally, a protector, in this struggle that promised to be long and perilous. But she knew, deep down, that the hardest part was yet to come. The confrontation with Vincent was inevitable, and she expected the worst.

The coffee, strong and scalding, went down Amélie's throat like a bitter potion, barely soothing the knot of tension that had settled in her stomach. Outside, Parisian life paraded past the café's misted window, an indifferent whirlwind of colors and movement that contrasted cruelly with the chaos that had gripped her inner world.

"The first step is to gather evidence," stated Léonard, his steady voice cutting through the tumult of Amélie's thoughts. "Tangible, irrefutable evidence that will allow the police to catch him without a shadow of a doubt."

He produced from his worn leather briefcase a notebook blackened by time and a silver pen that he twirled between his fingers with an almost hypnotic dexterity. "Tell me everything. Every detail, no matter how insignificant, could be useful to us."

Amélie, encouraged by the reassuring calm that emanated from Léonard, launched into a detailed account of her ordeal. She told him about the anonymous messages, the doctored photos, the fake social media profiles. She described the growing fear that gnawed at her, the feeling of being watched, hunted, like prey caught in the web of a patient and cruel spider.

Sophie, seated beside her, supplemented her account with precise details, dates, usernames, screenshots that she extracted from her phone like so many pieces of evidence. Léonard listened with unwavering attention, taking rapid notes in his tight, elegant script.

"And you think this Vincent could have had access to your accounts, to your personal data?" he asked, looking up, his piercing gaze settling on Amélie.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, doubt creeping into her mind. "I don't know," she murmured. "I never shared my passwords with him, but... he was very good with computers. He worked in a cybersecurity company, he knew all the workings of the web."

"Interesting," murmured Léonard, rubbing his chin with his fingertips. "It's possible that he was able to hack into your accounts, install spyware on your devices without you realizing it."

A glacial shiver ran down Amélie's spine. The idea that Vincent could have interfered in her private life, read her emails, listened to her conversations, filled her with a deep sense of violation.

"What can we do?" she asked, her voice betraying the anguish that overwhelmed her.

"We're going to check all of that," Léonard reassured her with a comforting smile. "I know an excellent computer scientist, a true coding genius, who can tell us if your devices have been compromised."

He jotted something down in his notebook. "In the meantime, I advise the utmost caution. Do not log into your personal accounts, change your passwords, and monitor your bank statements. And above all," he added, giving them a serious look, "do not contact him ever again. Let me handle this matter."

Amélie and Sophie nodded in unison, a mixture of fear and relief washing over them. They had finally found someone they could trust, someone who seemed capable of guiding them through this labyrinth of fear and manipulation. But the road ahead was long and perilous, and they knew that the worst might be yet to come.

"Now," said Léonard, taking another sip of his coffee, "let's talk about this meeting you've arranged with our friend Vincent..."



A silence heavy with implication fell over the table. Léonard's gaze, sharp as a blade, darted back and forth between Amélie and Sophie, scrutinizing their reactions, deciphering their most secret thoughts. The trap was set, the chess game had begun.

The thought of going to security pierced Amélie's mind like a beacon of hope in the suffocating darkness that enveloped her. Perhaps the surveillance cameras had captured something, a clue that could help her identify her stalker. Accompanied by Sophie, whose presence was a soothing balm on her raw nerves, she made her way to the guard's office.

The guard, a portly man in his fifties, his face etched with the weariness of countless overnight shifts, greeted them with a dubious frown. His jade eyes, accustomed to the trivial complaints of employees, settled on them with a mixture of indifference and fatigue.

"Good morning, Mr. Dubois," Sophie chirped, ignoring the skepticism that oozed from the guard's every pore. "My colleague, Miss Garnier, requires your assistance in a rather delicate matter."

The guard's eyebrows rose, clearly disinclined to be drawn into a situation that reeked of petty squabbles between colleagues. "Delicate, you say? And how may I be of service?"

Amélie summoned her courage, her voice trembling slightly despite her efforts to appear stoic. "I believe I am being followed, Mr. Dubois. I was hoping the surveillance cameras might have recorded something unusual in recent days, particularly around the parking lot."

Dubois sighed, his gaze drifting towards some undefined point in the distance. "Miss Garnier, you are well aware that we are not authorized to disclose surveillance footage without a valid reason. Do you have any tangible evidence to support your claim?"

Amélie's heart constricted in her chest. Evidence? She had nothing but her fear, her intuition, vague feelings she couldn't quantify or prove. A wave of helplessness washed over her, her throat tightening with anxiety.

Sophie, sensing her friend's distress, intervened once more, her voice firm and assured, a stark contrast to Amélie's fragility. "Mr. Dubois, we understand the constraints of your position, but it is imperative that you treat this matter with the utmost seriousness. The safety of your employees is at stake."

She leaned closer, her azure blue eyes locking onto the guard's with unsettling intensity. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear, Mr. Dubois: if anything were to happen to Miss Garnier, and we discover that you have been negligent in your duties, believe me, the consequences will be far more severe than a mere slap on the wrist."

Sophie's unwavering tone, the icy determination that flickered in her eyes, had the desired effect. Dubois's face hardened, a flicker of unease replacing the indifference that had been etched there moments before.

"Very well, very well," he mumbled, his fingers already dancing across his keyboard. "Let's see what we have..."

On the screen, grainy surveillance footage flickered to life, showcasing the comings and goings of employees and visitors in the lobby and parking lot. Dubois, manipulating the mouse with a dexterity surprising for a man of his size, rewound the footage, scrutinizing each frame with newfound attention.

"When, exactly, did this occur?" he asked, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Yesterday evening, around 6:30," replied Amélie, her heart pounding with anticipation as the footage continued to roll.

Dubois froze the video on a frame depicting the near-deserted parking lot bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun. A shiver ran down Amélie's spine.

There, at the edge of the lot, partially obscured behind a white van, stood a shadowy figure. The image was blurry, captured from afar, but Amélie instantly recognized the lanky frame, the dark hair, and the long coat of the individual who had followed her the previous day.

"That's him!" she exclaimed, her voice choked with anxiety. "That's the man!"

Dubois, without a word, resumed playback. The figure could be seen slowly approaching the building's entrance, his gaze fixed on the door as if awaiting someone's arrival. Then, moments later, Amélie and Sophie appeared on the screen, exiting the building and heading towards the exit. The individual then ducked behind the van, waiting for them to pass before resuming his pursuit.

Amélie's blood ran cold. This was no coincidence, no figment of her imagination. This man was following her, and he seemed to know her well enough to anticipate her movements.

"Can you zoom in on his face?" Sophie asked, her tone betraying no emotion.

Dubois complied, manipulating the camera controls with precision. The image zoomed in, becoming slightly clearer, but the individual's face remained shrouded in shadow, partially obscured by the hood of his coat. Vaguely discernible were sharp features, a strong jawline, and dark, piercing eyes that seemed to stare directly into the lens with chilling intensity.

"That's the best I can do," Dubois said with a shrug, his voice tinged with defeat. "The lighting is poor, and the image quality isn't sufficient for a positive identification."

Disappointment clouded Amélie's features. For a fleeting moment, she had dared to hope that she might finally be able to put a name to the face of her tormentor. But that hope now dissipated like a flock of startled birds.

"Wait a minute," Sophie interjected, her gaze fixed on the screen. "Go back, right before he ducks behind the van."

Dubois complied, rewinding the footage by a few seconds. The individual was once again visible, striding across the parking lot with purpose.

"Freeze it!" Sophie exclaimed.

On the screen, frozen mid-stride, the individual's hand was raised to his chest, reaching for something in his pocket. And there, in a fleeting glimpse, Amélie thought she noticed a crucial detail: an ID badge, hanging from a blue lanyard around his neck.

"The badge!" she cried. "He's wearing an ID badge!"

Dubois zoomed in on the image, his hand trembling slightly. The badge was small, barely visible, but it was there. A logo was vaguely discernible, along with some lettering...

"It looks like the company logo," Dubois murmured, his face paling. "But that's impossible. Access to the parking lot is restricted to employees. He would have had to pass through the security checkpoints."

"Unless he didn't need to," Amélie countered, her mind racing. "What if he works here?"

A heavy silence descended upon the room, thick with unspoken implications. The possibility that her stalker was one of her colleagues, someone she interacted with on a

daily basis, filled Amélie with a new and chilling terror. She felt trapped, surrounded by invisible walls, unable to discern friend from foe.

"Show us the footage from the secure areas," Sophie demanded, her voice cold and resolute. "If he has an ID badge, he must have used it somewhere."

Dubois hesitated for a moment, torn between his duty of confidentiality and the fear that was beginning to grip him. Sophie's piercing gaze, the fierce determination burning in her blue eyes, finally swayed him.

"Very well," he sighed. "Follow me."

He led them to a small, dimly lit room adjacent to the office, where a wall of monitors displayed feeds from the various floors and secure areas of the building. The atmosphere was heavy, filled with a palpable tension.

For what felt like an eternity, they reviewed the footage, scrutinizing every face, every passing figure, searching for the slightest clue. Fatigue began to set in, their eyes stinging, but they refused to relent.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement on one of the screens caught Sophie's eye.

"There!" she exclaimed, pointing to the image. "Rewind it, slowly."

Dubois obeyed, his hand shaking slightly as he manipulated the mouse. The image reversed, revealing an empty hallway at the end of which stood a door marked with a sign that read "Archives - Restricted Access." A man, his face obscured by the camera angle, swiped his badge and disappeared inside.

"It's the same coat," Amélie whispered, her voice thick with apprehension. "And look, the blue lanyard... It's the same badge!"

Dubois zoomed in on the image, his face ashen. There was no mistaking it: the man who had just entered the archives was the same individual who had been following Amélie.

"But... but who is he?" he stammered, his voice thick with a newfound terror. "And what was he doing in the archives?"

Amélie and Sophie exchanged a knowing look. They didn't have the answer to that question, not yet. But one thing was certain: the mystery of the man in the black coat had just taken a far more sinister turn. Their stalker was not a stranger, but someone close, someone who knew their routines, their movements, and who had access to the most sensitive areas of the company.

"Don't worry, ladies," Dubois said, his voice trembling slightly as he tried to regain his composure. "I'm going to report this incident to management. We'll tighten security and launch an internal investigation."

Amélie couldn't help but shiver. An internal investigation? What if they didn't believe her? What if her stalker was more cunning, more powerful than she had imagined?

As they left Dubois's office, Amélie felt the cold, piercing gaze of the man in the black coat burning into her back, an invisible and omnipresent threat. She knew, with chilling certainty, that this was only the beginning of her nightmare.

Back in her office, another wave of chills washed over Amélie, this time far more intense than before. Something was wrong, she could feel it in the pit of her stomach.

Her office door stood slightly ajar, an anomaly that did not escape her notice. Amélie was certain she had locked it when she left, a habit she had developed ever since her stalker's first messages began to poison her life.

Heart pounding in her chest, she cautiously pushed the door open, her senses on high alert, watching for any sign of a hostile presence.

The interior of the office was in a state of disarray. Drawers hung open, their contents scattered across the floor. Files had tumbled from shelves, their papers strewn about by some unseen draft. Chaos reigned in a space she had always strived to maintain as a reflection of her methodical and controlled personality.

"Looks like you've had a visitor," Sophie murmured, her voice laced with newfound concern.

Amélie didn't respond, too stunned by what she saw. Her office, her sanctuary, had been violated, desecrated. A wave of vulnerability and anger washed over her, leaving a bitter, metallic taste in her mouth.

Who could have done such a thing? And more importantly, what were they looking for?

Her gaze swept across the room, taking in every detail, every out-of-place object. Nothing seemed to be missing, at least at first glance. But the feeling of a malevolent presence lingered in the air, like a foul odor clinging to the walls.

"We have to call the police," Amélie said, her voice trembling with mounting fear. "It's too dangerous to stay here."

Sophie hesitated, her sharp gaze analyzing the situation. "No, not yet," she finally replied. "If we call the police now, they'll just think it's a simple break-in, an act of vandalism."

They won't take us seriously. We need proof, Amélie, irrefutable proof that will force them to act."

A strange glint flickered in Sophie's azure blue eyes, a mixture of determination and mischief that never lingered for long. "A plan? Oh, how I do love a good plan! We'll set a trap for this creep. We'll flush him out like a rat..."



## Chapter 5: The Point of No Return

Sophie, ever a woman of action, snatched her phone and punched in a number with disconcerting speed. "Leonard? It's Sophie. We have a slight change of plans... and a rather significant problem."

Amélie listened with half an ear, her mind still grappling with the chaos of her ransacked office. Perhaps the most violating aspect of it all was this intrusion into her personal space, this feeling of being watched, spied upon, dissected by an unseen and malevolent gaze.

"There's absolutely no way we're letting him get away with this," Sophie stated, hanging up the phone. "Leonard will be here shortly. We'll make him regret the day he decided to mess with you."

Leonard, a private investigator with a charmingly antiquated air and piercing blue eyes, arrived an hour later in a cloud of cigarette smoke and cheap cologne. Despite his somewhat disheveled appearance, he exuded an aura of quiet competence that instantly soothed Amélie's frayed nerves.

"Now then, ladies, let's have it," he said, settling into Amélie's armchair, his gaze sweeping over the ravaged office. "Don't spare any details, no matter how insignificant they may seem."

Emboldened by Leonard's reassuring calmness, Amélie recounted the events of the past few days: the threatening messages, the doctored photos, the feeling of being followed, the discovery of the access badge, the intrusion into her office. Her voice trembled at times, betraying the fear that gripped her, yet she managed to tell her story with an almost clinical precision, as if seeking to distance herself from the horror of it all.

Leonard listened intently, without interrupting, his impassive face betraying no emotion. He occasionally jotted down notes in a small notebook, his agile fingers making the pen dance across the paper with bewildering speed.

"And you believe this man, this 'Marc,' is behind all of this?" he finally asked, his gaze settling on Amélie with renewed intensity.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, weighing her words carefully. "I can't say for certain," she replied cautiously. "But it's a rather unsettling coincidence, don't you think? These messages started shortly after our exchange on the dating site. And then this insistence on seeing me, this ease with which he seems to find me... No, I can't believe it's just a coincidence."

"There are no coincidences, Mademoiselle Garnier," Leonard replied in a neutral tone. "There are only causes and consequences. Our job is to determine which are at play here."

He snapped his notebook shut and rose abruptly, his keen eyes scanning the room once more. "Did this 'Marc' ever give you any specific information about himself? A last name, a phone number, an address?"

"No, nothing like that," replied Amélie, disappointed. "He was very evasive about his personal life. He said he wanted to protect me, to avoid involving me in his problems..."

"Of course, of course," Leonard muttered cynically. "That's the classic line of men who have something to hide."

He approached Amélie's desk and closely examined the open drawers and scattered files. "He didn't steal anything?"

"Not that I'm aware of," replied Amélie. "But I confess I haven't had the heart to check everything in detail yet."

"Understandable," said Leonard with a flicker of compassion in his eyes. "But it needs to be done, and the sooner the better. We never know what he might have been looking for, what he might have found..."

He straightened up and fixed her with his piercing gaze. "Now, Mademoiselle Garnier, I need you to cast your mind back. Did this 'Marc' ever mention any details that could help identify him? Any particular tastes, strange habits, verbal tics?"

Amélie delved into her memories, trying to recall every detail of her conversations with "Marc." But the harder she tried to focus, the more the images became blurred, as if her mind were trying to shield her from memories that were too painful.

"He always drank his coffee black, no sugar," she said finally, her voice barely audible. "And he had a habit of playing with his lighter, an old silver Zippo he always carried."

"That's a start," said Leonard, jotting down the information in his notebook. "Anything else?"

Amélie closed her eyes, concentrating harder. "He had a scar on his left hand. A burn, I think. He told me he got it in a car accident when he was a child."

"A scar... interesting," murmured Leonard, a predatory smile playing on his lips. "Scars are like fingerprints, they never lie."

He turned to Sophie, who had been following the conversation with fierce attention. "Sophie, my dear, I'm counting on you to sift through the security camera footage. Focus

on any men matching 'Marc's' description: tall, brown hair, black coat. And above all, look for that scar on his left hand."

"No problem, Leonard," Sophie replied with a conspiratorial wink. "I love playing junior detective."

"In the meantime, Mademoiselle Garnier," Leonard said, turning back to Amélie, "I suggest you remain vigilant. Don't go out alone, and above all, do not respond to any communication from this 'Marc'. Do you understand?"

Amélie nodded, her heart pounding. She felt caught in a terrifying spiral, powerless to defend or protect herself.

"Don't you worry, Mademoiselle Garnier," said Leonard with a reassuring smile. "We'll find this scum. And when we do, he'll pay for what he's put you through."

A fierce glint ignited in Amélie's eyes. The notion of a trap, of gaining the upper hand over her tormentor, injected a surge of adrenaline into her veins, momentarily chasing away the paralyzing fear.

"What do we do? Set up a meeting somewhere? But what if he doesn't come?" Amélie worried, the nascent hope already overtaken by a wave of doubt.

"He'll come," Sophie asserted with disconcerting confidence. "He won't be able to resist the opportunity to see you again, to savor his little victory." She picked up her phone, a narcissistic smile stretching her thin lips. "We just need to serve him the perfect bait..."

Amélie watched as Sophie composed a new message to "Marc", her nimble fingers dancing across the touch screen. The words appeared on the display, carrying a deceptively innocent seduction and an implicit promise that made Amélie nauseous.

"There," Sophie said, placing her phone back on the desk, the smile lingering on her lips. "The trap is set. All that's left is to wait for the fish to bite."

The wait was agonizing. Every phone ring, every email notification, made Amélie jump, her entire body vibrating with unbearable tension. She paced her office like a caged animal, unable to focus on anything but the trap they had just set.

Léonard, on the other hand, remained olympically calm. Sitting in Amélie's chair, he leafed through a crossword puzzle magazine with soothing concentration, as if the situation were nothing out of the ordinary. From time to time, he would raise his eyes to Amélie, his piercing gaze seeming to probe her, dissect her, deciphering her slightest thoughts and deepest fears.

Finally, after an eternity that seemed to have no end, Sophie's phone lit up, displaying a new message from "Marc". Amélie rushed to her side, her heart skipping a beat.

"He bit," Sophie said, her voice triumphant. "Meeting tomorrow night, 8pm, at the 'Café de la Place'. Be ready, Amélie, things are about to get serious."

The "Café de la Place" was a small, unassuming bistro located a few blocks from the office building. A place frequented by neighborhood employees for lunch or an after-work drink, but which emptied quickly in the evening. The ideal place for a discreet rendezvous... or for an ambush.

Amélie had prepared herself with unusual care. She had chosen an outfit that was both elegant and understated, wishing to go unnoticed while still asserting a certain confidence. Her reflection in the mirror returned the image of a woman she no longer really recognized: her face pale and drawn, her eyes marked by lack of sleep, her features hardened by anxiety.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" asked Sophie, her azure blue gaze betraying a hint of worry.

They were in Amélie's living room, waiting for the appointed time that was fast approaching. Léonard, true to form, had disappeared into the labyrinthine city, ready to intervene at the slightest sign of danger.

"I have no choice, Sophie," Amélie replied, her voice steady. "This man is ruining my life. It has to stop. I need to know who he is, why he's doing this to me."

Sophie didn't answer, but simply squeezed Amélie's hand in hers, a silent gesture of support and complicity.

At 7:45 pm sharp, Léonard rejoined them, bringing with him a breath of fresh air and the scent of cold tobacco.

"Everything is in place," he announced in a neutral tone. "I have two men stationed inside the café, and two more outside. If this 'Marc' shows his face, he won't get away from us."

Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine. The excitement of the chase mingled with the fear of the unknown, creating a heady and dangerous cocktail.

"Ready?" Léonard asked, handing her a small, black, discreet device. "This microphone will allow you to stay in contact with us. Keep it in plain sight, he mustn't notice it."

Amélie took the microphone with clammy hands, aware of the dangerous role she was about to play.

"Don't worry, Mademoiselle Garnier," Léonard said with a reassuring smile. "We'll watch over you."

The "Café de la Place" was bathed in a subdued and warm light that contrasted with the tense atmosphere that reigned inside. Only a few lingering customers were nursing a last drink at the counter, oblivious to the drama unfolding before their eyes.

Amélie settled at a table near the window, as agreed with Léonard. From there, she had an unobstructed view of the street and the entrance to the café, allowing her to watch for "Marc's" arrival while remaining out of sight of other patrons.

The minutes dragged by, each one seeming to last an eternity. Amélie went over the plan in her head, reminding herself of Léonard's instructions and the different scenarios they had envisioned. Her nerves were raw, stretched to the limit, ready to snap at the slightest misstep.

Suddenly, a movement outside the café caught her attention. A man had just parked on the sidewalk opposite and was now getting out of his car. Amélie's heart skipped a beat. The stranger was tall and thin, dressed in a long black coat that concealed his figure. He was wearing a cap pulled down over his eyes, making identification difficult.

"Léonard, I have a suspicious individual in sight," she murmured into the microphone hidden in her scarf. "Tall, thin, black coat, cap. He just parked across from the café."

"Understood, Amélie," Léonard's calm voice responded in her ear. "Remain calm and do nothing that might alert him. We have eyes on him."

The man crossed the street with a determined stride and stepped onto the sidewalk that led to the "Café de la Place." Amélie followed him with her eyes, her whole body tense. He was a few yards from the entrance now. Amélie could almost feel his gaze on her, heavy, insistent, like an icy caress on her skin.

The man stopped in front of the café door and looked up, his gaze scanning the interior of the bistro. Amélie held her breath, her heart pounding in her chest. This was the moment of truth.

Slowly, deliberately, the man pushed open the door of the "Café de la Place" and crossed the threshold.

The cool night air weaved its way into the cafe, carrying with it a waft of that distinct autumn evening dampness. A shiver ran through Amélie, but she couldn't tell if it was from the chill or the impending arrival of her tormentor.

The man scanned the room, his eyes lingering on each face, each silhouette, like a predator sizing up its prey. His demeanor was taut, febrile, his movements imbued with a palpable nervous energy. He abruptly removed his cap, releasing a thick mane of dark hair that fell across his forehead. His face, finally revealed, was younger than Amélie had imagined, with sharp, angular features, a square jaw, his pale complexion a stark contrast to the darkness of his eyes.

He wasn't unattractive, far from it, but there was a certain hardness to him, an unsettling aura that made her uneasy. Amélie searched for the scar on his left hand, the one "Marc" had described, but the man wore black leather gloves, concealing his hands from view.

Doubt gnawed at her again. Was this really him? Was it possible that this man, so young, so different from the image she'd constructed of "Marc," was her tormentor?

As if sensing her gaze, the man turned towards her, and their eyes met in a flash. A flash of recognition? Of cruel amusement? Amélie couldn't be sure. For a fleeting moment, she thought she detected a glimmer of triumph in the stranger's dark eyes, as if he were savoring his victory before the battle had even begun.

He strode towards the counter, exchanging a few words with the bartender in a raspy, guttural voice that Amélie couldn't quite discern. Then, without taking his eyes off her, he ordered a drink and leaned nonchalantly against the counter, his large frame blocking her view of the rest of the cafe.



Amélie felt like a butterfly caught in a spider's web, unable to move, hypnotized by the predator's piercing gaze. She brought her hand to her neck, nervously adjusting the scarf that concealed the microphone.

"Leonard, he's here," she whispered into the tiny device. "He's at the counter. I don't know if it's really him, he doesn't look like I imagined..."

"Describe him," Leonard's voice ordered in her ear, as calm and reassuring as always.

Amélie obeyed, detailing the man's appearance with an almost clinical precision, as if trying to distance herself from the emotions that threatened to engulf her.

"He's young, twenties, maybe early thirties. Brown hair, short and messy. Dark eyes, I can't quite make out the color. Square jaw, strong chin. He's wearing faded jeans, black sneakers, a gray sweater under his coat. And black leather gloves."

A heavy silence followed her description, broken only by the clinking of cups at the counter and the murmurs of the few remaining customers. Amélie could feel her heart pounding in her ears, a bitter taste rising in her throat.

"Are you sure he's looking at you?" Leonard finally asked, his voice laced with a newfound tension.

"Yes, I'm sure," Amélie replied, her gaze fixed on the stranger. "He won't take his eyes off me. It's like... like he's taunting me."

"Don't let him out of your sight, Amélie," Leonard commanded. "And whatever you do, don't do anything rash. We're going to approach him. Be ready to make a positive ID."

A wave of cold washed over Amélie. A positive ID. The words echoed in her mind like a sentence, brutally thrusting her back into the reality of the situation. This was no longer about assumptions, anonymous messages, or doctored photos. This was about flesh and blood, a face, an identity that she was about to reveal to the world.

The wait became unbearable. Each second seemed to stretch into an eternity, each beat of her heart reverberating in her ears like an inexorable countdown. The man at the counter had finished his drink and was getting ready to leave. He pulled his cap back on with a swift gesture, once again obscuring his face from view.

"Leonard, he's leaving," Amélie whispered, her voice tight with anxiety. "We have to hurry."

