

Chapter 4

The place Ace had mentioned didn't have a sign.

Which, in her experience, was usually the best kind of promise—somewhere the city kept for itself, tucked between a shuttered pawn shop and a laundromat whose neon still flickered like a dying heartbeat. The street was narrower here, quieter, the kind of alley where streetlights threw long orange smears across wet brick and the air tasted faintly of fried oil from a food truck two blocks back. Rain hadn't started yet, but the sky was heavy, pressing down like it was deciding how hard to fall.

Daniel noticed it too. He slowed, hands still loose in his pockets, head tilting as the muffled thump of bass leaked through the brick like a secret someone half-wanted you to hear.

"That's it?" he asked, voice carrying just enough surprise to sound honest.

Ace nodded once, compact, already moving.

"That's it."

"No name?"

"Names attract attention."

Daniel's mouth twitched. "That sounds like something that should probably concern me."

Ace pushed the door open with her shoulder—solid, no drama. The hinge gave a soft complaint.

"Too late now."

Inside, the world shifted. Low warm lighting poured from recessed strips along the ceiling and under the bar, turning the long narrow room into something that felt carved out of the night itself. Exposed brick on one wall wore scars from decades of speakers and shoulders; the other side was dark wood paneling that soaked up sound like it was thirsty. The air smelled of good whiskey, worn leather, and the faint sweet burn of someone's clove cigarette still lingering from earlier. A small stage sat at the far end where three musicians were halfway through a slow hypnotic rhythm—upright bass walking lazy circles, brushed snare whispering like rain that hadn't arrived, a woman's voice curling around notes like she was telling a story she didn't need anyone to understand.

Bodies moved lazily across the floor, not dancing so much as breathing with the music—drinks in hand, heads close, conversations flowing low between high tables. No one stared. No one performed. Just the city unwinding itself in the dark.

Daniel glanced around, taking it in slow. "Okay," he admitted, a quiet laugh under the words, "this is definitely interesting."

Ace slid onto a stool near the end of the bar, back to the wall, sightlines easy out of habit. She didn't smile, but the corner of her mouth eased.

"Told you."

The bartender—tattooed forearms, silver threading his temples, eyes that had seen every kind of night—approached without questions, just a small nod that said he knew Ace's kind of quiet. Two glasses appeared a moment later, dark amber, ice catching the light like slow embers.

Daniel raised his slightly, the gesture casual but careful. "So," he said, leaning in just enough the music didn't swallow him, "what exactly is your strategy for nights like this?"

Ace sipped. The burn was clean, slow. She considered the room—the way shadows moved across brick, the way the singer let a note hang until it felt inevitable.

"Strategy?" she echoed, voice low, almost dry.

"Yeah. You seem like someone who has one."

Ace let her gaze drift across the shifting crowd, the way one couple leaned together laughing about something small, the way the bassist closed his eyes like the song was the only thing real.

Then she shook her head once. "No strategy."

"That can't be true."

"It is."

Daniel leaned back against the bar, studying her. "Then what do you call this?"

Ace gestured vaguely—small motion of her hand taking in the room, the music, the low hum of bodies finding their own gravity. "Improvisation."

He chuckled softly. "That sounds suspiciously like chaos."

Ace's smile came faint, barely there, but real. "Sometimes chaos is efficient."

The band shifted without announcement into a slightly faster rhythm—bass picking up a heartbeat, snare brushing sharper, the singer's voice sliding deeper like she'd just decided the night deserved more teeth. Someone at a nearby table laughed loud and unashamed, the sound cutting clean through the music for a beat before the room folded it back in.

Daniel studied her again, quieter now. "You're not from around here."

Ace raised an eyebrow, violet catching the low light for half a second. "Why would you think that?"

"You watch the room like it's a puzzle."

Ace took another sip, slow. "Maybe it is."

"Do you solve puzzles often?"

"Enough."

