GENETIC MEMORY

MARIUSZ TRYNKA

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BOOK I **OMNIS**

CRACOW 2026

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For Tymon and Filip –

This is where your reading adventure begins.
And if you don't start...
well, the author knows your where you live and...

PROLOGUE

October 20, 2026 — 2:30 p.m.
Nazca Plateau, Peru

Ben felt the dry, sandy ground give way beneath his feet. It was just a misstep—one he didn't know was wrong. A moment of inattention. A sound he didn't recognize at first. Stone breaking. Time seemed to freeze for a split second, then came the fall.

He plunged into the depths, the air thick with dust, his body slamming against jagged rock. Pain flared along his arm, but panic only gripped him when he landed awkwardly on his back and looked up. The sun, moments ago warm on his skin, was now just a narrow, shimmering slit above him.

It was tight.

His chest constricted. His pulse raced. The world shrank.

Ben tried to take a deep breath, but dust filled his lungs. His body wanted to flee, but there was no space. Rock pressed in from all sides, cold and hard against his skin, the crevice barely wide enough to move his arms. He felt trapped, wedged like an animal caught in a snare.

He pressed his hands against the walls, but they didn't budge an inch. The stone was ancient, unyielding, as if mocking him. His heart now pounded so loudly he couldn't hear anything else. A dull rushing rose in his head.

Not here. Not like this, he thought.

The darkness below him was deep and formless. He forced himself not to look down. Instead, his fingers searched for a grip, for a way to pull himself up, but found only smooth or crumbling edges. The narrowness around him seemed to close in further, as if the earth itself wanted to swallow him whole.

A gasp escaped his lips. The air felt thicker, heavier than before. His lungs worked frantically, but it was as if he couldn't get enough oxygen. Cold sweat trickled down his temples.

Get it together. Think.

But his mind was a storm of fear, his body a prison of adrenaline. Then came the trembling—first in his hands, then in his legs. His mouth was as dry as the desert floor.

He had to get out. Now.

His fingernails scraped against the rock, found a small ledge. He pulled, his arm trembling with effort. Just a few centimeters—nothing more. But it was a beginning.

A breathless sob escaped him, half despair, half relief. The panic still remained, a creature lurking in his chest, but he was moving. Inch by inch, against gravity, against the tightness, against the fear.

Though the sun appeared small overhead, it was still there, a comforting thought as he envisioned his eventual return to it...

...then the rock beneath him gave way, heralding the second fall.

CHAPTER 1

September 26, 2026 — evening
CyberGuard Solutions, 'The Stack', Vancouver, Canada

The lobby of CyberGuard Solutions on the second floor of 'The Stack' was deserted this Saturday evening. The dimmed lighting reflected off the polished concrete floors, while outside, the lights of the city flickered against the falling dusk. Not even the receptionist was at her desk. The rhythmic clicking of her keyboard was absent.

Liam, a man of tall stature, stood with his hands in his pockets by the floor-to-ceiling window. His pale face and fair hair were reflected in the glass as his gaze slid across the streets of Vancouver, though in truth he was waiting for the man who never came.

"Hi, Liam!"

He turned as Julia entered the lobby. Her shoulder-length dark hair was elegantly pinned back, exposing the neckline and straps of her black evening dress. She threw an investigative glance at Liam.

"Hi, Julia!"

"Are we the first ones here?" she asked, looking around.

"No, the others are already on the roof. The DJs are there too, and people are enjoying themselves." Liam smiled, but it was a practiced smile, one he wore in meetings when he wanted to mask his unease. "I just came down to check on Ben. I thought he'd be here by now. Apparently, he hasn't arrived yet."

Julia frowned. Unconsciously, she folded her arms, a flicker of disappointment crossing her face. "Yeah... that's just like him." Her tone was soft, but concerned. "Lately he's been so absent and always late. It's starting to show in the meetings too."

Liam was silent for a moment, his fingers playing with the silver smartwatch on his wrist. "Yeah... I know." He said no more.

The silence between them was short, but heavy. Then he cleared his throat and nodded toward the elevator. "Come on, let's go upstairs. Otherwise, people will start wondering where we are."

Julia hesitated for a moment longer, then followed him.