"Stay put, Amélie," came Leonard's voice in her ear, more strained than ever. "We're almost there."

But it was too late. The man had just crossed the threshold of the cafe and was already disappearing into the night.

Amélie sprang to her feet, a silent scream trapped in her throat. Her body, despite the paralyzing fear, craved a reaction, an action, anything to shatter the apathy that held her captive.

"We have to follow him!" she exclaimed, her voice hoarse, betraying her terror. Without waiting for a response, she rushed towards the exit, colliding with the neighboring table in a cacophony of shattered glass and metal.

"Amélie, wait!" Leonardo's voice, more insistent this time, pierced through the fog of panic engulfing her. But it was too late. Amélie was already outside, swallowed by the cold, damp night.

The street was deserted, the building facades dark and silent like slumbering giants. Only the streetlights, with their flickering, pallid glow, seemed to bear witness to Amélie's frantic pursuit, chasing after a shadow weaving its way through the labyrinth of darkened streets.

Where was he? Amélie scanned her surroundings, her gaze latching onto every silhouette, every recess of shadow. She had no idea which direction he had taken, no way of knowing if he was still within reach.

"Amélie, answer me! Where are you?" Leonardo's voice, closer this time, resonated from the earpiece she still clutched against her ear.

"I lost him," Amélie gasped, her voice broken by exertion and panic. "He disappeared..."

"Calm down, Amélie," Leonardo said, his tone softer now, more soothing. "Tell me where you are, we're coming."

Amélie described her location as best she could, her trembling voice betraying her mounting fear. She felt vulnerable, exposed, like easy prey in this hostile urban landscape.

"Stay where you are, Amélie," Leonardo ordered. "Don't move. We're two minutes away."

Amélie pressed herself against the cold wall of a building, her body trembling with cold and fear. She bitterly regretted her impulsiveness, her rash decision to chase this man into the night. What had she hoped to accomplish? Putting herself in danger, that much was evident.

The screech of a car braking violently made her jump. A dark sedan pulled up beside her, its headlights illuminating the street with a harsh, violent light. Leonardo emerged hastily, followed by Sophie, whose pale face reflected the worry gnawing at her.

“Amélie, are you alright?” Sophie asked, taking her in her arms, her embrace firm and reassuring, contrasting with Amélie’s fragility.

"He got away," Amélie repeated, her voice barely audible. "I couldn't do anything..."

“It's okay, Amélie,” Leonardo said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “The important thing is that you're alright. We'll find him, the bastard. He won't get far.”

Amélie looked at him, searching his eyes for a sign of certainty, a hope to cling to. But Leonardo's face, usually so imperturbable, betrayed a shadow of worry she had never seen before.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she asked, her heart clenching in her chest.

Leonardo hesitated for a moment, exchanging a meaningful look with Sophie.

“There’s something you need to know, Amélie,” he finally said, his voice low and steady. “Something important. But you're going to have to be strong...”

Amélie stared at him, anguish gripping her, her throat constricted. "What is it, Leonard? Tell me!"

The detective sighed, his gaze shifting away from hers. "My men lost sight of him. He's cunning, this fellow. He knows the neighborhood like the back of his hand, vanished into the dark alleys like a phantom."

Amélie's disappointment was as potent as a punch to the gut. "All this for nothing..." she murmured, her voice brittle.

Sophie squeezed her arm, her eyes brimming with compassion. "Don't lose hope, Amélie. We'll find him, the bastard. Leonard will find a way."

The detective nodded, but his face remained taut. "We won't give up, that's for sure. But we have to face facts, Amélie: this man is dangerous. He's organized, methodical, and always one step ahead."

He paused, his piercing blue eyes locking onto hers with intensity. "We can't wait for him to strike again. We need to anticipate his moves, understand his motives."

"But how?" Amélie asked, a shiver running down her spine despite the balmy summer night. "We don't even know who he is, what he wants!"

Leonard offered a grim smile, his rugged features hardening. "We'll find out, Amélie. We'll unmask him. And believe me, when we do, he will pay for what he's putting you through."

He turned to Sophie, his gaze softening. "Sophie, my dear, I believe our friend needs some company. Would you mind staying with her tonight?"

Sophie nodded without hesitation, her expression resolute. "Of course, Leonard. We won't leave her alone, that's a promise."

As Amélie settled into Sophie's car, her gaze lost in the blurry city lights flashing by, a nagging thought haunted her. Who was this man? Why was he fixated on her, stalking her, tormenting her, stripping her life away piece by piece?

Fear was omnipresent, an icy knot in her stomach, but a new resolve began to grow within her. She wouldn't let herself be broken, wouldn't be a passive victim. She would fight back, for her life, for her sanity, to reclaim the peace and serenity this man had stolen from her.

The fight ahead would be arduous, she knew, but she wouldn't face it alone. She had Sophie, she had Leonard, and together, they would unmask her tormentor and bring him to justice.

The night was far from over, but a glimmer of hope pierced through the darkness. Doubt and fear wouldn't vanish overnight, but Amélie knew now that she wasn't alone in her nightmare.

And somewhere, deep within her broken heart, she felt a new feeling blossom, a blend of cold fury and fierce determination. She would fight back.

## Chapter 6: Isolation

The apartment, once a haven of peace, now resembled a padded cell. The walls seemed to close in on her, suffocating her under the weight of fear and uncertainty. Sophie's scent, an intoxicating blend of jasmine and black coffee, still lingered in the air, a cruel reminder of her solitude. Sophie had tried, with the patience of a saint, to convince her to stay at her place for a few days, until things calmed down.

“You can’t stay here alone, Amélie, not now,” she had pleaded, her hazel eyes filled with worry. “Let me protect you, let me help you through this.”

But Amélie had refused. She couldn't bring herself to impose any further, to become a burden to her best friend, the only one she had left. So, she found herself alone, facing her demons and the menacing shadow of “Marc,” the phantom that relentlessly haunted her.

The hours had transformed into an endless litany of fear and suspicion. Every creak of the floorboards, every groan of the old building, made her jump, her heart pounding in her chest. Silence itself had become a tormentor, a deafening void where her worst fears resonated.

She had tried to distract herself, to lose herself in a book, to watch television, but nothing could chase away the obsessive images that paraded behind her closed eyelids. The blurred face of the man at the café, his cold, calculating eyes, pursued her relentlessly, taunting her with his anonymity.

Why? The question gnawed at her incessantly, a throbbing refrain that echoed in her head like a tribal drum. Why was he targeting her with such ferocity? What could she have possibly done to elicit such hatred, such cruelty?

She racked her brain, reviewing every detail of her life, every encounter, every relationship, but she found no logical explanation. Her life, though modest, had always

been peaceful, orderly, a reflection of her tidy little apartment. She had never had an enemy, at least not to her knowledge. So why?

The shrill ringing of the phone made her jump, pulling her brutally from her thoughts. She glanced suspiciously at the device, her heart pounding. An unknown number was displayed on the screen, nameless, without indication.

A wave of panic washed over her. Was it him? Had he found a way to locate her, to pierce her fortress of solitude?

The ringing sounded again, insistent, threatening. Amélie hesitated, torn between fear and the visceral need to know. To know who was behind this nightmare, why he was so determined to destroy her.

With an almost feverish gesture, she grabbed the receiver and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?" she murmured, her voice choked with anxiety.

An icy silence greeted her words, a silence heavy with menacing implications. Then, a man's voice, deep and raspy, resonated in the hollow of her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

"So, Amélie, are we playing hide and seek now?"

Gasping for breath, Amélie managed to articulate, "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

A sardonic laugh escaped the voice on the other end of the line. "You'll find out in due time, my dear. In the meantime, let's just say I'm an admirer... of your little secrets."



An icy shiver snaked down Amélie's spine. How did this man know her name? What kind of information did he possess about her?

"You have the wrong number," she stammered, her heart pounding in her chest. "I have nothing to do with..."

"Don't play the innocent with me," the voice cut her off, menacingly. "I know who you are, Amélie. I know everything about you. And soon, everyone else will too."

The man abruptly hung up, leaving her breathless, the receiver trembling in her hand. A torrent of questions swirled in her mind, but one haunted her above all others: how was she going to get out of this?

She needed help, that much was clear. But who could she possibly confide in? The police? Would they take her seriously with her ramblings about an invisible harasser? Her friends? They already doubted her, fueled by the lies circulating on social media.

No, she was alone. Alone against this predator lurking in the shadows, patiently waiting for the opportune moment to strike again.

Anxiety gnawed at her insides, transforming her into a terrified prey, unable to discern reality from fantasy. Had she dreamed the call? Was she losing her mind?

No, she forced herself to think. She had to stay calm, analyze the situation. This man, whoever he was, was trying to reach her, to destroy her psychologically. He wanted to see her sink into paranoia, fear, isolation.

Well, she wouldn't let him. She would fight back.

Suddenly, an idea sparked in her mind, a glimmer of hope in the darkness that enveloped her. Sophie. Sophie, with her boundless energy and unwavering optimism, would know what to do. She had always been there for her, through thick and thin. She would find a solution, she would help her get out of this.

Amélie rushed to her phone and dialed her friend's number, her heart pounding with fragile hope. She had to talk to her, tell her about this chilling call, ask for her help.

The phone rang once, twice, then a familiar and reassuring voice answered on the other end.

"Amélie? What's going on? Are you alright?"

"Sophie..."

Amélie's voice broke, choked with emotion.

"I need you."

Sophie's apartment, a haven of warm colors and inviting scents, stood in stark contrast to the icy dread that had overtaken Amélie. The soft glow of lamps cast a comforting warmth, and the familiar fragrance of vanilla and cinnamon candles wafted through the air, creating a soothing atmosphere. Yet, Amélie, huddled on the plush sofa, trembled uncontrollably, the memory of the phone call chilling her to the bone.

Sophie, seated beside her, held her hand firmly, her hazel eyes filled with genuine concern. She listened intently to Amélie's disjointed account, her voice soft and calm, a stark contrast to the tumultuous flow of her friend's words.

"Easy, Amélie, catch your breath," she said gently, tightening her grip on her friend's hand. "Tell me everything, every single detail."

Amélie took a deep breath, attempting to quell the tremor that shook her from within. She repeated the chilling words of her tormentor, her voice strained with anguish. Each word echoed in the silence of the living room, as if to underline the chilling reality of the situation.

Sophie listened without interruption, her face pale and drawn. When Amélie finished her story, a heavy silence descended upon the room, a silence thick with apprehension and uncertainty.

"I... I don't know what to do, Sophie," murmured Amélie, her voice broken with anguish. "I feel trapped, suffocating."

Sophie pulled her close, offering silent comfort. "You're not alone, Amélie," she murmured. "I'm here, and I won't let you down."

Gently disengaging from her friend's embrace, Sophie rose and went to the kitchen. She returned moments later with a steaming cup of tea, which she handed to Amélie. "Here, drink this, it will do you good."

Amélie took the cup gratefully, her cold fingers warming at the touch of the hot porcelain. The comforting aroma of chamomile tea wafted up to her, soothing her slightly.

"We have to find a solution, Sophie," she said, her voice trembling. "I can't go on living like this, in fear and uncertainty."

"I know, darling," replied Sophie, her gaze determined. "We'll find a solution, together. But first, we need to think clearly."

She settled back down beside Amélie, and for a long moment, they remained silent, each lost in thought. The steady ticking of the wall clock punctuated the silence, a haunting reminder of time passing, time that seemed to be working against Amélie.

Suddenly, Sophie lifted her head, a determined glint in her eye. "I have an idea," she said. "We're going to set a trap for this guy."

Amélie looked at her, bewildered. "A trap? But how?"

"We'll arrange a meeting," explained Sophie, a sly smile illuminating her face. "We'll make him believe that you agree to meet him, and then we'll see who is hiding behind this sick game."

Amélie's heart began to race. The thought of coming face to face with her tormentor terrified her, but at the same time, she felt a flicker of excitement mixed with hope.

"But where could we meet him? What if it's a trap?"

"Don't worry, I've got it all planned out," Sophie reassured her. "We'll meet him in a public place, in broad daylight, and Léonard will be there to watch over us."

The mention of Léonard brought a glimmer of hope to Amélie's eyes. The former policeman, now a private investigator, inspired confidence and security. His reassuring presence and piercing gaze had a way of calming her anxieties, at least momentarily.

"Do you think he'll agree to meet us?" asked Amélie, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

"We have nothing to lose by trying," replied Sophie, determined. "At worst, he'll refuse, and we'll be no further forward. But at best, he'll show up, and we can finally put a face to this nightmare."

Amélie nodded, convinced by her friend's arguments. She saw no other solution. She had to face her fears, take the risk of confronting her tormentor, even if it terrified her to the core.

"Okay," she said, her voice trembling but resolute. "Let's do it."

Sophie smiled at her, proud of her friend's courage. "I knew you'd say that. Come on, let's call Léonard and explain the plan."

Amélie's heart pounded as she dialed Léonard's number, her trembling fingers brushing against the phone's keypad. She knew that this decision, risky as it was, was her only chance to end this nightmare and regain control of her life.

Leonard, ever efficient, orchestrated the plan with a methodical precision that did little to soothe Amélie's frayed nerves. The chosen location was the "Café de la Place," a bustling establishment nestled in a small, cobblestone square in the historic district. The café boasted a constant flow of potential patrons, making discreet surveillance easier for Leonard and his men.

The message, composed by Sophie with a composure that surprised Amélie, was brief and devoid of pleasantries. "Agreed to meet you. Tomorrow, 3 PM, Café de la Place. Come alone." It was sent from a new burner number, like all the previous ones.

The wait that followed the message's dispatch was agonizing. Every notification chime, every phone vibration, made Amélie flinch, leaving a fragile and terrifying hope hanging in the air.

The silence, when it descended, was even worse. A silence heavy with unspoken words, with implicit threats, which left her at the mercy of her darkest thoughts. She felt like a hunted animal, watching for the slightest sign of its predator, unable to distinguish reality from the growing paranoia that gnawed at her.

Sophie, true to herself, didn't leave her side. She distracted her with board games, lighthearted movies, and animated conversations about trivial matters, desperately trying to inject a semblance of normalcy into their now oppressive daily life.

But behind Sophie's mask of forced cheerfulness, Amélie perceived the gnawing worry. She guessed the sleepless nights, the discreet calls to Leonard, the tireless internet searches attempting to understand, to find an element that could lead them to this elusive "Marc."

On the appointed day, the air crackled with tension. A palpable anxiety hung in the apartment, despite Sophie's efforts to maintain a calm atmosphere. Amélie felt like a boxer before a decisive fight, an intoxicating mix of fear and adrenaline washing over her in successive waves.

She slipped into a simple yet polished outfit, raw denim jeans, a white t-shirt, and a black blazer, like symbolic armor against the unknown that awaited her. She struggled to control her trembling hands as she applied a touch of makeup, masking the traces of fatigue and anxiety under a layer of foundation and mascara.

"Are you ready?" Sophie's voice, despite its feigned casualness, betrayed her worry.

Amélie took a deep breath, trying to calm the frantic beating of her heart against her ribs. She cast a final glance at her reflection in the mirror, as if to reassure herself that she was indeed the same person she was a few weeks ago, before this nightmare began.

Her face, usually luminous, seemed gaunt, her features drawn by anxiety. But her eyes, which she barely recognized, shone with a new light, a mixture of determination and cold anger.

She wasn't the same anymore. "Marc," whoever he was, had changed her forever. But one thing was certain, she wouldn't let him hurt her anymore.

"Yes," she replied in a firm, surprisingly calm voice. "Let's go."

The taxi ride to the Café de la Place was interminable. Amélie stared at the passing streets through the window, but nothing seemed to truly reach her consciousness. Her thoughts were elsewhere, caught in a whirlwind of hypotheses and scenarios, each more catastrophic than the last.

Who was she going to find at the end of this meeting? A familiar face? A stranger? And what if he didn't come? What if all this was just a cruel game, a way to torture her further?

The taxi finally stopped in front of the cafe. Amélie paid the fare with a distracted hand and got out of the vehicle, her legs shaking. Sophie joined her on the sidewalk, giving her an understanding and encouraging look.

"He's there," she murmured, discreetly pointing to a table near the window.

Amélie followed her gaze and felt her heart clench in her chest. Sitting alone, a newspaper unfolded before him, was a man she had never seen before in her life.

He was a young man, barely in his twenties, dressed in black from head to toe. His brown hair was cut short, his face thin and angular, his features hard and closed. He wore

sunglasses despite the overcast sky, hiding his eyes from view. His hands, thin and nervous, were gloved in black, even on this mild autumn day.

He looked like he had stepped straight out of a film noir, a disturbing and threatening figure against the picturesque backdrop of the cobblestone square.

Amélie scrutinized him for a few seconds, her heart pounding, trying to detect a sign, a detail that could put her on the right track. But the man remained impassive, his face hidden behind his dark glasses, like a wax statue in the bustling cafe.

"Are you sure it's him?" she murmured to Sophie, her voice barely audible above the surrounding din.

Sophie hesitated, a shadow of doubt crossing her face. "I don't know," she admitted. "He doesn't really match the description you gave me of 'Marc.' But he's the only one who arrived after we sent the message."

Amélie felt a surge of icy apprehension. What if they were wrong? What if this man was just an ordinary customer, an innocent caught in the web of their plan?

Before she could voice her fears, the man lowered his sunglasses slightly, as if he sensed their insistent gaze on him. Their eyes met for a brief moment, a flash in the dim light.

Cold, calculating eyes, of a glacial blue that seemed to suck all the light around him. Eyes that reflected no emotion, no humanity, only a distant and chilling curiosity.

Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine, despite the mildness of the autumn afternoon. Those eyes, she knew them. She had seen them before, somewhere, in a distant past buried in the recesses of her memory.



But where? When?

Before she could remember, the man replaced his sunglasses, cutting short their silent exchange. He stood up abruptly, dropped a few bills on the table, and melted into the crowd without a backward glance.

"Damn, he's leaving!" exclaimed Sophie. "Leonard, do you see him?"

Leonard's tense voice echoed in the earpiece Sophie had discreetly placed in her ear. "Yes, I see him. He's headed towards Rue des Vieux-Greniers. We're following him."

"Let's go too!" cried Amélie, a surge of adrenaline banishing her paralyzing fear. "I want to know who he is, what he wants from me!"

Without waiting for Sophie's reply, she set off in pursuit of the man in black, disappearing in turn into the maze of narrow, dark alleys of the old quarter.

Amélie's determination curdled into visceral terror as she plunged into the labyrinthine maze of narrow streets. The shadows cast by the centuries-old buildings, once comforting, now loomed menacingly, transforming the cobbled labyrinth into a corridor of dread. The sun, veiled by the clouds of an encroaching autumn, struggled to pierce the deepening gloom, as if the city itself were holding its breath.

Each footstep echoed in the almost unreal silence of the alleyway, amplified by the fear constricting Amélie's throat. The click of her heels against the uneven cobblestones intertwined with the frantic pounding of her heart, creating a chaotic symphony that resonated in her chest.

"Sophie!" she called out, her voice hoarse and trembling, lost in the maze of stone and brick. "Léonard! Where are you?"

Only silence answered her, a silence heavy with unspoken threats. She was alone, ensnared in this hostile labyrinth, hunted by an elusive shadow.

The memory of the man's cold eyes haunted her, a flash of glacial blue in the darkness of her mind. Those eyes, she had met them before, she was sure of it. But where? And why did that face, that gaze, remain so hazy, so intangible in her memory?

Frustration mingled with fear, a potent rage gnawing at her from within. She had been so close to unmasking her tormentor, to putting a face to the nightmare that had haunted her for weeks. And yet he had slipped through her fingers once more, taunting her with his anonymity, his invisible hold on her life.

"Calm down, think," she forced herself to think, leaning against the damp wall of an ancient building. Her distorted reflection in the dusty window of an antique shop showed her own image, warped by fear and exhaustion.

She took a deep breath, trying to quell the tremor that shook her from within. The damp scent of wet stone and dust filled her lungs, a fragrance of oblivion and closely guarded secrets.

Then the idea came to her, sudden and undeniable, like a truth imposing itself upon her. What if the key to the enigma, the answer to her questions, lay hidden in her past? What if those eyes, that icy stare, belonged to a ghost from her own history, a memory buried in the depths of her mind?

She had to delve, to remember. To plunge back into the meanders of her past, to exhume forgotten memories, faces erased by time and pain.

It was in this moment of fragile lucidity, at the heart of the panic that overwhelmed her, that Amélie made the decision that would change the course of her life. She would no longer wait passively for her tormentor to strike again. She would take the initiative, confront her demons, even if it meant losing herself in the labyrinth of her own past.

Instinct urged her to turn back, to flee the oppressive darkness of the alleyway. But a newfound resolve, a fierce determination born from fear and frustration, rooted her to the spot. No, she would not give up. Not this time.

Her eyes scanned her surroundings, searching for a clue, a trace that would lead her to her pursuer. A discordant detail caught her eye: a back door, half hidden beneath a pile of dusty, discarded furniture. With a heart pounding against her ribs, she cautiously approached and gripped the rusted handle. Locked.

A wave of despair washed over her. She was trapped, alone in this hostile labyrinth, at the mercy of an unseen predator. Tears welled in her eyes, hot and furious.

A raspy voice shattered the silence, making her jump.

"Looking for me?"

Amélie whirled around, her heart skipping a beat. Leaning nonchalantly against the brick wall stood a man she had never seen before. Tall, with a powerful build, he exuded an aura of raw strength and restrained danger. His dark attire, a worn leather jacket over faded jeans, seemed to absorb the meager light of the alley. His face, partially obscured by a several days' growth of beard, remained unreadable, lost in the shadow cast by the brim of his cap.

A glacial shiver ran down Amélie's spine. Instinct, that primal scream that shrieked of danger, urged her to run, to scream for help. But something in the stranger's piercing gaze, a glint of cold, calculating intelligence that flickered in his hazel eyes, held her captive.

"Who are you?" she managed to articulate, her voice choked by fear. "What do you want from me?"

A wry smile touched the man's lips, revealing a flash of white, predatory teeth. "Let's just say I'm a friend," he replied, his voice low and measured, a stark contrast to the palpable tension that thrummed in the air. "A friend who knows quite a lot about you, Amélie."

The sound of her name, spoken with such chilling familiarity by this stranger, sent a wave of unease through her. Who was this man? How did he know her name? And what did he mean by "a friend"?

"I don't know you," she said, taking a cautious step back. "Leave me alone."

The man didn't move, his smile widening slightly. "Oh, but you do know me," he countered, his tone deceptively reassuring. "Or at least, you know who I represent."

He took a step towards her, forcing her to retreat further. "Marc, remember him?"

The name, spoken with a hint of malicious relish, struck Amélie like a jolt of electricity. Marc. Her unseen tormentor, the puppet master who had orchestrated her descent into hell.

"What do you know about him?" she demanded, fear giving way to a surge of raw, potent anger. "Where is he?"

The man studied her for a moment, his sharp eyes seeming to bore into her very soul. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, he removed his cap, revealing a hard, angular face etched with the passage of time. His hair, a shock of jet black streaked with silver, was cropped close to his head. His eyes, a glacial, steely blue, seemed to gleam with an almost feline intensity in the dim light.

"Marc, that's me," he said, his voice soft and chilling, a cruel smile spreading across his thin lips. "And believe me, my dear Amélie, you haven't seen anything yet."

## Chapter 7: The Financial Assault

Marc's sardonic laughter lingered in the somber alleyways, each syllable etched in acid on Amélie's mind. Fear, a glacial sheet of lead, pinned her to the spot, paralyzing her limbs, stealing her breath. Marc, her invisible tormentor, now had a face, a voice, a palpable presence. Yet, instead of easing her terror, this revelation plunged her further into an abyss of dread.

She tried to scream, to call for help, but no sound escaped her lips, sealed by sheer terror. Her body trembled uncontrollably, wracked by chills that ran down her spine. The alley, once a harmless shortcut, had transformed into a suffocating trap, the damp brick walls closing in, threatening to crush her.

Marc approached with slow, measured steps, savoring every second of his perverse triumph. With each stride he took towards her, Amélie instinctively retreated, like a hunted animal seeking to escape its predator. But the space inexorably shrank, revealing the inevitable outcome of this uneven confrontation.

"You didn't really think you could get away so easily, did you?" he asked, his voice raspy with cruel amusement. "I've spent too much time weaving my web, orchestrating your downfall so carefully."

His words, venom distilled in carefully measured doses, were like daggers plunged into Amélie's heart. Each syllable dragged her back to her painful reality: she was a prisoner in a macabre game whose rules and stakes she couldn't grasp.

"But why?" she managed to articulate, her voice a mere whisper shattered by terror. "What have I done to you?"

Marc let out a short, glacial laugh, devoid of any genuine mirth. "You're asking the wrong questions, my dear Amélie."

He stopped a few paces away, leaving an impassable gulf separating their two worlds. His steel-blue eyes, two icy shards in the alley's gloom, fixed on her with hypnotic intensity.

"What you've done doesn't matter," he continued, his voice soft yet menacing. "What matters is what I'm going to make you pay."

