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# Vanishing Point

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## Introduction

Tessa Ward held her camera like a shield, wielding it between herself and the world. She'd always been restless, chasing the unpredictable—protests that teetered on the edge of chaos, city streets at midnight, the stories no one else would tell. The pressure of her profession was relentless: deadlines bleeding into one another, her phone persistent with calls for images that were ever more raw, more real, more dangerous. Every assignment felt like another gamble with fate, and lately the odds seemed to be turning against her. The city was a mosaic of light and shadow, and she moved through it in pursuit of truths most people would rather ignore.

Her apartment was a gallery of frozen moments—faces captured mid-shout, rain falling on abandoned cars, hands reaching for help or perhaps for something else entirely. She didn't bring many people home anymore. Photographs filled the spaces that friends and laughter used to occupy. Even her family had grown distant, worn down by misunderstandings and the persistent feeling that Tessa lived on some fault line they could not cross. When fatigue crept in, she told herself it was the cost of her calling, that only those willing to lose themselves in their work truly understood what it meant to document reality.

Yet cracks had begun to form. She'd wake in the night, heart pounding, unable to name the source of her anxiety. Arguments with her editor became commonplace. Old friends avoided her gaze. She felt the walls of her life pressing inward—her father's lingering illness, her failed attempts at reconciliation with her sister, her own inability to let anyone get close. And then there was Miles, whose resentful texts still buzzed at the edge of her consciousness. He, at least, had left without looking back.

A sense of dread threaded quietly through her days. There were things she couldn't remember, even before the night everything changed. Glitches in her recollection: a taxi ride with no clear destination, the smell of saltwater nowhere near the sea, rain on her skin—and a man's voice, low and insistent, somewhere just out of frame. It was as if her ever-present camera had jammed, leaving her with only half-exposed negatives. She drowned herself in work, hoping the noise would drown out whatever truth was trying to surface.

The city itself seemed to shudder beneath its bright veneer, and with each assignment, Tessa felt less like an observer and more like a participant in something she couldn't fully see. She sensed eyes on her at odd hours, shadows elongating in impossible directions. There was an error, she sometimes thought, in the way the world arranged itself for her—details out of place, moments she experienced twice, conversations she was certain she had only dreamed.

As she stood on the threshold between memory and oblivion, Tessa had no inkling how quickly her life was about to unravel. That one night would erase a month of her existence, hurl her into suspicion, and force her to confront impossible questions about who she truly was—and what she might be capable of, when the last safe certainties vanished from view.

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## CHAPTER ONE: A Patchwork Dawn

The first sensation was the taste of copper and a dull throb behind her eyes, as if someone had hammered a nail into the base of her skull and left it there to vibrate. Then came the artificial scent of antiseptic, sharp and cloying, pulling her further from the sweet oblivion of unconsciousness. Tessa's eyelids fluttered, a monumental effort against a weight she couldn't comprehend. When they finally parted, she was met not with the familiar chaos of her apartment or the vibrant cityscape, but with a sterile white ceiling. Fluorescent lights hummed, casting a sickly yellow glow.

Her throat felt like sandpaper. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was a desert. A thin, clear tube ran from the back of her hand, snaking its way to a drip stand beside the bed. IV. Hospital. The word echoed in her mind, detached and clinical. Why was she here? Her last coherent memory was of developing photos in her darkroom, the faint smell of chemicals, the hum of the enlarger. That was... yesterday? A week ago? The timeline was a blur, smeared like a poorly developed negative.

She tried to shift, to push herself up, but a searing pain shot through her left arm, making her gasp. It was tightly bandaged, elevated on a pillow. A sharp, stinging sensation bloomed on her forehead. Reaching up, she found another bandage, thick and clumsy, just above her temple. Her fingers, despite their trembling, felt alien, clumsy. A quick scan of her body revealed more bandages, more tenderness. Her ribs ached with a deep, bruised pain.

A faint beeping sound came from a machine next to her bed, its digital display glowing green. Heart rate, blood pressure, the steady rhythm of a life being monitored. But whose life? It felt like a stranger's. Her own seemed to have fragmented, leaving only these disjointed sensations. She closed her eyes, trying to force coherence, to summon a memory, any memory, from the immediate past. Nothing. Just a vast, echoing void.