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September 26, 2026 — evening
Rooftop of 'The Stack', Vancouver, Canada

The party was already in full swing. The air on the rooftop was warm for a night in Vancouver, the sky a deep dark blue, illuminated only by the city's sparkling

skyscrapers. Among high tables, sofas, and ambient lighting, conversations buzzed like a quiet background hum. The DJ blended smooth electronic beats with hints of jazz, while waiters in black T-shirts served cocktails.

"Hey, Julia, hey, Liam!" A young developer in a casual hoodie—Chris from IT—raised a beer bottle. "Did you find Ben?"

"No, not yet," Liam replied curtly, while Julia gave only a faint smile.

"Typical Ben," another voice chimed in. It was Sonya, who had worked as a senior analyst at the company for five years. "He'll probably show up right when it's about to end. And with that mysterious look again, like he's just saved the world from every hacker."

A quiet laugh rippled through the group, but Julia noticed Liam didn't join in. Instead, his gaze swept across the party, as if Ben might emerge from the shadows at any moment. After a while, the crowd thinned out a bit. Julia and Liam found a quieter part of the rooftop terrace, where a small lounge area lay away from the music. The sounds of the party grew softer, and the hum of the city became more audible. Julia leaned against the armrest of a sofa and looked at Liam. "So... you went downstairs to look for Ben. But you weren't really expecting him, were you?"

Liam didn't answer right away. He took a sip of his whiskey, then slowly lowered the glass. "I'm just worried." His voice was calm, but the words carried weight.

Julia furrowed her brow. "Worried? I mean... we've all noticed he's changed. But it's been going on for months. He used to be the one pushing all of us forward, you know? And now... now it feels like he's not even here anymore."

Liam sighed. "It's not just that. I can't tell you everything, Julia. It's not my story to tell. But I can say Ben isn't in a good place right now. And he knows it."

She studied him. "So you do know what's going on?"

He avoided her gaze. "I know enough to say he needs a break."

Julia leaned forward, clasped her hands together. "You mean... a break from the company?"

Liam nodded. "He's going to announce it tonight, in his speech."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The music played on; the party continued; their thoughts raced. Julia realized she had to take a deep breath to swallow her own disappointment. She had known Ben four years, had worked countless nights with him on projects, and had come to know him as a brilliant but reserved man. But now she understood—she barely knew him at all, outside of work. She knew how he argued in meetings, what coffee he preferred, that he only listened to music through headphones because he didn't like background noise. But she didn't know where the darkness in his eyes came from. She didn't know why he never truly talked about himself. And above all, she didn't know whether she had been fooling herself all these years. Ben had always been kind to her, respectful, and professional.

Respectful. Professional. But now, in this moment, it hit her: *Maybe he never saw me the way I see him.*

Liam seemed to sense her thoughts, but said nothing. Instead, he leaned back, scanned the party, and murmured quietly, "He'll do the right thing, Julia. But it won't be easy. Especially not for him."

Julia nodded slowly, the words settling heavily in her chest. And then, as if an invisible switch had flipped, she straightened her shoulders, put on her familiar smile, and raised her glass. "Then I guess we should toast to an unforgettable speech."

Liam returned the smile—and let the matter rest. Because in the end, he knew—some conversations had to come from Ben himself.

●●●

The atmosphere on the rooftop changed noticeably when Ben Foster finally appeared—as usual, with his perfectly coiffed dark hair and an aura that drew stares, even though he was slightly shorter than his partner, Liam. At first, a whisper could be heard; then, more and more heads began to turn toward the roof entrance.

"About time," Chris muttered, sipping his beer. "Thought he wouldn't show at all."

Ben looked... different. Not as burned out as usual, not as absent as in recent weeks. He smiled—not forced, but in a way that showed something inside him had changed. Maybe it was the decision he'd made. Maybe it was the feeling of finally being free. Liam and Julia heard the rising voices and emerged from their quiet corner back into the center of the party. Liam exhaled involuntarily when he saw Ben. It wasn't just relief that he was here—it was the certainty that Ben had finally found the courage to do what needed to be done.

"Uuuu. Foster, you old conspirator!" called Sonya from Finance, raising her glass toward him. "Thought you weren't going to show up tonight!"

