

The Seventh Line

Some diseases have no name or pathology. They cannot be isolated in a Petri dish or examined under a microscope. They are not infectious. They do not pass from one generation to the next. They do not originate in the body or spring forth from the ground.

They possess infinite patience and require no host from which to feed.

All they need is a purpose.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRUSION

The man in the orange jumpsuit watched from afar, feeling jumpy as the bus pulled away. It bothered him that the woman he knew only as “the model” had seen his face. He had watched her get on the city bus every day for the past week, and not once had she paid him any mind. It was just his luck that she would see him on the day he was supposed to break into her apartment.

He tried to allay his concerns by telling himself she would never know he had been in her apartment or that she had been robbed. She couldn't miss something she didn't know she had. The thought calmed him enough to focus on what he needed to do next. He walked away from Copacabana beach towards a public bathroom and slipped into a stall where he had stowed a backpack earlier that morning. He reached behind the toilet to retrieve the bag and quickly took off his jumpsuit and put on the street clothes, sunglasses, and baseball cap contained within. He shoved the stolen, sanitation worker uniform he had been wearing into the bag and pulled the straps over his shoulders, ready to begin.

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When he reached the woman's apartment building, he gripped the bars of the security gate protecting it and looked to either side. There were a few people on the street, but nobody paid him any mind. The man brought his fingers to the lock as if he held a key and visualized the tiny pin tumblers inside the lock rising and falling until he was able to rotate the cylinder and open the gate. He pushed it open, crossed a courtyard and performed the same exercise on the lobby door, easily gaining entry to the building.

Knowing the elevator was out of order, the man entered the stairwell and ascended to the woman's floor. Pushing open the fire door, he noticed a faint streak of dirt on the floor leading to her apartment. His left eyebrow rose. He had watched her long enough to know she was obsessed with cleaning and organizing her apartment. It was unlike her to leave without everything being perfect.

The man started to become nervous. Like any thief, he had his rituals and believed in omens. He didn't like it when things strayed from their routine, and now there were two things he hadn't been expecting. He sighed. He didn't have time for this. He told himself it was a dirty floor, nothing more, and once again brought his fingers to the lock. He imagined the pins moving, but this time, they did not align. The man stepped back to examine the door. There was nothing special about it. His powers should have worked. He tried again, thinking he may have been distracted the first time, but the lock refused to give.

Exhaling and staring at the ceiling, he weighed his options. There was only one other apartment on the floor. Nobody had entered or left it the entire time he had watched the building, which led him to believe it was unoccupied. The woman wasn't supposed to know anyone had been in her apartment, but if the lock wouldn't budge, he had no choice. With one quick motion, he stepped backward and drove his heel into the door. It flew open, and he rushed inside to

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examine it. The trim was broken, but thankfully the door was intact. A passerby would never know it was broken unless they tried to come inside. He closed it and went straight to the bathroom. Approaching the sink, he scanned the items lying next to it, expecting to pick up his prize and be gone. Instead, he dragged his fingers down his face and cursed.

The object was not there. The man walked into the living room and leaned forward to put his hands on his knees. She must have taken it with her—he had never seen her leave anything out of place. Righting himself, he cracked his neck and decided if he could not find a substitute, he would just have to wait for her to come home.

CHAPTER 2 – EXPOSED

Analise's pulse quickened at the sight of her bus already at the stop. She lengthened her stride to cover the remaining distance and squeezed through the doors as they closed. She handed a few coins to the fare collector and inwardly groaned when she saw the only empty seat was next to a man who was leering at her. She considered getting off the bus to wait for the next one, but she could not afford to be late for work.

As she expected, the man did not stand to let her pass, which forced her to climb over his legs. She pulled down on her skirt and kept an eye on his hands until she was seated with her purse between them, ready to grab her pepper spray at a moment's notice. She looked out the window to avoid conversation and saw a sanitation worker in an orange uniform who seemed to be wandering aimlessly along Copacabana Beach. She watched as he stepped past one piece of garbage after another and wondered what job he was supposed to be doing, and for whose benefit he was pretending to work. As if he could hear her thoughts, he suddenly looked up and scowled at her.

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Analise snapped her head toward the front of the bus and kept her eyes on the driver until it jolted forward. When she peeked out the window again, the sanitation worker was gone. She kept her eyes trained on the window, watching the ocean until it disappeared behind office buildings. One day she would wade out into that water. She just needed a little more courage to break her family's rule against going anywhere she couldn't reach by land.