A figure stirred in her peripheral vision. A nurse, her face kind but weary, approached the bed. "Ms. Ward? You're awake. That's excellent." Her voice was soft, practiced, designed to soothe. Tessa just stared, her mouth too dry to form words. The nurse checked the IV drip, then adjusted a knob on the machine beside the bed. "How are you feeling?"

*How are you feeling?* The question felt absurd. She felt like a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing, scattered to the winds. Her tongue felt heavy, a foreign object in her mouth. "Water," she croaked, the sound rough and grating.

The nurse nodded, pouring a small amount from a pitcher into a plastic cup. She held it to Tessa's lips, guiding her to sip slowly. The cool liquid was a revelation, a tiny anchor in the vast sea of her confusion. "Do you remember what happened, Ms. Ward?" the nurse asked gently, her eyes assessing.

Tessa tried. She really did. She closed her eyes again, concentrating, digging through the blank spaces in her mind. A flicker: a man's face, not clear, but a strong jaw, dark eyes. A flash of lightning, heavy rain. A guttural shout, then a crash. But it was fleeting, gone before she could grasp it, like trying to catch smoke. She opened her eyes, shaking her head minutely. "No. Nothing. Where am I?"

"You're at St. Jude's Hospital," the nurse explained, her voice still calm. "You were brought in early this morning. You've been unconscious for... oh, about twelve hours."

Twelve hours? It felt like a lifetime. Or no time at all. "What happened to me?" Tessa managed, a tremor in her voice.

The nurse hesitated, her gaze drifting towards the door. "The police will be able to explain that, Ms. Ward. They're very keen to speak with you."

Police. The word hit her like a physical blow. A cold dread seeped into her bones, replacing the dull ache. Why would the police be interested in her? What could she possibly have done? Or witnessed? The void in her memory felt less like a blank slate and more like a carefully erased document.

Just then, the door opened and two figures entered. A man and a woman, both dressed in plain clothes but with an undeniable air of authority. The man was tall, with a stern face and shrewd eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. The woman was shorter, with sharp, intelligent features and a notepad clutched in her hand. They approached the bed, their presence filling the small room.

"Ms. Tessa Ward?" the man asked, his voice deep and unyielding. "I'm Detective Harding, and this is Detective Miller. We're with the Metropolitan Police. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

Tessa's heart began to hammer against her ribs. She felt a surge of fear, primal and unreasoning. She was still in pain, still disoriented, and now these strangers were looking at her with an intensity that bordered on accusation. "I... I don't remember anything," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Detective Harding's expression didn't soften. "So the nurse informed us. However, Ms. Ward, we believe you may have some information regarding a very serious incident. You were found at the scene of a... a tragic event."

"Scene?" Tessa repeated, confusion battling with growing panic. "What scene?"

Detective Miller stepped forward, her voice surprisingly gentle, a stark contrast to Harding's clipped tone. "Ms. Ward, you were found unconscious in an alleyway, not far from the abandoned warehouse on Harper Street. And you were... in close proximity to a deceased individual."

Deceased individual. The words hung in the air, cold and heavy. Tessa's breath hitched. Her mind reeled, trying to connect the dots, to make sense of this horrifying revelation. An alleyway? An abandoned warehouse? A dead person? And *she* was there? A fresh wave of nausea washed over her, making the room spin.

"Who... who was it?" she managed to stammer out, her voice barely a whisper.

Detective Harding finally leaned forward, his gaze unwavering. "His name was Elias Thorne, Ms. Ward. And we're going to need you to tell us everything you remember about him."

Elias Thorne. The name meant nothing to her. Not a flicker of recognition. Just a vast, terrifying emptiness. Tessa stared at the detectives, her vision blurring, the humming of the fluorescent lights growing louder, more insistent, until it was a piercing shriek in her ears. She was in a hospital bed, injured, memoryless, and apparently, a suspect in a murder. The world outside the sterile room might as well have vanished. And with it, perhaps, her own sanity.

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