Ben laughed softly and held up his hands in mock surrender. "Come on, I wouldn't let you celebrate your anniversary without me. You know me better than that."

He shook hands, clapped old colleagues on the back, and exchanged brief words with the staff. Julia watched him closely. She knew Ben—or at least she thought she did. But then his gaze landed on her, and for a moment, there was recognition. He knew she knew more than he had told her.

"Liam, do you have a minute?" he asked, nodding subtly toward the terrace railing.

Liam understood immediately. "Of course."

The two men stepped away from the party, the hum of voices fading behind them.

"I take it Julia asked questions?" Ben began calmly.

Liam looked at him, tilting his head thoughtfully. "She's smart, Ben. I didn't say anything important, but she put two and two together. You haven't been yourself in meetings. Your head's somewhere else. She sees it—everyone sees it."

Ben rubbed his forehead with one hand. “I wanted to tell her myself. I wanted to... do it right.”

“Then do it,” Liam said gently. “Don’t avoid her. She deserves the truth.”

A moment of silence hung between them, then Ben nodded slowly. “I’ll talk to her. But not tonight. Tonight, I don’t want to explain myself anymore. It’s enough that I still have to give that speech.”

Liam snorted in amusement. “Ah, about that. I wanted to talk to you too. You’re not giving the speech.”

Ben blinked. “What?”

“I’m doing it.”

Ben studied him for a moment, then nodded gratefully. “Thanks, Liam.”

His friend clapped him on the shoulder. “Then let’s make this official.”

Liam grabbed his whiskey glass and tapped it with a dessert fork. Conversations gradually fell silent. The DJ turned the music down and ceremoniously handed him a wireless microphone. Liam stepped onto the small platform, prepared for the speech, and let his gaze sweep over the crowd. “Good evening, everyone,” he began with a charming smile. “Hmm. Hmm. First of all: thank you all for being here tonight. CyberGuard Solutions is celebrating its sixth anniversary, and that’s something worth celebrating!”

Applause. Glasses clinked. A sip from his whiskey glass.

“I could throw boring numbers at you now—how much revenue we made, how many clients we’ve gained, and so on. But let’s be honest, after the third drink, no one cares anymore.” Laughter erupted.

“So instead, I want to share a few stories with you.”

Liam pointed at Chris from IT. “Chris was the first person ever hired here. I still remember when, in his first month, he accidentally brought down the entire company network. And today? Today he’s the guy who makes sure that never happens again.” He waited for the laughter to subside.

“Or Trish—where’s Trish? Ah, there you are. In her first week, Trish accidentally forwarded an internal email to a client. The same client we had just, uh... thoroughly complained about in that email. It took weeks to fix that. But today, Trish is one of our most reliable analysts and has saved us from more than one disaster.”

He looked toward Julia. “And then there’s Julia, of course—our most successful project manager. She’s only been with us four years and has already broken every internal record. Without her, many of our biggest clients would’ve jumped ship long ago. So, if I ever resign, I hope Julia takes over the company.”

Julia smiled shyly, but it was a genuine smile.

Liam’s tone grew more serious. “But the most important thing here is you. Every one of you. CyberGuard Solutions isn’t just a company—it’s a living organism. And this organism only works because every one of you is part of it.”

A brief pause. A glance at Ben. "And now I have a personal announcement to make."

The crowd quieted again.

"Ben has decided, for personal reasons we won't elaborate on here, to take a leave of absence. He'll be traveling through South America for a few months. A part of the world that's fascinated him for years—and, let's be honest, a break he's well earned."

Murmurs rose. Some looked surprised, others nodded knowingly.

"I'll be stepping in as CEO during his absence, of course, but I can't do it all alone. I need a strong right hand. That's why I've decided Julia will step in as interim COO and support me. I hope you'll accept this challenge, Julia."

All eyes turned to Julia. Her face froze. She didn't know what to say. Applause erupted. Julia felt her thoughts race—joy, guilt, doubt, all at once. A mix of emotions, each one battling the others, yet all present. As Liam spoke the words, Julia felt the ground beneath her shift, just slightly. She repeated it in her mind.

"...That's why I've decided Julia will step in as interim COO."

