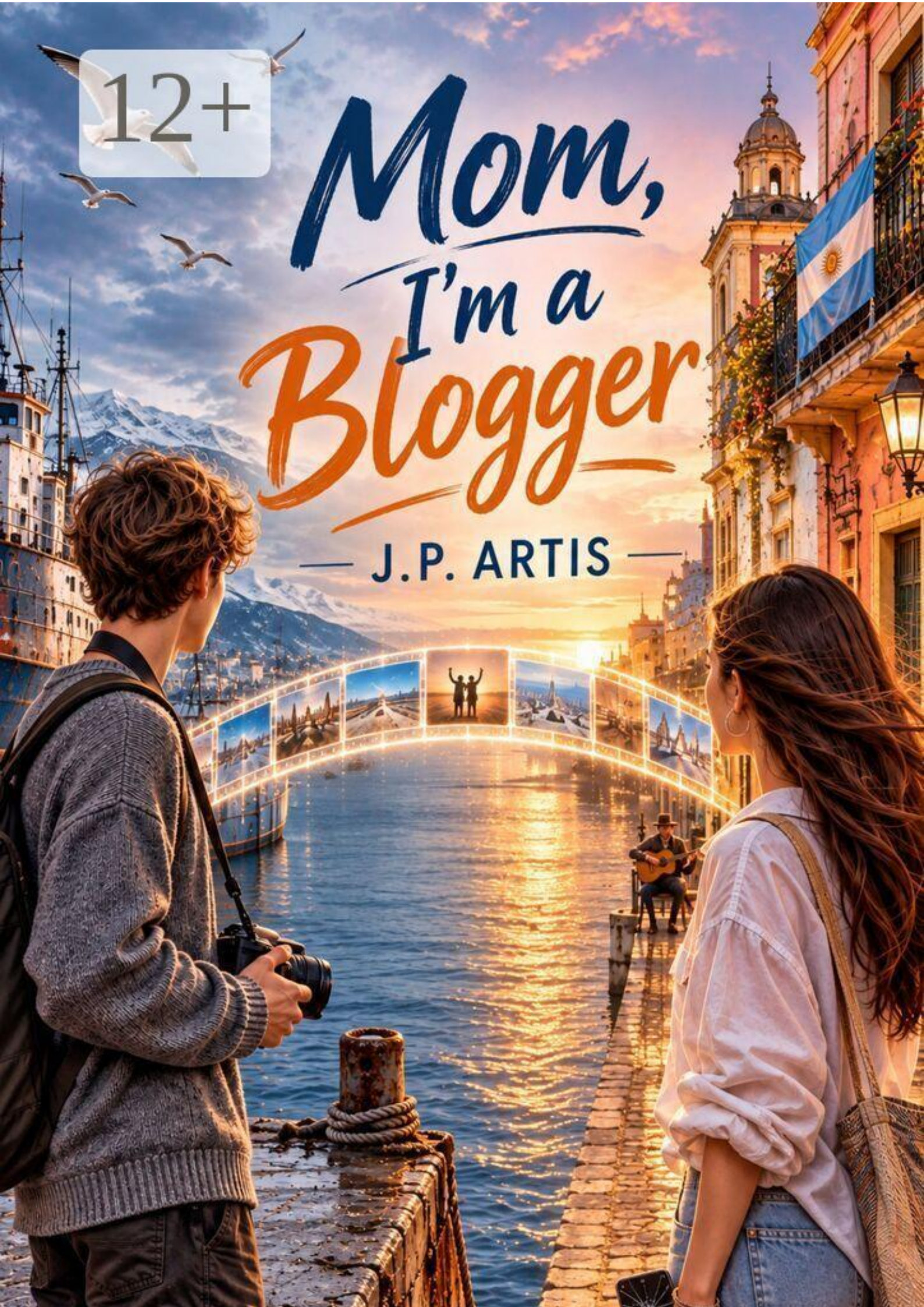
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«Издательские решения»

Artis J.

Mom, I’m a Blogger / J. Artis — «Издательские решения»,

Two teenagers. Two worlds. One dream. Liam is expected to become a mechanic in Iceland. Sofia is expected to become a lawyer in Argentina. But when they start posting honest videos online, they find each other — and a bridge across the ocean. As their audience grows, so does the pressure. Can you build a real life with someone you’ve never met? A story about courage, vulnerability, and pressing record.

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Mom, I’m a Blogger

J.P. Artis

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ISBN 978-5-0071-6995-0
Created with Ridero smart publishing system

CHAPTER 1: THE WEIGHT OF THE AIR

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The scent of engine oil and damp wool had clung to the kitchen for as long as Liam could remember. It was not merely a smell; it was a physical presence, a heavy, invisible blanket that settled into the pores of the walls, the grain of the Formica table, and the very skin of his hands. It seeped out of his father's heavy canvas work jacket, which hung on the iron peg by the narrow front door, dripping a slow, rhythmic *tap-tap-tap* of condensed harbor moisture onto the cracked linoleum floor.

Outside, the June dusk of Reykjavík refused to die. It hung in a perpetual, muted gray over the harbor of Grandi, casting a flat, metallic sheen over the cold, churning waters of Faxaflói Bay. The sun here did not set so much as it retreated, sliding sideways across the horizon like a shy animal afraid of the dark, leaving behind a bruised, indigo twilight that offered neither day nor night.

Liam sat at the kitchen table, his thumb tracing the jagged, freshly cut edge of his high school diploma. The thick paper felt dry, almost abrasive against his skin, like dried fish skin. He stared at the embossed gold lettering, but the words blurred into meaningless shapes.

Across the table, his father, Svein, tore off a hunk of dark, dense rye bread and smeared it with a thick layer of salted butter. Svein's hands were massive, the knuckles scarred and permanently blackened around the cuticles from thirty years of servicing marine diesel engines at the dry docks. The tendons in his forearms shifted like steel cables beneath his skin as he chewed. The only sounds in the room were the scrape of the butter knife, the hum of the old refrigerator, and the distant, muffled groan of a cargo ship shifting against its moorings.

"Magnus called from the yard today," Svein said. His voice carried the low, gravelly timbre of a man who rarely spoke unless it was to give an instruction over the deafening roar of heavy machinery. He didn't look up from his plate. "They're taking on two apprentices for the autumn shift. Diesel maintenance. Good pay. Union benefits. Real work."

Liam didn't look up from the paper diploma. His thumb pressed harder against the sharp edge of the paper until the skin turned white. "I haven't decided yet, Dad."

Svein stopped chewing. The silence that followed was sudden and absolute, heavier than the damp air outside. He slowly raised his head. His eyes, the color of faded sea glass, locked onto his son.

"Decided?" Svein chuckled. It was a short, dry sound, entirely devoid of humor, scraping against the quiet of the kitchen. He pointed his butter knife toward the window, where the rusted silhouette of a trawler creaked against the pier under a relentless North Atlantic breeze. "School is finished, Liam. Life isn't a waiting room. You get a trade in your hands, or the cold eats you up. Simple as that. Your grandfather pulled nets until his shoulders gave out. I pull wrenches until my hands look like this. It's the way of the blood."

Liam nodded slowly, keeping his lips pressed together into a thin, bloodless line. He could feel a tight, suffocating pressure building behind his ribs, a physical ache that expanded with every breath of the salt-tinged air. It wasn't that he hated the harbor; he had grown up with the sea wind stinging his cheeks and the screech of gulls echoing off the corrugated iron roofs. He knew the exact smell of the low tide, the specific shade of gray the sky turned before a storm. But the thought of stepping into that damp, oil-slicked pit every morning at 6:00 AM, of spending the next forty years with his hands buried in the greasy guts of a ship's engine, made his limbs feel heavy as lead. It felt like being buried alive in a concrete box.

"Fifteen minutes," Svein muttered, returning his gaze to his bread. "Then you go to your room. I need to wash the grease off before the morning shift."

Liam stood up, the legs of his wooden chair scraping loudly against the linoleum. He folded the diploma, slid it into the pocket of his faded gray sweater, and walked out of the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, he was in his bedroom on the upper floor. It was a small, low-ceilinged room tucked directly under the eaves. The wind rattled the double-glazed pane of the single window, a constant, vibrating hum that he had tuned out years ago. The walls were slanted, painted a peeling, institutional white.

He locked the door. The click of the brass latch was a small, sharp sound of finality. He sat on the edge of his narrow mattress, the springs groaning in protest, and pulled out his phone. His thumb swiped automatically, a muscle memory born of a thousand sleepless nights.

The screen bloomed with radiant, blinding light, cutting through the gloom of the Icelandic evening.