When the bus reached the city center, Analise was thankful she did not have to climb over the leering man again, as he had gotten off before her. Once she exited, she began the trek to the high-rise building that housed the modeling agency that represented her. Out of habit, she kept her head down and her eyes fixed on the pavement before her. The morning was off to a somewhat rocky start, but that didn't explain the gnawing feeling in her stomach that she was forgetting something important.

She mentally recited the checklist she had to complete before leaving her apartment each morning. All of her travel magazines were hidden in the freezer. Her notes on flight options she was researching were written in a code only she could understand and locked in her desk drawer to be doubly safe. She had taken the prayer beads, candles, herbs, and fragments from a whale bone out of a box she kept under her bed and arranged them on the makeshift altar her aunt and uncle insisted she maintain. While not a part of the usual routine, she had also swept up the potting soil she had kicked into the hallway after tripping over yet another open bag of dirt her aunt and uncle did not think to tell her they had left by the front door.

Analise sighed at the thought of her unorthodox family. Her aunt and uncle had taken to leaving housewarming gifts outside her door at odd times since the day she left home six months before. First, it was the candles and skeletal fragments, then bushels of herbs and an empty pot.

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Unsealed bags of potting soil came next, and one day, they promised, they would give her actual seeds. She had never been allowed to own anything she couldn't fit into a suitcase when she lived with her aunt and uncle. Now they couldn't stop giving her things.

She thought they would be comfortable with her living alone by now, but there was still no sign they were close to ending their surprise inspections (even though they denied that's what their unannounced drop-ins were). She never knew when they would show up, only that her apartment needed to be ready when they did. She had no doubt they would insist she move back home at once if they suspected she was not abiding by their teachings—wherever home happened to be that month. How she wished they would stop worrying about her and let her live like everybody else did—without crazy rules and rituals that made no sense. The amount of work that went into deceiving them was exhausting.

She could not think of anything else she should have hidden or put on display, so she chalked her nerves up to the weird guy on the bus. When she reached her building, she nodded to the door attendant and stepped onto the elevator. As it rose, she thought the day might still turn out okay—until the doors opened and she saw her office manager waiting for her. Analise did her best to keep her mouth from turning downward and pulled back her shoulders to brace herself for an unpleasant conversation.

“Good morning, Analise,” the woman said in clipped tones. “So nice of you to be on time.”

“Good morning, Sofia,” Analise replied, choosing to ignore the demeaning tone in her greeting. She waited for Sofia to speak again, but the woman only stared at her with the look of someone who had just gotten a whiff of rotting trash. The animosity was mutual.

“You were almost late again,” said Sofia.

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Analise could hardly tell Sofia she was running behind because she was cleaning up dirt she assumed was for some superstitious ritual her family wanted her to perform. Nor could she mention the time it took her every morning to stage a life she didn't actually have. She opted instead to lower her eyes and feign shame, which had the added benefit of making it impossible to stare at Sofia's forehead. It was massive, and Sofia's decision to rake her thinning blonde hair into a tightly wound bun did not help matters. Sofia had caught Analise staring at it once before and had not been understanding. If she was already annoyed, it was best not to provoke her.

Sofia proceeded to circle Analise in the ensuing silence, examining her from every angle. Analise felt naked under her stare and wondered what she was doing. She could count the number of times they had spoken on one hand, since Sofia prided herself on limited interaction with "mannequins," as she liked to call the models.

Analise privately agreed that many women at the modeling agency resembled plastic things without personality, but she did not think it was right for Sofia to label them as such. She wished the agency's owner, Marcus Cardoso, would have a word with Sofia. The thought made her realize something was out of sorts.

"Why aren't you in your morning meeting with Marcus?" Analise asked.

Sofia stopped circling and used one hand to prop up her elbow while she tapped on her cheek with the fingers of the other. A knot formed in Analise's stomach. Had she asked another inappropriate question? Even after six months of seeing how other people spoke to one another, she still had trouble with all the unspoken rules of social intercourse. Sofia shook her head in dismay.

"You've been a thorn in my side since the day you started working here. I don't know why I thought today would be any different," Sofia said.

Analise's face sank. "What's wrong? What did I do?"

"If you had bothered to look at the schedule I sent out last week, you would know you have go-sees today. Your first one is in an hour, and you're nowhere close to being ready."