A shiver of dread ran down Amélie's spine. She was trapped, alone and defenseless, facing a man whose cold madness chilled her to the bone. In his eyes, she thought she saw a flash of pure sadism, a thirst for vengeance that petrified her.

"You won't get away with this," she managed to articulate, drawing a shred of desperate courage from the depths of her terror. "The police..."

Marc cut her off with a wave of his hand, a mocking smile stretching his thin lips. "The police?" he echoed derisively. "You really think they'll believe you? Who would listen to the ramblings of a hysterical woman?"

He took another step towards her, forcing her to retreat until her back hit the rough brick wall. Amélie felt trapped, like an animal cornered in its cage.

"I destroyed your life, Amélie," he murmured, his voice soft and venomous, like a poisoned caress. "I sullied your reputation, shattered your career, poisoned your relationships. And this is just the beginning."

He brought his face close to hers, so close that Amélie could feel his fetid breath on her skin. His steel-blue eyes, two icy points that seemed to pierce her very soul, held her captive in their hypnotic gaze.

"From now on," he whispered, his voice barely audible in the heavy silence of the alley. "You will live in fear. You will never know when or where I will strike again. Every shadow, every dark corner, will be my domain. And you, you will be my prey."

Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, Marc vanished into the night. Amélie remained there, paralyzed by terror, her heart pounding in her chest. Marc's words, like curses cast upon her future, echoed in her mind.

She was alone, broken, at the mercy of a man whose madness was equaled only by his cruelty.

Slowly, like a marionette whose strings had just been severed, Amélie crumpled against the wall, releasing a strangled sob. Fear, a wild and uncontrollable beast, submerged her, devouring her from the inside out. She was a prisoner of a waking nightmare, a labyrinth of terror from which she could find no escape.

Burning tears streamed down her cheeks, tracing wet paths on her face, contorted with anguish. The street, silent and deserted, echoed her solitude, her despair. She felt terribly vulnerable, exposed to the invisible eyes of her tormentor. Every shadow, every dark corner, seemed to harbor the ghostly presence of Marc, ready to pounce on her at any moment.

The survival instinct, that primal force that slumbers within every human being, finally took over. She couldn't stay there, prey offered at the mercy of a ruthless predator. She had to flee, to find shelter, to find help.

Rising with difficulty, leaning against the damp wall to keep from collapsing, Amélie started off with hesitant steps in the opposite direction from the one Marc had taken. Her legs trembled under the weight of terror, her lungs burned with lack of air. But she forced herself onward, driven by a newfound energy, a desperate mix of fear and adrenaline.

She walked aimlessly, traversing a maze of narrow, poorly lit streets, lined with ancient and decrepit buildings. The silence, broken only by the dull thud of her own footsteps, was unbearable. She wanted to scream, to shriek her terror to the world, but fear choked her.

Turning a corner, she finally recognized a familiar landmark: the bright neon sign of a café, a haven of light and warmth in the icy night. Without hesitation, she rushed inside, pushing the door open with a strength she didn't know she possessed.

The café was almost deserted at this late hour. Only a few lingering customers occupied the tables scattered around the dimly lit room. Amélie collapsed heavily onto a chair, her breath short, her heart pounding. She felt like she had run a marathon, her body so exhausted by terror.

A cup of steaming tea was offered to her by a waitress with a kind look. Amélie thanked her with a nod and brought the hot beverage to her lips, gratefully sipping the comforting liquid. The warmth spread slowly through her chilled body, slightly easing the tension that gripped her.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts, to bring order to the chaos in her mind. She had to find a way to contact Sophie, to warn her of the danger. But how? Her cell phone, forgotten in her haste, must still be lying on the sidewalk, in the very spot where Marc had approached her.

Despair washed over her again. She was alone, utterly isolated, with no way to contact the outside world. Marc was right: she was his prey, at his mercy.

"Amélie?"

A soft, familiar voice pulled her from her dark thoughts. She looked up and saw Sophie walking towards her, her face etched with worry.



"My God, what happened?" Sophie exclaimed, sitting down hastily opposite her. "You're white as a sheet!"

Amélie tried to smile, but her lips formed a pathetic grimace. "I thought... I thought I'd never see you again," she murmured, her voice broken with emotion.

Sophie looked at her with infinite tenderness. "Tell me everything," she said, taking her hand. "Don't hold anything back."

And Amélie, for the first time since the beginning of her ordeal, finally felt safe. In the hands of her friend, she let the words flow, recounting in vivid detail the terrifying encounter she had just experienced. She spoke of Marc, his icy voice, his piercing gaze, his terrifying threats.

Sophie listened without interrupting, her face hardening as Amélie's story continued. When she was finished, a heavy silence fell between them.

"We have to call the police," Sophie declared decisively. "This guy is dangerous."

Amélie shook her head, a flicker of fear crossing her eyes. "No, not the police!" she cried. "Marc said they wouldn't believe me. He said I was... hysterical."

Sophie squeezed her hand tightly. "Listen to me, Amélie," she said firmly. "What you experienced was horrible. You were the victim of a predator, and it's not your fault. Don't let this guy destroy you."

She paused, choosing her words carefully. "I know someone," she continued. "A former police officer. His name is Léonard, and he owes me a big favor. I'm sure he'll agree to help us."

Amélie looked at her, a glimmer of hope returning to her eyes. "Do you think he can do something?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm convinced of it," Sophie replied with a reassuring smile. "Léonard is the best in his field. He'll find a way to nail this Marc."

A feeling of immense gratitude washed over Amélie. In her friend's eyes, she saw a strength, a determination that gave her a little courage. She was no longer alone. Sophie was there, by her side, ready to support her through this ordeal.

"Thank you, Sophie," she murmured, her voice choked with emotion. "I don't know what I would do without you."

Sophie gave her a knowing smile. "We're friends, aren't we?" she said. "We face problems together."

She took out her cell phone and dialed a number.

"Léonard? It's Sophie. I need your help. It's about Amélie..."

The next day, Amélie awoke with a sensation of emotional hangover. The sun, filtering through the curtains, seemed to mock the darkness that had fallen upon her life. The previous day's account, the terrifying revelations, the icy terror that had gripped her in the alleyway, all of it came back to her in tumultuous waves, submerging her once again in a tide of anguish.

Sophie, ever thoughtful, awaited her in the kitchen, a steaming cup of coffee in hand. Her benevolent gaze, filled with sincere compassion, brought a fragile balm to Amélie's bruised heart.

"I've contacted Léonard," announced Sophie in a soft voice, as if not to startle Amélie, still fragile as broken crystal. "He's expecting us this afternoon."

Hope, timid as a fragile sprout piercing arid soil, peeked its nose into Amélie's heart. Léonard represented perhaps a chance, a glimmer in the dark night that had swallowed her existence.

Léonard's apartment, nestled in the heart of an old building in the Latin Quarter, exuded a strange ambiance, an antiquated blend of yellowed books, furniture weathered by time, and discreetly integrated cutting-edge technology. A paradox that seemed to reflect the man himself.

Léonard was an imposing man, hewn from rock, with the build of an aging athlete and a gaze of disconcerting acuity. His iron-grey hair, cropped short, framed a weathered face, etched with the trials of time and the stresses of his profession. But it was his eyes, piercing steel blue, that captivated one's attention. Eyes that had seen everything, heard everything, eyes that seemed to probe the human soul with unsettling accuracy.

He listened to Amélie's account with unwavering attention, his impassive face betraying no emotion. Only his eyes, two bright points in the dimness of his office, seemed to animate at times, betraying a keen intelligence and a discreet empathy.

When Amélie had finished, silence fell, heavy with unspoken words and apprehension.

"Marc..." began Léonard, his deep voice resonating in the silence of the office. "Are you certain of this name?"

Amélie hesitated for a moment, gnawed by doubt. The face of the man who had terrorized her in the alleyway, that hard and cruel face, did not correspond in any way to the image she had of Marc. And yet, the icy certainty that had emanated from every word uttered by that man, the appalling familiarity with which he had evoked the sordid details of his harassment, all of it inexorably brought her back to that name.

"Yes," she finally replied, her voice barely audible. "That's what he told me to call him."

Léonard nodded, his gaze boring into Amélie's. "Tell me everything you know about him. Everything. Even the details that seem insignificant to you."

Amélie closed her eyes, trying to gather her memories, to untangle the threads of her past to extract the common thread that would lead her to Marc. She spoke of their chance encounter, of the immediate attraction she had felt for this charming and attentive man. She recounted their romantic rendezvous, the passionate conversations, the plans for the future that had briefly blossomed between them. Then, she addressed the dark side of their relationship, Marc's increasingly possessive behavior, his irrational fits of jealousy, his uncontrollable outbursts of anger.

Léonard listened attentively, taking sporadic notes on a notepad resting on his desk. His impassive face revealed nothing of his thoughts, but Amélie sensed the expert profiler hidden behind the mask of the seasoned investigator.

"And you say that this man, this Marc, had access to your home?" questioned Léonard, his gaze settling on Amélie with a new intensity.

Amélie nodded, a wave of nausea clenching her throat. The memory of the intrusion into her privacy, the violation of her personal space, sent shivers down her spine.

"He had a set of keys," she replied, her voice trembling. "I trusted him with them at the beginning of our relationship. I didn't suspect anything... I was in love."

"And the photos, the videos... You think he could have taken them without your knowledge?"

Amélie closed her eyes, haunted by the degrading images that had invaded her life. The stolen nudity, the trampled intimacy, exposed to the eyes of the entire world, like an indelible mark of infamy.

"It's possible," she murmured. "He often had my phone in his hand. He liked taking pictures, videos... He said I was photogenic."

A bitter grimace stretched her lips. The perverse cruelty of Marc now struck her. Every compliment, every gesture of affection, had been nothing more than a sordid manipulation, another stone added to the edifice of her destruction.

"You have to give me everything you have on him," declared Léonard, his voice regaining its neutral professional tone. "Photos, videos, messages... Anything that can help me identify him, track him down."

Amélie nodded in agreement. She had nothing left to lose. Her life had become a nightmare, and Léonard represented her only chance to escape it.

"Good," said Léonard, rising. "I'll get to work. Don't you worry about a thing, Amélie. I'm going to find this bastard. And when I find him..."

He paused, his steely gaze settling on Amélie with a renewed intensity.

"... he'll have me to answer to."

A flash of determination lit up Amélie's eyes. "We're going to get him, the bastard!" she exclaimed, clenching her fist.

Sophie looked at her with a mixture of admiration and concern. "Easy, tiger. We need a plan. And above all, we need proof."

Leonard nodded in agreement. "Sophie's right. This guy is clever; he covers his tracks. We can't afford to act rashly."

He took a notebook out of his pocket and scribbled a few words. "First, we need to establish a precise chronology of events. When did you receive the first suspicious message, Amélie?"

Amélie delved into her memories, retracing the days, the weeks, searching for the breaking point, the precise moment when her world had plunged into horror. "It was about three months ago," she said, her voice hesitant. "I received a message on FaceLink, an innocuous message at first. Someone who complimented me on a vacation picture I had posted."

"Do you remember the username?" asked Leonard, without looking up from his notebook.

Amélie closed her eyes, searching her memory. "No, not exactly. It was a common name, something like 'SunLover' or 'WorldTraveler.' I didn't pay attention to it at the time."

Leonard sighed. "Too bad. These anonymous nicknames are a haven for online predators. It's difficult to trace them."

"But I kept the messages," exclaimed Amélie, a glimmer of hope appearing in her voice. "I kept everything, all the messages, comments, photos... I even have screenshots of the fake profiles and websites he created."

Leonard looked up, a glint of interest in his eyes. "Interesting... Very interesting. You have a real gold mine there, Amélie. With a little luck, we can trace this individual's IP address and locate him."

A shiver of excitement ran through Amélie. The prospect of seeing her tormentor unmasked, dragged into the harsh light of justice, gave her renewed strength.

"Furthermore," Leonard continued, "it is imperative that we strengthen your security. Sophie, can your friend put you up for a while?"

"Of course, no problem," Sophie replied without hesitation. "Amélie can stay with me as long as it takes."

"Perfect," said Leonard. "For the time being, avoid all contact with the outside world. Don't answer any messages, don't check your social media accounts. And above all, don't go out alone."

Amélie hesitated for a moment, a question burning on her lips. "What about Marc?" she asked, her voice barely audible. "What will happen when you find him?"

Leonard fixed her with his impassive gaze, an insurmountable wall behind which hid years of experience and shadowy battles. "Don't worry about him, Amélie. He'll get what he deserves."

Leonard's neutral tone, devoid of any anger or vengeance, was more chilling than the most abject threats. Amélie then understood that she was in the presence of a man who knew darkness, who had looked evil in the face and emerged forever marked. A man capable of delivering justice, but also of making those who dared to cross the line pay the price.

In the days that followed, Amélie settled into a daily routine of caution and apprehension. Taking refuge at Sophie's, she spent her days sorting through her memories, trying to piece together the complex puzzle of her harassment. Every message, every photo, every malicious comment was scrutinized, analyzed from every angle, in search of the slightest clue that could lead to Marc.

Leonard visited her regularly, keeping her informed of the progress of his investigation. The man was infuriatingly laconic, limiting himself to short, factual sentences, never revealing the extent of his discoveries. But Amélie sensed, behind this professional restraint, an unwavering determination to drag her out of the abyss into which she had sunk.

One afternoon, as Amélie was scrolling through old photos on her laptop, one image caught her eye. It was a picture of her and Marc, taken at a friend's party a few weeks before their separation. They were both smiling, complicit, looking in love. But something about Marc's smile, a strange glint in his eyes, sent a shiver down her spine.

She zoomed in on Marc's face, examining every detail, every wrinkle, every expression. And there, in the cold reflection of his pupils, she thought she saw a fleeting shadow, a flash of malice that chilled her to the bone.

"Sophie!" she cried, her voice breaking with emotion. "Come and see this, quick!"

Sophie rushed over, worried. "What is it, Amélie? Are you alright?"

Amélie pointed to the screen, her heart pounding. "Look at this picture... Look at Marc's eyes. Don't you think there's something... strange about them?"

Sophie approached the screen, examining the photo carefully. A heavy silence fell over the room, only the sound of their breathing disturbing the quiet.



"My God..." Sophie murmured, her voice filled with a suddenly understandable horror. "It's like... It's like he's watching us."

The shadow of "Marc" stretched over her life, sprawling and suffocating. Fear, constant and insidious, had seeped into every corner of her being, transforming her into a terrified prey, haunted by an invisible predator. The outside world, once familiar and reassuring, had morphed into a hostile territory, every unknown face a potential mask behind which her tormentor lurked.

She sought refuge in the hushed silence of Sophie's apartment, but the walls, once protective, seemed to close in on her, imprisoning her in an endless cycle of anxiety. Sleep, once a haven of peace, had transformed into a battlefield where nightmares, fueled by fear and uncertainty, held her captive.

In these moments of forced solitude, the face of "Marc", blurred and uncertain like a bad dream, haunted her relentlessly. She scrutinized every detail of her memory, desperately trying to give it form, an identity. But the face remained elusive, slipping away with each attempt to focus on it, like a phantom toying with her despair.

Sophie, a pillar of strength and tenderness in this ocean of turmoil, tried as best she could to keep Amélie afloat. She nurtured her with small gestures of kindness, gentle and comforting words, and complicit silences when words became superfluous.

Léonard, on the other hand, remained an enigma. He called regularly, his voice grave and reassuring, betraying little of his progress. He bombarded her with precise, detailed questions, as if he were trying to piece together a complex puzzle. He seemed to be getting closer to the truth, but kept his cards close to his chest, leaving Amélie consumed by impatience and uncertainty.

"We have to force him out of the shadows," he declared one evening, his voice resonating with a new firmness. "If he can't reach you directly, he'll find another way."

A plan was then set in motion, a risky stratagem designed to trap "Marc", to force him to reveal himself. Apprehension gripped Amélie's heart, but she knew it was her only chance to end this nightmare.

The wait was unbearable, each hour stretching out like an eternity. The silence of the phone, usually a source of anxiety, took on the air of a bitter victory. Each day that passed without news of "Marc" was a battle won, but the war was far from over.

Then, one evening, as the sun set over the city, the phone rang. A blocked number flashed on the screen. Amélie felt her heart clench in her chest, a chill running down her spine.

"Amélie?"

The voice was distorted, unrecognizable, but she could have picked out that mocking tone, that sickly sweet intonation from a thousand.

"It's me," she replied, her voice barely audible.

Silence, then a soft, sardonic laugh on the other end of the line. "Have you been good?"

Amélie clenched her fist, fighting back the nausea rising in her throat. "What do you want?"

"Oh, just to say hello," the voice replied, drawing out the words with an unhealthy glee. "To remind you that I'm still here, close by. That I'm watching you."

"Leave me alone!" Amélie cried out, her voice breaking with anguish.

Another silence, then the voice resumed, closer, more threatening: "See you soon, my dear. Very soon."

The line went dead, leaving Amélie trembling and nauseous, the phone slipping from her clammy fingers. "Marc" was back, more menacing than ever. And this time, he seemed determined to make his move.

## Chapter 8: Lost and Hunted

The silence that followed the call was deafening. Amélie stood frozen, the phone still glued to her ear, as if the mere act of moving would shatter the fragile equilibrium of her already unraveling world. Marc's words echoed in her mind, each syllable etched with acid into her memory. "We'll see each other soon, my pretty. Very soon."

A wave of nausea washed over her. She dropped the phone onto the sofa as if it were a burning object, contaminated by the evil that pursued her. Her legs buckled under the weight of the terror that flooded her, forcing her to sit down heavily. She drew in a shuddering breath, trying desperately to quell the turmoil raging within.

Sophie, alerted by the unusual silence, appeared in the doorway, her face etched with concern. Her eyes scanned Amélie's face, searching for a clue, a glimmer of hope in the storm that seemed to be engulfing her.

"Amélie? What's wrong?" she asked softly, hesitant to break the heavy silence that had settled.

Amélie's eyes lifted to hers, her gaze vacant of all expression, as if a part of her had fled, leaving behind an empty shell. Her voice, when she finally spoke, was barely a raspy whisper.

"He called," she breathed, the words catching in her dry throat.

Sophie felt her heart clench in her chest. She moved to Amélie's side and gathered her into her arms, holding her close as if to shield her from the evil that gnawed at her from within. She didn't need to ask any questions. She knew the answer. She read it in Amélie's eyes, in the trembling of her lips, in the despair that emanated from her like an icy aura.

"What did he say?" she finally asked, her voice barely audible.

Amélie clung to her like a lifeline, then, in a voice broken with emotion, repeated her tormentor's chilling words, each one rekindling the terror that held her captive.

Sophie listened intently, her face hardening as Amélie spoke. She felt anger rise within her, a cold and determined anger. This man, this monster, had taken enough from Amélie. It was time to put an end to it.

"Don't worry," she said firmly, trying to mask her own fear. "We'll find him. Léonard will take care of him."

But deep down, a nagging voice whispered that things wouldn't be so simple. Marc's shadow still loomed over them, menacing and elusive.

The air had thickened, saturated with a palpable fear. The silence of the apartment, usually peaceful, now resonated with echoes of the threat that hung over them. Amélie, huddled in on herself, fought against the shiver that ran through her. Sophie's arms, her anchor in this maelstrom of anguish, suddenly seemed fragile against the glacial determination of the one who was after them.

Léonard, contacted in the emergency, arrived a few minutes later. His impassive face, marked by years of struggle against the dark recesses of the human soul, offered no comfort. Only his eyes, piercing like those of a raptor, betrayed a glint of steel, a promise of cold and calculated vengeance.

He listened to Amélie's account, each word punctuated by the still vivid memory of the call, without a gesture, without interruption. His silence was that of a patient predator, absorbing every detail, every nuance of fear in his prey's voice, the better to anticipate his adversary's moves.

"He's playing with us," he finally concluded, his deep voice resonating in the silence of the apartment. "He feeds on your fear, Amélie. The more weakness you show, the more powerful he feels."

Amélie, her eyes fixed on the floor, felt like a child caught in the act. The terror that paralyzed her had become a weakness, an admission of vulnerability that only served to fuel her tormentor's cruelty.

"What should we do?" Sophie's voice trembled slightly, betraying the anxiety that gnawed at her despite her outward assurance.

Léonard straightened, his gaze scanning the apartment with an expert eye, assessing every corner, every possible exit. "It's too late to run," he declared in a neutral tone, implacable as a guillotine blade. "We have to change strategy. Beat him at his own game."

A flash of defiance crossed Amélie's extinguished gaze. The idea of letting fear dictate her actions, of passively enduring her tormentor's assaults, was unbearable. She wanted to fight back, to regain control, even if it meant facing her worst nightmares.

"What do you suggest?" she asked, her voice regaining a hint of firmness.

Léonard gave a mirthless smile, a grimace that betrayed an unhealthy familiarity with the labyrinthine workings of the human psyche. "He wants to play? Let's play. But this time, we're going to make the rules."

Léonard's plan was as simple as it was risky: lure "Marc" into a trap, force him to reveal himself in broad daylight, obtain tangible evidence to expose him. To do this, Amélie was going to have to become the bait, throw herself into the wolf's mouth, hoping that Léonard would be quick enough to save her from its fangs.

The days that followed were torture. Every ringing phone, every anonymous message, every furtive glance on the street revived the terror that gnawed at her. The constant presence of Léonard, his imperturbable calm in the face of danger, was her only comfort.

Sophie, despite her own fears, was unwavering in her support. She transformed her apartment into a bunker, checking locks, closing shutters, creating a semblance of security in a world that suddenly seemed hostile.

The wait was unbearable, a slow agony punctuated by bursts of fear and moments of precarious calm. Then, one afternoon, as Amélie frantically checked her emails, an image caught her eye. It was a photo, sent from an unknown address, with no accompanying message.

In the photo, blurry, taken from afar, she recognized herself, sitting at a cafe terrace. Beside her, Sophie was laughing heartily, oblivious to the danger that loomed. But what made Amélie's blood run cold was the gaze. A cold, calculating gaze, fixed on them like that of a wild animal stalking its prey. A look that left no doubt: "Marc" was there, lurking in the shadows, observing every movement, every smile, every sign of weakness.

"He's there." Amélie's voice was barely a hoarse whisper.

Léonard, alerted by the change in atmosphere, leaned over the screen. A flash of satisfaction crossed his impassive face. The trap was set. The hunter was about to become the prey.

The terror, which had seeped into her like a slow poison, transformed into an icy cold that stole her breath. The photo trembled between her fingers, reflecting the distorted image of her own fear. It wasn't so much the presence of "Marc" that terrified her, but the feeling of being watched, spied on, reduced to a puppet in a macabre game whose rules and stakes she didn't know.

Sophie, her face ashen, approached, placing a hesitant hand on Amélie's shoulder. "It's the terrace of the café downstairs from my place," she murmured, her voice choked with anguish. "We were just there yesterday..."

The banality of the place, the proximity of danger, everything conspired to amplify the feeling of unreality that gripped Amélie. "Marc" was no longer an abstract threat, a blurry face on a phone screen. He was there, lurking in the shadows of their daily lives, ready to strike when they least expected it.

Leonard, his face impassive, took the picture from Amélie's trembling hands. His eyes, two points of steel in the dimness of the apartment, scanned the image with an almost supernatural intensity. "He's challenging us," he stated in a neutral voice, devoid of emotion. "He wants to show us that he's always one step ahead."

A heavy silence fell over the apartment, laden with unspoken words and unexpressed fears. Amélie, her throat constricted with anxiety, watched Leonard from the corner of her eye, searching for a sign, an indication of what to do next. But the former policeman, his face closed off, remained unreadable, lost in his thoughts.

"What... what is he going to do now?" Sophie's voice, barely audible, broke the silence like a crystal thread shattering on the floor.

Leonard raised his eyes to hers, his piercing gaze fixing her with unsettling intensity. "He waits," he replied simply, placing the photo on the coffee table as if it were a contaminated object. "He waits for us to make a wrong move, for fear to push us into making a mistake."

Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine. The certainty in Leonard's voice, far from reassuring her, only increased her unease. "Marc" wasn't just an opportunistic predator. He was a cruel puppeteer, savoring every moment of their terror, every racing heartbeat, every breath stolen by fear.



"We have to do something," she suddenly declared, her voice trembling but imbued with a newfound determination. Passivity, anxious waiting, had become unbearable. She no longer wanted to be a helpless victim at the mercy of her tormentor. She wanted to fight back, to regain control, even if it meant confronting her worst nightmares.

Leonard stared at her for a moment, his face impassive, then a slight smile lit up his rugged features. It wasn't a warm smile, but rather the expression of an icy satisfaction, like that of a chess player anticipating his opponent's next move.

"Good," he said in a soft, almost caressing voice. "It's time to show our friend 'Marc' that we're not so easy to manipulate."

Leonard's plan, elaborated in the greatest secrecy, was contained in a few laconic sentences. Amélie, her heart pounding, listened with feverish attention, each word etched in acid in her mind. It was a risky, audacious plan that placed her at the heart of a dangerous game whose rules she didn't know. But it was also her only chance to break free from "Marc's" grasp, to unmask him and bring him to justice.

