

# PROLOGUE

**Friday 23 February 2046**

**THE SKY OVER** the Spanish port was smeared with the colour of blood smoke, a heavy red-orange haze that clung to the air like the last breath of a dying sun. The scent of burning oil and salt hung thick, carried by the heavy coastal winds. It was sharp and acrid, biting against the damp of the sea. Fires crackled along the ridgelines of the coastal city, their glow flickering in the black water below. Distorted reflections trembled with every wave.

In the distance, the sound of falling glass mixed with the wail of sirens. Their shrill cries sliced through the thickening smoke like wounded animals in pain. Puerto de Málaga, once vibrant with the clatter of trade and the bustle of travellers, was now sprawling in disarray. The heat rose from the charred remnants of buildings, still glowing faintly as they collapsed in on themselves. The air was dense, almost suffocating, with the taste of ash and burning wood. The kind of fire that was all consuming.

At the edge of the docks, where the flames hadn't yet reached, a body stirred amongst the shadows.

He rose from the ground slowly, uncertainly, like something dredged from the depths. His shirt was torn and wet with dark stains, his skin pale and cool against the rising heat. Beneath the surface of his eyes, something had shifted... something new and ravenous.

He didn't know his name. He couldn't remember. Not right now. Names were small things; the world was suddenly too loud for small things.

The salt air reeked of dashed hopes and desperation, but beneath that, beneath everything, was scent. Raw. Delicate. Sweet. It curled into his senses like perfume on fire.

People.

He could smell them.

Not just the sweat on their clothes, but the life blood moving beneath their skin. He could feel their warmth like a beacon. Hear their hearts. See the trails their bodies left in the air – vibrant, electric threads.

And he was starving.

The hunger lived in him like a second spine, twisting through his ribs, pulling at his throat. It was not like needing food, not like any hunger he had ever known. This was something more, something pure. It throbbed like instinct. It demanded.

Ahead, the docks were alive with panicked life. Families clutched their documents, arguing with port guards. Children wailed, sensing the anxiety around them. Ship horns blared over the shouting. The flames had cut off the southern road, and now hundreds of people pushed towards the vessels anchored at the quay, hoping to escape the violence swallowing the city. Amongst the chaos of the port, a young couple moved quickly, weaving through the crowd with a grace that seemed to carve a path of calm through the throngs of

fearful, stressed faces. They clung to each other, their hopeful laughter soft but real, a gentle sound that contrasted with the heavy tension in the air.

Their smell hit him like lightning.

They were dark-skinned, their features a striking blend of beauty that caught the light in a way others didn't. The rich, smooth tone of their skin seemed to absorb the firelight and the fading daylight, glimmering like polished wood. They weren't the only ones with darker skin in the crowd, but there was something different about them. The way they moved, the way they stood, set them apart. Their essence was clean... pure. Not a trace of the fear or desperation that rippled through the others.

The woman, older than the man by a few years, wore a bright red scarf that fluttered behind her like a banner, bold and proud. The younger man, possibly her brother, had a leather satchel slung over one shoulder, his posture firm, the weight of it a comfort rather than a burden. They moved with a serene assurance, as if they had walked through fire to reach this moment, and now they were here, in this place, they knew they were safe. They were running towards something: towards home.

He couldn't explain why, but he followed.

They didn't see him. Not truly. Just a man in a crowd. A shape in their periphery.

Nearby, another couple had stopped at the checkpoint. An argument was unfolding. The air was thick with frustration. Shouts rose above the low murmur of the crowd. A tall Englishman, face red with rage, towered over a Spanish official. His words were clipped, sharp, each one slicing through the tense silence. His fists clenched. Veins stood out in his neck. Every inch of him was pressing forwards, demanding an answer.

Beside him, his wife stood still. She cradled a baby wrapped in a pristine white blanket. She remained silent, her eyes distant, her face pale, betraying none of the anxiety in the air.

The Spanish official, weary and weathered, gestured curtly, his voice firm but tired. 'The passports for the woman and child,' he stated, 'are not valid for the British ship. They cannot board.'

They will have to wait for the Spanish vessel, which departs later tonight.'

'No!' the man barked. 'We stay together. We go as a family!' His words were harsh, but they felt like they hung in the air, falling into the thickening tension like stones in water, creating ripples but no true movement. The woman beside him didn't speak, only tightening her hold on the baby, whose cries were soft, unknowing. Her gaze, fixed on the horizon, seemed to be somewhere far away, as though the entire scene were not something she could reach.