"I saw the schedule and I did know about the go-see. I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner. I just had to take care of an unexpected issue this morning."

"It doesn't matter," Sofia said. "Go get ready. I'm coming with you."

"Why?" Analise asked.

Sofia rolled her eyes as if the answer should have been obvious. "I'll be waiting downstairs in the car with your portfolio. There's an outfit for you in the dressing room. Change quickly. I don't like to be kept waiting."

Analise was about to ask what was wrong with what she was wearing when Sofia arched her eyebrow, prompting Analise to stay quiet. In the ensuing silence, Sofia buttoned the front of her suit jacket, gave Analise a final hardnosed look and turned on her heel.

Analise's shoulders slumped as she walked to the dressing room. Interactions with Sofia were demoralizing. Once she saw the tight dress and uncomfortable stilettos Sofia had laid out for her, she decided the day had gone from mildly annoying to bad. Analise grumbled as she tied her hair back to avoid catching it in the zipper running up the back of the dress. After she put on the shoes, she turned to examine herself in the mirror and saw a note from Sofia taped to it.

Makeup in bag. Fix your face. - S

Analise ripped the note off the mirror and cursed Sofia as she hastily smeared concealer over her cheeks. She toyed with the idea of applying glitter blue eyeshadow and hot pink lipstick to irritate Sofia, but she must have planned for that as there was not a hint of color in the makeup bag. Temper flaring, Analise threw open the dressing room doors and stormed out just as another model named Tanya walked by.

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“Whoa! Watch out!” Tanya yelled as they collided.

“Sorry! I didn’t see you,” Analise said as she repositioned her purse and resumed stomping toward the elevator.

“Wait up!” Tanya said, chasing after her. “Where are you going?”

Since Tanya was one of the few people at the agency Analise liked, she slowed her step instead of ignoring the question as she would have done with anybody else.

“I have go-sees today. Sofia is waiting for me downstairs.”

Tanya’s eyebrows flew to the middle of her forehead. “Sofia is going on go-sees with you?”

“Yeah,” Analise said with a shrug as she looked up at the elevator display and repeatedly pushed the call button as if that would make it arrive faster.

“I didn’t think she did that,” Tanya said.

“Maybe she’s come up with a new way to make my life miserable,” Analise said with a smirk.

Tanya didn’t laugh like she usually would. She looked around the lobby to make sure they were alone and moved toward Analise. “You need to be careful,” she said under her breath.

“Are you going to be alone with her in the car?”

Analise gave Tanya a serious look. “I don’t know. She didn’t mention anyone else coming with us. Why?”

“She might want to talk to you about your magazine cover.”

“What magazine cover?” Analise asked, giving Tanya her full attention.

“Why are you acting dumb right now?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Analise said.

“Seriously? You’re on the cover of *Style Brazil* this month and you don’t know about it?”

“I am?”

“Yes! How have you not seen it?”

Analise looked away, consumed with self-loathing. She usually kept her head down when she walked in the city to avoid making eye contact with strangers. She had probably passed her face dozens of times without knowing it. Her brow furrowed. “I did that shoot months ago. Sofia told me the magazine had chosen not to use the photos.”

Tanya suddenly had trouble keeping eye contact with Analise and began fidgeting with her bracelets.

“What’s wrong?” Analise asked.

Tanya squirmed as if she needed to be somewhere else and her ride wasn’t coming fast enough. “Oh hell,” she said. “You may as well know. There’s a rumor going around that you slept with the magazine’s editor to get on the cover.”

“What? That’s ridiculous!” Analise cried.

“Shhh!” said Tanya. “Be quiet!”

“Who’s saying that?” Analise demanded.

“I overheard some of the girls talking about it in the bathroom. Look, I know it’s not true, but maybe that’s why Sofia is going with you. What if this came as just as much of a surprise to her, and she’s trying to find out if you’re doing something inappropriate to win business?”

Analise put her hands over her face and groaned. “This is terrible. Do you think I should say something?”

“I’m not sure,” said Tanya. “It would be really embarrassing if you brought it up and Sofia had no idea what you were talking about. Maybe you should just gauge it?”

Analise nodded and dragged her feet to the elevator, which had finally decided to show up. Tanya followed and held out her arms to embrace Analise as tightly as she could.

“Try not to let this bother you,” she said. “You should be happy about the cover. It’s a big deal.”

Analise nodded and hugged her before the elevator closed, but her mood still plummeted with every floor she passed.

