

Chapter 1

The plane hummed beneath Ryan like a low, steady breath, filling the cabin with a sound that dulled thoughts and softened edges. The recycled air smelled faintly metallic, tinged with stale coffee and detergent. Overhead, the soft whir of the vents blended with the muffled voices of passengers and the clink of plastic cutlery on trays. Outside, the sky stretched endless and pale, clouds drifting as if they were slow, forgotten ideas.

Ryan's spine was straight in his seat, his gaze fixed on the horizon beyond the window. His book lay open in his lap, but the words had stopped meaning anything pages ago. His fingers rested lightly on the paper, holding on out of habit more than need. He wasn't reading. He wasn't really watching the sky. He was somewhere in between, where distance felt safer than clarity. His dark hair fell slightly over his brow, softening his sharp features, and his pale shirt made him look almost washed in the amber glow of the cabin lights.

A child's laugh bubbled from somewhere behind him, the high, bright sound cutting through the hum of the cabin. Ryan blinked, dragged briefly from his fog of thought, and let his gaze flicker down to his reflection in the window, a faint, pale ghost overlaid on blue. He looked tired. Distant. He wondered if he'd always appeared that way, or if the sky had done it to him.

One row back, Ray slouched into his seat, hoodie bunched at his waist, headphones resting loose around his neck. His skin was sun-touched even before the Bali's air could get to him, and his dark hair was casually tousled, as if the flight hadn't dared to flatten it. His easy smile when he shifted in his seat spoke of someone who didn't mind the waiting, didn't mind much at all. The world outside had paused. The engines buzzed softly, the seat cradled him, and for once, he didn't have to decide a thing. Not yet.

They didn't see each other. One row apart, one moment apart. The same destination pulling at them both.

At the baggage carousel, Bali's airport greeted them like a sauna wrapped in marble. The air shimmered with heat, too many people crowded too close, signs stacked above signs, light bouncing off polished stone. The mingled smells hit Ryan. Jet fuel, incense, hot oil from food stalls just outside. He noticed a tired mother soothing a crying baby, her voice soft and frayed with exhaustion. A gecko skittered across the marble near a pillar, startling him briefly. His chest tightened unexpectedly. Why did he always feel more alone stepping off a plane? His mind flashed, uninvited, to someone who might have met him here, once upon a time, or someone he thought would be by his side. But he kept walking. Be early. Be measured. Be invisible enough not to be mistaken for someone interesting.

Ray, meanwhile, was all relaxed limbs and quiet confidence. He helped a tourist woman lift her oversized bag onto a cart, sharing a brief laugh with her at the ridiculous size of it. At customs, he cracked a joke that made the officer smirk as the stamp hit his passport. His navy hoodie clung too warm against his skin, but it felt true to him. He whistled under his breath, taking in the chaos with easy acceptance, the kind of man who let the world swirl around him without letting it in.

Carousel Four groaned as it turned. Ray spotted the bag first. Black canvas, a little worn at the edges, tagged neatly R. Kim. He grabbed it without thinking.

Four seconds later, Ryan did the same. Black canvas, same tag, same initials. They passed each other again, shoulders brushed. No eye contact. No spark. Just a quiet wrong turn.

The hotel room was cool, quiet. A polished contrast to the dizzying heat outside. Ryan stood near the window, wiping a thin layer of sweat from the back of his neck with the edge of his shirt. A soft knock. The bellhop entered with the bag, rolling it gently near the foot of the bed. Ryan nodded a quick thanks, offered a small tip, and let the door close behind him.

All he wanted was his charger. He crouched beside the bed, reached to unzip the front pocket. Then paused. The zipper was stiff. The texture felt off. He straightened slowly.

This wasn't his bag. Same shape. Same tag. R. Kim. But the keychain was gone. The corner scuff looked wrong. His pulse kicked up a little. He unzipped it halfway, just enough to peek inside. A camera strap. A tangle of bracelets. Something floral. Definitely not his. Ryan zipped it shut again quickly, as if that might undo it.

He sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the bag. One hand hovered above the handle. His thoughts spiraled. He reached for his phone. No missed calls. No messages. He looked at the bag again. After a beat, he exhaled and slowly unzipped it again.

The room's stillness seemed too loud as the teeth rasped open, catching slightly on fabric. The scent rising from inside wasn't his. Something warm, faintly spicy, possibly cardamom or old cologne. A camera strap lay coiled at the top. A tangle of beaded bracelets. A postcard, unsent, with a temple scrawled in quick, sure lines. He touched each item with care, as if they might explain themselves. The bag was almost human. Familiar in shape, but not the kind of person he was.

"Nope."

His voice sounded loud in the room. He shut the bag. It felt wrong to look any further. He sat back, frustration rising.