The crowd around them seemed to retreat, uneasy. The man's frustration was contagious, yet it failed to spark any real response from the official, who remained unmoved, his eyes cold, his posture rigid. The couple was surrounded by murmurs and mutters from the crowd, but it felt like nobody was truly listening. Concerned only with their own woes.

The woman shifted slightly, sensing something, or maybe it was just the sensation of being watched. Her grip tightened on the baby, her eyes flickering towards the shadows, though she saw nothing. The air around her thickened, and she couldn't quite place why her heart began to race.

Because he was watching the argument. But he wasn't watching them – the brother and sister. Their scent, now feeling distant. His mouth ached. His body trembled.

They had slipped from his grasp. The moment was gone. They had vanished into the flow of the crowd, their warmth and purity fading, like smoke lost to the night air. The watcher's pulse quickened, but the hunt had shifted. He could still feel their faint trace, a lingering pull, but they were no longer within reach.

He quickly moved through the crowd, his steps light, measured, and the scent of sweat and smoke filled his senses, dulling his focus. But then, something changed. His head tilted slightly, drawn by a new, unexpected fragrance that cut through the heavy air. It was delicate, fresh, like the first spring buds on a tree, sharp yet soft. The scent was subtle, fleeting, but unmistakable. It was the scent of a young woman.

Alone.

Nervous.

His gaze flicked in her direction, a predator spotting its next target. He couldn't see her yet, but he could feel her presence in the air; a vulnerability that stood out against the hardened masses around her. There was a stillness in her, but the air around her vibrated with anxious energy. She didn't belong to the crowd, not like the others. She wasn't lost, exactly, but there was an uncertainty in the way she moved, as though the port itself was a vast, unknowable place to her.

He moved slowly through the throng; his every sense tuned to her. Her scent drew him closer, a fragile thread that wound through the chaos. She wasn't trying to escape, not in the way the others did. She was just... there. Walking, weaving through the people, her eyes darting, scanning for something. Looking for someone. Her nerves were a song to him, soft and fragile.

He could see her now, just ahead, her dark hair framing a face that seemed too young for the worry she carried. Her posture was hunched, as if she were trying to make herself smaller, to disappear into the crowd. She wasn't trying to be seen, but the watcher saw her all the same.

And she was still.

Thinking.

He felt a stir of anticipation, his gaze narrowing as he took another step towards her. There was something about the way she looked, not at the crowd, not at anything. Her eyes kept drifting towards the shadows, as though she felt something watching her, though she couldn't know it was *him*.

He moved closer, quietly... patient. He would have her. She was his now.

He moved silently, a smudge amongst shadows, slipping from container to crate, blending into the murky dark of the port. His steps were slow, calculated, his presence a breathless whisper in the night. Each movement was precise, natural.

Her footsteps echoed on the wooden boards as she moved through the labyrinth of abandoned structures. Her pace quickened, her heart already pounding, as if some deep instinct had begun to warn her. The air was heavy, thick with the scent of rust and salt, the smell of old fish and the faint, lingering tang of blood. This area of the dock felt empty, desolate, but there was something beneath it, a presence she couldn't quite place. She turned a corner, her pace frantic now, as if her body knew something her mind refused to admit.

She glanced over her shoulder, and there it was, that chilling feeling of being followed. Her eyes searched the darkened spaces, the shadows between the crates, the broken walls of

forgotten buildings, but there was nothing. Still, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

She quickened her step, but then she made a mistake.

A wrong turn.

The path narrowed as she hurried down the dock, the sound of her boots slapping against the timber carrying through the silence. She didn't see it at first, not until it was too late – a small, isolated room at the end of the corridor. The heavy open door loomed ahead like an invitation. Panic surged through her chest, but there was no turning back now. Her instincts screamed at her to flee, to find another way out, but her legs carried her forwards, into the dim light of the room.

The door slammed shut behind her.

She froze.

The room, that looked like a forgotten storage area, was empty except for some shelves, discarded crates and netting that smelt of old mildew. The walls felt like they were closing in on her, the air thick and close, the silence broken only by the sound of her ragged breathing. There was no way out. The windows were too small, the walls too strong, the door too solid.

And then, a sound. A faint click.

He had locked them in.