When Analise and Sofia arrived at the first design house, Analise expected Sofia to relegate herself to a corner and judge her in silence to rattle her. Instead, she took on the role of mentor to help Analise through the interviews. To her surprise, Sofia advocated for her at each house they visited, resulting in Analise booking more shows in one day than in the previous six months.

When the last go-see concluded, the two women climbed into the backseat of a waiting car, and Analise settled in to reflect on the day’s events. She had not understood why Sofia wanted to go with her, but now that she had seen Sofia in action, the reason was clear. The agency did not make money unless its models booked business, and booking was not one of Analise’s strong suits. She had beauty but not the social skills to go with it. She had little experience interacting with people outside of her family. Strangers were a thing to fear, not engage. Until she observed Sofia, she had not realized how awkward she must seem. She could see how someone might think she sold her body to get a magazine cover.

“I think that went quite well,” Sofia said after the driver closed the car door.

Analise forced a tight smile. “Thanks for your help today.”

Sofia nodded. “I think you’ll do fine on your own tonight.”

“What’s tonight?” Analise asked.

Sofia frowned and narrowed her eyes at Analise. “Didn’t you read the schedule?”

“Yes, I thought this was the last go-see.”

“It is, but you still have a client dinner.”

“Client dinner?” Analise repeated.

“Right here,” Sofia said, taking out the schedule and tapping at the time slot. “Marcus will pick you up from your apartment.”

Analise shot upright. Suddenly she understood why she had felt so uneasy that morning. The thing she had forgotten was Marcus.

“I assume you’re coming, too?” Analise asked. Sofia never allowed any of the models near Marcus if she could help it.

“No,” Sofia said, turning away to look out the window.

Analise’s stomach clenched with nerves. Marcus made her uncomfortable for a number of reasons, some of which she did not want to admit to herself. While he had tried to befriend her on many occasions, they were just as much strangers now as when they’d first met six months ago. She wished Sofia would say more about the dinner, but her body language made it clear she did not want to talk.

Analise sank back into the seat and mulled over the situation. She knew better than to push Sofia, but the fear of what awaited at dinner made her pluck up her courage.

“Sofia,” she ventured, “why am I going to this dinner?”

Sofia’s body stiffened, and her lips involuntarily stretched into a thin line.

“I’m sorry,” Analise said. “I’m not trying to be difficult. I just want to know what’s expected of me.”

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Sofia's face relaxed, and she reached out to give Analise an uncharacteristic pat on the hand. The momentary lapse disappeared as quickly as it arrived, but Sofia's initial reaction concerned Analise.

"Don't worry," Sofia said in a soothing, unfamiliar voice. "Just remember what you saw me do today. Listen more than you speak. Smile. Ask people questions. Don't talk about yourself too much, and of course, enjoy the food."

Analise's pulse quickened at the mention of food. Everyone at the agency thought her voracious appetite was unbecoming for a model. Something was wrong.

By the time Analise took leave of Sofia and boarded the bus home, the sun had retracted its rays and dipped behind the ocean. Streetlights flickered to life across the city, and the sound of a street performer strumming chords on a guitar floated upon the night air. Traffic was heavy and Analise started to worry when she realized it was almost time to meet Marcus and she was just reaching her stop.

She walked toward her apartment as quickly as she could on her sore, blistered feet, passing a group of people samba dancing on the corner. Analise longed for their energy and became so consumed with wishing she did not have to go out that she failed to notice her building gate was ajar. She pushed it open and was about to reach for her keys when she realized what she had done.

Analise looked around the courtyard, but there was no one there. She closed the gate and tried to lock it, but the key only spun with each turn of her wrist, failing to engage the bolt.

"That's strange," she murmured.

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Tightening her grip on her purse, she slowly approached the lobby door. She inserted her key and twisted it to the right but found it already open and unable to lock. She pushed down on the handle and peered around the door into the lobby. Everything looked exactly as it had that morning. Analise returned to the courtyard, willing herself to calm down.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said aloud. “You’re going to march upstairs, call the landlord, and let him know he has two locks to fix, and a broken elevator. After that, you’re going to get ready for dinner with Marcus, and you’re going to have fun.”

Analise nodded as if she had won an argument with another person and strode into the lobby. She ascended the stairs with as much confidence as she could muster, only to be stricken with fear when she stepped out of the stairwell and found the door of her apartment wide open. In her haste to back away, she lost her grip on the fire door and it slammed shut with a bang.