At Ray's villa, the reveal began with heat. He dropped the bag on the bed and peeled off his hoodie, the fabric clinging damp against his skin. He was already reaching for something cooler to change into. Maybe swim trunks, something light. A quick dip in the pool in his villa sounded perfect.

He unzipped the bag and tossed it open.
A button-down shirt slid free. It smelled faintly of starch.
A slim leather notebook, pristine.
A charger coiled like it had been packed with care.
A pen with a corporate logo.
A small tin of mints, unopened.
A business card slipped from between the folds.
He picked it up.

Ryan Kim.

The name sat neat in the center, printed in crisp, serif font. Ray blinked. He gave a small, amused exhale, part laugh, part question.

"Well. Hello, Ryan Kim."

Ray definitely dug more than he'd admit. His fingers lingered on the notebook's clean cover, on the straight crease of the itinerary. He could almost see the man, buttoned-down, measured, probably too careful by half. And none of it would help him in the heat.

He pulled out a shirt and held it up. His size. But stiff, pale, and far too serious for Bali. He dropped it back into the bag, unimpressed.

He pushed down his jeans, leaving him in just his shorts. The villa's closet caught his eye. A robe hung there, white, soft and far more inviting. With a grin at himself, he crossed the room and pulled it on, the cotton cool against his flushed skin. He caught his reflection in the glass door, smirked at the contrast of robe and bare legs, and picked up his phone.

He stared at the blank message screen, thumb resting just above the keyboard, thinking about what to say. He chuckled, typed slowly.

Ray: I think we switched bags.

He stared at it. Considered rewording. Sent it anyway.

A pause. The phone vibrated in his hand. Ryan's reply lit the screen.

Ryan: How did you get my number?

Ray hesitated, smirked at himself.

Ray: There was a card inside. I didn't dig. Just the card.

He knew the lie as his thumb pressed send. The screen stayed bright, waiting.

Ryan hesitated before sending his reply, thumb hovering over the keyboard. He stared at Ray's message, feeling the weight of the decision before typing. The air felt too warm, the quiet pressing in. He set the phone down on the nightstand, ran a hand through his hair, walked to the window. The city outside glowed in scattered lights. He breathed out slowly, thinking.

When he returned to the bed, he picked up the phone again, read Ray's message once more, then finally typed his response, simple and direct.

Ryan: Meet at Serasa Café. 10 a.m.

He watched the words on the screen for a moment longer than necessary, then sent it.

Ray read it twice, then smiled small at the empty room, the phone cooling slowly in his palm as night settled outside, the soft hum of insects filling the quiet space.

A beginning. Maybe.

But still, his skin itched with the weight of the day, and the night was too warm, too wide to stay inside.

Ray found the bar at the far edge of the villa, where the pool mirrored the low lights, scattered across the water in glints of gold. The night air clung warm against his skin, sweat still trailing the curve of his back. He dropped onto a stool, bare-chested in worn jeans, the mix of beach and city boy just odd enough to draw the bartender's glance. He flashed a smile, unbothered.

"Something cold," Ray said, voice easy, grin easier. "The coldest thing you've got."

Tama glanced up, dark eyes sharp but polite. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, forearms lean and tanned from the same sun that had baked Ray all afternoon. His dark hair was tied back low, a stray strand falling near his cheek.

Ray's grin lingered, a little slower now. Cute. Definitely cute.

"Sir," Tama said, reaching for the ginger-lime tonic, "you look like the sun got to you."

Ray laughed, running a hand through his damp hair, the heat still clinging to his skin.

"Bag mix-up. Grabbed the wrong bag at the airport. Haven't had time to fix it, so... here I am. No shirt."

Tama raised a brow as he reached for a tall glass, added ice, then poured a pale ginger-lime tonic over it. The liquid fizzed as it settled, crisp and sharp, condensation racing down the sides.

"Bag mix-up?"

Ray accepted the drink and took a long sip. Then another, almost finishing it before setting the glass down with a sigh.

“Let’s just say my bag’s not here, and the one I’ve got isn’t mine. I’m supposed to get it back tomorrow... maybe.”

He pressed the cold glass briefly to his cheek, letting the chill sink in.

“In the meantime, I figured I’d hide out here before the heat kills me.”

Tama smirked, “So you came to the hottest part of the villa for refuge? Bold strategy.”

Ray chuckled, the sound low, easy, “I didn’t say it was a good plan.”

Tama’s eyes glinted, humor softening his features.

“Bad luck,” he said, but there was warmth in it now.

“Hang on. Let’s see if we can fix at least one thing.”

He vanished for a moment, returning with a folded white T-shirt, plain, soft, and smelling faintly of soap and sun.

“Spare staff shirt,” he said, offering it over.

“Should help you survive at least one day.”

Ray took it with a raised brow, “You’re a hero.”

Tama smirked, then poured a fresh glass of ice water, the cubes clinking as he slid it toward Ray.

“Thanks. You really saved me tonight.” Ray leaned in, elbow on the bar.