A video auto-played. The transition was violent. One second, he was in a cold, gray room smelling of diesel; the next, he was plunged into a world of hyper-saturated, impossible color. A creator in his mid-twenties, sun-kissed and laughing, stood on the edge of a jagged cliff in Bali. The water below was an impossible, glowing turquoise. The creator held a sleek camera on a lightweight carbon-fiber gimbal, moving with a fluid, effortless grace.

"Three years ago, I was stuck in a dead-end job, watching the rain outside my window," the voice-over boomed, layered over high-energy, cinematic electronic music that seemed to vibrate directly in Liam's teeth. *"Then I bought a camera. I stopped asking for permission. Today, I run a six-figure media company from anywhere in the world. You don't need a trust fund. You just need the courage to press record."*

Liam replayed the video. Three times. Four times.

He stared at the creator's eyes. There was no hesitation in them. There was no smell of stale diesel oil, no gray northern gloom, no crushing weight of generational expectation. The lighting was crisp, the colors popped, the skin looked golden and flawless. It was a world where the wind didn't bite, where the cold didn't seep into your bones.

Liam looked at his own reflection in the black glass of his turned-off screen. His face was pale, almost translucent in the dim room. His dark hair was shaggy, falling into his eyes. He was wearing the same faded gray sweater he had worn three days in a row. He looked exactly like what he was: a boy trapped in a freezing room at the edge of the world.

He opened a web browser. The blue light of the screen reflected in his dark eyes. He cleared his search bar, his thumb hovering over the glass. He took a deep breath, the air whistling slightly through his nose, and typed into the search prompt: *Best budget camera for lifestyle vlogging 2026.*

A quiet, electric surge went through his throat. It was a terrifying, exhilarating sensation, like standing on the edge of the harbor wall and looking down into the freezing, black water. *Why not me?* he thought, his chest tightening with a sudden, irrational hope. *He started with nothing too. All it takes is the courage to press record.*

He didn't know it yet, but as he scrolled through the specs, the aperture sizes, and the ISO ranges, he wasn't just looking for a camera. He was looking for a parachute.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Five thousand miles away, the air inside the apartment in San Telmo was thick, hot, and smelled faintly of roasted coffee beans, the acrid diesel fumes from the buses idling on Avenida Independencia, and the damp, sweet mold of old brickwork. The ceiling fan hummed rhythmically overhead, its wooden blades warped and unbalanced, doing little more than pushing the warm, heavy air around the living room in a futile, circular motion.

Sofia stood by the tall, wrought-iron balcony doors, her forehead resting against the warm glass, looking down at the street below. The chaos of Buenos Aires was in full swing. A yellow-and-black taxi screeched around the corner, its tires squealing against the asphalt; a street vendor shouted his final, melodic call for *facturas* before the sun dipped behind the crumbling, majestic facade of the 19th-century buildings across the road. The light here was not the flat gray of the north; it was a heavy, golden syrup that coated everything in a warm, unforgiving glow.

Behind her, the dinner table was a chaotic orchestra of clattering plates, loud voices, and the sharp clinking of cutlery. Her family — three generations gathered under one roof in a space that was too small for their massive personalities — was celebrating her graduation from high school. The air was thick with the smell of seared beef and the sharp, vinegary tang of chimichurri.

"To our future lawyer!" her uncle Mateo boomed, slamming his glass of Malbec onto the white tablecloth. A small red drop sloshed over the rim and bloomed like a tiny wound on the fabric. "Sofia, continuous effort, child! Law school at UBA in March, then a position at your father's firm. The family path! We don't break the chain!"

Sofia forced a tight, polite smile. The muscles in her cheeks ached from the effort. "Thank you, Uncle."

Her mother squeezed her shoulder, her fingernails painted a bright, polished crimson digging slightly into Sofia's collarbone. "She's going to excel, Mateo. She's quiet, but she's disciplined. Aren't you, *mi amor*?"

"Yes, Mama," Sofia murmured, her voice barely audible over the roar of a passing motorcycle outside.

Her stomach turned, a slow, sickening roll. The words *disciplined, quiet, lawyer* felt like a heavy woolen blanket thrown over her head in the middle of a summer heatwave. She didn't want to sit in drafty, wood-paneled courtrooms reading fifty-year-old property disputes. She didn't want to wear stiff suits and argue over boundary lines. She wanted to feel seen. She wanted her life to belong to *her*, not to the loud, affectionate, overwhelming expectations of a family that loved her so much they were suffocating her.

She excused herself under the pretense of a headache, slipping out of the dining room before her father could ask for a detailed medical diagnosis. She walked down the narrow hallway, the floorboards creaking familiarly under her bare feet, and slipped into her bedroom. She closed the door, turning the old brass key in the lock with a soft, definitive *click*.

The silence of her room was instantaneous, broken only by the muffled, rhythmic bass of a song playing from a car passing on the avenue below, and the distant, mournful wail of a bandoneon from a nearby window.

Sofia turned on her desk lamp. The soft yellow light illuminated her sanctuary — the wooden floors worn smooth by decades of footsteps, the peeling posters of classic French cinema, the notebooks filled with half-written thoughts, sketches, and observations that she had never shown a single human being.

She picked up her phone. The screen was spider-webbed with a crack in the top right corner, a souvenir from a drop on the subway tiles. She opened a social media app.

A video swept across her feed, autoplaying with a smooth, silent grace. A young woman was walking through the sun-drenched, cobblestone streets of Paris. She held a pastel-pink coffee cup, wearing an effortless, oversized linen coat that billowed perfectly in the breeze. The camera work was impossibly smooth. The caption read: *"Creating the aesthetic life I deserve. Stop letting others write your script."*

Sofia watched the girl's easy smile, the smooth camera pans, the thousands of comments underneath scrolling by in a blur of adoration: *"You inspire me so much!"*, *"Goals!"*, *"I wish I had your confidence."*

Sofia looked down at her own hands. They were trembling slightly. She was wearing an old, oversized t-shirt with a bleach stain on the hem. Her hair was pulled back in a messy, frizzy bun. She felt entirely invisible, a ghost haunting her own life.

She walked over to her bookshelf, her bare feet silent on the wood. She picked up three heavy, intimidating textbooks — *Introduction to Civil Law*, *Constitutional Precedents*, and *Penal Code* — and stacked them on her desk. She set her cracked phone upright against the top book, adjusting the angle until her chest and face were framed in the center of the screen. The background was a messy bed and a pile of laundry, but if she squinted, it looked like a rustic, candid moment.

She tapped the red record button.

The small red timer began to tick in the corner of the screen: *00:01… 00:02… 00:03…*

Sofia opened her mouth to speak. She wanted to say something profound, something aesthetic and inspiring, something that sounded like the girls in Europe who had it all figured out. She wanted to talk about freedom, about the courage to leave the nest.

But no sound came out.

Her throat snapped shut, a physical constriction that blocked the air. Panic — sudden, cold, and deeply humiliating — flushed through her cheeks, burning hot against her skin. She stared at her own eyes in the front-facing lens. They looked wide, terrified, and entirely fraudulent. The silence in the room stretched, heavy and mocking. *00:08… 00:09… 00:10…*

She lunged forward, her hand shaking, and slammed her finger onto the screen to stop the recording.

She sat on the edge of her bed, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. The silence rushed back in, ringing in her ears.

She stared at the phone. The humiliation was sharp, a physical sting behind her eyes, but right under it, buried deep in her chest, was a stubborn, burning spark of defiance. She hadn't just failed; she had been exposed. But the desire to be seen hadn't vanished. It had only grown sharper.

"I can do this," she whispered into the dark room, her voice shaking but firm, testing the weight of the words. "I just need to practice. I'll show them. I'll show all of them."

CHAPTER 2: THE SOUND OF REHEARSAL

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The intercity bus to the Smáralind shopping center smelled of damp rubber floor mats, stale filter coffee, and the sharp, metallic tang of heated wet wool from the passengers' winter coats. Liam sat rigidly in the back row, his knees jammed tightly against the hard plastic shell of the seat in front of him. Outside the scratched plexiglass window, the familiar, suffocating gray of the Grandi harbor district slowly dissolved into the sterile, brightly lit commercial sprawl of Kópavogur.

In his right jacket pocket, his fingers continuously traced the edges of a folded stack of banknotes. One hundred and twenty-nine thousand, nine hundred Icelandic krónur. It was not a large sum in the grand scheme of Reykjavík's inflated economy, but for Liam, it represented nearly three months of grueling, back-breaking labor: sweeping icy fish guts off the dock at 5:00 AM, hauling heavy wooden crates for his uncle at the weekend market, and skipping meals to save every single coin. His father, Svein, firmly believed this money was sitting untouched in a high-yield savings account, earmarked specifically for the tuition deposit at the marine technical college. The deception sat in Liam's stomach like a swallowed stone, heavy and cold.