The night that followed was a succession of endless hours, punctuated by jolts of fear and moments of precarious calm. Amélie, unable to sleep, was haunted by the images of the day, by the cold, calculating look in "Marc's" eyes in the photo. The silence of the apartment, usually reassuring, had become heavy, laden with implicit threats.

By daybreak, her face etched with anxiety and lack of sleep, she felt like a hunted animal, ready to jump at the slightest suspicious sound. But deep down, beneath the weight of fear, a glimmer of determination still shone. She wouldn't let herself be defeated. She would fight. For herself, for her life, for her future.

Leonard, true to his word, arrived at dawn. His impassive face and steely gaze gave him the air of a guardian angel come to guide her through the darkness. He wasted no time in unnecessary words. Every gesture, every look, betrayed the urgency of the situation.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice neutral, devoid of judgment.

Amélie took a deep breath, fighting against the knot that tightened her throat. A hesitant "yes", barely audible, escaped her dry lips. She wasn't sure she was ready, but she knew she had no choice. The time for confrontation had arrived.

The day dawned gray and frigid, mirroring the dread that clutched at Amélie's heart. Léonard's meticulously orchestrated plan was in motion. A macabre choreography where each step drew her closer to the precipice, to the inevitable confrontation with her tormentor.

They had chosen a public place, a bustling park in the heart of the city, for the meeting. A place where "Marc" would feel confident, surrounded by the anonymous crowd, convinced he could act with impunity. But he hadn't reckoned on the invisible presence of Léonard, lurking in the shadows, ready to intervene at the slightest misstep from their prey.

Amélie, dressed in simple jeans and a shapeless sweater, tried to blend into the throng, to go unnoticed. But the gazes of others, however fleeting, seemed laden with suspicion, as if everyone could guess at the drama unfolding within her. Each step was a superhuman effort, her legs trembling under the weight of the terror that gripped her.

Arriving at the rendezvous point, an isolated bench beneath a weeping willow with gnarled branches, she took out her phone, her fingers shaking. The message from "Marc" was brief, devoid of any human warmth, like an order dictated by a machine: "Bench under the willow. 2:00 pm sharp. Come alone."

Amélie's heart pounded in her chest. She sat on the bench, her gaze fixed on the main path, watching for the appearance of her tormentor. Around her, life went on, indifferent to her torment. Children played, couples strolled hand in hand, elderly people chatted on nearby benches. A semblance of normalcy that only accentuated the surreal nature of her own situation.

The minutes stretched out, interminable, each second bringing her closer to the fateful moment. The sun, veiled by low clouds, gave the park a spectral, unreal atmosphere. Amélie felt like an actress thrust onto the stage of an absurd play, forced to play a role whose lines and ending she did not know.

Suddenly, a movement at the periphery of her vision made her flinch. A man, his face partially hidden by a hood, had just stopped a few meters from her. His body was tense, like that of a predator stalking its prey.

Amélie felt her heart clench in her chest. The blood drained from her extremities, replaced by an icy cold that chilled her to the bone. It was him. She knew it.

The man took a step forward, then another, as if gauging her reaction. Amélie remained frozen in place, unable to tear her gaze from the menacing silhouette. The man's face remained shrouded in shadow, partially concealed by the hood of his coat and his raised collar.

"Amélie?"

The voice was rough, distorted, as if the man was trying to disguise his natural timbre. Yet, despite this attempt at concealment, one detail shot through Amélie's mind like an electric shock. A particular inflection, an almost imperceptible way of pronouncing her name. It wasn't Marc's voice. At least, not the one she knew.

The man moved closer still, stopping a few paces from the bench. Amélie stared at him, trying to pierce the darkness that masked his features. His body was tense, like a predator ready to pounce. She noticed he was clutching something in his right hand, a long, thin object that glinted faintly under the pale sunlight. A knife? An iron bar? Fear made her instinctively recoil on the bench, as if this simple distance could protect her from the violence emanating from him.

"Who are you?" she managed to articulate, her voice dry, strangled by fear. "What do you want from me?"

The man did not answer. He stood motionless, staring at her with empty eyes, as if observing, evaluating her. Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine. This silence, this lack of response, was more terrifying than the most abject threats. She was facing a predator, there was no doubt about it. But who was he? And what did he want from her?

"Talk to me!" she cried out, her voice cracking with panic. "What do you want from me?"

The man tilted his head slightly, as if he had just made a decision. A chilling smile, devoid of any joy, stretched his thin lips.

"Don't you recognize me, Amélie?" he murmured, his voice barely audible above the dull roar of the city. "It's funny, I recognize you perfectly."

He took a step forward, and the pale sunlight finally struck his face, revealing it to Amélie's view. A scream of horror died in her throat, her voice suddenly silenced by fear.

The face staring back at her was not Marc's. Nor was it a familiar face, a face she might have forgotten. No, she had never seen this face before. And yet, there was something in his eyes, an unhealthy, triumphant gleam, that made her feel like she had always known him. As if this face were the materialization of all her nightmares, the very personification of the terror that had haunted her for weeks.

An icy shiver coursed down her spine, far more intense than the bite of the glacial wind. The face before her, unfamiliar yet disturbingly familiar, seemed to have sprung forth from a nightmare, etching a visceral terror within her that she had never before experienced.

“Who... who are you?” she stammered, her voice reduced to a raspy whisper, betraying the panic threatening to consume her.

The man stared at her for a moment, a narcissistic smile stretching his thin lips as if savoring every ounce of terror emanating from her. “You truly don’t recognize me?” His voice, a low rasp bordering on inaudible, seemed to slither into her very being, coiling in the pit of her stomach like a malevolent presence.

Amélie shook her head, her eyes fixated on the stranger who inspired such primal, instinctive fear. Her mind, as if caught in a desperate overheat, attempted to connect the face to a memory, an encounter, anything that could explain the icy terror paralyzing her. In vain. The face remained an enigma, a chilling mask concealing an unspeakable threat.

“Look at me, Amélie,” the man insisted, his voice gaining intensity, taking on an almost mocking tone. “Make an effort. I’m sure you can remember me.”

Despite the terror pinning her in place, a flicker of defiance crossed Amélie’s gaze. She lifted her chin, forcing her body to straighten, refusing to be annihilated by fear. “I don’t know you,” she asserted, her voice trembling but resolute. “And I suggest you leave, otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?” The man took a step towards her, closing the distance between them to mere inches. Amélie smelled the rancid odor of his cheap cologne, a nauseating blend of musk and stale tobacco, which seemed to cling to her clothes like a fetid claw.

“You’ll call for help?” he continued, his smile widening, revealing yellowed, uneven teeth. “You’ll scream? Who will believe you, Amélie? Who will listen?”

His question, thrown like a challenge, made her falter. He was right. Who would believe her? Who would pay attention to a hysterical woman, pursued by her own demons? She was alone, left to her own devices, facing a predator who seemed to know her name, her history, her worst nightmares.

“I’m not alone,” she retorted finally, her voice regaining a semblance of firmness. “Léonard is...”

The words caught in her throat, cutting short her attempt at a threat. Léonard. Where was he? Her gaze darted around frantically, searching for any sign of him, a familiar silhouette that would come and pull her from this nightmare. But the park, suddenly and strangely empty, offered only an icy silence in response.

“Léonard?” she murmured, her heart clenching in her chest like a fist. “Léonard, where are you?”

The man let out a low, sardonic chuckle, a cold and cruel sound that seemed to reverberate through the silence of the park. “Looking for your guardian angel, Amélie?” His right hand extended, slowly, deliberately, as if to emphasize his next words. “I’m afraid he can’t hear you.”

A shrill scream tore through the frigid air of the park, but it wasn't his. The stranger recoiled, hand flashing out from beneath his coat, but instead of a weapon, it was empty, as if struck by a sudden pain. From the corner of her eye, Amélie caught a flicker of movement, a shadow detaching itself from a thicket of bushes a few feet away.

Before she could even grasp what was happening, a dark form slammed into the stranger, knocking him off balance. A guttural cry, a mixture of surprise and pain, escaped his lips as he crashed heavily to the ground, the figure pouncing on him in a tangle of limbs.

Amélie, her heart pounding in her chest, sat up straight on the bench, her eyes wide with disbelief. Two figures were grappling at her feet, one dark and stocky, the other slither but animated by a savage fury. It took her only a few seconds to recognize the controlled rage emanating from the aggressor's every move: Léonard.

His face, usually impassive, was contorted in a cold fury, almost terrifying in its intensity. Each blow delivered to the stranger was precise, calculated, a testament to a contained

violence and expertise that made Amélie's blood run cold. This was no longer the calm, composed former police officer she knew, but a predator unleashing his rage on his prey.

"Léonard!" she screamed, her voice lost in the din of the struggle.

The man looked up at her, a flash of surprise crossing his features before giving way to an expression of steel. "Call the police, Amélie! Quick!"

His order, abrupt and absolute, snapped her out of her stupor. The phone! It was still clutched in her hand, slick with sweat. Fingers trembling, she frantically dialed the emergency number, the digits swimming before her eyes like a waking dream.

"Police! Ambulance! Hurry! There's a man... He attacked..." The words tumbled from her lips, incoherent, unable to convey the urgency of the situation.

Meanwhile, the tide of the fight had turned. The stranger, recovered from his surprise, was now offering fierce resistance to Léonard. The two men rolled on the ground, exchanging blows of fists and feet, their bodies a blur of contained violence.

Amélie, powerless, watched the scene unfold, the phone pressed to her ear, her heart pounding against her ribs. She couldn't tear her gaze away from the vicious struggle, fear and adrenaline coursing through her veins like an explosive cocktail.

Suddenly, a sickening crack echoed through the air, cutting short the dull thud of blows. The stranger cried out in pain, his body stiffening before collapsing heavily to the ground, inert. Léonard, his face bathed in sweat and his breath ragged, slowly rose to his feet, his trembling hands stained a dark red.

Silence fell over the park, heavy, unreal, as if the whole world were holding its breath. Amélie, petrified, stared at the scene, her mind still unable to grasp the reality of what had just transpired.

"He's... He's..." she stammered, the words struggling to escape her dry lips.

Léonard turned to her, his piercing gaze betraying an infinite weariness. "It's over, Amélie," he said, his voice hoarse, almost gentle. "It's really over."



## Chapter 9: The False Accusations

The silence that followed the ambulance's departure was as heavy as the stormy sky gathering above the city. Amélie, huddled in a corner of the kitchen, clutched a cold cup of tea between her trembling hands. The brownish liquid swayed precariously, threatening to spill over the already chipped rim of the cup, mirroring her life which seemed on the verge of shattering.

She couldn't stop replaying the scene in her mind, like a horror movie she couldn't escape. Léonard's sudden appearance, the violence of the confrontation, the sharp crack that accompanied the stranger's fall... Each image was etched deep within her mind, leaving an indelible mark.

The police, arriving with sirens blaring minutes after her call, had cordoned off the park and taken the stranger away, seriously injured but still alive. Léonard, meanwhile, had been taken to the station for questioning, his face an impassive mask.

Before leaving, he had cast one last glance at Amélie, an intense, almost pleading look, that pierced her to the core. "I'll explain everything," he had murmured, his raspy voice barely audible. "Trust me."

Trust... The word echoed strangely in Amélie's mind. How could she trust anyone after what she had just witnessed? Léonard, the man who presented himself as her protector, had just revealed a dark, violent side that chilled her to the bone.

Who was he really? And what did he know about the man who had attacked her? The stranger's words still rang in her ears: "Don't you recognize me, Amélie?" Had their paths crossed before? His strangely familiar face vaguely evoked a memory, a blurred and distant image she couldn't quite grasp.

The insistent buzzing of her phone pulled her from her thoughts. It was Marc. Her heart clenched in her chest, a mixture of relief and apprehension washing over her. Since their

argument, he had called only once, to make sure she was alright after the incident with the delivery man.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, the phone vibrating between her fingers. Did she want to talk to him? To tell him what had happened? Fear, confusion, but also shame prevented her from dialing his number. How could she explain the inexplicable? How could she confess that she was incapable of protecting herself?

The phone stopped vibrating, silence falling back on the room like a guillotine. Amélie slowly placed it back on the table, her distorted reflection staring back at her from the black screen. She felt trapped, locked in a nightmare she couldn't find her way out of.

The doorbell rang, making her jump. Who could it be at this late hour? The police? Léonard? Or even worse, the stranger from the park?

Heart pounding, she cautiously approached the door, her gaze scrutinizing the darkness of the peephole. A stocky silhouette stood on the landing, face concealed by the shadow of a hat. Amélie held her breath, her body seized by an icy shiver. She didn't recognize the man, but her instinct screamed at her not to open.

"Amélie? It's me."

The voice, deep and steady, traveled through the door like a ghostly whisper. Amélie froze, her blood turning to ice in her veins. It was impossible. And yet...

"Vincent?" she breathed, his name escaping her lips like a prayer.

The man's face was illuminated by a faint smile, a sad, almost apologetic smile. "May I come in, Amélie? We have things to discuss."

As a chill wind swept into the apartment when Vincent stepped across the threshold, it was as if an evil presence had invited itself into his sanctuary. Amélie instinctively recoiled, her heart racing with a mixture of shock and fear, her mind refusing to accept the reality of this apparition, of this specter from the past risen from the depths of her memory.

Vincent closed the door behind him with a deliberate slowness, as if savoring the control he had over the situation. His gaze, once so gentle, so filled with false solicitude, gleamed with an unsettling intensity, betraying a darkness she had never suspected. He had changed, hardened by some unyielding force that seemed to emanate from every pore of his skin.

He removed his hat, revealing a shorn head that accentuated the severity of his features. His brown hair, which she loved to caress with her fingertips, was gone, replaced by a smooth cranium that troubled her deeply. It was as if she faced an unknown stranger wearing the mask of a man she had loved.

"Amélie," he murmured, his voice rough and low resonating strangely in the silence of the apartment. "You look surprised to see me."

Amélie merely nodded, unable to find her voice, paralyzed by a mix of fear and incomprehension. What was he doing there? How had he found her? A thousand questions swirled through her mind without finding an answer.

Vincent approached her with measured steps, like a predator closing in on its prey. Each movement exuded a glacial confidence that sent shivers down her spine. He halted just inches from her, close enough for her to feel his warm breath on her face, a tainted gust of air reeking of lies and betrayal.

"You didn't respond to my messages," he continued, his tone neutral, devoid of apparent reproach. "I thought I understood you no longer wished to speak with me."

Amélie stared at him, her eyes wide with terror. Messages? What messages? He had tried to reach her? A wave of nausea washed over her. Suddenly, she realized that the hell she'd been living through for weeks took root in her past, in this toxic relationship she'd tried to forget.

"Do you fear me, Amélie?" he asked, a sarcastic smile spreading across his lips. "That's not what you said before. You said you felt safe with me, that I protected you from the world."

His voice had taken on a honeyed tone, sickly and unwholesome, freezing her to the bone. Each word was a razor-sharp blade cutting deep within her. Memories of their relationship, once idyllic then suffocating, flooded back into her mind like waves crashing over her.

"It's not you," she managed to articulate, her voice barely audible. "It's not you who..."

"Who hurt me?" he interrupted, his smile expanding. "Who dared to harm me, my angel?"

His gaze settled on the bruises that marred her wrists, reminders of the attack by the delivery man. A flash of rage crossed his eyes, as fleeting as it was violent. He touched his face with a caressing gesture, a false display of tenderness that sent her recoiling.

"I'll find him," he murmured, his voice dripping with glacial menace. "I'll make him pay tenfold for the pain he inflicted on you."

Amélie watched him, paralyzed, unable to decipher his true intentions. Was he sincere? Did he genuinely want to protect her? Or was he playing a twisted game in which she was the willing victim?

"Why?" she managed to articulate, her voice choked with fear. "Why have you come back?"

Vincent gazed at her for an eternity, his black eyes probing as if seeking to explore the depths of her soul. A heavy silence fell over the room, weighed down by unspoken threats and hidden truths. Then, slowly, he sketched a cruel smile, a smile that left no doubt about his intentions.

"I've come back to get you, Amélie," he whispered, his voice sweet as a mortal caress. "You belong to me, have always belonged to me. And no one, do you understand, no one will take you away from me."

A shiver ran through Amélie, but not one of fear. It was a visceral revulsion, as if an icy hand had slipped beneath her skin. This was not her Vincent, not the one she held a blurred and embellished memory of in a corner of her mind. This man, this imposter with his shaved head and hard eyes, was a stranger who had usurped the identity of her former love.

"You... You've changed," she murmured, taking a step back to put more distance between them.

A cold smile stretched Vincent's lips. "Life changes people, Amélie. It teaches us not to be naive, to protect ourselves."

His gaze fell on the coffee table, where the photos she had printed were still scattered - those of "Marc," of Léonard, and of the unknown man with the ghostly face. With a brusque gesture, he picked them up, his eyes scanning each image with an intensity that made her uncomfortable.

"What is all this circus? You think you're safe with these people?"

He crumpled the photos in his fingers, his face hardening. "Strangers, Amélie. Liars. You don't know anything about them."

Amélie felt a ball of panic rise in her throat. She had to calm him down, make him leave before he did something irreparable. "Vincent, please, listen to me. It's not what you think. These people are trying to help me."

A sardonic laugh was his response. "Help you? You really believe that? They're manipulating you, Amélie. They want to hurt you, just like the others."

He turned to her, his dark eyes piercing her. "Don't you remember what they did to you? What they did to us?"

Amélie stumbled back again, hitting the edge of the countertop. Fear was slowly creeping through her, cold and paralyzing. What was he talking about? What memories was he trying to unearth?

Vincent approached her, his face inches from hers. His breath, heavy with a sickly sweet odor, scorched her nostrils. "They separated us, Amélie. They turned everyone against us. Don't you ever forget that."

His voice was low, menacing, like a venom slowly spreading through her veins. Amélie closed her eyes, overwhelmed by a rush of confused images, snippets of painful memories she had tried to bury deep within herself.

Faces contorted in anger, cruel words thrown like stones, a feeling of isolation, of incomprehension. She saw herself again, young and fragile, clinging to Vincent's arm like a lifeline in an ocean of hate.

But those memories were blurry, distorted by time and pain. Were they real, or were they merely chimeras fabricated by Vincent's sick mind?

"Vincent," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I... I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

A sad, cruel smile lit up Vincent's face. "You'll remember, Amélie. Sooner or later, you'll remember everything."

He caressed her cheek in a gesture both tender and terrifying, then straightened up and walked towards the door. Before leaving, he turned back, his dark eyes fixing her with an intensity that chilled her to the bone.

"Don't trust any of them, Amélie. They're not your friends. I'm the only one who can protect you."

Then, without a backward glance, he disappeared into the hallway, leaving her alone with her fears and doubts. The door slammed shut behind him with a sharp crack that echoed through the apartment like a funeral bell.

The apartment suddenly felt suffocating, the walls imbued with ghosts of the past, closing in on her, threatening to smother her. She craved air, yearned to escape this confined space that reeked of stale air and betrayal.

Without a second thought, she grabbed her coat from the rack, ignoring the biting cold that had descended upon the city. Outside, night had fallen, shrouding the streets in a disquieting darkness. The streetlights, haloed in a hazy glow, cast long, dancing shadows on the sidewalk, transforming the familiar cityscape into a scene from a film noir.

She walked aimlessly, her feet instinctively leading her toward the park, the very place that had become the stage for her nightmares. The icy wind whipped through the deserted pathways, swirling fallen leaves in a macabre ballet. In the distance, she heard the wail of sirens weaving through the city, a constant reminder of the danger lurking around every corner.

Reaching the bench where she had been assaulted just hours earlier, her legs gave way, and she collapsed. The memory of the scene, the brutality of the encounter, washed over her again, triggering a wave of nausea. She squeezed her eyes shut, desperately trying to banish the haunting images.

Why had Vincent returned? What did he mean by "remember"? And what role did Leonard play in all of this?

Each question was a thorn piercing her mind, tormenting her relentlessly. She felt herself sinking into an abyss of confusion and paranoia, unable to distinguish reality from the figments of her imagination.

The sound of a familiar buzzing startled her. Her phone vibrated in her coat pocket, the screen illuminating her face with a pale glow. An unknown number appeared, accompanied by a short, chilling message:

"You can't trust anyone. Not even him."

A glacial shiver ran down her spine. Who was this invisible sender who seemed privy to her innermost secrets, her deepest fears?

The phone slipped from her grasp, falling to the ground with a dull thud. She stared at it, powerless, unable to bring herself to pick it up, to answer this call from beyond the grave.



Around her, the park seemed to be closing in, the trees morphing into menacing silhouettes, the shadows stretching out like claws ready to imprison her. Fear, cold and visceral, washed over her, paralyzing her with terror.

She was safe nowhere. Not in her apartment, not on the streets, not even within the confines of her own mind. She was being hunted, watched, manipulated like a puppet in a macabre game whose rules and stakes she couldn't begin to fathom.

A silent scream caught in her throat. For a fleeting moment, the world tilted into an unreal distortion, the icy wind of the park morphing into a scorching gale, the damp fragrance of the moist earth into an acrid odor of smoke and white-hot metal. It was as if her subconscious was trying to pull her back to another time, another terror, but the memories remained blurred, incomprehensible.

Rising with difficulty, she retrieved her phone, the screen still displaying the threatening message. Who was this "him"? Leonard? Marc? Or was it a crueler game orchestrated by Vincent to sever her from all support, to make her completely dependent on his supposed protection?

The thought chilled her more than the wind that swept through the deserted park alleys. What if Vincent was right? What if she had walked into the lion's den by trusting Leonard, this man with a troubled past, with a contained violence?

The image of their confrontation a few hours earlier came back to her, brutal and raw. The cold fury that had contorted Leonard's features, the icy precision of his blows, the dry crack that had punctuated the stranger's fall...

No, she couldn't allow herself to doubt him. Leonard was her only ally in this nightmare, her only chance to uncover the truth, however terrible it may be.

Determined not to give in to panic, she tucked her phone into her pocket and resumed her walk, moving away from the cursed bench, from the menacing shadows of the trees. She needed to think, to gather her thoughts, to come up with a plan.

The main avenue, bathed in the harsh light of neon signs, offered her a semblance of comfort. The incessant ballet of cars, the animated conversations of passersby, all conspired to bring her back to a tangible reality, far from the ghostly shadows that haunted the park.

She walked aimlessly, letting her feet guide her through the maze of streets. The biting cold stung her face, but she ignored it, too absorbed in her thoughts. She had to find a way to uncover the truth about Vincent, about the past he was hiding from her, about the reasons for his return.

Suddenly, her gaze was drawn to a bright sign, a name that made her stop short: "The Phoenix." It was the name of the bar where she had met Vincent for the first time, years ago. A place laden with memories, both sweet and bitter.

A sudden impulse pushed her to enter. Perhaps the familiar atmosphere of the place, the ghosts of the past, would reawaken her memory, would allow her to decipher the riddles that tormented her.

The bar hadn't changed much. The same dim light bathed the room, the same scent of beer and cigarettes hung in the air, leaving a sticky film on the skin. Only the faces had changed, replaced by a new generation of troubled souls who came to drown their sorrows in alcohol and deafening music.

Amélie settled at the counter, ordering a neat whiskey, her favorite drink from the days when she still frequented this kind of place. The amber liquid, burning her throat with a comforting fire, seemed to warm her from within, dispelling some of the fear that gripped her.

"You're not from around here, are you?" said a gruff voice beside her.

Amélie turned to her interlocutor, a man in his forties with a weathered face and piercing blue eyes, who was staring at her with a benevolent curiosity.

"We don't see you here often," he continued, an amused smile lighting up his face. "Are you looking for someone?"

Amélie hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should confide in this stranger. But her need to talk, to share her burden with someone, was stronger than her caution.

"I... I came looking for answers," she murmured, her gaze lost in the wisps of smoke dancing above the bar.

The man raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Answers? About what?"

Amélie took a sip of her whiskey, gathering her courage. "About a man," she replied in a low voice. "A man I knew a long time ago. Vincent."

The man's smile froze. A flash of surprise, then worry, crossed his face. He leaned towards her, lowering his voice.

"Vincent... That's not a name I like to hear."

Amélie's heart leaped in her chest. "You... You know him?"

The man nodded slowly, his gaze darkening with an indefinable shadow. "Our paths crossed a few times, a long time ago. He used to come to this bar, like you."

"Do you know what's become of him?" asked Amélie, her heart pounding.

The man hesitated for a moment, seeming to weigh his words. "Let's just say he didn't leave the best of memories in these parts," he finally replied, his gaze shifting from hers. "Why all these questions? What did he do to you?"

Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine. She didn't know why, but she felt like she was touching a secret, a truth that concerned her more than she thought.

"I think... I think he's dangerous," she murmured, her voice trembling slightly.

The man stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers as if to detect the slightest lie. Then, he sighed and sat back on his stool.

"Listen carefully," he said in a serious voice. "If you value your life, forget that man. Forget you ever met him. And above all, never let him know you talked about him."

A heavy silence fell between them, broken only by the clinking of glasses and the murmur of conversations around them. Amélie, petrified, felt an indefinable danger enveloping her like a shroud.