For the fraction of a second, she thought she had misheard. Then she heard it again—the applause, the soft murmur of colleagues in the background. The stares fixed on her. She should be happy. She should smile and seize the opportunity. But instead, all she felt was an uneasy pull in her chest. She had worked hard for this company. Her name stood for success, for precision, for tireless dedication. It was no secret she had hoped for a higher position sooner or later, and not without reason. But this... this didn't feel right. She looked at Ben. His face gave little away—he seemed to watch the crowd, but Julia knew that he knew. *He knows I can't be happy about this.* Because what seemed like a well-earned recognition to everyone else felt like an undeserved victory at the expense of someone suffering. The hands that had almost automatically joined in applause now rested on her hips. Her gaze drifted across the other employees. Her colleagues were happy for her. They congratulated her with looks, with nods, with genuine pride on their faces. No one knew what was going on inside her.

Liam continued his speech, talking about team spirit, collaboration, and shared success. But Julia barely heard him anymore—she only heard the faint pounding in her head. I didn'*t want it like this. Not this way.* And then came the second, even heavier thought that slowly spread inside her: *I'm benefiting from the fact that Ben is not okay.* Her stomach clenched. She didn't want to think that, but the thought was there, and no matter how hard she fought it—it was the truth. She had watched Ben change over months. She had hoped he would open up to her at some point. Instead, she was now the one taking his place. While the others kept applauding, she did something she rarely did: she lowered her head and hoped no one could read the guilt in her eyes. When she finally dared to look up again, her gaze met Ben's. He hadn't clapped. He hadn't smiled either. He just had that look—that calm, knowing look, as if he wanted to tell her: *It's okay. It's not your fault.*

But she wasn't sure she could truly believe that.

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The party was nearly over. Of the forty employees who had attended, only about a dozen remained. The music played more softly, the lighting was dimmer, the conversations quieter, more intimate. Julia wandered across the nearly empty rooftop terrace, her gaze instinctively searching for one person. Ben. She had lost sight of him during the celebration, but the gnawing feeling inside her remained—that she still had to talk to him. About everything. About him. About his leave. About what Liam had said. About what Ben himself had not said. She finally found him—alone at the railing, a glass of whiskey in hand, the lights of Vancouver reflected on the surface. He looked calm. Perhaps too calm.

She approached quietly. "Hey."

Ben turned, as if he'd already been expecting her. His gaze was soft, yet piercing, as though he could see more than she wanted to show. "Hey."

A few seconds passed in silence... Julia stood next to him, resting her forearms on the cool metal railing. The wind played with her hair. "It was a lovely party."

Ben nodded, took a sip from his glass. "Yeah. Six years. Feels kind of... unreal."

Julia let her gaze drift over the city. The sounds of car horns and distant sirens rose up only faintly at this height, like a distant carpet of sound. "I think it's good you're taking a break."

He chuckled quietly, without sarcasm. "Funny. You know that's what almost everyone said tonight?"

"Then it must be true."

He was silent for a moment, then took a deep breath. "I know you're worried, Julia. I saw it in your face when Liam announced my leave—and then your promotion right after."

Her fingers unconsciously tightened around the railing. "I..." She searched for the right words. "I don't know if I should be happy, or if I should feel guilty."

Ben turned to her, his gaze direct, questioning, yet gentle. "Why would you feel guilty?"

Julia looked into his green eyes, which appeared darker in the faint rooftop light. "Because I'm getting the position that should be yours. And because I'm getting it because you're not okay."

He looked at her for a moment, then placed his glass on the railing and turned fully toward her. "Julia... listen. You've earned this. This has nothing to do with me. You're the best project manager this company has ever had. Everyone here knows it. That you're stepping up as operations manager isn't a consolation prize for my absence—it's the logical result of your hard work."

"But..."

He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "No buts. I'll be gone. And you'll carry on. And when I come back, I want to find a company that runs even better than before." His words were rational, sensible—and yet Julia didn't feel relieved. Because now she realized she didn't feel guilty about the promotion.

She felt guilty, because for four years she believed she truly knew him. And tonight, she realized she never had. Not in the way she'd thought.