When the bus hissed to a halt, Liam stepped out into the biting wind and walked into the electronics store. The transition was violent. The store was a sanctuary of sanitized, artificial warmth. It smelled of warm plastic, freshly vacuumed synthetic carpets, and the faint, ozonic hum of a hundred glowing screens. It was a stark, almost offensive contrast to the salt-slicked concrete and diesel fumes of the harbor.

Liam approached the glass display case, his hands buried so deep in his jacket pockets that his knuckles ached. Behind the thick, smudged glass sat the object of his obsession: a compact, black mirrorless camera with a small, versatile wide-angle lens attached. It looked sleek, professional, and utterly alien in this fluorescent-lit environment.

A salesman drifted over. He was a guy barely older than Liam, perhaps twenty-two, wearing a crisp black polo shirt with the store's logo embroidered on the chest. He carried an air of casual, practiced expertise, leaning his hip against the glass counter with a relaxed slouch.

"Looking for something specific, or just browsing?" the salesman asked, his tone friendly but distinctly detached.

Liam swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. He pulled his hand from his pocket and pointed a trembling finger at the camera behind the glass. "That one. The mirrorless kit with the flip-out screen."

The salesman nodded, unlocking the cabinet with a small magnetic key and lifting the camera out. He handled it with the casual familiarity of a man who held a dozen of them every day. "Good choice. It's the most popular starter rig for video content right now. Excellent dual-pixel autofocus, fully articulated touchscreen, and a proper 3.5mm audio jack for external mics. If you're doing vlog-style stuff, travel, or lifestyle content, this is basically the industry standard for beginners."

Liam reached out, his fingers brushing the cold, textured rubber grip of the camera body. It felt surprisingly dense, a solid block of engineering that seemed to anchor him to the floor. "Does it… does it work well in low light?" he asked, his voice coming out a fraction lower and more hesitant than he intended. "I mean, specifically in Icelandic winter light. Gray days. Overcast skies. No direct sun."

The salesman shrugged, a slight, dismissive movement of his shoulders. "It's decent. The sensor handles high ISO reasonably well without introducing too much noise, but you'll still want to be mindful of your shutter speed. Honestly, if you're shooting indoors or on dark days, you'll eventually want to invest in a cheap LED panel or a ring light to fill in the shadows. But for starting out? It's

more than capable." He paused, looking at Liam's worn-out sneakers and the anxious set of his jaw. "You taking it today?"

"Yes," Liam said. The word felt final, like a door clicking shut.

Ten minutes later, the transaction was complete. Liam walked out of the store and back into the parking lot, carrying a crisp, dark-blue cardboard box nestled securely inside a heavy, reinforced paper bag. The weight in his hands felt balance-shifting, terrifying, like carrying an unexploded shell that could detonate at any moment. He caught the bus back toward Grandi, holding the paper bag tightly on his lap, his eyes darting nervously to every passenger who boarded, terrified that someone might bump into him, crush the box, or ask him what was inside.

Back in his bedroom, he locked the door and engaged the deadbolt. The familiar, damp chill of the room wrapped around him. He cleared his desk with meticulous, almost reverent care, pushing aside old, dog-eared schoolbooks, a half-empty mug of cold, stale tea, and a pile of unpaid utility bills.

He unboxed the camera slowly, peeling back the layers of protective tissue paper. The smell of new electronics — sharp, clean, and chemical — filled his nostrils. He snapped the battery into the compartment with a sharp, precise, deeply satisfying mechanical click. He inserted the memory card. He flipped the articulated screen around so it faced forward, toward the chair.

When he turned the power switch, the screen flashed to life, displaying a crisp, high-definition live feed of his room — and of him.

Liam froze.

Through the unforgiving lens of the camera, the room looked entirely different. It looked harsher, smaller, and infinitely more pathetic. The small, peeling tear in the wallpaper near the bookshelf was magnified in brutal detail. The faded gray sweater he had worn for three consecutive days looked washed out, dingy, and impoverished under the dim, yellow glow of the single ceiling lamp.

But worse, infinitely worse, was his own face on the 3-inch LCD panel. His posture was hunched, his shoulders drawn up defensively toward his ears. His eyes darted nervously, unable to hold a steady gaze, flicking between the black glass of the lens and his own distorted reflection on the screen. He looked exactly like what he was: a frightened boy playing dress-up.

He mounted the camera on the small, flexible tripod he had purchased alongside it, setting it on the desk. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to expand his constricted chest, and hit the red record button.

"Hey guys," Liam said to the lens.

His voice sounded thin, nasal, and completely devoid of the booming, confident resonance of the creators he watched online. It was the voice of a stranger, weak and unconvincing. He cleared his throat aggressively, trying to reset his vocal cords, and tried again, forcing a broad, enthusiastic smile that felt like a tight, painful mask stretching across his jaw.

"Hey everyone. Welcome back to… well, welcome to my very first video. Today, I'm going to show you what life is really, truly like here in Reykjavík."

He stopped talking.

The silence of the room flooded back in, heavy, suffocating, and absolute. Outside, a sudden gust of North Atlantic wind rattled the windowpane with a violent, hollow thud.

Liam reached forward and hit the stop button. His hands were ice cold. He played the twelve-second clip back.

Watching himself was a form of physical agony. His smile looked grotesque and fake. His posture was as stiff as iron. The camera's built-in microphone had picked up the annoying, high-pitched electrical hum of the old space heater in the corner with unbearable, piercing clarity, completely drowning out his voice.

He didn't hesitate. He selected the file and deleted it immediately.

He sat back in his chair, staring at the black, unblinking glass of the camera lens. The technical gear was finally in his hands, but the chasm between the polished, sun-drenched reality on his phone screen and the awkward, terrified teenager sitting in a freezing, gray room in Iceland felt wider and more insurmountable than the ocean outside his window.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The afternoon sun hit the exposed brick walls of San Telmo with relentless, oppressive intensity, turning Sofia's small bedroom into a stifling, airless oven. The temperature hovered around thirty-four degrees Celsius. The small, oscillating desk fan whistled mournfully on its highest setting, blowing hot, recycled air directly onto her face, doing absolutely nothing to combat the heavy, humid weight of the city.

Sofia had spent the last two hours meticulously preparing her setup. She had dragged her heavy wooden desk closer to the open balcony window to catch the natural, directional light, exactly as a highly-viewed tutorial video had recommended. She had arranged a rustic ceramic vase filled with dried lavender and eucalyptus branches, and placed two aesthetic, leather-bound notebooks on the corner of the wood to create a sense of curated, intellectual depth.

She was wearing a loose, cream-colored linen shirt she had borrowed from her older sister's closet without asking. It was two sizes too big, but when she carefully pinned the excess fabric at the small of her back, it looked effortlessly stylish and breezy in the preview frame of her phone.

Her phone was propped securely against a stack of thick, hardcover art history volumes. On the screen, her setup looked surprisingly, deceptively good. The warm, golden Argentinian sunlight cut across the desk at a perfect angle, giving the scene a soft, glowing, cinematic aesthetic that completely hid the peeling paint on the walls and the pile of laundry on her bed.

"Okay," Sofia murmured to herself, smoothing a stray strand of hair behind her ear for the twentieth time. Her heart was beating a rapid, staccato rhythm against her ribs. "Just speak naturally. Look at the lens, not the screen. Like you're talking to a friend. A confident friend."

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and tapped the red record button.

"Hola a todos," she began, offering a warm, practiced, and perfectly calibrated smile to the camera lens. "Welcome to my space. Today, I wanted to talk about something deeply personal: finding your true voice, and discovering the courage to pursue it when everyone around you expects you to follow a path that isn't yours."

She paused, taking a slow, deliberate breath. It was going well. The words felt poetic, grounded, and authentic. The lighting was catching the golden highlights in her hair. She reached out with her free hand to gently adjust a single dried flower in the vase, wanting to make the shot feel just a fraction more dynamic and alive.

Suddenly, the heavy wooden door of her bedroom rattled violently as someone pounded on it with a closed fist. Three loud, aggressive knocks shook the frame.

"Sofia! Are you in there?" her brother Mateo shouted from the hallway, his loud, booming voice cutting straight through her pristine, carefully constructed scene like a chainsaw. "Mom says to come down right now and help carry the groceries from the car! And why is the bathroom door locked? I need to wash my hands!"