He laughed under his breath, genuine. "You're definitely hiding a story."

Ace shrugged, shoulders rolling once under damp jacket. "Everyone is."

Daniel lifted his glass again, the motion easy, no pressure. "To mysterious strangers."

Ace tapped hers lightly against his—the clink small, almost private. "To interesting evenings."

The music kept breathing around them. The night outside waited.

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Much later, the rain finally arrived.

Not dramatic. Just steady, patient drops that turned every streetlight into a smeared halo and made the pavement shine like black glass.

Ace stepped out of the club with Daniel beside her, the cool damp air cutting sharp through the warmth still clinging to their clothes. The door sighed shut behind them, muting the bass until it was just a heartbeat felt more than heard. The street shimmered now—reflections stretching long and liquid under sodium lamps, puddles already forming in cracks where the city had worn thin.

Daniel pulled his jacket collar a little tighter, breath fogging faintly. “Okay,” he said, laughing quiet and low, “now it’s officially late.”

Ace glanced up at the sky—clouds low and bruise-dark, rain sliding down her face without hurry. “Technically early.”

“That’s a terrifying way to look at time.”

Ace started walking, stride compact, unhurried. Daniel fell in beside her without asking. They moved through the quieter part of the city, the noise of the nightlife gradually fading behind them into distant hum—tires hissing on wet asphalt somewhere, a siren curling far off like a question no one answered.

For a while neither spoke. Just the rhythm of boots on pavement, rain ticking against shoulders, the faint metallic smell of the city waking up to water.

Finally Daniel asked, voice carrying soft through the downpour, “So what happens now?”

Ace looked ahead toward the intersection where their paths would probably split—crosswalk glowing faint red, steam rising lazy from a grate. “Well,” she said calmly, no rush, “this is usually the part where people decide whether the night was interesting enough.”

Daniel nodded slow, rain dripping from his hair. “And?”

Ace glanced sideways at him—quick, observant, no weight. “That depends.”

“On?”

Ace’s grin returned, small and dry, the kind that didn’t ask for anything. “How adventurous you are.”

Daniel laughed softly, shaking his head like he was surprised and not surprised at all. “You really don’t do normal conversations, do you?”

“No.”

He thought about that for a moment, rain steady between them, then shrugged easy. “Well.” He gestured down the street ahead, where lights blurred softer. “I suppose we’ll have to continue the experiment.”

Ace’s grin stayed. “Good answer.”

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Far above the grid, where rooftops bled into low clouds and rain slid off edges that weren't quite solid, Mephisto watched the two figures walk through the reflections of streetlights and water, their conversation lost in the distance but the shape of it clear enough.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, coat collar high, voice velvet over the hiss of rain, "that escalated exactly the way I expected."

Konrad said nothing at first. Just stood a half-step away, hands deep in pockets, eyes tracking the small silhouettes until the wet glow swallowed them around a corner.

Mephisto glanced sideways, amused. "You're very quiet."

Konrad finally spoke, tone flat and certain, the kind that didn't need volume. "You think the important part of tonight is what she's doing."

Mephisto's smile curved slow, satisfied. "Isn't it?"

Konrad shook his head once. "No."

Mephisto raised an eyebrow, the motion elegant. "Then enlighten me."

Konrad's gaze stayed fixed on the city below—rain streaking the view, lights bleeding, the safehouse window still dark and waiting somewhere in the sprawl. "The important part," he said calmly, "is what happens when she returns home."

Mephisto's smile widened again, something older flickering behind it. "Ah."

"Yes."

"Now that," Mephisto murmured softly, almost intimate against the rain, "is the part I'm looking forward to."

The city kept breathing—wet tires, distant laughter fading, rain steady and unhurried. Below, Ace and Daniel had already split into the night, paths diverging but the echo lingering. Above, the wager hung heavier now, sharp and patient, waiting for the door to click open again.

The night wasn't done deciding yet. —

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