The man had seen the fear in her eyes. "Come on," he said, getting up. "I'll walk you back. It's not safe to stay here."

Amélie followed him without a word, her heart pounding. As they left the bar, she cast a final glance at the smoky room, its atmosphere strangely familiar and threatening at the same time.

She felt like she was sinking deeper into a labyrinth of lies and betrayals every day, not knowing if she would ever find her way out.

The man, a regular known as Gus, turned out to be an unexpected ally. After walking Amélie home, reassuring her with a kind look despite his own apprehensions, he promised to find out what he could about Vincent.

Amélie waited anxiously for his call the following day. The night had been fraught with troubled dreams, Vincent and Léonard's faces melting together in an anxiety-ridden vortex. The morning sun, filtering through the closed blinds, struggled to dispel the shadow of fear that clung to her.

Gus called late in the morning. His voice, usually jovial, was imbued with an unusual gravity. "I have some information," he announced without preamble, "but you're not going to like it."

He went on to reveal snippets of a past unknown to Amélie. Vincent, far from being the idealistic young man she had known, had spiraled into a cycle of violence and vengeance after their separation. Rumors circulated about acts of retaliation against those he deemed responsible for their breakup, acts that Gus refused to discuss over the phone.

"This guy is dangerous," he concluded in a low voice. "He's obsessed with the past. You need to leave, Amélie. Disappear before it's too late."

The shock of these revelations left her speechless. The Vincent she thought she knew was merely a facade, a mask concealing a toxic and destructive personality. The terror, this time, was no longer diffuse, it had a face, a name: Vincent.

She hung up, her hands trembling, feeling caught in the throes of a waking nightmare. Leave? Disappear? Where would she go? And how could she escape a man who seemed to know her every move?

Suddenly, an idea took root in her mind, a faint glimmer of hope in the darkness that surrounded her. Léonard. She had to talk to Léonard, tell him the truth about Vincent, about their shared past.

She dialed his number with a trembling hand, praying he would answer, that he would listen, that he would believe her. The phone rang once, twice, three times... Then, silence. A silence that echoed like a condemnation.

Léonard didn't answer. Was it already too late?

Despair washed over her, leaving an icy bitterness in its wake. She was alone, truly alone, facing a danger she had underestimated, facing a past that was catching up with her mercilessly. The chapter of her life that lay ahead, far from being a blank page, was opening onto an abyss of uncertainty and terror.

## Chapter 10: The Quest for Truth

The apartment, once her sanctuary, had morphed into a prison of anxiety. Every creak of the floorboards, every whisper of the wind in the stairwell made her jump. The silence of the phone, after the unanswered call to Leonard, pressed down on her like a leaden shroud.

The thought of remaining there, prostrate, awaiting a danger she couldn't even identify, drove her to the brink of madness. She had to act, to regain control, even if she still didn't know how.

Gus's words echoed in her mind, fragments of a macabre puzzle. Vincent, the man she had loved, had become a stranger, a shadowy being fueled by a tenacious rancor. What kind of man lashed out at those who had dared to approach the woman he loved? A broken man, undoubtedly, consumed by a morbid jealousy and a thirst for revenge.

But who were these people Vincent held responsible for their separation? Mutual friends? Former colleagues? Vague memories, dating back to that dark period, flickered through her mind: arguments, names uttered with hatred, veiled threats.

She rummaged through her old emails, her Facebook archives, hoping to find a trace, a clue that would illuminate the past. Forgotten faces, banal conversations, photos yellowed by time passed before her eyes, without providing any answers.

It was then that she stumbled upon a series of messages, long deleted but reappeared as if by magic. Messages from Vincent, sent a few weeks after their break-up. Words at first tinged with sadness, then with reproaches, and finally, with thinly veiled threats. He accused her of having manipulated him, betrayed him, tossed him aside for another man.

Amélie's heart clenched. This other man... was none other than Julien, a colleague with whom she had flirted a few weeks after their separation. An innocent flirtation, without a future, but which had obviously struck Vincent to the core.

A wave of nausea washed over her. What if Julien was one of Vincent's victims? What if the accusations against her were only the beginning of a wider, more perverse revenge?

She had to find him, warn him, but how? His name didn't appear anywhere in Vincent's messages, just thinly veiled allusions, venomous insinuations.

Amélie felt herself increasingly caught in an invisible spiderweb, woven by a sick and vengeful mind. Every step she took seemed to bring her closer to the center of this web, where a truth awaited her that she dreaded more than anything.

The irrepressible need to escape the oppressive atmosphere of her apartment drove her outside. The park, once a symbol of serenity, now appeared to her as the potential stage for a tragedy. Each blurred silhouette in the distance, every rustle of dead leaves under the footsteps of a passerby, made her tremble.

She wandered aimlessly, seeking refuge in the anonymity of the crowd, but feeling more alone than ever. Vincent's shadow hung over her, menacing, omnipresent.

It was then that she found herself in front of the playground, deserted on this grey late afternoon. Painful memories resurfaced, blurred images of a violent argument, screams stifled by the night, the dull pain of a brutal fall. It was there, on that same cold bench, that everything had changed, years ago.

A shiver ran down her spine. She remembered now. Vincent had pushed her, blinded by rage, and she had landed on the hard ground, breathless, fear gripping her more tightly than the physical pain. He had apologized afterwards, tears in his eyes, swearing it would never happen again.

But violence, once unleashed, leaves invisible marks, indelible scars. And Amélie, blinded by love, had chosen not to see, to forgive, to believe in a better future.



A beep pulled her from her thoughts. A message, on her phone, from an unknown number.

"Be careful of him, Amélie. He's dangerous."

No name, no signature, just this laconic warning that chilled her to the bone. Who was this anonymous guardian angel? A silent witness to her past ordeal? Or Vincent himself, playing a perverse game to terrorize her even more?

Fear, this time, had a metallic taste in her mouth, a pungent smell of cold sweat. She couldn't stay here any longer, exposed, vulnerable. She had to find a safe place, a refuge to wait for dawn.

Her steps led her instinctively towards "The Phoenix", a small bar with a hushed atmosphere that she sometimes frequented with Léonard. A discreet place, sheltered from prying eyes, where she hoped to find some comfort in the comforting warmth of alcohol and the anonymous company of the regulars.

The bartender, a burly man with a weathered face, greeted her with a friendly nod. She settled at the counter, ordering a whisky in a flat voice that betrayed her anxiety.

Around her, lively conversations, bursts of laughter, the jazzy music floating in the air... Nothing seemed to have changed, and yet, Amélie's world had collapsed, leaving an abyssal void.

She took a sip of her whisky, feeling the alcohol burn her throat, trying in vain to warm her body, chilled to the bone.

"Not like you to drink alone, Amélie," said a husky voice beside her.

It was Gus, a regular at "The Phoenix", a taciturn man with piercing eyes whom she often passed without ever speaking to. He seemed to know her, which wasn't exactly reassuring.

"I... I have things on my mind," she stammered, hesitant to say more.

"I know," Gus replied in a neutral tone, staring at his glass absently. "I saw your friend, Vincent."

With a shaky breath, Amélie managed to articulate, "You saw him? Where? When?"

Gus swiveled on his stool, his gaze scanning the entrance of the bar as if expecting Vincent to appear at any moment. "Don't panic, he's not here. I ran into him a few days ago, in front of your place. He was asking about you."

An icy shiver coursed down Amélie's spine. Vincent was lurking near her home, perhaps watching her for some time now. The thought chilled her to the bone. How could she have been so blind, so naive?

"What did he want?" she asked, her voice constricted with fear.

Gus took a sip of his drink, his weathered face impassive. "He wanted to know if you were seeing anyone, if you had any friends, that sort of thing. He seemed... concerned."

"Concerned?" Amélie echoed incredulously. "That man destroyed my life and he's concerned?"

A wry smile flickered across Gus's face. "He claims he wants to protect you, you know. Says you're in danger, that you can't trust anyone."

Amélie let out a humorless laugh. “That’s just like him. Playing the victim, the savior... He’s always been good at that.”

She massaged her temples, trying to calm the torrent of thoughts that assailed her. The situation was taking an increasingly disturbing turn. Vincent was obsessed with her, trying to isolate her, control her. And the worst part was, he seemed sincere in his madness.

“You should leave, Amélie,” Gus repeated, his gaze settling on her with a newfound intensity. “Leave town, change your identity, start a new life somewhere else.”

Amélie shook her head in despair. “It’s not that simple. Where would I go? And besides, I can’t spend the rest of my life running. I have to face this nightmare, end it once and for all.”

She lifted her glass to her lips once more, seeking solace in the alcohol that burned its way down her throat. But the fear, tenacious and unrelenting, refused to release its grip. She felt like a hunted animal, constantly scanning for any sign of danger lurking in the shadows.

“You’re right,” Gus conceded after a long silence. “Running would be pointless. He’d find you, wherever you went.”

He fixed her with his piercing eyes, as if reading the depths of her soul. “You have to fight back, Amélie. Show him that you’re not afraid of him anymore.”

Amélie lifted her chin, a spark of determination igniting in her eyes. Gus was right. She couldn't allow herself to be broken, to become a willing victim to Vincent’s derangement. She had to fight, for herself, for her life, for her future.

But how could she fight against a ghost, an enemy who lurked in the shadows, pulling the strings of her life like a cruel puppet master?

“I don’t know how,” she admitted, her voice hoarse with desperation. “I have no proof against him, no one believes me.”

Gus leaned towards her, his face inches from hers. “You have Léonard, don’t you?”

Her friend’s name, uttered in this context, sent a shiver down her spine. Léonard... Where had he disappeared to? Why hadn’t he returned her calls?

“Léonard is... unreachable,” she murmured, a growing sense of unease settling over her.

Gus nodded slowly, as if he’d expected as much. “Don’t trust him, Amélie. He might be involved in this, one way or another.”

Gus’s words hit Amélie like a physical blow. Léonard, involved? Impossible! He was her friend, her confidant, her only support in this ordeal.

And yet... a small voice whispered in the back of her mind that Gus might be right. Why had Léonard been so distant lately? Why hadn’t he reacted more forcefully when she’d told him about Vincent?

“You’re wrong,” she said, more to convince herself than out of genuine belief. “Léonard is on my side. He’ll help me.”

Gus scrutinized her for a moment, then shrugged. “I hope you’re right, Amélie. For your sake.”

He drained his glass in one swift gulp, rose from his stool, and fixed her with a final look, his gaze filled with a strange sadness.

“Be careful, little one.”

Then, without a backward glance, he walked out of the bar, leaving Amélie alone with her fear and her mounting doubts. She remained motionless for a long moment, her heart pounding in her chest, the feeling of standing at the edge of a precipice overwhelming her. Gus had opened her eyes to a terrifying truth: she could trust no one, not even those she considered friends.

She was alone, utterly alone, facing an invisible and formidable enemy.

The ambiance of "The Phoenix," warm and comforting just moments ago, suddenly felt suffocating to her. The lively conversations, the boisterous laughter, the jazzy music... it was all a facade, a cardboard backdrop concealing the darkness of the world.

She stood abruptly, knocking over her half-full glass of whiskey, which shattered against the tiled floor with a deafening crash. The gazes of the other patrons turned toward her, curious, amused, indifferent. No one seemed to notice the terror that gripped her, the chasm of solitude opening beneath her feet.

"I have to go," she articulated in a colorless voice, unable to meet the bartender's insistent gaze.

She rushed towards the exit, bumping into a group of boisterous men who showered her with lewd insults. She cared nothing for them, nothing for anything or anyone. A single thought consumed her: to reach Leonard, to tell him of Gus's revelations, to understand his deafening silence.

Outside, night had fallen, enveloping the city in a blanket of disquieting darkness. The wind had picked up, blowing in icy gusts that tore through her light coat. She shivered from the cold, but it was fear, visceral and paralyzing, that made her tremble from head to toe.

She took out her phone, dialed Leonard's number with a feverish hand. Once again, the ringing echoed into emptiness, a hollow response that resonated like a sentence. Where was he? Why wasn't he answering?

Was Gus right? Was Leonard truly involved in this affair? The thought struck her like lightning, searing her already raw mind. No, it was impossible. Leonard was her friend, her confidant, her rock in the storm. He would never betray her.

And yet... doubts, like poisoned seeds, had been sown in her mind. Leonard's behavior lately, distant, enigmatic, took on a new meaning in light of Gus's revelations.

She tried to reason with herself, to banish these dreadful thoughts. Perhaps Leonard had a good reason not to answer. Perhaps he was in danger too. Vincent was unpredictable, capable of anything.

She had to find him, make sure he was alright. But where to look?

An image flashed through her mind: Leonard's cabin, nestled in the heart of the forest, a few hours' drive from the city. A secret refuge, hidden from prying eyes, where they had spent so many peaceful weekends, far from the tumult and darkness of the world.

It was a risky gamble, she knew. If Leonard wasn't there, she would be alone, vulnerable, at Vincent's mercy. But she had no other choice. She had to take the chance.

Without further hesitation, she headed towards the nearest taxi stand, her heart pounding, fear gnawing at her stomach, but driven by a glimmer of tenacious hope. She had to know, she had to understand. And for that, she was ready to face any danger.

The taxi dropped her off in front of "The Phoenix," an island of light in the dark and windy night. Amélie hesitated a moment, her heart torn between the hope of finding Leonard and the growing fear of renewed disappointment. She pushed open the door, a shiver running through her as the humid warmth and the scent of tobacco and beer enveloped her.

The bar was surprisingly crowded for a Monday night. Groups of colleagues were unwinding after work, couples nestled in dark corners, solitary souls drowned their sorrows in lonely glasses. At the counter, the bartender mechanically wiped glasses, his eyes vacant, indifferent to the human ballet playing out around him.

Amélie scanned the room, searching for a familiar silhouette, but Leonard was nowhere to be found. A bitter disappointment washed over her, tinged with a hint of worry. Where could he be?

"Can I help you, miss?"

Amélie startled, surprised by the gruff voice that pulled her from her thoughts. A imposing man, his head shaved and his face etched with wrinkles, stood before her, arms crossed over his massive chest. He wore a black leather jacket that revealed a tribal tattoo on his left forearm.

Amélie studied him for a moment, hesitant to answer. The man exuded an aura of brute force that impressed her as much as it intimidated her.

"I... I'm looking for someone," she finally stammered, her throat dry.

"And who are you looking for, if it's not too indiscreet?" asked the man without blinking.

"Leonard," replied Amélie, barely audible, unsure of the relevance of her answer.

A fleeting glint crossed the man's eyes, as if he recognized the name. He leaned slightly towards her, conspiratorially.

"Leonard isn't here tonight," he said in a low voice. "He's... detained."

Amélie felt a shiver run down her spine. There was something strange in the man's tone, a menacing nuance that chilled her to the bone.

"Do you know where I can find him?" she asked, trying to mask her apprehension.

The man scrutinized her for a moment, as if assessing the situation. Then, he sketched a cold smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Follow me," he said simply.

Without waiting for her answer, he pushed his way through the compact crowd, disappearing into a dark corridor at the back of the bar. Amélie hesitated a moment, torn between her instinct for caution and the imperative need to know what had happened to Leonard.

She took a deep breath and set off after him, her heart pounding, praying she wouldn't regret her choice.



The narrow corridor, dimly lit by yellowish wall sconces, smelled of must and stale beer. Each step Amélie took echoed on the tiled floor, the sound amplified by her frantic heartbeat. She followed the imposing man, aware that she was venturing into unknown territory, guided by a blind trust that already felt foolish.

Reaching the end of the corridor, the man pushed open a dark wooden door, revealing a cramped, smoke-filled room. A single lamp cast a hazy light on a massive mahogany desk, cluttered with yellowed papers and overflowing ashtrays. Behind the desk, a corpulent man, his round, jovial face at odds with the coldness of his steel-blue eyes, observed them with a questioning air.

"Boss," the shaven-headed man stated, "this young lady is looking for Leonard."

The heavyset man raised a bushy eyebrow, a sardonic smile stretching his fleshy lips. "Leonard, Leonard... That name rings a bell. And you are...?"

"Amélie," she replied in a barely audible voice, uncomfortable under the man's scrutinizing gaze. The atmosphere of the room, heavy and menacing, made her uneasy.

"Amélie," the heavyset man repeated, savoring the name like a fine wine. "I see... You're a friend of Leonard's, is that it?"

Amélie nodded hesitantly. She didn't know how much she could confide in these men, but she didn't have much choice. "Yes, we're friends. Do you know where I can find him?"

The heavyset man exchanged a knowing look with his companion, a predatory smile illuminating his face. "Let's just say Leonard is having... problems at the moment. Problems that are beyond him, if you catch my drift."

"Problems?" repeated Amélie, her heart pounding. "What kind of problems are you talking about?"

"Let's just say Leonard isn't always... scrupulous in his dealings," replied the heavyset man, lighting a fragrant cigar. "He has a tendency to attract trouble, and to drag others down with him."

"I don't understand," murmured Amélie, feeling increasingly lost. "What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say, my dear," replied the heavyset man, blowing out a thick plume of smoke, "is that Leonard has incurred a debt. A big debt. And that his creditors are not the patient type."

Amélie felt a knot forming in her stomach. Leonard, in debt? That was impossible! He had always been so discreet about his private life, so secretive about his finances...

"I... I didn't know," she stammered, her throat dry. "What can I do to help him?"

The heavyset man stared at her for a moment, his icy blue eyes piercing her through and through. Then, he let out a booming laugh that echoed in the small room like a clap of thunder.

"You? But my dear, there's nothing you can do. Nothing at all. Except maybe... tell us where to find Leonard."

Amélie took a step back, her heart racing. She felt like she was trapped in a bad movie, a film noir where appearances were deceiving and violence was never far away.

"I... I don't know where he is," she lied, her voice trembling. "I swear I'd tell you if I knew."

The heavyset man didn't take his eyes off her, his predatory smile widening further. "Come now... Don't tell me you're taking us for fools. You came here for a reason, didn't you?"

Amélie felt trapped, her lies unraveling like a house of cards. She cast a desperate look at the shaven-headed man, but he remained impassive, his face closed, like a Cerberus guarding the entrance to hell.

"We know you care about Leonard," the heavyset man continued, his honeyed voice at odds with the hardness in his eyes. "And we know you'd do anything to get him out of this mess. So, do the right thing. Tell us where to find him, and we'll let you go, both of you."

Amélie hesitated, torn between her survival instinct and her loyalty to Leonard. She couldn't betray her friend, not after everything he had done for her. But could she risk disobeying these men? What hold did they have over Leonard? How far were they willing to go?

Fear, that familiar, icy presence, crept into her veins, paralyzing her thoughts. She felt lost, alone, on the edge of an abyss.

Silence stretched in the small, smoky room, a heavy, menacing silence, punctuated by the insistent ticking of a wall clock.

"Well?" the heavyset man finally said, his voice cracking like a whip. "Have you made your choice?"

Amélie closed her eyes, feeling the weight of the world fall on her shoulders. She had no way out, no escape.

"Yes," she murmured, her voice strangled by fear. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

A knot of apprehension tightened in her chest. Her voice, when she managed to free it, was barely a whisper. "He... He has a cabin. In the mountains. Near Lake Clairval."

The heavy man's smile broadened, revealing a row of yellowed teeth that starkly contrasted with the whiteness of his cigar. He took a puff, exhaling a cloud of acrid smoke that enveloped Amélie in a suffocating aura. "Well, well... Lake Clairval. Now that's interesting." He cast a knowing glance at his accomplice, a flicker of connivance passing between them. "Thank you, mademoiselle. You've been most helpful."

Amélie felt her stomach clench. She had just delivered Léonard into the hands of these men, these ruthless brutes who held him in their grasp. She had betrayed his trust, his loyalty, for a promise of safety that now rang hollow and deceitful.

"May I go now?" she asked, her voice trembling with a mixture of hope and terror.

The heavy man took his time, savoring his moment of triumph. He fixed her with his cold eyes, scrutinizing her face, creased with anguish, as if searching for any hint of rebellion.

"But of course, mademoiselle," he finally replied, his honeyed tone at odds with the hardness in his gaze. "You are free to go. But don't even think about lying to us. We have eyes and ears everywhere. If Léonard isn't at Lake Clairval, if you've tried to deceive us, you will regret it dearly."

He crushed his cigar into an overflowing ashtray, a gesture that resonated like a thinly veiled threat. Amélie didn't wait another second. She slipped out of the room, her heart

pounding in her chest, fear gripping her like a wild beast. She ran down the hallway, ignoring the curious stares of the few patrons seated at the bar, and burst outside into the cold, hostile night.

The icy wind whipped her face as if to punish her for her weakness, her cowardice. She had betrayed Léonard, delivered him to dangerous men who wished him no good. Guilt, crushing and glacial, descended upon her, leaving a bitter taste in her mouth and an abyss of emptiness in her soul.

She wandered aimlessly through the deserted streets, her mind caught in a whirlwind of dark thoughts. What to do? Where to go? She was alone, utterly alone, facing an enemy she could not identify, trapped in a game whose rules and stakes she did not know.

A glimmer of hope, as fragile as a flickering flame in the night, suddenly illuminated her mind. Léonard's cabin. She had to warn him, alert him to these men. It was her only chance, her only hope for redemption.

Without further hesitation, Amélie walked with determined steps towards the nearest taxi stand, her heart clenched with apprehension, yet fueled by a newfound resolve. She had made a mistake, a terrible mistake, but she would do everything to repair it. She had to save Léonard, even if it meant putting herself in danger.

## Chapter 11: The Return of the Past

The taxi rank stood deserted, illuminated solely by a sputtering neon sign that cast a sickly pallor over the damp pavement. Amélie shoved her fists deep into her coat pockets, attempting in vain to warm her fingers, numb from the biting cold. A dull anxiety gnawed at her insides, amplified by the heavy silence that pressed in from all sides.

Each passing minute drew her closer to Léonard's chalet, but also closer to the unknown. She had no idea what to expect, no way of knowing if she was already too late, if she wasn't blindly rushing into a trap. The image of the burly man's weathered face, his predatory grin and eyes as cold as ice, refused to release its grip on her mind.

A taxi finally emerged from the avenue, its headlights slicing through the darkness like probing, yellow eyes. Amélie flagged the driver down with a hesitant gesture, her entire body thrumming with nervous tremors. She sank onto the back seat, the cold, damp leather clinging to her clothes, and gave the chalet's address in a voice barely a whisper.

The journey felt interminable. Every turn, every blast of the horn, every furtive glance the driver shot in the rearview mirror, served only to heighten her mounting paranoia. She scanned the passing landscape through the rain-streaked window, searching fruitlessly for a sign, a clue, anything to reassure her or put her on her guard.

At last, the taxi turned onto a narrow, winding country road, hemmed in by skeletal trees that loomed like spectres in the night. The wind whipped with greater force, sending branches scraping against each other and moaning through the frame of the car. Amélie felt her heart pounding against her ribs, a dull thud that echoed in the silence of the taxi.

"We're almost there, miss," the driver announced in a neutral tone, breaking the heavy silence that had settled within the car.

Amélie straightened in her seat, her breath catching in her throat. In the distance, she could just make out the dark silhouette of Léonard's chalet, stark against the backdrop of the star-dusted sky. A faint light flickered from behind the closed shutters, like a watchful, yellow eye gazing out from the darkness.

"Wait for me here," she instructed the driver in a flat voice, not truly giving him a choice.

She extricated herself from the taxi and started up the short dirt path that led to the chalet. Her footsteps echoed in the stillness of the night, each crunch of gravel beneath her shoes seeming to reverberate in her chest like a hammer blow.

The closer she got to the chalet, the heavier the atmosphere grew, thick with a palpable tension. The light behind the shutters had vanished, plunging the front of the chalet into an unsettling gloom. Amélie stopped a few feet from the front door, hesitant.

She raised her hand to knock but stopped at the last moment. What if Léonard wasn't alone? What if the men from the bar had already found him? A wave of nausea rose in her throat, a stark reminder of the familiar fear that had been gnawing at her for weeks.

Summoning her courage, she gripped the doorknob and slipped inside the chalet.

The air hung heavy inside, thick with the scent of damp wood and must. The only light emanated from a lifeless fireplace, a few smoldering embers casting a faint glow on the main room. Dancing shadows played across the rough-hewn walls, forming eerie, disquieting shapes. Amélie's eyes darted around the room, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs. Silence pressed in from all sides, broken only by the dying crackle of the fire and the wind's mournful sigh outside.

"Leonard?" she called out, her voice thin and tremulous, acutely aware of the way it echoed in the empty cabin.

Silence met her question.

Hesitantly, she stepped further into the room, every sense on high alert. The cabin was rustically simple, furnished with sturdy wooden pieces and tapestries faded with age. An unusual disorder reigned, as if a struggle had taken place: books lay scattered on the floor, a chair lay overturned near the hearth, and a dark stain, disturbingly reminiscent of dried blood, marred the worn rug.

A chill snaked down Amélie's spine. She fumbled for her phone, her fingers clumsily dialing Leonard's number, but the call dropped immediately, met with the monotonous drone of his voicemail. A wave of panic washed over her. Where could he be? Had those men from the bar taken him?