Sofia jumped, a jolt of pure adrenaline spiking through her nervous system. Her elbow clipped the corner of the heavy art history textbook stack.

The phone wobbled precariously, slid sideways, and crashed onto the hardwood floor with a sharp, sickening plastic clatter. The ceramic vase tipped over, spilling dried lavender buds and brittle eucalyptus leaves across her handwritten notes.

"Sofia?" Mateo called again, his voice closer now, as he aggressively turned the brass doorknob, rattling the locked mechanism. "Why is the door locked? What are you doing in there? Open up!"

"Nothing!" Sofia cried out, her voice cracking slightly, pitching up in panic as she scrambled onto her knees to scoop up the phone. She slammed her thumb onto the screen to stop the recording, her pulse racing in her throat like a trapped, frantic bird. "I'm coming down! Just give me a minute!"

She checked the screen of her phone. A fresh, jagged hairline crack ran diagonally across the top right corner of the glass. It wasn't completely ruined, but that thin, white line across the display felt like a physical slap across the face.

She sat on the floor among the scattered, fragrant lavender buds, holding the cracked phone tightly against her chest. Through the thin wood of the door, she could hear the chaotic, overwhelming sounds of her family downstairs: the television blaring a midday news broadcast, her mother calling out sharp orders in the kitchen, the loud clatter of metal pots and pans.

With trembling fingers, Sofia opened her gallery and looked at the clip she had managed to record before the catastrophic interruption. The first ten seconds were beautiful. The lighting was perfect, her posture was relaxed, and her voice sounded calm, articulate, and wise. But right at the end, her face had twisted in sheer terror at the sound of the knock, followed by a chaotic, dizzying blur of ceiling fan and floorboards as the phone fell.

Her thumb hovered over the trash icon. *Delete it. Hide it. Put it away before anyone else sees this embarrassing mess.*

She looked at her reflection in the dark, cracked glass of the phone — a nineteen-year-old girl sitting on the floor of a sweltering room, trying to sell an aesthetic, independent life that she did not actually possess.

Her hand trembled violently, but she did not hit delete.

Instead, she dragged her finger across the editing timeline, carefully trimming off the embarrassing, chaotic crash at the end. She saved only the calm, composed, perfect ten seconds at the start.

She stared at those ten seconds on a loop. On screen, she looked confident, serene, and completely in control of her destiny — a girl who had everything figured out, a girl who was not afraid.

"Ten seconds," she whispered to the empty room, brushing a fallen lavender stem off her knee, her voice thick with unshed tears. "I just need to make it ten seconds longer next time."

CHAPTER 3: THE ZERO-VIEW VOID

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The blue light of the monitor burned into Liam's tired eyes, leaving phantom afterimages whenever he blinked. It was 3:15 AM. Outside his narrow window, the perpetual summer dusk of Reykjavík had merely turned a shade darker, casting an eerie, pale indigo hue across the slanted ceiling of his attic bedroom. The only sound in the house was the low, rhythmic shudder of the old refrigerator downstairs and the faint, whistling draft slipping through the window frame.

On the screen was the dashboard of his brand-new YouTube channel. The video had finished processing twenty minutes ago. *Title:* My Honest Reality | 24 Hours in Reykjavík (First Vlog) *Thumbnail:* A frame he had spent three agonizing hours editing — himself standing by the gray concrete sea wall of Grandi, trying to look reflective and mysterious, with the bold, yellow text "NEW BEGINNINGS" stretched awkwardly across the overcast sky.

Liam took a long, shaky breath, his cursor hovering over the blue *Publish* button. His palm was clammy, slipping slightly against the plastic of the mouse. His heart was beating a frantic, irregular rhythm against his ribs. In his mind, he imagined the instant ripple: the video going live, the algorithm picking it up, a few dozen views rolling in, maybe a comment from someone in Australia or California saying, *"Awesome vibe, man, love Iceland!"* He imagined the notification bell ringing, a steady, validating chime that would prove to his father that he existed, that he had a voice.

He closed his eyes, whispered a silent plea to the digital ether, and clicked.

Status: Public.

For the first fifteen minutes, Liam sat frozen in his wooden chair, his body rigid. He refreshed the page every thirty seconds. *Views: 1.* (That was him, testing the link from an incognito tab). He refreshed again. *Views: 1.* He refreshed again. *Views: 1.*

By 4:00 AM, the counter hadn't moved. The global internet, a vast, invisible web connecting billions of souls, felt like a dark, bottomless ocean. He had dropped his video into the middle of the Pacific, and it hadn't even made a splash. The silence of the analytics dashboard was louder than the wind howling off Faxaflói Bay. Defeated, his eyes burning from screen fatigue, he finally crawled into bed and fell into a restless, dreamless sleep to the dull hum of his electric heater.

When he woke up, the pale gray light of noon was filtering through the skylight. The kitchen downstairs was filled with the heavy, rich smell of fried lamb fat and strong, bitter coffee. Svein was sitting at the Formica table, wearing his navy canvas coveralls, the smell of diesel and machine oil clinging to him like a second skin. He was reading the local newspaper, his thick finger tracing the lines of text.

"You slept late," Svein said without looking up from the paper. His voice was a low rumble, vibrating through the small room. "Magnus called me this morning. He asked why you weren't at the dry dock office at eight to fill out the apprenticeship paperwork. I told him you were sleeping. I told him you'd be there on Monday."

Liam stopped in the doorway. He grabbed a mug from the drying rack and poured himself a cup of black coffee, his back to his father. "I'm… I've got some projects I'm working on first, Dad. I need to sort out my schedule."

Svein slowly lowered the newspaper. He turned his head, his gray eyes — pale and weathered like sea glass — narrowing slightly as he studied his son's hunched posture. "Projects? What projects?"

"Just… media stuff," Liam said, keeping his voice carefully neutral, staring intently at the dark surface of his coffee. "Digital work. I'm setting up a channel. It takes time to configure the software and render the files."

Svein released a heavy, exhausted sigh that seemed to drag his broad shoulders down an inch. He placed his thick hands flat on the table. "Liam. Look at me."

Liam turned around.

"You think the internet pays for heating oil?" Svein asked, his tone devoid of anger, which somehow made it worse. It was the tone of a man stating an undeniable law of physics. "You think a 'digital project' keeps the frost off the pipes when the January storms hit? Magnus offered you a trade. A union job. Men who work with their hands build this city. They fix the ships, they clear the ice, they keep the blood pumping. People who chase shadows on a screen… they end up freezing on the dock."

"It's not just chasing shadows," Liam said, his voice tightening, a defensive heat rising in his chest. "It's editing. It's storytelling. It's a real skill, Dad. You just can't see it because it's not covered in grease."

Svein's jaw tightened. The silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating, filled only by the ticking of the wall clock. "I don't care about the grease, Liam. I care about survival. The harbor doesn't wait forever. Think about what is real. When that little screen stops lighting up, you'll still need a way to feed yourself."

Svein picked up his newspaper and raised it back to his face, effectively dismissing his son.

Liam walked back upstairs without another word. His hands were shaking slightly as he entered his room and locked the door. He pulled out his phone and opened the YouTube Studio app.

Views: 4. Likes: 0. Comments: 0.

He stared at the screen until the numbers blurred. The zero felt heavy, like a physical weight pressing down on his throat, suffocating him. It wasn't just a number; it was a verdict.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The heavy wood-and-glass door of the cafe in Palermo Soho clicked shut, cutting off the roaring, exhaust-choked symphony of the street and replacing it with the curated, mellow sound of indie-folk music and the hiss of an espresso machine. A blast of aggressive, sterile air conditioning hit Sofia's face, a shocking contrast to the stifling, thirty-four-degree humidity of the Buenos Aires afternoon.

She walked to a small, round marble table in the corner and sat down, carefully placing her canvas tote bag on the empty chair beside her. She ordered a cold matcha latte — a drink she didn't particularly like, but which cost an absurd amount of pesos and looked perfectly vibrant green in a glass ceramic cup. It was a prop. A toll she had to pay to sit in this room.

Beside her laptop sat her cracked phone, connected to a bulky power bank. She had spent six hours cutting a 45-second short-form video. It was a reel titled *"Minimalist Morning Habits in Buenos Aires."* It featured five carefully timed, color-graded clips: the pour-over coffee dripping, her hand turning the page of a poetry book, the morning light hitting her bedroom floor, and her voiceover reading a quote about self-discovery in fluent, carefully practiced English.