The night had grown quieter. The music played softly, and the sky above Vancouver was clear and glittering. The wind on the rooftop had turned cooler, but Ben hardly noticed. Julia still stood beside him, her glass nearly forgotten in her hands. Her gaze was on the city, but Ben knew her mind was elsewhere. She took a deep breath. "I can't just accept this, Ben."

He raised an eyebrow. "Accept what exactly?"

"This. That you're leaving. That you're walking away from everything." She turned to him. "I want to understand, I really do. But you... you just say it's okay. That you need this. And I keep wondering whether you actually believe that—or if you're just saying it because you don't want to burden anyone with your thoughts."

Ben said nothing.

She studied him. "Liam says you need this journey, but I don't think it's about the travel."

A bitter smile flickered on his lips. "Of course not. I'm not going to South America because I'm craving a long vacation."

Julia waited.

Ben rubbed his temples, then took another sip of whiskey. "It's not that I don't like it here. I built this company, Julia. It's my life. But it feels like I'm... empty." He turned the glass in his hands, as if looking for answers in its reflection. "*Bore-out*. Ever heard of that?"

She shook her head.

"It's basically the opposite of *burnout*. When the work doesn't overwhelm you—it smothers you. Because it's always the same. Over and over again. IT security used to excite me. I used to enjoy finding solutions. But now... every year the same meetings, the same problems, the same calls from clients panicking because they think we can promise them absolute security. And at some point, you realize you're just functioning—not living anymore."

Julia said nothing.

"And then comes the second reason," he continued, his gaze fixed on the skyline. "When you're trapped in that monotony, old things start surfacing. They simmer inside you until they begin to boil and eventually overflow." He swallowed hard. She searched his face for a clue. For something buried long ago.

"My parents."

Now she looked him directly in the eyes. Ben took a deep breath. He knew this was the point of no return. But maybe it had to be. "I was seventeen. We were in Whistler, on a winter vacation. My father was driving, my mother in the passenger seat. I was in the back. Heavy snow. And then... black ice."

Julia blinked, her fingers gripping her glass more tightly.

"The car skidded. My father was going too fast. He tried to correct it. Left, right, back again. And before I even realized what was happening, the car veered off the road and flipped... It happened so fast and yet so slowly. I still remember how the screams fell silent when we landed upside down. The front of the car was on a tree trunk, the rear on the snowy ground. Everything was dark. Cold. And I was trapped in the back."

His jaw clenched.

"Time passed. I was helpless. Eventually, I heard the voices of the first responders, but it took them hours to get me out. And the whole time I already knew... my parents were gone."

Julia placed a hand on his arm. Ben exhaled deeply. "*And now?* Now I lie in bed at night, think of that moment and wonder why I was the only one who made it out, or whether I even deserved to."

Silence. Julia said nothing. She didn't need to. She recognized the classic, familiar survivor's guilt. Her eyes shimmered, and Ben realized in that moment—she wasn't just listening. She felt it. She had pictured it in her mind as he told it. And right here, right now, for the first time, he didn't care whether it was good or bad that someone knew so much about him.

Maybe it was the whiskey. Maybe the exhaustion. Maybe the feeling that Julia was someone he could trust. It made no difference. But what he didn't see coming was the way she looked at him. And then she was suddenly closer. Her fingers traced his arm gently, not just to comfort, but to understand.

"Ben," she whispered. He knew what was coming. And he knew it shouldn't. But he did nothing when she kissed him.

It was gentle, tentative, like a question. He should have pulled away. But he didn't. Maybe because, just for a moment, he didn't want to feel alone.

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They took an Uber together. Ben leaned, exhausted, against the window, the whiskey from the company party still heavy in his blood. *Three, maybe four drinks too many,* he thought, as the city passed outside. Julia sat closer to him than necessary. Her perfume—cloyingly sweet—cut through the fog of his intoxication. She had insisted on accompanying him home.

"You shouldn't be alone," she had said, but her gaze had promised more.