“Who’s out there?” she heard a muffled voice yell from her apartment.

Analise bolted down the stairs as fast as she could. When she reached the second-floor landing, she heard the stairwell door open and slam shut above her and she panicked, taking the steps two at a time. Her feet screamed with pain and her lungs felt close to exploding as she tore down the stairs. She could see light from the lobby and was about to rush forward with a surge of adrenaline when she missed a step and went flying.

Her outstretched arms smacked against the ground first, followed by her head, which slid into the wall when the rest of her body hit the floor. Her temple throbbed, and her eyes were unfocused, but she could still make out the sound of oncoming footsteps. She tried to push herself up with her hands, but when she put pressure on her wrist she screamed and fell back onto the floor. Before she could do anything else, a pair of hands grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to her feet.

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“Help!” she screamed, trying to wrestle her arms free to claw at her attacker’s face.

“Analyse! It’s okay! It’s me, Marcus!” the man said as he tightened his grip on her shoulders.

“Marcus?” she said.

“Yes! It’s me!”

“Oh, thank God!” she said, and her knees buckled. She grabbed Marcus’s forearms to keep from falling, and he leaned forward to catch her around the waist before she dragged them both down. Once they were steady, he held her by the shoulders and took a step back to examine her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“What are you doing here?”

“I got here early. The gate and the lobby door were unlocked. Did you know your elevator doesn’t work?”

Analyse stared at him in disbelief. “Yes, I know that. How did you get into my apartment? What were you doing in there?”

“When I knocked on the door, it swung open. Someone ransacked your apartment! It’s a mess! I was on the phone with the police when I heard the stairwell door slam. I thought you were the burglar. That’s why I chased you.”

“You chased me because you thought I was the person who broke in?”

“Yes,” he said, pushing a strand of hair away from her face to see if she was hurt anywhere else.

Analise waved his hand away, and her eyes flashed a warning. “That wasn’t smart, Marcus,” she said as though scolding a child and squirmed to loosen his grip. “What if I had been the burglar? You could have been hurt.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that at the time. I was worried about you,” he answered.

Analise averted her eyes and tried to step away from him, but her legs were still shaky.

“It’s okay. I have you,” he said, propping her up.

She avoided his gaze and looked back up the stairs the way they had come. “Does it look like anything was stolen?” she asked, anxious to change the subject.

“I’m not sure. They either took everything you own, or you didn’t have much to start with,” he said with a small grin. Analise did not appreciate his attempt at humor and tried to step away again but wobbled without his support. Marcus put his hand around her waist to steady her and tried to keep a straight face when she leaned into him instead of shoving him away.

When they reached Analise’s floor, her legs felt steady enough to let go of Marcus. Her first instinct upon entering her apartment was to cry, but she could never do that with Marcus there. He sprang into action and stepped around her to begin righting the overturned furniture. “I’ll take care of things in here,” he said. “The police are on the way. You should probably check the other rooms before they get here so you can report if anything is missing.”

Analise nodded, breathed deeply, and once she felt ready, made her way to the kitchen. Inside she found open cabinets, emptied drawers, and silverware, pots, and pans scattered across the floor. She briefly scanned the items, but even if something was gone, she didn’t have time to dwell on it. The only thing that mattered was getting the mess cleaned up quickly. She turned off the light to shut out the sight of the kitchen and walked toward her bedroom, dreading what awaited her.

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The bedroom had not fared any better. The intruder had laid its contents bare, including stripping the bed sheets to expose her thin, yellowing mattress. Analise began mentally calculating the amount of work she had to do to set things right and how much time she had to do it, fearful her aunt and uncle might see the apartment before she finished. It had not yet entered her mind to be frightened of the person who had been there. Feeling overwhelmed and anxious about the task ahead of her, she dragged herself back to Marcus and gave him a defeated look.

“What did you find?” he asked.

“It doesn’t look like anything was taken, but I won’t know until I put things back,” she answered.

Analise hadn’t bought much since leaving her family, but just being able to do so made her feel like she was building a home and a life for herself. The items gave her surroundings a sense of permanence and belonging. Things she’d always wanted but never had with them. To see her possessions treated like trash made her fear it was just a matter of time before another person’s actions upended her life again. To live anywhere longer than a few months would be incredible.

“I need to sit down,” she said.

“Let me help you,” he said, easing her onto the couch. “Do you want me to fix you a drink?”