She took a deep breath, tapped *Post*, and immediately pulled her arms close to her body, wrapping her fingers around the cold, condensation-slicked glass of her matcha. Her heart beat with a high-pitched, nervous flutter. She glanced around the cafe — at the trendy art students typing furiously on their MacBooks, the freelancers discussing design campaigns over espressos, the girls in linen dresses laughing softly. She felt a fleeting, intoxicating rush of belonging. *I'm one of them now,* she told herself, a small smile touching her lips. *I'm a creator. I have a voice.*

She checked her profile ten minutes later. *Views: 12.* (One of them was her own refresh). *Likes: 1.* (Herself).

An hour passed. The ice in her matcha melted, watering down the green sludge. The sun shifted outside, illuminating the dusty, floating motes of air inside the cafe. *Views: 48.*

Then came the first notification. A tiny red dot on her screen. A comment.

Sofia's heart leapt into her throat. She tapped the icon with a trembling finger, expecting a compliment, a question about the location, a connection.

The comment was from an account named @user98421049: *"why are u speaking english lol your accent sounds so fake fake girl"*

Sofia felt the blood drain from her face so fast it left her dizzy. It was as if she had been slapped across the face in the middle of the crowded cafe. A intense, burning heat rushed into her ears and cheeks. She stared at the words on the screen — nine words that picked apart the tiny, fragile shell of confidence she had built over the last forty-eight hours.

Fake girl.

The words echoed in her mind, perfectly aligning with her deepest, most terrifying insecurity. She wasn't a global creator. She was a nineteen-year-old girl from San Telmo, wearing her sister's borrowed shirt, speaking a language she dreamed in but didn't truly own, pretending to live a minimalist aesthetic life while her family argued about money in the next room. The commenter hadn't just insulted her; they had seen right through the illusion.

Her instinct was pure, panicked self-preservation. She tapped the three dots next to the comment and hit *Delete*.

Then, her thumb hovered over the video itself. *Delete it. Hide it. Put it away before anyone else sees this embarrassing fraud.* Her pulse was racing, a trapped bird battering against her ribs. The indie-folk music suddenly sounded mocking; the laughter from the next table sounded like it was directed at her.

She looked at her reflection in the dark, tinted glass of the cafe window. She saw a girl sitting alone with a cracked phone, drinking an expensive, watered-down matcha, trying to sell an aesthetic life that wasn't hers.

Her hand trembled violently. The trash icon was right there. One tap, and the humiliation would be over. She could go back to being invisible. She could go back to being the quiet, disciplined law student.

But she didn't hit delete.

Instead, she locked the phone screen, shoved it deep into her canvas tote bag, and stood up. She left the half-full matcha on the table, walked out of the air-conditioned sanctuary, and pushed open the heavy glass door.

The heat of Buenos Aires hit her like a physical blow, a wall of thick, humid air smelling of diesel exhaust and roasting street meat. She squinted against the blinding, golden afternoon sun, gripping the straps of her bag until her knuckles turned white, and walked into the chaotic, unforgiving reality of the city.

CHAPTER 4: THE FIRST WITNESS

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The number four sat on Liam's screen like four small stones placed on his chest.

Views: 4. Likes: 0. Comments: 0.

He lay on his bed with his phone held above his face, the blue light washing the slanted ceiling in a sickly glow. The attic room felt smaller than it had that morning. The walls seemed to lean inward, as if the house itself were listening to the silence of his failure. Outside, the wind pushed against the window with a low, steady pressure, not a gust but a presence, a cold hand testing the glass. The smell of fried lamb fat from downstairs had crept under his door and mingled with the damp wool of his sweater, the old dust in the radiator, the faint chemical ghost of the new camera.

Four views. One was him. The other three might have been bots, or accidental clicks, or people who had opened the video and closed it before the first second had fully loaded. No one had stayed. No one had seen him.

He locked the phone and pressed it face-down against his chest. The screen's warmth leaked through the fabric, a small, stupid heartbeat. He thought of his father's hands on the Formica table, the thick fingers spread flat, the blackened cuticles. *People who chase shadows on a screen end up freezing on the dock.* The words had not been shouted. That was the worst part. Svein had not raged. He had simply stated the weather.

Liam sat up. The room tilted slightly, the way it did when he had been staring at a screen too long. He could not stay here. The walls were too close, the silence too full of numbers. He pulled on his jacket, stuffed the camera into his backpack, and went downstairs.

The kitchen was empty. His father's mug sat in the sink, a dark ring of coffee drying at the bottom. The newspaper lay folded on the table, the crossword half-finished in Svein's blunt, blocky handwriting. Liam looked away from it. He stepped into his boots, the leather stiff with old salt, and opened the front door.

The June afternoon hit him with a wet, mineral breath. Grandi was not beautiful in the way the tourist photographs promised. It was a working harbor, a place of rust and rope and grease, of corrugated iron and concrete stained by decades of fish blood and diesel. The sky was a low, pewter ceiling. The sea beyond the breakwater was the color of old coins. Gulls screamed overhead, their cries sharp and ragged, and somewhere behind him a crane groaned as it swung a crate over the pier.

Liam walked without thinking. His boots found the familiar cracks in the asphalt. He passed the dry dock office, a squat building with a fogged window and a sign that had faded from blue to gray. Through the glass he could see Magnus at his desk, a telephone pressed to his ear, his free hand gesturing at the air. Liam turned his face away and kept walking.

He did not stop until he reached the old harbor wall at the edge of the pier. It was a long ridge of black basalt and concrete, slick with seaweed and the memory of high tide. He sat on the cold stone, his legs hanging over the water. Below him, the surface churned and slapped against the wall, dark and patient.

He took out the camera.

The screen bloomed to life. His own face appeared in the corner of the frame, pale and small against the gray water. He set the camera on the wall beside him, angled it toward the harbor, and pressed record.

For a long moment he said nothing. The wind filled the microphone, a low, roaring hiss. A gull landed on a nearby bollard and stared at him with one yellow eye. Liam watched the bird and felt, absurdly, that it was judging him.

"Hey," he said at last. His voice was thin. The wind tore at it. "I don't really know what I'm doing."

He stopped. His thumb hovered over the stop button. The old instinct rose in him — delete, hide, pretend it never happened. But he did not press it. He looked at the water, at the rusted trawler creaking against its moorings, at the gray sky pressing down on everything.

"My dad thinks I'm wasting my time," he said. "He's probably right. I mean, four views. That's not a career. That's not even a conversation." He laughed, a short, dry sound that the wind swallowed. "But I don't know. I keep thinking there has to be something else. Not because I hate this place. I don't. I love the harbor. I love the smell of it, even when it's disgusting. I love the way the light looks in winter, when it's not really light at all. But I don't want to wake up at forty and realize I never tried anything except what was already decided for me."

He rubbed his thumb against the cold rubber grip of the camera. His fingers were red with cold. The wind pushed tears into the corners of his eyes, or maybe they were not tears at all.

"So this is my first video," he said. "Not the one I edited. That one was crap. This is the real one. I don't know if anyone will watch it. I don't know if I'll keep doing it. But I'm here. That's something."

He stopped recording.

The silence after was enormous. The wind, the gulls, the water — they all rushed back in, louder than before. Liam sat on the wall until his legs went numb. Then he stood, put the camera back in his bag, and walked home.

At the dry dock office, he stopped. Magnus saw him through the window and raised a hand. Liam raised one back. The gesture felt like a small betrayal of himself, or maybe a small surrender to his father. He did not go inside. He did not take the paperwork. Not yet.

That night, he uploaded the second video. No edits. No thumbnail. No title except a single line: *I don't know what I'm doing.*

Then he waited.

The first hour brought nine views. By midnight, it had thirty-seven. Two likes. And one comment.

The comment was from an account named **@sofia.in.between**.

It said: *"this made me feel less alone. i'm trying too."*

Liam read it six times. Then he clicked on the profile. There was only one video, a forty-five-second reel titled *Minimalist Morning Habits in Buenos Aires*. He watched it twice. The girl in the video had dark hair and a cracked phone propped against a stack of books. The light was golden and warm. She moved carefully, as if every gesture had been rehearsed. But in the last few seconds, just before the video ended, her eyes flicked to something off-screen and her smile faltered. It was a small thing, barely visible. Liam noticed it anyway.

He went back to his own video and typed a reply. His thumb hesitated over the send button. Then he pressed it.

"The ten seconds were enough. Keep going."

He locked his phone and lay back on the bed. The attic ceiling was dark now, the blue light gone. Outside, the wind had softened. Somewhere down the street, a car passed with a wet hiss of tires. Liam closed his eyes and listened to his own heartbeat. It did not feel like a verdict anymore. It felt like a signal, sent out into the dark, answered by someone very far away.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The heat followed Sofia home.