"Leonard, where are you?" she whispered, her voice constricted with fear.

She forced herself to move, inspecting every corner of the cabin with growing trepidation. The kitchen stood empty, the pantry door ajar, revealing sparsely stocked shelves. In the cramped bathroom, a damp towel lay abandoned on the edge of the sink, as if its owner had departed in haste.

Amélie's anxiety morphed into an icy dread. Everything in the deserted cabin screamed of urgency, of flight, of disappearance. The image of the men from the bar flashed before her eyes, their faces hardened, their gazes calculating and cold, and she understood with terrifying clarity that she had made a terrible mistake. She had led these men to Leonard, set him in their path like prey to be hunted.

A sudden noise from outside jolted her. It sounded like the snapping of branches, as if someone was approaching the cabin. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she rushed to the window, peering cautiously through a crack in the shutters.



The night was pitch black, the wind picking up, sending dead leaves swirling in a macabre dance. She could discern nothing in the darkness, but the unsettling noise persisted, drawing inexorably closer.

Amélie stumbled back from the window, her mind a whirlwind of frantic thoughts. Should she try to run? Hide? Scream for help? But who would hear her in this desolate place?

She felt trapped, like a hunted animal in its own den.

The creaking sound grew louder, closer. Something, or someone, was trying to force the back door of the cabin. Amélie stumbled backward, her breath catching in her throat, desperately searching for an escape, a hiding place. Her eyes darted around the room, finally settling on a cramped cupboard beneath the stairs leading to the upper floor. It was a meager hiding place, but it was better than nothing.

Heart pounding against her ribs, she rushed to the cupboard, squeezed inside, and pulled the door shut behind her, leaving only a minuscule crack for observation. The darkness within was absolute, the air thick and musty. She felt the rough wood pressing against her face, the scent of mildew stinging her nostrils. The silence within the cupboard stood in stark contrast to the growing commotion outside.

The cabin's back door gave way with a sinister crack. Heavy footsteps echoed across the wooden floor, followed by a muffled curse. Low, menacing voices slithered into the main room. Amélie held her breath, her entire body thrumming with a visceral fear.

"You sure he's here?" growled a voice, rough and gravelly.

"Let me check," replied another voice, smoother, more measured, yet no less chilling.

Amélie felt her stomach twist into a knot. That second voice... she would recognize it anywhere. It was Gus, the barman from The Phoenix. What was he doing here? And who was he with?

A heavy silence descended upon the cabin, broken only by the crackling of the dying fire. Amélie felt suffocated in her cramped hiding place, the absolute darkness enveloping her like a shroud. She dared a cautious peek through the crack in the cupboard door.

Two silhouettes were etched against the faint glow of the embers. One, bulky and massive, was facing the window, scrutinizing the darkness outside. The other, leaner and more agile, stood near the fireplace, a cruel smile illuminating his face in the semi-darkness. It was indeed Gus, his usually affable features twisted into an expression of malicious triumph.

"He's not here," the bulky silhouette stated, his voice laced with disappointment. "You had us trek out here for nothing, Gus."

Gus merely shrugged, his smile widening. "He won't get far. He's trapped here, like a rat in a cage."

A shiver traced its way down Amélie's spine. Who was this "he" they were talking about? Leonard? Was it Gus who had sent these men after him? But why?

"We should search the area," the bulky silhouette suggested. "He might have a shack, a place to hide."

Gus shook his head. "Pointless. He wouldn't leave without his things. Besides..." He paused, his gaze drifting towards the cupboard door where Amélie was concealed. A strange glint sparked in his eyes, a mixture of malice and satisfaction. "I believe we already have some company..."

Amélie held her breath, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. An icy cold spread through her limbs, tetanizing muscles already rigid with fear. She dared not move, terrified that the slightest rustle would betray her presence. Her eyes, fixed on the two menacing silhouettes, desperately sought an escape, a way out of this waking nightmare.

Gus approached the closet slowly, his footsteps on the wooden floor seeming to echo in the silence like claps of thunder. His predatory smile widened further, revealing a row of sharp white teeth that contrasted cruelly with the darkness of his gaze. He reached for the closet door handle, an unhealthy gleam dancing in his eyes.

Amélie closed her eyes, powerless, awaiting the inevitable. Her mind, overwhelmed by terror, clung to a tenuous hope, a silent prayer addressed to a fate that seemed to have abandoned her.

Suddenly, a deafening din shattered the silence of the night. The sound, like a muffled detonation, came from outside the chalet, followed by a guttural cry of surprise and pain.

Gus froze, his smile vanishing instantly to be replaced by an expression of fury mixed with anxiety. He turned abruptly, striding purposefully towards the window.

"What was that?" growled the massive silhouette, his voice betraying his unease.

"Stay here, I'll go see," Gus ordered curtly, before disappearing into the darkness outside.

Amélie opened her eyes, her heart pounding. Luck, that caprice of fate she thought forever lost, seemed to smile upon her once more. This was a unique opportunity, a brief moment of respite offered by destiny. She couldn't let it slip away.

Rising cautiously, she emerged from her hiding place, her body still trembling from the adrenaline. The massive silhouette, stationed by the window, was too absorbed by what was happening outside to notice her.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Amélie slipped silently towards the front door, her movements as stealthy as those of a feline in the night. She reached the door, grasped the cold handle, and turned it cautiously, holding her breath with each creak of the floorboards beneath her feet.

A wave of cool, damp air hit her face as she crossed the threshold. Closing the door behind her with infinite gentleness, she found herself plunged into the black night, her heart pounding wildly.

The night air was glacial, biting at her exposed skin despite the layers of clothing she wore. Her lungs burned with the effort of each breath, yet she continued to run, her legs torn by the brambles and stones of the rugged path. Fear, that familiar poison, gripped her, driving her deeper into the darkness.

Behind her, the confused din of the struggle blended with the howling of the wind in the trees, creating a chaotic symphony that echoed through the night. She dared not look back, afraid to see the menacing silhouettes launching themselves in pursuit, their harsh voices drawing inexorably closer.

Her only hope lay in the dense forest that surrounded her, a labyrinth of shadows and indistinct shapes under the pale glow of the moon. She plunged into the woods, ignoring the pain that pierced her with every branch that whipped at her face, every root that threatened to trip her.

Her frantic flight led her to a clearing, an expanse of silver grass bathed in the spectral light of the moon. In the center stood an old gnarled oak, its skeletal branches reaching towards the sky like pleading arms. A flash of lucidity crossed Amelia's mind: she couldn't keep running forever. She needed to find refuge, a place to catch her breath and consider her next move.

She slipped behind the imposing trunk of the tree, seeking a semblance of protection in its thick shadow. Her heart pounded against her ribs, a dull hammering that echoed in the relative silence of the clearing. She listened intently, scanning the impenetrable darkness of the forest, watching for any sign of her pursuers.

Silence. A heavy silence, laden with implicit threats. Was she truly alone? Or were they hiding in the shadows, patiently waiting for her to make a fatal mistake?

A shiver ran through her, and she realized she was trembling with cold. She had to pull herself together. Panic would get her nowhere. She needed a plan, and fast. But what plan could be made against invisible enemies, lurking in the shadows, whose motives and resources she knew nothing about?

A sudden glimmer caught her eye. A flickering light, distant, piercing through the trees at the edge of the forest. A glimmer of hope illuminated her weary gaze. A dwelling? A road? A chance to escape this hell?

Summoning her courage, Amelia slipped out of her hiding place and cautiously made her way towards the saving light. Each step was a gamble, every crackle of a branch underfoot a potential threat. But she had no choice but to move forward, guided by that fragile glimmer in the night.

The glow intensified as she drew nearer, morphing into a yellowish halo filtering through the trees. An immense relief, tinged with a hint of apprehension, washed over her as she recognized the source of the saving light: a small wooden cabin, perched upon a knoll overlooking the clearing. Acrid smoke curled from its crooked chimney, bearing witness to human presence.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, torn between prudence and the urgent need to find refuge. Her instinct screamed at her to be wary, to melt into the protective darkness of the forest. Yet, her body, numb with cold, and her mind, exhausted by fear, craved shelter, a respite from the glacial and hostile night.

Summoning her courage, she ascended the knoll with hesitant steps, her senses on high alert. The cabin, illuminated by the flickering glow of an oil lamp, seemed straight out of a forgotten fairytale. Its log walls were blackened by time and weather, its minuscule windows obstructed by crudely nailed wooden planks. An acrid odor of burning wood and dried herbs hung in the air, mingled with a strange, indefinable scent that was as alluring as it was unsettling.

Amélie cautiously approached the front door, a simple slab of rough-hewn wood secured by a worn leather thong. She knocked timidly, the hollow sound echoing strangely in the nocturnal silence.

Silence. A heavy, oppressive silence that seemed to draw the air from around her. Amélie held her breath, her heart pounding in her chest. Had she made a mistake in coming here? Was this isolated cabin, lost in the heart of the forest, the lair of a hostile hermit, a recluse fleeing the world and its dangers?

A raspy creak suddenly shattered the silence, originating from within the cabin. The door slowly opened, releasing a sliver of golden light and a waft of warm, fragrant air. Amélie instinctively recoiled, her eyes straining to pierce the darkness that reigned within.

A silhouette materialized in the doorway, illuminated by the flickering oil lamp. It was a woman, aged, her face etched with time and hardship, framed by hair of a pristine white. Her eyes, a deep blue like the glacial waters of a mountain lake, scrutinized Amélie with an unsettling intensity.

"What do you seek, lost child?" the old woman inquired, her voice raspy, almost a whisper, seemingly emanating from the depths of the earth.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to answer. Should she trust her? Reveal the truth about her flight, about the men pursuing her? Or should she retreat into silence, at the risk of appearing an intruder, a potential threat?

"I... I need help," she finally murmured, her voice broken with emotion. "I am lost, pursued... I do not know where to go."

The old woman stared at her for a long moment, her piercing gaze seeming to penetrate her very soul and hidden torments. A heavy silence descended once more, as if the old woman were weighing each word, each breath that escaped Amélie.

"Enter, child," she finally declared, her voice softened, almost maternal. "The cold is a cruel enemy, and the night is fraught with danger for those who wander aimlessly."

Amélie hesitated for another moment, fighting against her instinct to flee, before stepping across the threshold and into the cabin.

The interior of the cabin was spartan in its simplicity, yet it exuded a strangely comforting warmth. A log fire crackled merrily in the hearth, casting dancing shadows on the roughly hewn log walls. A kettle whistled softly on the cast iron stove, filling the air with the scent of wood smoke and wild herbs.

The old woman gestured towards a rough-hewn wooden stool. "Sit by the fire, child. You're chilled to the bone."

Amélie obeyed, her legs feeling like lead beneath her. The heat of the hearth slowly seeped into her, chasing away the icy bite of the night. She observed the old woman, who moved silently about the task of preparing an herbal infusion. Her face, etched with wrinkles as deep as furrows in timeworn earth, exuded a mixture of strength and serenity. Her hands, gnarled and knotted like ancient roots, handled the dried herbs and cooking utensils with astonishing precision.

"Who are you?" Amélie finally asked, her voice barely a raspy whisper.

The old woman gave an enigmatic smile, her blue eyes twinkling in the dim light. "My name matters little, child. Call me the Weaver. That is how I am known in these woods."

"The Weaver?" repeated Amélie, intrigued.

"I weave the threads of destiny, child. The threads of life, death, hope, and despair. Invisible threads that connect every being, every event, in a complex and mysterious tapestry."

Amélie didn't know what to say. The Weaver's words, imbued with an ancient wisdom, both unsettled and fascinated her. Was she mad? Or did she truly possess a secret knowledge, a deep understanding of the mysteries of existence?

"What do you know of the men who pursue me?" she dared to ask, her voice trembling with apprehension.

The Weaver set the pot of infusion down on the table, then turned to Amélie, her gaze piercing her with intensity. "I know they are driven by greed, child. By the thirst for power, by the desire to possess what is not theirs to take."

Amélie shivered. The Weaver's words echoed her own anxieties, her growing suspicions about the motivations of Gus and his cohorts. But how could the Weaver know all this? Was she merely a hermit, cut off from the world, or did she possess some unsuspected source of information?

"How can I escape them?" whispered Amélie, despair tinged with panic constricting her throat. "They are stronger than I, more numerous... I am trapped, doomed..."



"Destiny is a winding path, child," replied the Weaver in a calm, steady voice. "But every path, however dark, always offers a glimmer of hope. A way out, a possibility of redemption."

She took a sip of her infusion, her eyes fixed on the fire dancing in the hearth. "You are here for a reason, Amélie. There is no such thing as chance, only the threads of destiny that intertwine, weaving the fabric of our lives."

Amélie watched her, hanging on her every word. Each word uttered by the Weaver, however enigmatic, seemed to carry a profound meaning, a hidden truth that concerned her directly.

"What is my destiny, then?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

The Weaver rose and walked over to a dusty shelf, where glass jars containing dried herbs, roots, and strangely colored powders were lined up. She picked up a small leather pouch and took out a handful of dried leaves, which she threw into the fire. Thick, fragrant smoke rose in spirals towards the ceiling, filling the air with a strangely captivating atmosphere.

"Your destiny, Amélie, is to fight," declared the Weaver, her gaze locking onto Amélie's once more. "To fight the darkness that assails you, to uncover the truth hidden behind the lies."

She handed the leather pouch to Amélie. "Take these herbs. They will give you the strength and discernment you need to face your destiny."

Amélie took the pouch hesitantly.

Amélie grasped the leather pouch, its grainy texture against her clammy skin providing a strange sense of solace. A flicker of fragile hope, as tenuous as a candle flame in the night, stirred within her wounded heart. The Weaver's words, enigmatic yet oddly reassuring, echoed within her like a promise, a call to action.

The old woman, her face etched with time and wisdom, scrutinized her for a moment, her piercing blue eyes seeming to peer into the depths of her soul. Then, with a slow, measured gesture, she turned towards a carved wooden chest resting against the wall, its lid adorned with ancient symbols obscured by the dim light.

"The path that awaits you is fraught with peril, child," the Weaver murmured, her raspy voice resonating through the small hut like an omen. "You will need more than mere herbs to face the darkness that pursues you."

She opened the chest carefully, releasing a scent of aged leather and forgotten incense. Inside, nestled in a bed of faded red velvet, lay a collection of disparate objects: a silver pendant depicting a wolf howling at the moon, a small crystal vial containing a shimmering amber liquid, and a dagger with a blade as slender as a razor, its bone handle engraved with intricate patterns.

The Weaver picked up the dagger with reverence, turning it slowly between her gnarled fingers as if weighing each ounce of its history. The blade, polished by time and use, glinted faintly in the flickering firelight, reflecting a cold, dangerous gleam.

"This blade has protected my ancestors for generations," the Weaver explained, her gaze never leaving the weapon. "It is imbued with an ancient magic, capable of repelling the forces of evil and severing the bonds that bind you."

She offered the dagger to Amélie, hilt first. "Take it, child. Let it be your shield and your guide on the path that lies ahead."

Amélie hesitated for a moment, her hand hovering over the weapon. The coldness of the metal against her palm sent a shiver up her spine, a sensation strangely familiar, like a distant echo of a forgotten past. This dagger, imbued with a history she could only guess at, seemed to vibrate with a latent energy, both alluring and frightening.

"I... I'm not sure," Amélie murmured, her voice laced with a hesitation tinged with a growing fascination. "I'm not made for violence. I wouldn't even know how to use a weapon."

"Strength does not always reside in muscle, child," the Weaver replied, a faint smile gracing her weathered face. "Sometimes, the greatest strength lies in the will, in the determination to fight for what one believes in, for those one loves."

She placed her wrinkled hand over Amélie's, her palm warm and dry against the coldness of the metal. "Take the dagger, Amélie. Not as a weapon of destruction, but as a symbol of your own inner strength. When the time comes, you will know what to do."

Amélie closed her eyes, breathing deeply the smoke-filled air, thick with the scent of wild herbs that permeated the hut. The Weaver's words resonated within her, like a summons to delve deep within herself, to awaken a strength she never knew she possessed.

Opening her eyes, she fixed the dagger with a newfound gaze. It was no longer a mere object, a cold and menacing weapon. It was a symbol, a talisman, a tangible link to an ancestral force that surpassed her understanding, yet offered her a chance to fight, to break free from the toxic grip that held her captive.

With a resolute gesture, she took the dagger. The handle, fitting perfectly in her hand, brought a strange sense of comfort, as if the object had been crafted for her since the dawn of time.

"Thank you," she whispered, her gaze fixed on the Weaver, a newfound respect tinged with gratitude filling her heart.

The old woman nodded, a glint of pride in her eyes. "It is time for you to go, child. The night is far advanced, and the road is long."

Amélie rose, clutching the dagger to her as a protective talisman. She left the hut, venturing back into the cold, hostile night, but this time a newfound determination fueled her steps, a glimmer of hope shone in her eyes. The road would be long, fraught with obstacles and dangers, but she was no longer alone. She carried within her the strength to fight, to defy fate and reclaim her life, whatever the cost. The dagger, pressed against her beating heart, was there to remind her.

Dawn was just breaking on the horizon, painting the sky with a pale glow, as Amélie finally reached the first houses of a slumbering village.

## Chapter 12: The Confrontation

The nascent dawn illuminated the village in an uncertain light, cloaking the shuttered houses in an unreal aura. Amélie advanced with hesitant steps along the paved path, her shadow stretching behind her like a trail of darkness. The leather bag, weighed down by the dagger and the Weaver's vials, bumped against her hip with every stride, a constant reminder of her mission and the dangers that awaited her.

The crisp morning air, laden with the damp scent of earth and the heady fragrance of pine, struggled to dissipate the icy mist that clung to her clothes and bit at her skin. Fatigue tugged at her aching limbs, but she refused to stop, driven by a newfound urgency, a fierce determination that consumed her from within.

Vincent. His name echoed in her mind like a funeral knell, each syllable rekindling the throbbing ache that gripped her heart. He was the key to the enigma, the root of her nightmare. She knew it now with unshakeable certainty. The Weaver, with her sibylline pronouncements and strange potions, had only confirmed what her intuition had whispered all along.

Find Vincent. Confront him. Wrest the truth from the clutches of his deceit.

The thought imposed itself upon her with the force of an epiphany. It was the only possible course of action, the only way to break the chains that held her captive to her past.

But where to find him? How to hunt down a phantom, a master of illusion who thrived in the shadows and reveled in her despair?

The question gnawed at her, a worm eating away at her nascent determination. The flicker of hope ignited by the Weaver wavered precariously, threatened by the icy wind of doubt.

She reached the village square, deserted at this early hour. The stone fountain at its center, frozen solid, resembled a spectral ice sculpture. A stray dog, a ghostly silhouette in the mist, scavenged through overturned bins, its weary gaze meeting Amélie's for a fleeting moment before disappearing down a shadowy alley.

The heavy silence, broken only by the crunch of her footsteps on the cobblestones, amplified her sense of isolation. She felt terribly alone, lost in a labyrinth to which Vincent held the map.

Suddenly, a glimmer of light caught her eye. On the opposite side of the square, a carved wooden sign, half-hidden by the mist, read: "The Old Mill Inn".

A fragile surge of hope warmed Amélie's heart. A village, even one as small and isolated as this, meant inhabitants, people who might help her, provide information, shelter. Perhaps even a telephone.

She crossed the square with hurried steps, her hopes growing with each stride. The inn, a squat, gray stone building with narrow windows, appeared to be asleep, but a faint glow emanated from behind the shutters on the ground floor, promising warmth and solace.

Amélie approached the heavy wooden door, her heart pounding in her chest. She raised her hand to knock, hesitated for a moment, then grasped the heavy iron knocker, shaped like a wolf's head, and let it fall against the wood with a dull thud that reverberated in the morning stillness.

A minute passed, interminable. Amélie waited, holding her breath, her gaze fixed on the closed door. Then, she heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching from the other side, followed by the creak of a lock.

The door opened hesitantly, revealing a stocky man in his fifties, his weathered face framed by a thick mane of graying hair. His gaze, initially etched with a mixture of surprise and suspicion, settled on Amélie with cautious curiosity.

“Yes?” he inquired in a gruff voice, his accent hinting at distant origins.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, unsure of how best to address this stranger. Her throat felt dry, the words seeming to catch in her throat.

“I... I’m looking for a place to stay,” she finally managed, her voice barely a murmur. “And perhaps something to eat...”

The man scrutinized her for a moment, his eyes raking over her weary features and mud-spattered clothes.

“You’ve come far?” he finally asked, his neutral tone giving no clue as to his thoughts.

“Yes,” replied Amélie, deciding not to elaborate on the details of her harried flight. “I’ve been walking all night. I’m exhausted.”

The man nodded slowly, seeming to weigh his options. Then, with a weary sigh, he stepped back, opening the door a little wider.

“Come in,” he said flatly. “We don’t let a lost soul freeze to death on our doorstep.”

Amélie followed him inside, her heart pounding with a mixture of hope and apprehension. The inn was even more welcoming from within. A fire crackled merrily in the monumental hearth, radiating a comforting warmth that banished the glacial chill from her bones. The air was thick with the appetizing aroma of freshly baked bread and strong coffee, a scent that made her painfully empty stomach rumble.

The man, whom she guessed to be the innkeeper, led her to a table made of solid wood near the fire. The flickering light of the flames danced across his weathered face,

accentuating the deep wrinkles etched by time and hardship. He pulled out a chair with a brusque but not unfriendly gesture, inviting Amélie to sit.

"Have a seat, rest," he said, his gruff voice softened by a hint of hospitality. "I'll bring you something to warm you up."

Amélie sank onto the chair, relieved to feel the solid wood beneath her. She carefully removed her leather satchel, placing it on the table as if it were a precious treasure. The familiar feel of the dagger through the thick leather brought her a sense of illusory security, a tangible reminder that she was not completely helpless in the face of the unknown.

The innkeeper returned a few moments later, carrying a tray laden with a loaf of dense, dark bread, a wedge of goat cheese, and a steaming mug of a dark, aromatic beverage. He placed it before Amélie with a rare smile that illuminated his weary features.

"It's nettle tea," he explained, observing Amélie's dubious expression. "Wakes you up better than wine and warms the insides on a day like this."

Amélie took a cautious sip. The drink was bitter, almost earthy, but a pleasant warmth quickly spread through her stomach, chasing away the chill that had been clinging to her for hours.

"Thank you," she murmured, surprised by the sudden gentleness that crept into her voice. "It's... very good."

The innkeeper nodded, satisfied. "Eat now, regain your strength. You can tell me your story later, if you wish."



Amélie took a bite of the bread, savoring the rough texture and the slightly sweet taste of the sourdough. Each mouthful, each sip of the hot tea, was a victory over the exhaustion that was threatening to consume her.

As she ate, she observed the innkeeper from the corner of her eye. He was bustling behind the counter, cleaning pewter mugs tarnished by time with an almost hypnotic meticulousness. His movements were slow, measured, as if he were performing an ancient dance learned over generations.

The man seemed to be alone. The inn was immersed in a strange silence, devoid of the usual murmur of conversations and the clinking of glasses found in such places of passage. The absence of customers, unusual at this time of day, added to the feeling of isolation that enveloped the place like a shroud.

Amélie finished her meal in silence, her thoughts oscillating between gratitude for the innkeeper and the persistent anxiety that gnawed at her insides. She needed information, a way to contact the outside world, to find Vincent before he disappeared again into the labyrinth of his delusions.

"Excuse me," she finally said, breaking the silence that had settled between them. "Do you know if there's a telephone nearby? I need to... contact someone."

The innkeeper stopped cleaning and looked at her, his dark eyes scrutinizing her with an unsettling intensity. He remained silent for a moment, as if weighing each word before uttering them.

"A telephone?" he finally repeated, a strange smile stretching his thin lips. "Those are rare things around here, miss. We haven't quite entered the century of machines yet."

A glacial shiver cascaded down Amélie's spine. Her stomach, barely appeased by the frugal meal, knotted painfully. A village devoid of telephones, without a tangible link to

the outside world, was it conceivable? Had she stumbled into a temporal rift, a forgotten nook of the world untouched by progress?

She observed the innkeeper with renewed scrutiny, searching his demeanor, his gestures, for any telltale sign of deception, of cruel jest. But the man's face remained an impassive mask, his gaze as unreadable as that of a stone statue.

"There is no way to contact... anyone?" she asked, her voice strained, choked by the dread rising within her like a black tide. "A landline, perhaps? A telegraph?"

The innkeeper shook his head slowly, a weary smile stretching his thin lips. "You are in the remote mountains, Mademoiselle. Here, time flows differently. News travels slowly, carried by the wind and the migratory birds."

He approached the counter, picking up a worn cloth to wipe his calloused hands. "But do not worry," he added, his gaze meeting Amélie's with newfound intensity. "If you seek someone, if this someone is in the region, believe me, we will know. Rumors travel faster than the wind in these mountains."

His words, laden with a hidden weight Amélie couldn't decipher, chilled her more than the icy wind howling outside. She felt ensnared in an invisible spiderweb, woven from secrets and unspoken truths. Was the innkeeper, with his gruff demeanor and piercing gaze, an ally or a jailer in disguise?