They didn't speak much during the ride, but kissed all the more. For his part, the kisses were mechanical—movements of a man too drunk to make sensible decisions. Julia, on the other hand, kissed him with an intensity that reflected four years of waiting, of hoping. Her hands moved eagerly over his body, each touch fueled by suppressed longing. At his apartment, Ben opened a bottle of wine—more out of habit than necessity. They didn't need more alcohol—

He, to lower his inhibitions. She, to justify a long-held desire. He barely noticed the admiring glance with which Julia took in his penthouse. The place he had kept hidden from colleagues—for four years. From her. Not out of secrecy, but simply out of the need for a space that was his alone. She could hardly believe he had avoided inviting her all those years. Avoided inviting anyone. A beer at the bar across from the office was common. A dinner with coworkers wasn't unusual. But this—this was different. For Julia, this final invitation was like a broken dam, an admission of feelings she had long ascribed to him since their very first meeting. Ben took a large gulp of wine, feeling the alcohol further cloud his already foggy perception. Tomorrow, he'd have a terrible hangover. Tomorrow, he'd have to face the reality of what was happening tonight. But that was tomorrow.

And tonight, he needed distraction, forgetfulness—some form of human warmth to push the stressful day, the looming South America trip, and his growing doubts about his lifestyle into the background, if only for a few hours. And now she was here, by his side. Every small movement was, for Julia, an unspoken declaration of love. For Ben, merely the path of least resistance. When she pulled him closer, he let it happen. When she loosened his tie, unbuttoned his collar, he did nothing to stop her. Her touches were demanding, possessive, filled with a passion he didn't return, but accepted in his intoxicated state. When he unbuttoned her blouse, felt her skin beneath his fingers, his mind finally quieted—for a moment.

No thoughts of the company.

No thoughts of responsibility.

No thoughts of tomorrow.

Only the primitive instinct set free by alcohol. For Julia, though, each of his touches was the fulfillment of a long-held dream, the confirmation of her fantasies, nourished in lonely nights. When she kissed him like she'd waited four years for this, there was no more hesitation from him. Clothes fell. Stumbling, she pushed him backwards toward the sofa, not letting go of him for even a second. They toppled down together, entangled. Their bodies were warm. So was the night. And for a few hours, Ben managed to forget that come morning—he would regret everything.

Not just the hangover, but the unavoidable complication this night would bring to their professional friendship. Julia, meanwhile, lost herself in the illusion that this

was the beginning of something meaningful—instead of what it truly was: a slip—born of too much alcohol and too little self-control.

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September 27, 2026 — Morning
Ben's Penthouse, Vancouver, Canada

Ben woke before his mind fully understood where he was. A dull throbbing behind his eyes reminded him he had definitely drunk too much the night before. The scent of freshly brewed coffee lingered in the air. He blinked. His apartment. His bedroom. His bed. And then—Julia...

The realization hit him like a punch to the gut. She stood in the open kitchen, wearing one of his shirts, which reached her thighs, and poured coffee into two mugs. The memories of the previous night crashed down on him like a wave. The kiss on the rooftop. The Uber ride. The wine they never finished. A kaleidoscope of tangled images, soaked in whiskey and regret. His stomach clenched slightly. Julia turned to him and smiled. "Good morning."

Her eyes sparkled with a hope he couldn't return. She had reserved that smile for him—for four years—and now, seeing it in full bloom, he wished more than anything he had never seen it.

He slowly sat up, rubbing his temples. "Morning."

She came over with the two mugs, handed him one. "I figured you need this more than I do."

He took a sip. The bitter taste was a welcome distraction. "Thanks."

The silence between them stretched like a living thing, filling the room with unspoken questions and quiet regret. She sat beside him on the edge of the bed, watching him for a moment.

"You regret it, don't you?" Her voice was calm, almost composed, but he heard the fine crack in it—the first tremor of a heart bracing for impact.

Ben placed the mug on his nightstand and exhaled slowly. "Julia... I..."

She raised a hand. "No, it's okay. You don't have to say it."

But that didn't make it better. She looked out the window, her fingers tightly clasped around the coffee cup. "I've imagined this so many times, you know?"

Ben looked at her, but said nothing.

"For four years I've wondered if you ever... if we ever..." She laughed softly, but it wasn't a happy laugh. It was a fragile sound, like thin ice that could crack under the weight of truth at any moment. "And now it's happened, I don't know if it was a beginning or just an ending that felt like a beginning."