It pressed against her back as she walked up Avenida Independencia, past the shuttered kiosks and the bus stops crowded with people fanning themselves with folded newspapers. The golden light of late afternoon had turned the crumbling facades into something almost beautiful, but Sofia could not see it. The comment was still inside her, a splinter of ice in the middle of all that warmth.

Fake girl.

She had deleted it. She had not deleted the video. That small fact felt enormous, like a stone she had decided to carry instead of dropping.

When she reached the apartment, the door was open. The smell of reheated milanesas and strong coffee drifted into the stairwell. She could hear the television, her mother's voice, Mateo's laugh. She stopped on the landing and pressed her back against the cool, peeling wall. For a moment she considered turning around, walking back down the stairs, disappearing into the city until the house had gone quiet.

But she was already home. She pushed open the door.

"Sofia!" Her mother appeared in the kitchen doorway, a dish towel over her shoulder, her hair pulled back with a plastic clip. "Where have you been? I called you twice. Did you see? Your father brought the papers from the firm. He wants you to read the internship contract before Monday."

Sofia nodded. "I saw."

"And your brother says you locked yourself in your room again. Why do you lock the door? This is not a hotel."

"I was changing."

Her mother's eyes narrowed slightly, but before she could ask another question, Mateo appeared from the living room, a half-eaten empanada in his hand. "Did you get the groceries? Mom said you were going to help."

"I forgot."

"You forgot?" Mateo laughed, but it was not a cruel laugh. It was the laugh of someone who had never had to remember anything important. "You're going to be a lawyer, Sofi. You can't forget the groceries."

Sofia forced a smile. "I'll go now."

"No, no," her mother said, waving the dish towel. "It's too late. Your father will go tomorrow. Come and eat."

Sofia shook her head. "I have a headache. I'm going to lie down."

She walked down the narrow hallway before anyone could stop her. The floorboards creaked under her bare feet, familiar as her own pulse. She closed her bedroom door and turned the brass key in the lock. The click was a small, sharp sound of safety.

The room was still hot. The fan on her desk whirred uselessly, pushing warm air across the scattered lavender buds. She had not cleaned them up. They lay on the floor like tiny, dried tears.

Sofia sat on the edge of her bed and took out her phone. The new crack in the corner of the screen caught the light, a thin white scar. She opened the app. Her reel still had forty-eight views. The comment was gone. But the words were still there, printed behind her eyes.

She scrolled without thinking. Her feed was full of girls in linen dresses, girls with perfect coffee cups, girls who seemed to have been born with the confidence Sofia had to practice in front of a mirror. She was about to close the app when a video appeared at the bottom of her feed, strange and out of place among the golden light and smooth transitions.

It was gray. The sky was gray, the water was gray, the face of the boy on the screen was pale and uncertain. He was sitting on a stone wall at the edge of a harbor, the wind tearing at his hair. The title was simple: *I don't know what I'm doing.*

Sofia watched.

The boy did not smile. He did not use a filter. He did not tell her to buy a course or stop asking for permission. He just sat there, his voice thin and half-eaten by the wind, and said he did not know if he was wasting his time. He said his father thought he was chasing shadows. He said he loved the harbor, but he did not want to wake up at forty and realize he had never tried anything else.

When the video ended, Sofia sat very still. The fan clicked as it turned. The sounds of her family filtered through the door — the television, her mother's laugh, Mateo's heavy footsteps. They were the sounds of her life, loud and loving and suffocating. But for a moment, she felt something else. A small, quiet thread connecting her room in San Telmo to a cold harbor at the edge of the world.

She opened the comments and typed before she could talk herself out of it.

"this made me feel less alone. i'm trying too."

She pressed send. Her heart hammered. Then she locked the phone and pressed it against her chest, the way she used to hold a book as a child when a story had frightened her.

She did not expect a reply.

She did not expect anything at all.

But twenty minutes later, while she was lying on her bed in the dark, the phone buzzed against her ribs. She lifted it. A notification glowed on the cracked screen.

@liam.grandi replied to your comment: *"The ten seconds were enough. Keep going."*

Sofia stared at the words. She did not know what ten seconds he meant. She did not know who he was. But the words settled into her chest like a small, warm stone. She read them again. Then she opened her gallery and looked at the trimmed clip of her own reel — the perfect ten seconds before the crash, before her brother's fist on the door, before the vase tipped and the lavender scattered.

Ten seconds. Maybe that was all she had. Maybe that was enough to start.

She locked the phone, set it on the nightstand, and lay back on the bed. The room was still hot. The fan still whirred. Her family still argued and laughed and expected her to be someone she was not sure she could become. But for the first time in days, the silence inside her was not empty. It was waiting.

CHAPTER 5: THE SHAPE OF A VOICE

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The reply came at 1:47 AM.

Liam had not been asleep. He had been lying on his back in the dark, the camera on the desk beside him like a small, patient animal, its lens cap on, its battery half-drained. The phone buzzed against the windowsill where he had left it, and the sound was so unexpected that he sat up before he was fully awake, his heart already pounding.

He read the words three times in the dark, the screen's brightness cutting a white rectangle into the black room.

@sofia.in.between: *"thank you. i almost deleted everything tonight. i'm glad i didn't."*

Liam exhaled. The breath came out shaky, almost a laugh. He typed back before he could think about it too much.

"Me too. I almost didn't post that video. It felt too honest. Like standing outside without a coat."

He pressed send and immediately felt foolish. *Like standing outside without a coat.* Who said things like that? He was about to add something else, something to soften it, when three dots appeared on the screen. They pulsed for a long moment. Then disappeared. Then appeared again.

@sofia.in.between: *"exactly. i keep trying to make everything look perfect and it just makes me feel more invisible."*

Liam stared at the words. He knew that feeling. He knew it the way he knew the smell of low tide and the particular gray of the sky before snow. He had spent years trying to make himself small enough to fit into the shape his father had carved for him, and then he had spent months trying to make himself large enough to fit into the shape of the creators on his phone screen. Neither had worked. Both had left him feeling like a ghost in his own life.

He typed: *"What are you trying to make perfect?"*

The reply took a long time. Liam watched the ceiling, the pale indigo of the summer night bleeding through the skylight. The wind had died down. The house was silent except for the low hum of the refrigerator and the occasional creak of old wood settling.

Then the phone buzzed again. It was not a comment. It was a direct message.

@sofia.in.between: *"everything. my room. my voice. my accent. my life. i'm supposed to be a lawyer. my family has it all planned. but i don't want to be a lawyer. i want to make things. i want to tell stories. i want to be seen. and every time i try, i feel like a fraud."*

Liam read the message with his thumb hovering over the screen. The words were raw, unpolished, the kind of thing you only said to a stranger in the middle of the night. He understood. He understood so completely that it ached.

He wrote back: *"My dad wants me to be a diesel mechanic. Union job. Good pay. He says people who chase shadows on a screen end up freezing on the dock. I think he's probably right. But I can't do it. I can't spend my life in the guts of an engine. I want to make things too. I want to tell stories. I don't know if I'm any good at it. But I can't stop trying."*

He sent it. Then he added: *"Maybe we're both frauds. Or maybe we're just beginners. I don't know. But I'm glad you didn't delete your video."*

The three dots appeared. Then a message.

@sofia.in.between: *"what's your name? i'm sofia."*

He smiled. It was a small smile, barely there, but it felt like the first real thing he had done in days.

"Liam. Nice to meet you, Sofia."

They talked until the gray light of dawn began to seep through the skylight, turning the room from black to charcoal to a soft, pearlescent gray. They talked about the videos they watched and the creators they admired and the fear that lived in the pit of their stomachs every time they pressed publish. Sofia told him about Buenos Aires — the heat, the noise, the way the city pressed in on her from all sides. Liam told her about Reykjavík — the endless dusk, the smell of the harbor, the way the wind could strip the warmth from your bones in seconds.

They did not talk about what came next. They did not make promises. They were two strangers in two cold rooms at opposite ends of the earth, and for one night, that was enough.

When Liam finally lay down to sleep, the sky outside was the color of wet slate. The camera on his desk looked different now. It did not look like a weapon or a verdict. It looked like a window. A small, imperfect window, but a window nonetheless.

He fell asleep thinking about the shape of Sofia's words. The way she wrote in lowercase, as if she were trying to take up less space. The way she said *i want to be seen* without any punctuation, as if the sentence had simply trailed off into the dark.

He understood that too.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Sofia woke to the sound of church bells and the smell of burning toast.