"What do you mean?" she asked, her hesitant voice betraying her unease. "How... how would you know?"

The innkeeper stared at her for a moment, his dark eyes scrutinizing her as if reading the depths of her soul. Then, with a slow, theatrical gesture, he rounded the counter and approached her, his steps soundless on the wooden floor.

"Let's just say that in this village, we have our ways of communication," he murmured, his gravelly voice barely audible. "Ways more ancient, more... discreet."

He stopped before her, so close that Amélie felt his warm breath on her face.

"But before I can assist you, Mademoiselle," he continued, his gaze unwavering. "I need to know who you seek. And most importantly, why."

Amélie hesitated, torn between her instinct for caution and the urgent need for answers. Could she trust this enigmatic man, this village cut off from the world?

She glanced around, searching for a sign, a clue that could guide her decision. Her gaze fell upon her leather bag, resting on the table like a protective shield.

The dagger. The Weaver.

The old woman's words echoed in her mind with newfound clarity. "Trust your intuition, Amélie. It will lead you on the right path."

Taking a deep breath, Amélie made her choice. She would play the game, follow the current of this subterranean river of secrets and enigmas, until she found its source, the truth she sought.

"I seek a man," she said, her voice firm, meeting the innkeeper's gaze. "A dangerous man. A man who owes me answers."

She paused, letting the suspense hang in the air for a beat.

"His name... is Vincent."

A slow, almost cruel, smile stretched the innkeeper's lips. It was as if the mere act of uttering the name, like an incantation, had changed the atmosphere of the inn, thickening the air with palpable tension.

"Vincent, you say?" he murmured, his piercing gaze fixing on Amélie with a newfound intensity. "That is not a name easily forgotten in these parts."

He took a few steps back, leaning against the massive counter, his arms crossed over his chest. The inn, plunged into a heavy silence, seemed to hold its breath, the flames of the hearth crackling like conspiratorial whispers.

"And what business do you have with this... Vincent?" the innkeeper continued, his raspy voice echoing in the silence. "Why seek him in this forgotten corner of the world?"

Amélie hesitated, weighing her words carefully. She didn't know how far she could trust this man, what role he played in the game of mirrors Vincent seemed to be orchestrating around her.

"He... he's involved in some shady dealings," she finally replied, choosing a partial truth over a blatant lie. "Illegal things. I have to find him, to... to testify against him."

The innkeeper arched an eyebrow, a dubious look on his weathered face. "Testify? Against Vincent? You seem rather fragile to play the vigilante, Mademoiselle."

Amélie felt a prick of irritation pierce through her fatigue. She was tired of being underestimated, reduced to the role of a powerless victim. The dagger, concealed beneath her cloak, burned against her skin like a tangible reminder of her determination.

“Don’t be fooled by appearances,” she retorted, her gaze meeting the innkeeper’s with newfound firmness. “I may not look like a warrior, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to see justice served.”

A tense silence fell over the inn once more, the crackling fire and the relentless ticking of an ancient clock the only sounds that could be heard. Amélie held the innkeeper’s gaze, refusing to give in to the fear that gnawed at her.

“You have courage, I’ll grant you that,” the innkeeper finally said, a flicker of respect crossing his hardened features. “But courage alone is not always enough against a man like Vincent. He is... elusive. Dangerous. Like a wolf that prowls in the night, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.”

He paused, his gaze lost for a moment in the dancing flames.

“If you truly wish to find him,” he resumed, his raspy voice imbued with a newfound gravity. “You must learn to think like him. To see the world through his eyes.”

Amélie shivered, a growing unease washing over her like a shockwave. The thought of penetrating Vincent’s tortured mind, of immersing herself in the darkness that clung to him, filled her with dread.

“And... how am I supposed to do that?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

The innkeeper gave her an enigmatic smile, his dark eyes gleaming with a strange light.

“Follow me,” he said simply. “I know a place... a place that might enlighten you.”

He walked around the counter and headed towards the back of the inn, disappearing into a dark corridor, the entrance of which was concealed by a heavy red velvet curtain.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, her instinct for caution tugging at her. Should she really follow this man into the unknown bowels of the inn? Was she ready to plunge into the dark depths of Vincent's world?

She cast a final glance at the main room, at the welcoming warmth of the hearth, at the illusory safety of the daylight filtering through the closed shutters.

Then, clutching the dagger beneath her cloak like a protective talisman, she took a deep breath and stepped into the dark corridor, following the innkeeper into the unknown.

The corridor was narrow, low-ceilinged, the air thick and clammy like that of a forgotten crypt. Amélie followed the innkeeper a few paces behind, her heart pounding against her ribs like a prisoner seeking escape. The darkness, disturbed only by the flickering glow of a candle held by the innkeeper, transformed the shadows cast by their bodies into menacing shapes, fantastical creatures straight out of a nightmare.

The musty odor, mingled with an acrid perfume of dried herbs and burnt incense, stung her nostrils, reawakening a profound unease, a visceral fear she couldn't quite name. Every creak of the wooden floor beneath their feet, every sigh of the wind rushing through the gaps in the walls, amplified her sense of anguish, the chilling sensation that she was venturing into forbidden territory.

They finally emerged into a small, circular room, dimly lit by a single barred window overlooking a lightshaft. Shelves groaning under the weight of dusty books and yellowed parchments lined the walls, creating an atmosphere of occult knowledge, of forgotten alchemy. In the center of the room, a round table of dark wood, as if polished by time and the countless hands that had brushed against it, was cluttered with disparate objects: ancient maps with faded contours, vials containing liquids of improbable colors, animal bones arranged in a mysterious order.

The innkeeper placed the candle on the table, casting dancing shadows on the walls of the room. He then turned to Amélie, his weathered face illuminated by a strange glow, as if he were about to reveal a long-kept secret.

"Welcome," he said in a hoarse, almost solemn voice, "to my secret den. A place where the boundaries of reality blur, where the past mingles with the present, where answers hide in the heart of shadows."

Amélie, petrified by a mixture of apprehension and morbid fascination, scanned the room with a circular gaze. The air vibrated with a strange, palpable energy, as if the objects themselves were imbued with an invisible force, ready to be unleashed.

"What... what is this place?" she managed to articulate, her voice barely audible in the heavy silence of the room.

The innkeeper gave an enigmatic smile, his black eyes gleaming with an intense light.

"A place of knowledge, Mademoiselle. A place of memory. A place where one can decipher the signs, unravel the mysteries, and perhaps... influence the course of destiny."

He approached the table and took one of the yellowed parchments, unrolling it carefully. Complex symbols, drawn in black ink, covered the fragile surface, evoking ancient runes, forgotten magic formulas.

"You seek Vincent, do you not?" he resumed, without taking his eyes off the parchment. "You want to understand his motivations, his secrets, the tortuous paths of his mind."

Amélie nodded, unable to speak, her gaze captivated by the enigmatic symbols that seemed to dance before her eyes.

"Then you must learn to see the world as he sees it," continued the innkeeper, his raspy voice mingling with the rustling of the parchment. "Through the prism of his past, his obsessions, his inner demons."

He placed the parchment on the table and turned back to Amélie, his hard face lit by an intense glow.

"Are you ready to plunge into the abyss, Mademoiselle? To confront the darkness that slumbers within him, and perhaps... within yourself?"

The air solidified in her lungs. The gloomy lair, the strange objects arranged like offerings to a forgotten god, the innkeeper's intense gaze... Everything conspired to ignite a primal terror within her. Yet, deep down, a faint glimmer persisted, an echo of the determination instilled by the Weaver. To see the world through Vincent's eyes... Was this the price to pay to defeat him?

"I..." she began, her throat constricted with apprehension. "I'm not sure I understand... How could these... things possibly help me?"

A flicker of something akin to admiration crossed the innkeeper's weathered face. "You possess more courage than you realize, mademoiselle. Few would dare to tread upon this slippery terrain."

He gestured towards the table. "These are not children's toys, understand this well. They are tools, keys to unlock doors most choose to ignore."

The innkeeper approached a shelf and began shifting books with a dexterity surprising for a man his age. "Vincent... you called him? Ah yes, Vincent... He was always drawn to that which lurks behind the veil, to the dark forces that slumber within us all."



He retrieved a volume bound in black leather, its spine adorned with a metallic symbol eerily similar to the one she had seen on Leonard's cabin. An icy shiver raced down her spine. Could it be a coincidence?

The innkeeper laid the book on the table, a cloud of dust rising in the still air. "This book," he said, his voice raspy, "belonged to his mother. A strange woman... Unsettling. It was said she could read the future in flames, converse with spirits."

Amélie felt a wave of unease wash over her. Fleeting visions of the turbulent night at the cabin, incomprehensible whispers, dancing shadows, returned to her memory, blurring her perceptions. Was she descending into madness?

Ignoring her growing disquiet, the innkeeper opened the book to a page marked with a black velvet ribbon. Complex diagrams, formulas written in a language she did not recognize, sprang into view.

"His mother taught him things... dangerous things," the innkeeper continued, his calloused finger tracing the lines of the ancient text. "Things he should never have known. Secrets that warped his view of the world, led him down a dark path."

He looked up, his piercing gaze fixing Amélie with a newfound intensity. "Vincent is convinced he can control destiny, that he can manipulate the threads of reality to weave his own tapestry. And he uses the tools his mother bequeathed him to do so."

Amélie felt increasingly ill at ease, caught in an invisible spiderweb spun from secrets and lies. Was this the truth about Vincent? Or was she losing herself in a mental labyrinth of his design?

"But... why?" she whispered, her voice choked with anguish. "Why do this to me? What have I done to him?"

The innkeeper regarded her for a moment, a mixture of pity and sorrow in his eyes. "You are but a pawn in his game, mademoiselle. An instrument to sate his lust for power, to prove to the world that he is above the laws, that he is the master of fate."

He closed the book with a sharp snap that shattered the heavy silence of the room. "But he is wrong," he added, his voice hoarse. "No one controls destiny. The only power we possess is the power to choose our path, to fight against the darkness that lurks within us and around us."

He turned to Amélie, his stern face illuminated by a new light, a flicker of hope piercing the gloom like a wavering flame. "You have that power within you, mademoiselle. It is time to embrace it."

The weight of his words, heavy with unspeakable truths, fell upon Amélie like a leaden shroud. A cold terror, different from that inspired by Vincent, seeped into her veins. This one spoke of a world where the boundaries of reality were porous, where shadows themselves were bearers of power. Suddenly, the events of recent days, the unsettling coincidences, the whispers at the edge of her consciousness, took on a new, terrifying dimension.

"I... I don't know if I can..." she murmured, her voice strangled by fear. The thought of confronting not only Vincent's madness but also the dark forces he manipulated left her breathless at the edge of a dizzying abyss.

The innkeeper approached her, not with menace, but with an unexpected compassion that pierced the harshness of his features. "The path is perilous, I will not hide it from you. But you are not alone, Amélie. You carry within you a strength you do not yet know."

He took her hand, his as rough as bark, yet strangely warm. "Let your intuition be your guide. It is the voice of your soul, and no one can corrupt it, not even Vincent."

A flash of determination lit up Amélie's eyes. A fragile glimmer, flickering like a candle flame in the wind, but one that refused to be extinguished. "What must I do?" she asked, her voice hoarse but firm.

A slow, almost sad smile touched the innkeeper's lips. "The book will show you the way. But be warned, Amélie. What you discover within it will change your perception of the world, perhaps forever. Are you prepared to pay that price?"

Amélie's heart pounded in her chest. Fear still gripped her, but a new strength, drawn from the depths of her wounded being, urged her forward. She felt as if she stood at a crossroads in her destiny, a point of no return beyond which nothing would ever be the same.

"Yes," she replied, her voice clear and resolute. "I am ready."

The innkeeper nodded, satisfied. He picked up the book and held it out to Amélie. "Take it," he said. "And remember what I told you. The path will be difficult, but you have the strength within you to see it through."

Amélie took the book from the innkeeper, feeling the weight of the worn leather and the secrets it held. She clutched it to her chest, as if to draw it closer to her beating heart.

"Thank you," she murmured, her gaze fixed on the innkeeper, a newfound respect tinged with gratitude filling her heart.

The man nodded, a glint of pride in his eyes. "Go now," he said. "It is time for you to begin your journey."

Amélie took a deep breath, her heart pounding in her chest. She lifted her head, her gaze fixed on the doorway of the lair, ready to confront the darkness and unravel the secrets that haunted her.

The book, heavy with promise and danger, was her only compass in this dark labyrinth where reality blurred with shadows. She was no longer the same woman who had crossed the threshold of the inn a few short hours ago. Fear was still present, but it was now accompanied by a glimmer of fierce hope, a newfound determination that drove her forward, towards the unknown, towards the truth, towards Vincent.

## Chapter 13: The Trap

Amélie clutched the book to her chest, a talisman against the encroaching darkness. Bathed in the flickering glow of a wall-mounted lantern, the room seemed to breathe around her, shadows dancing in time with her pounding heart. She cast a final glance at the innkeeper, his weathered face a stoic sculpture in the dim light.

"Do not be afraid," he said, his voice a gravelly rasp that seemed to snag on the silence. "Knowledge is a weapon, but one must learn to wield it."

Amélie could only nod, a knot of apprehension constricting her throat, rendering her speechless. Turning, she stepped into the narrow corridor, leaving the inn and its enigmatic proprietor behind.

Back in her room, a spartan cell furnished with little more than a narrow bed and a rickety bedside table, Amélie sank onto the edge of the mattress, the book resting on her lap. Its leather cover felt cool and smooth beneath her trembling fingers. She hesitated, the weight of the unknown pressing down on her, then, with a resolute gesture, cracked it open.

The yellowed pages released a musty, ancient scent, like time itself. The writing, delicate and elegant, seemed to dance before her eyes. Amélie recognized the language – archaic French, nearly forgotten – a relic of her passionate scholarly pursuits. She immersed herself in the text, deciphering the words with fierce concentration.

The book chronicled the lineage of women, witches, the text declared, who had inherited a potent gift: the ability to manipulate the unseen forces of the world. They used their magic to heal the sick, protect the vulnerable, and defend themselves against those who sought to do them harm.

Amélie devoured the pages, uncovering a hidden, subterranean world where magic was not the stuff of fairytales, but a tangible reality, as potent as it was perilous. She learned

of the different schools of magic – white, black, blood – each with its own intricate rules and inherent dangers.

Then, she stumbled upon a passage that made her breath catch. It spoke of a ritual, a pact with a shadowy entity, that granted exponential power at a terrible cost: blood. The very essence of one's soul.

A glacial shiver raced down Amélie's spine. The innkeeper's words, Vincent's powers, his ability to manipulate fate – what if he had forged a pact with this dark entity? Sacrificed his soul for ultimate power?

Terror coiled in her gut, but alongside it, a strange fascination bloomed. What if she could use this knowledge, this forbidden lore, to defeat Vincent?

The book seemed to thrum between her fingers as if echoing her darkest thoughts. A newfound strength coursed through Amélie, raw and untamed, taking root deep within her being.

She spent the night consumed by the book's secrets, oblivious to fatigue, hunger, or danger. Dawn broke, painting the sky in hues of orange and rose, as Amélie closed the book, her eyes burning, her mind aflame.

Rising, she approached the small window, her pale reflection staring back from the dusty glass. She was different now. The book had opened a door within her, a door that could never be closed. She had glimpsed the world with new eyes, eyes that perceived the magic woven into the fabric of reality.

Amélie knew what she had to do. She had to find Vincent, and she had to defeat him, even if it meant plunging headlong into the abyss.

Leaving the room, book clutched tightly to her chest, she rejoined the innkeeper in the common room. He watched her approach, an unreadable smile playing on his lips.

"So," he said, his voice a low rumble in the silent inn. "Have you found what you were looking for?"

"Yes," Amélie replied, her voice resolute. "I know what I have to do."

The innkeeper nodded, a flicker of sadness in his gaze. "The path ahead is fraught with peril, Amélie. But you are stronger than you know."

He rose and moved to a cupboard, retrieving a long, dark cloak. "Take this," he said, holding it out to her. "It will offer you protection."

Amélie accepted the cloak, draping it over her shoulders. The fabric felt soft and warm, a comforting weight.

"Thank you," she murmured.

The innkeeper inclined his head. "Go now," he said. "Destiny awaits."

With a final word of gratitude, Amélie left the inn, her steps purposeful. She had a long road ahead, but she was no longer alone. She had knowledge, determination, and the sheltering embrace of the black cloak. She was ready to face Vincent, and the darkness that cloaked him.

The sun, already high in the sky, beat down on the dusty earth with its scorching rays. Amélie adjusted the black cloak on her shoulders, seeking illusory protection from the oppressive heat. The inn had vanished from sight, replaced by a desolate and arid

landscape. The road, a beaten dirt track winding through barren hills, seemed to stretch endlessly before her.

Doubt, like a tenacious weed, crept into Amélie's mind. Was she foolish to venture into the unknown like this, armed only with an old book and a newfound, fragile confidence? Was Vincent truly reachable in this desert that seemed straight out of a nightmare?

Yet, each step brought her a little closer to the truth, to understanding the infernal spiral her life had become. The book, which she kept pressed against her, had become her sole compass, a guide to an unsuspected world, both terrifying and fascinating.

Walking with a determined step, Amélie let the landscape unfold before her eyes. The crushing heat, the heavy silence, the absolute solitude of the place seemed to reflect the chaos reigning in her soul. She thought of Marc, of the life they had built together, a life shattered, reduced to pieces by Vincent's madness. Anger, silent and powerful, surged within her, fueling her determination.

In the distance, a silhouette appeared on the horizon. A man, cloaked in a long, dark tunic, stood motionless in the middle of the dusty track. Amélie stopped, her breath catching in her throat. Was it him? Was he aware of her coming?

The man turned slowly, and Amélie felt her heart clench in her chest. It wasn't Vincent. The stranger's face, weathered by sun and time, was marked by a profound sadness, his dark eyes reflecting an ancient wisdom.

"You seek Vincent," he said in a raspy voice, as if reading her thoughts.

Amélie hesitated a moment, surprised by this unexpected encounter. "Who are you?" she asked cautiously.



The man smiled sadly. "A friend," he replied simply. "Or perhaps an enemy, it all depends on you."

Amélie frowned, perplexed. "I don't understand," she murmured. "What do you mean?"

The stranger approached her, his movements slow and measured, like a predator stalking its prey. "Vincent is dangerous, Amélie. More dangerous than you can imagine. He has gone too far, he has crossed a line from which he can never return."

Amélie felt a chill run down her spine. "I know," she murmured. "That's why I'm here. I have to stop him."

"You cannot stop him alone," replied the stranger, his voice heavy with a strange gravity. "You need help."

Amélie looked him straight in the eye, seeking to pierce the mystery that surrounded him. "And you think you can help me?" she asked, a hint of defiance in her voice.

The man nodded slowly. "I know Vincent, Amélie. I know his secrets, his weaknesses. I can lead you to him, but I cannot guarantee your safety. Are you prepared to take that risk?"

Amélie took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the decision upon her shoulders. She had no choice. She had to trust this stranger, even if her instincts screamed at her to be cautious.

"Yes," she replied, her voice firm and determined. "I am ready."

The man nodded, a flicker of respect in his eyes. Without a word, he turned and started down a barely visible path, winding between rocks and thorny bushes. Amélie followed without hesitation, her heart pounding in her chest.

The landscape, a scene of utter desolation, seemed to vibrate under the scorching heat. Strangely shaped rocks, sculpted by wind and sand, stood like forgotten sentinels. A deathly silence hung over the hostile place, broken only by the crunch of gravel beneath their feet.

As the hours passed, the shadow of doubt crept into Amélie's mind. Who was this man, and where was he taking her? Was she truly safe by his side, or was she walking into a trap even more terrible than the one Vincent had set for her?

The sun descended slowly towards the horizon, setting the sky ablaze with flamboyant colors. The air cooled slightly, bringing relative relief from the furnace of the day. Amélie, exhausted by the walk and the tension, felt her strength failing her.

Suddenly, the man stopped. He turned to Amélie, his weathered face illuminated by the reddish glow of twilight. "We're here," he said in a grave voice.

Amélie looked up and felt an icy shiver run down her spine. Before her stood a massive structure, hewn from the rock itself. An aura of mystery and danger emanated from this place, like a menacing presence.

"Is this where Vincent lives?" asked Amélie, her voice strained with apprehension.

The man nodded. "This is his lair," he said. "The place where he feeds his obsessions, where he weaves his illusions."

Amélie felt an immense weight settle on her chest. The thought of confronting Vincent in this hostile place, imbued with his madness, terrified her. But she knew she had no choice. She had to see this through, for herself, for Marc, to break free from Vincent's toxic grasp.

"What should we do?" she asked, seeking support in the gaze of her strange guide.

The man didn't answer immediately. He stared at the stone fortress for a long moment, his face impassive. Then, he turned back to Amélie, a glint of determination in his eyes.

"We will enter his den," he said in an icy voice. "And we will confront him."

The silence that followed the man's words was heavy with unspeakable dangers. Amélie, her heart hammering against her ribs like a caged bird, scanned the stone fortress. The setting sun, draping the sky in shades of violet and blood red, lent the edifice a sinister, almost unreal aura. The entrance, a gaping arch hewn from the raw rock, seemed to open onto an abyss of shadow and silence.

Fear, cold and visceral, constricted Amélie's throat. She instinctively recoiled a step, her foot striking a stone that rolled with a dry clatter in the oppressive silence. The sound, amplified by the palpable tension, struck her like a clap of thunder.

"We must go," the man's voice, low and hoarse, roused her from her stupor.

Amélie turned to him, searching his gaze for an ounce of comfort, a glimmer of hope in this desolate landscape. But the man's face, hewn and hard as the stone itself, remained impassive, an indecipherable mask beneath the twilight sky.

"Are you certain about this?" he asked, his gaze piercing hers. "There's still time to turn back. Vincent is powerful... and unpredictable. To enter his lair is to venture onto dangerous ground, where the rules of the real world no longer apply."

The man's words, far from reassuring her, only served to stoke the anxiety that gnawed at her. Yet, deep down, Amélie knew there was no other way. She had come this far, braving fear, fatigue, reason itself, to find Vincent, to confront him with his actions, to break the unhealthy hold he exerted over her life.

"I have no choice," she murmured, her voice hoarse, almost inaudible. "I have to do this."

The man nodded, accepting her response without a word. He approached the entrance of the fortress, his massive silhouette outlined against the blazing sky. He paused for a moment, as if to gauge the threat that lurked beyond the stone threshold, then vanished into the shadows.

Amélie hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding in her chest. The book, which she clutched to her chest like a talisman, seemed to vibrate in time with her racing heartbeat. She drew a deep breath, summoning her last reserves of courage, and followed the man into the jaws of the wolf.

The darkness, total and absolute, engulfed her like a wave of ice. The air, heavy and damp, was saturated with an acrid odor, a mixture of dust, incense, and something indefinable that tightened her chest. Amélie moved forward tentatively, guided by the muffled footsteps of her guide, her senses on high alert, watching for the slightest sound, the slightest hostile presence.

Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the gloom. She made out rough stone walls, damp and cold, that seemed to close in on her like a tomb. The place was freezing, oppressive, as if the air itself were imbued with a malevolent energy.

They emerged into a vast circular chamber, dimly lit by torches fixed to the walls. In the center of the chamber, a stone brazier burned with a pale flame, casting moving shadows on the walls. Esoteric symbols, drawn in chalk on the floor, formed an irregular circle around the brazier. The air vibrated with a strange, almost palpable energy that made Amélie nauseous.

"Where are we?" she murmured, her voice strangled by apprehension.

"The heart of Vincent's sanctuary," replied the man, his voice echoing strangely in the heavy silence. "The place where he draws his power."

Amélie scanned the room, searching for a trace of Vincent, a sign of his presence. "Where is he?" she asked, her voice strained.

The man didn't answer. He approached the brazier and leaned over the flames, as if to read the future in them. "He's coming," he said finally, without turning around.

A cold shiver ran down Amélie's spine. She clutched the book to her chest, seeking illusory support against the terror that washed over her. The moment had come. The moment to face her demons, to look truth in the face, however terrifying it might be.

A chilling smile lit up the man's face. "Yes, Amélie," he said, his voice soft, almost caressing. "He's coming."

And in a flash of pure terror, Amélie understood. She had been tricked.

The man, or rather, the thing that stood before her, scrutinized her with a cruel joy that twisted his features. His face, once marked by a melancholic sadness, was now a grotesque caricature of humanity, warped by an unhealthy jubilation. His eyes, once dark

and unfathomable, blazed with a reddish light, reflecting the infernal glow of the brazier crackling between them.

An icy terror, more intense than anything Amelia had ever felt, seized her, paralyzing her limbs and stealing her breath. She wanted to scream, to call for help, but no sound escaped her lips, sealed as they were by fear. She was trapped, like an insect caught in the web of a patient and cruel spider.

"You were very naive, Amelia," hissed the creature, its voice nothing more than a hoarse murmur, like the beating of bat wings in the darkness. "Did you really believe you could confront Vincent? He is far more than you can imagine, far more than this world can contain."