The morning sun streamed through the windows and painted golden streaks across her face, making her eyes shine—or were those tears she held back? He lowered his gaze. "Julia, I... I'm not in the right place for a relationship. Not right now."

The words sounded hollow, even to his own ears. An excuse, paper-thin—but the best he could offer in that moment.

She nodded slowly. "And tomorrow you're flying to South America." Not a question. A statement—the final straw to which she clung to preserve her dignity. He looked at her, wanted to say something, but instead he just nodded. She placed a hand on his cheek and gave him a sad smile. "It's okay, Ben. I understand."

She stood up, set her mug down on the table, and slowly began getting dressed. Every movement was precise, controlled—a desperate attempt not to break in front of him. When she was ready, she stepped up to him, leaned in slightly, and kissed him on the cheek. "Maybe we'll talk when you get back."

He nodded. "Of course."

A lie, wrapped in kindness, accepted by both. The last gift he could give her. Then she walked to the door. Turned once more. "Please take care of yourself."

He nodded again. He watched her until the door clicked shut behind her. The quiet snap echoed through the apartment, like the final period at the end of a chapter that should never have been written. Then he let himself fall back and stared at the ceiling. He knew she would wait for him. And he knew he couldn't return as if nothing had happened. The trip to South America had suddenly become more than just an escape from his routine—it was an escape from this moment, from the consequence of a whiskey-soaked night, from her hopeful eyes and his own failure.

Because there are some things no one ever really leaves behind.

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Ben stood at the window of his living room, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his phone to his ear. The sun had already risen, but he felt no clarity—only exhaustion. Julia had left half an hour ago. Her goodbye had been kind—almost too grown-up, as if she was hiding her disappointment behind a perfect façade. But Ben had seen it in her eyes, that brief moment when she expected something—and realized it wouldn't come.

Now he waited for Liam to pick up. On the third ring, he heard the familiar, grumpy rumble of his best friend: "Ben? You realize it's barely eight in the morning?"

Ben snorted softly. "Good to know you can still count. I figured the whiskey would've knocked you out last night."

"Not all of us are in the middle of an existential crisis, Foster." A yawn on the other end. "Why are you calling? Or better yet—why isn't Julia knocking at your door with pancakes right now?"

Ben was quiet for a moment. Then: "Because she just left."

Silence. Then a quiet sigh. "Please tell me you weren't as stupid as I think you were last night."

"Depends on how stupid you think it is to sleep with your coworker, who clearly has feelings for you that you don't return."

Liam swore under his breath. "Damn it, Ben."

"Yeah."

A few seconds passed. Then: "Why'd you do it?"

Ben leaned against the window, his forehead resting on the cool glass. "I was drunk. I was tired. And I didn't want to be alone for a moment."

Liam didn't respond right away. Ben let the words hang in the air, waiting for his friend to tear into him. But instead came only a resigned exhale. "You know what? Maybe it's better this way."

Ben blinked. "What?"

"Maybe it was exactly what Julia needed to finally understand that you don't feel the same."

Ben rubbed his temples. "Or it was exactly what she needed to keep hoping."

"Possible. But at least now she has clarity. She'll keep hoping—but not blindly. She knows now that you didn't seek her out. That this wasn't the beginning of something. It was the end of a fantasy she's carried for four years."

Ben closed his eyes. "I hurt her."

"Yes. But less than if she'd kept imagining it for years longer."

Ben said nothing. Then he heard Liam chuckle quietly. "Well, at least now you get to run off to South America before you have to deal with any of this."

Ben shook his head, a tired smile on his lips. "You're a real asshole, Bennett."

"And you're an idiot, Foster."

They both fell silent for a moment, then Liam's tone grew more serious. "Do me a favor, yeah?"

"What kind?"

"Try to actually figure out what you want while you're down there, not just what you're running away from."

Ben slowly exhaled. "I'll try."

Liam made a satisfied sound. "Then that's it for now."

"Until I get back."

"Exactly. Until you get back. And then you can clean up your own mess."

Liam hung up. Ben stared at his phone for a moment, then let it drop onto the table, took a long sip of his coffee, and looked out over the city he would be leaving in just a few hours.