The bells came from the old parish on the corner, their iron tongues clanging with a rhythm that felt older than the city itself. The toast was her mother's doing — she burned it every Sunday, a small, consistent tragedy that the family had learned to accept. Sofia lay in bed for a long moment, her phone clutched in her hand, the screen dark. Her eyes were gritty from lack of sleep. Her head ached with the particular heaviness of a night spent staring at a screen.

But she was smiling.

She scrolled back through the conversation, reading the messages in the pale morning light. Liam. His name was Liam. He lived in Iceland, which she knew was a real place but had always imagined as a kind of abstract concept — ice and volcanoes and long, dark winters. He had a father who wanted him to be a mechanic. He had a camera he had bought in secret. He had called her brave, or at least he had said he was glad she hadn't deleted her video, which was close enough.

She had told him things she had never told anyone. Not her mother, not her sister, not the friends she had known since primary school. She had told a stranger in the north about the tight, suffocating feeling in her chest when she thought about law school. About the way she practiced her English in the mirror, shaping her mouth around words that did not feel like her own. About the dream she had never spoken aloud: that she wanted to make films. Real films. Not just reels and short-form content, but stories with beginnings and middles and ends, stories that made people feel seen.

She had never said that out loud. Not once. She had barely admitted it to herself.

"Sofia!" Her mother's voice cut through the morning quiet, sharp and familiar. "Sofia, ven a desayunar! The toast is getting cold!"

Sofia locked her phone and sat up. The room was already warm, the morning sun slanting through the balcony doors and turning the dust motes into floating gold. She looked at the mess on her floor — the dried lavender, the fallen textbooks, the borrowed linen shirt crumpled in a corner — and felt, for the first time in weeks, a small, stubborn surge of energy. Not motivation, exactly. Not hope. Something closer to defiance.

She stood up, pulled on the oversized t-shirt with the bleach stain, and opened her door.

Her mother was in the kitchen, her hair still in its plastic clip, a spatula in one hand. Mateo was at the table, scrolling through his phone. Her father was in his usual chair, the newspaper folded beside his plate, his reading glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

"Good morning, mi amor," her father said without looking up. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Sofia said. It was not true, but it was not entirely a lie either.

She sat down and poured herself a cup of coffee from the old enamel pot. The coffee was strong and bitter, the way her father liked it. She drank it slowly, feeling the heat spread through her chest.

"Your father wants to go over the internship contract today," her mother said, sliding a plate of burned toast onto the table. "After lunch. He has some notes for you."

Sofia's hand tightened around her mug. "I have plans today."

Her mother turned. "Plans? What plans?"

"I'm meeting a friend," Sofia said. The lie came easily, which surprised her. She did not have a friend to meet. But she had an idea, a small, reckless idea that had been forming in her mind since she woke up.

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "What friend?"

"Just a friend from school. We're going to study together."

Her father lowered his newspaper. His eyes, dark and patient, studied her over the rim of his glasses. "The contract is important, Sofia. It's not every day a firm offers a first-year internship. Your mother and I are proud of you."

"I know, Papa."

"Then why do you look like you want to run away?"

The question hung in the air. Sofia felt the blood rise to her cheeks. She stared at her plate, at the burned toast, at the crumbs scattered across the tablecloth. *Because I do,* she wanted to say. *Because I want to run away more than I have ever wanted anything.*

"I'm not running," she said instead. "I'm just… tired."

Her father held her gaze for a long moment. Then he nodded and returned to his newspaper. "We'll talk after lunch. Don't be late."

Sofia finished her coffee in silence. Then she stood, kissed her mother on the cheek, and walked back down the hallway to her room. She closed the door and locked it. The click was a small, familiar comfort.

She sat on the floor, her back against the bed, and opened her phone.

@liam.grandi: *"Good morning. Or afternoon. I don't know what time it is where you are. I just wanted to say I watched your video again. The ten seconds. They're good. You look like you're about to say something true. I hope you get to say it."*

Sofia pressed the phone against her chest. The cracked screen was warm against her skin. She read the message twice, three times, letting the words settle into her.

Then she stood up, cleared the laundry off her bed, and set her phone against the stack of law textbooks. She adjusted the angle until the morning light fell across her face. She did not put on her sister's linen shirt. She did not arrange the dried flowers or the leather-bound notebooks. She was wearing her oldest, softest t-shirt, the one with the bleach stain, and her hair was a mess, and her face was still puffy from sleep.

She pressed record.

"Hola," she said. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper. The camera's microphone caught the low hum of the fan, the distant clang of the church bells, the sound of her own breathing. "I don't have a script today. I don't have a plan. I just wanted to say something real."

She paused. The red timer ticked in the corner of the screen. *00:05… 00:06… 00:07…*

"I'm nineteen years old," she said. "I live in Buenos Aires. My family wants me to be a lawyer. And I don't know if I can do it. Not because I'm not smart enough. Because I don't think I want it."

The words came out shaky. Her voice cracked on *want*. She almost stopped recording. She almost deleted the whole thing. But she thought of the boy on the harbor wall, the gray wind, the thin voice saying *I don't know what I'm doing.* And she kept going.

"I want to make things," she said. "I want to tell stories. I want to be seen. And I'm terrified that if I say that out loud, everyone I love will look at me like I've lost my mind."

She stopped recording.

The silence in the room rushed back in, loud and thick. Her heart was hammering. Her hands were shaking. The video was only twenty-two seconds long. It was not polished. It was not aesthetic. It was not beautiful.

She posted it anyway.

Then she locked her phone, put it in her pocket, and walked out of her room to help her mother clear the table. The church bells were still ringing. The heat was already building. The city was waking up. And for the first time in a long time, Sofia felt like she was waking up too.

CHAPTER 6: THE CRACKED LENS

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The video found its audience on a Tuesday.

Liam was at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of skyr with a spoon that had been in the family for three generations, when his phone began to buzz against the Formica. Not once. Not twice. A steady, insistent rhythm, like a fly trapped against a windowpane. He ignored it at first, assuming it was a group chat he had forgotten to mute. But then it buzzed again. And again. And again.

Svein was at the stove, his back to Liam, scrambling eggs in the old cast-iron pan. The smell of butter and coffee filled the kitchen. Outside, the June morning was bright in a way that felt almost aggressive, the gray having lifted for once, leaving the harbor glittering under a pale, watery sun.

"You going to answer that?" Svein asked without turning around.

Liam picked up the phone. The notification screen was crowded, stacked with comments, likes, and a single line of red text that made his stomach drop and rise at the same time: **Your video is getting attention.**

He opened the app.

Views: 12,847. Likes: 3,204. Comments: 416.

He stared at the numbers. They did not make sense. They were too large, too sudden, like a wave that had been building somewhere far out at sea and had chosen this exact moment to crash over his head.

"Liam?" Svein's voice was sharper now. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Liam said, but his voice came out strange, thin and high. He locked the phone and set it face-down on the table, as if the screen itself were radioactive. "Just… something online."

Svein turned. The spatula hung in his hand, dripping egg. His eyes moved from Liam's face to the phone on the table and back again. "Something online," he repeated. The words were flat, the way he said them when he was deciding whether to be angry.

"It's just a video," Liam said. "I posted a video. People are watching it. It's not a big deal."

Svein set the spatula down. He turned off the burner, wiped his hands on a dish towel, and walked over to the table. He did not sit down. He stood, his broad shoulders blocking the light from the window, and looked at the face-down phone.

"How many people?" he asked.

"I don't know. Twelve thousand."

The silence that followed was heavy with the smell of eggs and the distant cry of gulls. Svein's jaw tightened. His hands, resting on the back of the chair, were still. "Twelve thousand people watched you do what? Talk about the harbor?"

"Talk about my life."

Svein exhaled slowly through his nose. "And what did you tell them about your life?"

Liam looked up. His father's eyes were the color of the sea in winter, pale and cold and patient. There was no anger in them yet, but there was something else, something that looked almost like fear. Liam had never seen fear on his father's face before. It unsettled him more than anger would have.

"I told them the truth," Liam said. "I told them I don't want to be a mechanic."

Svein was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded, once, a small, stiff movement of his head. "And now twelve thousand strangers know more about my son than I do."

He picked up his mug, poured the rest of his coffee down the sink, and walked out of the kitchen. The front door opened and closed with a soft click. Liam sat alone at the table, the skyr turning warm in its bowl, the phone buzzing against the Formica like a living thing.

He did not pick it up until his father's footsteps had faded from the street.

The comments were a flood.

Most were kind. Some were not. Liam read them in his room with the door locked, the curtains drawn against the aggressive sunlight, his back against the slanted wall. He read them until his eyes ached and the words began to blur and lose their meaning.

"This is the most honest thing I've seen on this app."

"The way you talk about the harbor is beautiful. You should write."