Amelia, struggling against the paralysis that was overtaking her, managed to articulate a few words, her voice a plaintive breath in the heavy silence of the room. "Who... Who are you?"

The creature let out a dry laugh, devoid of all joy, which echoed off the stone walls like the death rattle. "Don't you recognize me?" it cackled. "Take a good look, Amelia. Look what your precious Vincent has done to me."

Amelia, forcing her terror to subside for a moment, observed the creature with newfound attention. And suddenly, the shock of recognition struck her full force, drawing from her a silent scream. She recognized the gaunt figure, the drawn features, the eyes burning with an infernal glow. She recognized the scar that slashed across the creature's left cheek, a scar she herself had inflicted years before, in a fit of rage and despair.

"Mother?" she stammered, the word escaping her lips like a stifled sob.

The blood in her veins turned to ice, every cell in her body screaming at the impossibility of it all. Her mother, the one who had taught her to read and to dream, whose gentle voice

still echoed in her most cherished memories, stood there, disfigured, deformed, consumed by a force beyond comprehension.

"You... This can't be," Amélie whispered, her voice barely audible. Denial wrapped around her, trying to seal the cracks appearing in her perception of reality. Her mother had died, consumed by illness years ago. It was a painful memory, but clear, sharp, undeniable.

"Death is but a veil, my dear," hissed the creature, its smile widening to reveal yellowed, pointed teeth. "And Vincent, dear Vincent, has found a way to tear it asunder."

A stabbing pain, like icy fire, spread through Amélie's chest. Vincent. His name was poison running through her veins, contaminating everything in its path. He was the source of this nightmare, this blasphemous mockery of reality. He had unearthed her mother, allowed some foul shade to take possession of her remains, all to sate his own twisted lust for power.

"Why?" Amélie choked out, despair clouding her vision. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"Power, my darling, always comes at a price," the creature replied, its voice a honeyed rasp that twisted the familiar intonations of her mother's speech. "Vincent aspires to a grand destiny, and I... I merely aspire to serve him, to be his instrument in this world and the next."

Amélie tasted bile rising in her throat. Her mother, her sweet, loving mother, was nothing more than an empty shell, a vessel for Vincent's dark ambitions. He had corrupted her, defiled her, twisted her into a parody of her former self.

"Mom... Come back to me, please," Amélie begged, reaching out to the creature as if to pull her from a horrifying dream. "This isn't you talking. Vincent is manipulating you, using you."

The creature let out a mocking chuckle. "He is not using me, my dear, he has liberated me. Freed me from the constraints of this weak, perishable body, from the limitations of mortal existence. We are bound now, he and I, by a pact of blood and will. And together, we shall reshape the world in our image."

Amélie felt a chill of horror run through her. She understood now that her mother was lost, forever lost to the darkness that had consumed her being. There was nothing left of her, only an empty shell animated by Vincent's perverted will.

"You won't win," Amélie spat, her fear giving way to a cold, determined anger. "I won't let you do this, Vincent. I will destroy you, you and your empire of darkness."

The creature stared at her for a moment, its red eyes flashing. Then, a cruel, triumphant smile spread across its face.

"You are far too late, Amélie," it hissed. "The ritual is almost complete. And when Vincent has fulfilled his destiny, nothing and no one will be able to stop him."

It raised its hands, its skeletal, claw-like fingers reaching for Amélie like the talons of some monstrous bird of prey. "And you, my dear, will have the honor of witnessing his victory. You will bear witness to our eternal glory."

Amélie knew then that she was playing her final hand. The book, clutched tightly against her chest, burned against her skin as if reminding her of its existence, its power. She was no longer afraid. Anger, grief, despair – they had cauterized her former fears, leaving only a steely resolve in their wake. She would fight, to her last breath, to stop Vincent from carrying out his plan.

With a guttural cry, Amélie ripped the book from her chest and brandished it towards the creature that was once her mother. Yellowed pages fluttered in the wind of terror that swept through the chamber, their scrawled words like forgotten talismans. Vertigo seized



her, the esoteric symbols etched on the floor seeming to writhe and animate before her eyes.

She did not comprehend the book's language, nor decipher the obscure formulas that danced upon the parchment, yet a visceral force emanated from its pages, responding to her fierce determination like an echo to her own terror.

Inhaling deeply the thick air of the chamber, Amélie allowed instinct to guide her. She flipped through the book until she reached a page that seemed to vibrate with an energy of its own, an illustration depicting a woman standing defiant against a shadowy silhouette, arms raised towards a night sky streaked with lightning.

Letting the words flow from her lips in a forgotten tongue, she felt a newfound power surge through her. A raw, chaotic energy coursed along her outstretched arms, electrifying her veins like a living current. The brazier at the center of the chamber roared, flames erupting in a vortex of light and heat that forced the creature back a staggering step.

"What are you doing?" the thing bellowed, its voice warped with surprise and a flicker of newfound fear. "Stop this, you fool! You don't know what you're doing!"

But Amélie was already gone, swept away by the torrent of energy coursing through her. The words of the book resonated within her, vibrating in unison with a force beyond her comprehension, transcending her very being. She was the conduit, the instrument of a will far older and more terrible than Vincent's, than that of the creature that stood before her, eyes wide with dawning horror.

The entire chamber trembled as Amélie unleashed the final syllable, her voice no more than a hoarse whisper lost in the rising tumult. A shockwave of unimaginable power exploded from the book, sweeping through the chamber like a tidal wave.

Amélie squeezed her eyes shut, clinging to her wavering consciousness as chaos unfurled around her. She heard the creature's earsplitting shriek, a raw sound of pain and terror, and then nothing. Silence descended, heavy and absolute, only the crackle of the brazier daring to break the newfound stillness of the fortress.

Opening her eyes slowly, Amélie blinked, adjusting to the flickering torchlight. The chamber was empty. The creature that was her mother was gone, as was the man who had led her here. Only the book lay open on the floor, its pages still thrumming with residual energy.

Amélie pushed herself to her feet, the weight of the world settling heavily upon her shoulders. She had survived, but at what cost? The book, the catalyst for this liberating chaos, burned in her hands. She closed it carefully, struck by the sensation of holding a power both intoxicating and dangerous.

Around her, the fortress seemed to exhale a final breath, as if the magic that animated it had vanished with the creature's demise. Amélie knew she had to leave, to flee this cursed place and never return. But a question lingered, sharp and raw as an open wound: was Vincent truly vanquished, or was this merely a fleeting victory in a war whose rules she had yet to grasp?

Alone in the silence of the fortress, Amélie clutched the book to her chest, her sole compass in a world plunged into the unknown. She had defied the darkness and survived, but the shadows of her past still pursued her, threatening to consume her once more. The fight was far from over, she knew, and a newfound resolve hardened within her as she stepped into the fortress's dark maze, searching for the way out, towards an uncertain future.

## Chapter 14: The Reconstruction

The air was frigid, sharp as shattered glass, as Amélie emerged from the bowels of the fortress. The sun, a pale glimmer through the wintry sky, struggled to pierce the menacing shadow that seemed to permeate the very air. Every stone, every gnarled tree, still breathed the dark magic that had seeped into this cursed place.

She pulled her scarf tighter around her neck, trying in vain to warm fingers numbed by cold and fear. The book, nestled in the folds of her cloak, weighed heavy on her heart. A constant reminder of the raw power it contained, and the terrible price she had paid to wield it.

The path that snaked through the forest was muddy and treacherous, the knotted roots of ancient trees reaching up like skeletal fingers to trip her. Every snapping twig, every distant hoot of a nocturnal bird, made her flinch, her mind still haunted by the horrors she had faced.

How long had she wandered through this labyrinth of stone and terror? Hours? Days? Time had lost all meaning in this otherworldly place. Her only companions were the oppressive silence of the woods and the dull thud of her own heart, a frantic rhythm that served as a constant reminder that she was alive, for now.

A bone-deep weariness threatened to overwhelm her, to make her collapse right there on the frozen ground. But Amélie fought back, driven by a fierce will to put as much distance as possible between herself and this accursed place. She had to find her way back to the real world, a world where magic was nothing but a child's fairytale and the dead stayed buried six feet under.

A flicker of light through the trees caught her eye. A clearing? A path? Hope, fragile as a newborn bird, stirred in her exhausted heart. Summoning the last of her strength, she stumbled towards the light, her breath forming wisps of vapor in the icy air.

She emerged into a small clearing bathed in an ethereal glow. In its center stood a wooden cabin, humble and welcoming, a thin plume of smoke rising from its chimney. A haven of peace in this desolate wasteland.

Driven by a hope she dared not name, Amélie approached the cabin, her steps hesitant on the frost-covered ground. She raised her hand to knock on the door, but it swung open before she could touch it.

A man stood framed in the doorway, his tall silhouette backlit by the golden light spilling from within. He was tall and powerfully built, with broad shoulders and rugged features etched by time and hardship. His eyes, piercing blue as winter ice, scrutinized her with an intensity that made her take a step back.

“Who are you?” Amélie asked, her voice barely a rasp.

The man didn't answer immediately. He continued to study her with that unsettling gaze, as if reading the deepest secrets of her soul. Then, a faint smile touched his lips, a weary, melancholy smile that never quite reached his eyes.

“They call me the Warden,” he said finally, his voice low and rumbling, like the distant roll of thunder. “And what brings you, lost traveler, to my forgotten woods?”

Amélie hesitated, unable to tell if this man represented a threat or a potential ally. Could she trust him? Did she really have a choice?

“I’m trying to get home,” she replied cautiously. “I... I got lost.”

The Warden regarded her for a long moment, then stepped aside from the door.

“Come in,” he said simply. “It’s cold out here, and you look exhausted. We’ll talk later.”

Amélie crossed the threshold hesitantly, her gaze sweeping over the cabin’s interior. It was a single room, spartan but cozy, with a fire crackling merrily in the hearth and a heavy wooden table in the center. The air was thick with the scent of pine and damp earth, a strangely reassuring smell after the putrid atmosphere of the fortress.

The Warden closed the door behind her, cutting her off from the outside world with a single gesture. Amélie turned to face him, a flicker of apprehension tightening her throat.

“Who are you, really?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. “And what do you want?”

The Warden turned towards her, an enigmatic smile playing on his lips.

“All stories have a beginning, traveler,” he said softly. “Sit down, and I will tell you mine.”

Amélie moved closer to the fire, reaching her hands towards the comforting warmth of the flames. A wisp of steam rose from her damp gloves as she watched the man move about the room. He navigated the cocoon of wood and stone with an unsettling grace, as if the very place recognized him as its master.

He filled two wooden cups with a steaming liquid and offered one to Amélie. The spicy aroma stung her nostrils, an intoxicating blend of herbs and something more...ancient. She accepted the cup cautiously, her fingers brushing against the Warden’s in a contact that was both searing and fleeting.

“Drink,” he invited, his voice a deep resonance that seemed to reverberate in the silence of the cabin. “It will warm you, body and soul.”

Amélie hesitated a moment longer, caution wrestling with the exhaustion that was consuming her. She lifted the cup to her lips, the liquid a burning kiss of embers on her tongue, spreading through her numb limbs like a sweet promise of oblivion.

“Who are you?” she repeated, her voice stronger now that the warmth was beginning to seep into her. “This place...it’s steeped in an old magic, a dark magic.”

The Warden settled opposite her, his blue eyes holding hers with an unsettling intensity. “This place,” he began slowly, “is a crossroads. A place where the pathways of the world converge, where shadow and light wage their timeless battle.”

“And you, which side are you on?” Amélie asked, unable to suppress the edge of defiance that sharpened her voice.

A ghost of a smile touched the Warden’s lips. “I am the guardian of this place,” he replied, his gaze drifting towards the dancing flames. “I ensure the balance, that the darkness does not spill over into the world of men.”

“And Vincent?” Amélie burst out, her tormentor’s name a curse that shattered the quiet. “What is he doing here? What is his purpose?”

The Warden straightened, his gaze returning to her with a newfound gravity. “Vincent is a child of chaos,” he said, his voice heavy with meaning. “He seeks to shatter the balance, to plunge the world into darkness.”

“But why?” Amélie cried out, despair threatening to drown her once more. “Why me? What have I done to deserve any of this?”

The Warden rose and moved to the window, his silhouette a stark outline against the icy night that was falling over the forest. "Vincent is obsessed with power," he said, his voice devoid of judgment. "And he believes you hold the key to it."

Amélie stared at him, incredulous. "Me? But I am just an ordinary woman. I possess no power."

"You are mistaken," the Warden replied, turning back to face her, his eyes gleaming with a strange light. "You possess a strength you do not yet know. A strength Vincent craves above all else."

He stepped closer, and Amélie felt again that aura of power that clung to him, as ancient as the forest itself.

"Vincent is afraid of you," he murmured, his voice barely a whisper in the stillness. "That is why he hunts you, why he seeks to destroy you."

"But why?" Amélie repeated, her voice breaking with the sheer incomprehension. "Why me?"

The Warden laid a hand on her shoulder, his touch surprisingly gentle. "Because you are the one who can defeat him," he said, his gaze boring into hers. "You are the only one who can stop him."

The weight of his words fell upon Amélie like a leaden shroud. She, defeat Vincent? A being capable of bending reality to his will, of manipulating the living and the dead? The idea seemed as absurd as it was terrifying.

"You're mistaken," she murmured, her voice strangled by fear. "I am but an ordinary woman. I possess no power, no magic. I am no match for him."

The Guardian withdrew his hand, but his gaze remained fixed on hers, burning with a disconcerting intensity. "You carry within you the flame, Amélie," he said, abandoning the formal "vous", as if to emphasize the gravity of his words. "A flame that Vincent both covets and fears."

A shiver ran down Amélie's spine. The flame? What was he talking about? Had she lost her mind amidst this enchanted forest, a prisoner of some mystical delirium?

Seeing the disbelief in her eyes, the Guardian turned towards the window. Night had fallen, enveloping the clearing in an inky veil studded with glittering stars.

"The story is written in the heavens, Amélie," he murmured, his gaze lost in the vastness of the night. "One need only know how to read between the lines."

He beckoned her closer. "Come," he said, gesturing towards the window. "Observe and understand."

Hesitantly, Amélie approached and peered outside. The night sky stretched above them, possessing a crystalline clarity she had never witnessed before. The stars, brilliant as diamonds scattered across black velvet, seemed to pulsate with a life of their own.

"What do you see, Amélie?" asked the Guardian, his gruff voice resonating in the silence of the cabin.

"Stars," replied Amélie, perplexed. "A magnificent sky, certainly, but I don't understand..."

"Look closer," interrupted the Guardian. "Don't just see. Observe. Feel."



Amélie closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply the crisp night air. Then, slowly, she opened them again, fixing her gaze once more on the starlit sky. This time, she did not seek to understand, contenting herself with observing, allowing the celestial forms to imprint themselves upon her retina.

And then, she saw it.

Amidst the apparent chaos of the stars, a pattern took shape. An unfamiliar constellation, formed by luminous points of a peculiar intensity. It resembled... a woman. A woman with her arms raised towards the heavens, as if to embrace infinity.

"Is that... me?" whispered Amélie, her voice thick with emotion.

The Guardian nodded, a sad smile illuminating his weathered face. "It is the Prophecy, Amélie. The Guardian of the Flame, destined to confront the Shadow and restore balance."

Amélie stumbled back, overcome by a wave of dizziness. The Prophecy? The Guardian of the Flame? These words, worthy of a fairy tale, resonated within her with incredible force, awakening within her a visceral terror and a newfound fascination.

"But... I don't understand," she stammered, clutching the edge of the window as if to keep from falling. "I am but a simple woman. I am no warrior, no sorceress... I cannot fight a being like Vincent."

The Guardian approached her and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You are not alone, Amélie," he said gently. "The flame that burns within you is more powerful than you know. It draws to it those who believe in the light, those who fight against the darkness."

He looked her straight in the eye, his gaze burning with fierce conviction. "You have already shown extraordinary courage and strength, Amélie. You survived Vincent's fortress, you faced your deepest fears. You have the power to defeat him, of this I am certain."

Amélie looked at him, uncertain. Could she really trust this man, this prophecy? Did she have a choice?

One thing was certain: she could no longer run. Vincent was hunting her, relentlessly pursuing her, and his grip on the world tightened with each passing day.

Amélie took a deep breath, feeling a new determination wash over her. "What must I do?" she asked, her voice trembling but resolute.

The Guardian smiled, a flicker of pride shining in his eyes. "You must learn to control the flame, Amélie," he replied. "To master its power before it consumes you."

He gestured towards the book Amélie still clutched tightly to her chest. "This book is the key," he said. "It will guide you on the path of knowledge, reveal to you the secrets of the Prophecy."

Amélie lowered her eyes to the book, her heart pounding in her chest.

The timeworn leather was cold beneath her fingertips, yet a strange, almost imperceptible heat seemed to emanate from the yellowed pages. As if the book itself pulsed with a lifeblood, faint but constant, echoing the beat of her own blood at her temples. A primal fear coursed through her, a temptation to fling the book into the depths of the forest, to flee this legacy as fascinating as it was terrifying.

But fear was a familiar flame now, burning in her veins without consuming her. Amélie knew flight was no longer an option. Vincent had woven his tapestry of lies and terror around her, stripping her of all that truly mattered. All that remained was this book, this tenuous link to a destiny she didn't yet understand, but could no longer ignore.

"How... how do I use it?" she asked, her voice hoarse from holding silence for too long.

The Warden approached the table, his gaze never leaving the book. "It is not an object to be mastered, Amélie," he said, trailing his fingers across the leather cover. "It is a guide, an ally. Approach it with respect, with humility, and it will yield its secrets."

He opened the book to a random page. Intricate symbols, drawn in ink as black as dried blood, seemed to dance on the parchment under Amélie's gaze. A shiver traced her spine. She didn't understand these signs, these intertwined lines that seemed to vibrate with an energy of their own. Yet, a morbid fascination held her captive, as if some part of her, buried deep within her being, recognized this forgotten language.

"I don't understand any of it," she confessed, her voice a mixture of frustration and mounting dread.

The Warden closed the book with a sharp snap that made Amélie flinch. "Patience, little sister," he said, a benevolent smile softening his rugged features. "The path of knowledge is long and fraught with obstacles. But you will learn quickly. You have a gift."

Amélie stared at him, incredulous. A gift? Her? Until now, her life had been a model of banality, a succession of identical days punctuated by work, grocery shopping, and evenings spent in front of the television. What possible gift could she possess to fight against a being like Vincent?

"I don't see what gift you're talking about," she replied, her voice laced with bitterness. "I'm just an ordinary woman, thrust into a story that's way over my head."

"You underestimate yourself, Amélie," the Warden countered, his steel-blue eyes fixing on her with an intensity that brought a blush to her cheeks. "You have faced your worst nightmares, you have survived the hell that Vincent created for you. You are far stronger than you think."

He paused, letting his words resonate in the silent air of the cabin. "The flame that burns within you, Amélie, is the force of life itself. It is courage, determination, love. And it is this that Vincent craves, for he has forsaken all of that to embrace the darkness."

Amélie listened, her heart pounding in her chest. The Warden's words awakened new, confusing emotions within her. A sense of power mingled with a dull terror. Could she really trust this man, this prophecy that seemed to be unfolding before her very eyes?

"But how... how am I supposed to learn to control this flame?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

The Warden offered an enigmatic smile. "The book will guide you, Amélie," he replied, gesturing towards the volume with a flick of his fingers. "But you will not be alone. I will teach you what I know."

He paused again, and Amélie thought she detected a flicker of sadness in his eyes. "Time is short, little sister," he murmured. "But I will do everything in my power to prepare you for the battle that awaits."

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows on the walls of the cabin. The scent of wood smoke mingled with the more acrid aroma of dried herbs that the Warden burned in a small terracotta brazier. It was a strangely comforting smell, reminiscent of both the healing potions of her childhood and the ancestral rituals spoken of in history books.

Amélie held the book on her lap, the weight of the volume seeming to have lifted. She had spent hours turning the yellowed pages, deciphering the esoteric symbols that seemed

to mock her ignorance. Hours trying to unlock the secrets of a magic she didn't understand, that perhaps she refused to understand.

The Warden, seated opposite her, observed her in silence. His gaze, usually so piercing, seemed veiled with an infinite sadness. As if he carried on his shoulders the weight of all the secrets of the world, the burden of all the battles fought in the shadows.

"Magic is not a game, Amélie," he finally said, his deep voice breaking the silence like the distant rumble of thunder. "It is not a children's fairy tale, nor a conjuror's sleight of hand."

He rose and walked towards the window, his massive silhouette outlined against the silver glow of the moon filtering through the trees. "Magic is a raw, chaotic force, as ancient as time itself. It permeates all that lives, flows through our veins like the very blood that animates us."

He turned to her, his blue eyes blazing with an intense light. "And like any force, it can be used for good or for evil. It all depends on the one who wields it."

Amélie nodded, understanding without really understanding. She had seen with her own eyes the destructive power of magic, the way it could twist reality, corrupt the purest souls. But she had also felt its protective strength, the comforting warmth that emanated from the Warden, the glimmer of hope that still shone in his eyes despite the darkness that surrounded him.

"How do you know?" she murmured, her voice choked with anxiety. "How do you know if you're using magic for good or for evil?"

The Warden approached her and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "The answer lies within you, Amélie," he said gently. "Listen to your heart. It will guide you."

He straightened and handed her the book. "This book will show you the way, will teach you the rudiments of magic. But the true knowledge, the one that will allow you to master the flame that burns within you, you will only find within yourself."

Amélie took the book, clutching it to her chest like a protective talisman. "But I'm not sure I can do it," she confessed, doubt gnawing at her fragile hope. "What if I'm not up to it? What if I'm not strong enough?"

The Warden smiled, a flash of pride illuminating his weathered face. "You are stronger than you think, Amélie," he said with conviction. "You have survived trials that few could endure. You have faced your deepest fears and emerged victorious. You have the courage of a lioness, the determination of a river carving its bed through the mountain."

He paused, letting his words resonate in the silence of the cabin. "You are the Keeper of the Flame, Amélie. Never forget that."

Amélie looked at him, her eyes shining with a mixture of fear and determination. She didn't know what the future held, or if she would ever be able to master the magic that slumbered within her. But one thing was certain: she would not give up. She would fight. For herself, for those she loved, for a world threatened by darkness.

A glacial wind swept into the cabin as the Warden opened the door. Dawn was barely breaking, painting the horizon with a pale, uncertain light. Amélie shivered, clutching the book to her chest. The esoteric symbols etched onto its cover seemed to radiate a subtle warmth, as if comforting her.

"It is time," the Warden said, his voice grave, resonating with the solemnity of the moment.

Amélie followed him out of the cabin. The cold bit at her face, stealing her breath. Around them, the forest was just beginning to awaken, the frost-covered branches shimmering under the first rays of the sun.

The Warden stopped at the edge of a clearing bathed in spectral light. He gestured towards a circle of standing stones, barely visible in the morning mist.

"This place is imbued with ancient magic," he said. "It is here that your apprenticeship shall begin."

Amélie stepped into the circle, her heart pounding in her chest. She felt a subtle energy vibrating beneath her feet, as if the earth itself pulsed with a slow, powerful rhythm.

"Open the book," the Warden commanded, his voice resonating with a newfound intensity.

Amélie obeyed. She opened the book to the first page and began to read aloud, the words coming naturally to her, as if she had always known them. As she read, the air around them crackled with a new energy. Multicolored lights danced between the trees, shadows seemed to come alive, and a violent wind began to blow, swirling around the circle of stones.

The Warden observed the scene, his features drawn, his eyes blazing with a feverish light. He raised his arms to the sky and uttered a series of guttural words in a forgotten tongue. A pillar of white light erupted from the center of the circle, enveloping Amélie in intense heat.

Amélie closed her eyes, blinded by the light and overcome with dizziness. She felt herself being pulled in all directions, as if her body were about to disintegrate. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the pain vanished. Amélie opened her eyes to find that the world around her had changed.

The forest was gone. She now stood in the middle of a vast plain, stretching endlessly beneath an ink-black sky studded with incandescent stars. In the distance, she saw a chain of mountains rising towards the heavens like the jagged teeth of a monstrous creature.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice hushed with astonishment.

"Between worlds," the Warden replied, his voice resonating with a newfound depth. "It is here that you will learn to master your true power."

Amélie shivered. The icy wind that swept across the plain seemed to pierce her to the bone. She clutched the book to her chest, seeking in vain for refuge against the hostile immensity that surrounded her. The book was cold to the touch, but a strange, almost palpable energy seemed to emanate from it, spreading along her arms like an electric current.

"Do not be afraid, Amélie," the Warden said, reading her thoughts with disconcerting ease. "You are not alone. I am here to guide you."

He approached her and placed his calloused hand over hers. A shock ran through Amélie, both burning and comforting. She looked up at him, and for the first time, she saw not just the old man weathered by years and hardship, but also the raw power that slumbered within him, contained by an iron will.

"You are ready, Amélie," he said, his voice resonating with a newfound strength. "It is time to begin."

Amélie's transformation had only just begun.