“Better not. I’ve already fallen down once today,” she said, attempting a joke.

Marcus gave her a small smile. “May I see your hand?”

Analise hesitated as she debated whether it was wise to do so. *People do this kind of thing all the time*, she told herself. *Just let him feel like he’s helping*. Analise placed her hand in his and waited.

“Does that hurt?” he asked as he ran his thumb over her knuckles. She looked into his eyes, which showed genuine concern, and debated whether to lie or tell the truth.

“No,” she replied, thinking she should have lied.

A flush bloomed across Analise’s cheeks as Marcus pressed his fingers into her palm and he asked her to grip his hand. She marveled at how soft his skin was in comparison to her own and fought to suppress the conflicted feelings that arose whenever she was near him. Despite her aversion to his brash, arrogant personality, she was begrudgingly attracted to him.

When word had spread around the agency that Marcus had recruited her, the other models wasted no time warning her to stay away from him. Not only was he a playboy, but Sofia was fiercely protective of him. There was no question she would make Analise’s life hell if she returned Marcus’s advances.

That was six months ago, and as the models predicted, Marcus had tried to flirt with her at every opportunity, and Sofia never missed the chance to debase her in kind. Another person would have left long ago, but Analise knew she could not find a job that paid as well with her limited education. So, Analise ignored her occasional urges and tuned Sofia out as much as she could. She had briefly considered quitting and getting a roommate to help pay for her apartment, but she quickly abandoned the idea when she realized nobody would put up with her aunt and uncle sneaking in at random times.

Analise knew she should set some boundaries with her aunt and uncle, but she didn’t want to hurt them. They were all she had and keeping them happy was important to her. She had no other family. No real friends. The constant moves they had subjected her to saw to that. Analise craved stability and the chance at a normal life. If the only way to have it was to avoid the man who employed her, then so be it.

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Marcus lifted his eyes from her hands and studied her face. He slowly slid his fingertips over the top of her hand and pressed on her wrist, causing her to immediately stop thinking about her family.

“Owww!” she cried.

“Oh, Jesus, I’m sorry! Did I hurt you?”

“It’s okay,” she moaned as she cradled her wrist and rocked back and forth on the couch.

“Hold on a second,” he said, springing to his feet.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To get ice,” he called over his shoulder. “You could probably use some on that bump on your head, too.”

“Oh,” Analise said, raising her hand to her temple. She had forgotten she was injured somewhere else. “Thank you.”

“I’ll take you to the hospital after the police leave,” he shouted over the sound of ice dropping out of trays. “Hey! Did you know there’s a pile of magazines in your freezer?”

Analise groaned. While she appreciated everything Marcus was doing for her, he was the last person she would choose to tell about the magazines, even if the explanation were simple. She needed to get him out of her house as soon as possible.

“Magazines?” she replied, trying to sound surprised. “Really? What on earth would they be doing in there?”

While Analise spun lies and tried to change the subject, the man who had broken into her apartment listened from the ledge outside her window. If the police were coming, he needed to get out of there. He briefly considered tackling Marcus and snatching what he needed from

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Analise, but it was too risky. He would just have to accept that he had done his best and hope his employer saw it that way, too.

The man slid across the ledge with his back against the wall for balance. When he reached the end, he judged the distance from his spot to the rooftop of the adjacent building to be thirty feet. He took a few steps back to allow for a running start and then leaped into the air. He dropped like a stone, but instead of panicking he squeezed his eyes shut, spread his arms, and envisioned himself standing where he wanted to land. The air seemed to tighten around him as he fell, and he struggled to breathe as if caught in a snake's coils. When the suffocation became unbearable, he worried his employer had foreseen his failure and meant to kill him, but then his feet slammed into the pavement and he toppled over. He rolled onto his back and scanned the length of his body. To his astonishment, not only was he unharmed, he had landed in the exact place he'd imagined. Stunned, he stood, patted down his body and raced across the rooftop to climb down the fire escape.

When the man reached the ground floor, he tugged the lid of his baseball cap down just as a police cruiser pulled up to the building. At the next block, he removed the hat and deposited it into his backpack, along with the substitute item he had taken from Analise's apartment. He briefly wondered why anyone would pay such an exorbitant amount of money for something that seemed so insignificant but promptly pushed the thought from his mind. The only thing he needed to be concerned with was that he had a new life ahead of him. The pay for retrieving this object was more than he could earn in a month robbing tourists at the beach.