"Bro why are you so sad just get a job lol."

"I've never been to Iceland but I feel like I'm there."

"The part about your dad broke my heart."

"This is boring. Nothing happens."

He read the last one four times. *Nothing happens.* It was true. He had sat on a wall in the wind and talked about his feelings. There had been no drone shots, no jump cuts, no perfectly framed aesthetic coffee cups. It was just him, gray and awkward and unfinished.

But the kind comments kept coming. People from Brazil and Japan and Canada and a small town in Ohio. People who said they felt the same way. People who said they had also stood at the edge of a life they had not chosen and looked down into the dark water.

And then, buried in the flood, a message from Sofia.

@sofia.in.between: *"look at the views. liam. look. people are watching. people are feeling it. don't let the mean ones get in your head. the boring one is wrong. things are happening."*

He laughed. A real laugh, the kind that surprised him. He had not known he was capable of it today.

He typed back: *"I posted a second video. Just me talking. No edits. My dad saw the numbers and walked out. I think I broke something."*

The reply came fast: *"or maybe you opened something. my family doesn't even know i'm doing this. they think i'm studying for the internship."*

Liam stared at the words. A thought was forming in the back of his mind, quiet and dangerous and impossible to ignore. *Maybe we don't have to do this alone.*

He typed: *"What if we made something together? You in Buenos Aires. Me in Reykjavík. A conversation. Two people trying to figure it out."*

The three dots appeared. Then disappeared. Then appeared again, pulsing for a long, agonizing minute.

@sofia.in.between: *"you mean like a collab?"*

"Something like that. Not a collab. A conversation. A real one."

Another long pause. Then: *"i've never shown anyone my face on camera. not properly. not saying real things."*

"Neither have I. Not until this week."

The reply came after a moment that felt like an hour.

@sofia.in.between: *"okay. let's try. but you go first."*

Liam set the phone down. He looked at the camera on the desk, the small black mirrorless body he had bought with money he was not supposed to spend, the lens that had captured his first fumbling attempts at being someone else. He picked it up, turned it over in his hands, and thought about the word *collaboration.* It felt too big, too professional, too much like something the creators in Bali would say. What he and Sofia were doing was smaller than that. It was two people in two cold rooms, holding up a candle to the dark and hoping someone else could see the flame.

He turned the camera on and began to set up the shot.

PART II — SOFIA (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The apartment was empty for the first time in months.

Her mother had taken Mateo to the dentist. Her father was at the firm until eight. The silence in the apartment was so unusual that Sofia kept pausing to listen, as if she did not quite believe it. The refrigerator hummed. The ceiling fan clicked. Outside, a distant bus groaned and hissed and pulled away from the stop on Avenida Independencia. That was all.

She had the entire afternoon. A whole, uninterrupted, golden afternoon.

She stood in the middle of her bedroom and looked at the space as if she were seeing it for the first time. The peeling paint. The wooden floor worn smooth by decades of footsteps. The stack of law textbooks on the desk, their spines cracked from use, their pages dense with a future she had not chosen. The borrowed linen shirt, now returned to her sister's closet. The cracked phone with its new scar.

She cleared the desk. Not the way she had before, arranging it to look effortless and aesthetic, but truly cleared it. She stacked the textbooks in a corner. She folded the laundry on her bed. She swept the dried lavender off the floor and threw it away. She opened the balcony doors and let the warm, diesel-scented air rush in.

Then she set up her phone on the desk and pressed record.

"Okay," she said. Her voice was steady this time. She had practiced. Not the words — she did not want to practice the words — but the feeling. The feeling of being allowed to speak. "Liam. I don't know if you can hear this yet. I don't know how we're going to put this together. But I wanted to try."

She paused. The fan clicked. A motorcycle roared past on the avenue below, and she waited for it to fade before she spoke again.

"You said you didn't know what you were doing. I don't either. But I know what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of spending my life in a room I didn't choose, doing work that doesn't belong to me, and slowly forgetting that I ever wanted something else."

She looked down at her hands. They were not trembling. She had expected them to tremble. They were steady, resting on the worn wood of the desk.

"My father says the family path is a gift," she said. "He says I should be grateful. And I am grateful. But gratitude isn't the same as belonging. I keep thinking — what if the life you're grateful for isn't the life you're meant to live? What do you do with that?"

She stopped recording.

The silence after was not empty. It was full of the sounds of her own life — the fan, the buses, the distant church bells — but for the first time, she did not feel trapped by them. She felt surrounded. Held.

She saved the video and sent it to Liam.

Then she sat back in her chair and looked out the balcony doors at the crumbling, majestic facades of San Telmo, and she allowed herself to imagine, just for a moment, a life in which she was allowed to want what she wanted.

Her phone buzzed. A message from Liam.

@liam.grandi: *"I watched it three times. You're not a fraud. You're not pretending. You're just telling the truth in a language you're still learning. That's not fake. That's brave."*

Sofia pressed her hand against her mouth. The tears came suddenly, without warning, the way summer rain comes in Buenos Aires — hot and fast and overwhelming. She cried for a long time, her forehead pressed against the desk, the cracked phone clutched in her hand. She cried for the girl she had been, the girl who had practiced smiling in the mirror until her cheeks ached, the girl who had never said *I want* out loud.

When the tears stopped, she sat up, wiped her face with the hem of her t-shirt, and opened the editing app.

She had work to do.

They spent the next three days building the video together.

It was a strange, intimate process. They sent each other clips and fragments, voice notes and screenshots. Sofia would film her part in the morning, when the light in her room was soft and golden and the apartment was quiet. Liam would film his at night, when the endless Icelandic dusk had deepened to a bruised, pearlescent blue and the harbor wind rattled his windowpane. They wrote and rewrote the script, then threw the script away entirely and simply talked.

Sofia learned that Liam's father had not spoken to him in three days. He left for the dry dock before Liam woke and returned long after the house had gone dark. The silence between them was worse than the argument had been. It was a cold, heavy presence in the kitchen, at the table, in the hallway, filling the spaces where words used to be.

Liam learned that Sofia's father had noticed the cracked phone and asked her about it twice. She had lied both times, telling him she had dropped it on the subway. The lie sat in her chest like a stone, but she did not know how to explain the truth — that she had dropped it while filming a video about a life she was not supposed to want.

They talked about the things they did not have words for. The shape of their families. The weight of expectations. The particular loneliness of being loved and still feeling invisible. They talked until their voices grew rough and their batteries ran low, until the sky outside Sofia's window turned gold and the sky outside Liam's turned to charcoal.

On the third night, Liam sent a message that made Sofia set her phone down and stare at the ceiling for a full minute.

@liam.grandi: *"Do you think we'll ever actually meet? Not just through a screen. In person."*

She typed back: *"I don't know. Iceland is very far away."*

"Buenos Aires is very far away too."

She picked up the phone and held it against her chest, the way she had held it when they first started talking. She could hear the fan. She could hear a couple arguing in the street below, their voices rising and falling in the familiar, musical cadence of the city. She could hear her own heartbeat.

She wrote: *"Maybe that's what the videos are for. Maybe we're not supposed to meet yet. Maybe we're supposed to build something first."*

The reply came after a long pause.

@liam.grandi: *"Then let's build it."*

They uploaded the video on a Thursday, at the same moment, in two different time zones. Sofia posted it on her account first, then Liam linked to it from his. The title was simple, a phrase they had agreed on after a long, exhausting conversation that had lasted until 4:00 AM Buenos Aires time and 7:00 AM Reykjavík time.

"Two Strangers, Two Cities, One Question."

They did not know if anyone would watch. They did not know if it would matter. But as Sofia locked her phone and lay back on her bed, the evening heat pressing against the balcony doors, she felt something she had not felt in a long time. Not hope, exactly. Not confidence. Something quieter. Something sturdier.

She felt like she was building a bridge. One plank at a time. From her room in San Telmo to a cold harbor at the edge of the world.

And somewhere on the other side of that bridge, a boy in a faded gray sweater was building the same thing.

CHAPTER 7: THE FLOOD

PART I — LIAM (Reykjavík, Iceland)

The video went live at 6:00 PM Reykjavík time.

Liam had chosen the hour deliberately. It was the hour when the Icelandic evening was at its most deceptive — bright enough to feel like afternoon, dim enough to hint at the long dusk to come. He had read somewhere that 6:00 PM was a good time to post if you wanted to catch the American morning scroll. He did not know if that was true. He did not know anything anymore, except that his hands were cold and his heart was beating too fast and the camera on his desk was watching him with its single, patient eye.

He pressed publish. Then he stood up, walked to the window, and pressed his forehead against the cold glass.

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