“Hope the person who took my bag’s at least half as much of a hottie as you.”

Tama’s smirk sharpened, but his tone stayed easy.

“Fingers crossed, sir.”

Ray lifted his glass, eyes playful.

“When are you off? Maybe I’ll buy you one of these to thank you properly. It’s good, by the way. What’s it called?”

“Full shift tonight,” Tama said, the corner of his mouth quirking.

“But I’m free tomorrow night.”

He leaned in slightly, voice low.

“Nothing fancy. Just something I threw together. No name yet but maybe you can help me come up with one, sir.”

Their gazes held.

Ray tipped his glass in a casual salute, “Then here’s to tomorrow.”

Tama wiped down the counter, eyes warm, “We’ll see, sir.”

Ray’s grin lingered, “And you can call me Ray.”

Tama’s gaze didn’t waver. “Yes, sir. And you can call me Tama.”

Inside, Tama sized Ray up between polite smiles and casual pours. Friendly enough, easy charm, but still a guest. And guests were always a risk. He debated offering the shirt, fingers brushing the soft cotton before handing it over, wondering if it crossed a line that staff weren’t supposed to step over. When Ray’s grin lingered, Tama felt the tug of temptation, the memory of how a smile like that had once led him into something messy, something he’d sworn to avoid. He wiped the counter with practiced ease, trying to keep his heart steady. As Ray’s flirting edged bolder, Tama wondered if this was the drink talking or something real. And if it was real, did he want to know what might come next?

Later, when Tama finally stepped away, Ray lingered at the edge of the pool. The moon’s reflection wavered across the surface, broken and reshaped by each ripple. The weight of the day settled heavy on him, the thick heat, the strange detour of the bag mix-up, the unexpected spark with Tama. He let his fingers graze the water, watching the ripples spread, thinking of the man whose bag he’d taken. A neat stranger with buttoned shirts and folded ties. And it surprised him, how much he wanted to know more. The water cooled his skin, but his thoughts stayed warm, circling back again and again to what the next meeting might bring.

Meanwhile, Ryan wound through the streets, the crush of sound and color washing over him. The clatter of scooters, the glow of paper lanterns, and the scent of grilled satay and spiced corn filled the night. He lingered near a food cart, watching skewers sizzle as the vendor fanned coals, smoke curling into the air. A child called out, chasing a dog, and someone nearby laughed. The smells were rich, sharp with chili and lemongrass. Ryan watched, intrigued but hesitant. The vendor caught his eye, smiled, and gestured. Ryan's mouth almost opened, almost, but he shook his head, murmured a polite refusal, stepping back. His stomach knotted with hunger and regret as he turned away, weaving through the crowd until the hotel's lit entry pulled him in like a safe harbor. Upstairs, the room's quiet felt too sterile, but familiar. He ordered room service without much thought. A plain cheeseburger. Fries. No risk. As he waited, he stood at the window, watching the city's lights and the distant hum of nightlife. He told himself the burger would do. He told himself he was fine.

The morning unfolded slow, a pale sun rising behind gauze-thin clouds. Serasa Café waited at the edge of the street, its bamboo walls catching the morning light through gaps where palm fronds swayed. The murmur of other patrons blended with the clink of cups and the soft scrape of chairs on wood. Its thatched roof half-hid in the shadow of tall palms. The smell of roasted coffee mingled with the salt tang of the nearby sea. The air was warm but still gentle, not yet heavy with the day's heat. Inside, ceiling fans turned with lazy effort, stirring the heavy air but offering little relief.

Ryan sat at a round table of woven rattan, the seat creaking softly beneath him as he shifted. The faint aroma of his coffee mingled with the warm air. His fingers brushed the rattan's rough surface, grounding him. His mind ticked through possible outcomes, the awkwardness of this meeting pressing at him. What would this man be like? Laid-back? Carefree? He pictured a dozen versions of Ray, none of them quite fitting. The weight of the situation settled in his chest even as he tried to appear composed. He had arrived thirty minutes early. That was who he was. Better to be early, to control what he could. His iced coffee stood untouched, beads of condensation sliding down the glass in slow trails that pooled onto the coaster. The bag, Ray's bag, rested at his feet, silent, waiting.

He watched the street beyond the café's open walls where scooters buzzed past, horns beeped, and the world moved in easy, unhurried rhythms. His shirt was crisp, pale against his skin. The collar felt too tight this morning, his breath just a little shallow. Sweat gathered at his nape beneath the collar, an itch he ignored. His eyes swept the café every so often, cataloging its details. The chipped edge of the counter, the way sunlight spilled uneven across the floorboards, the faint clatter of cups in the kitchen. He didn't check his phone. Didn't check the time. Just waited, still as stone, eyes steady on the door.

A family sat near the back, the father's voice low and musical as he pointed out birds hopping along the thatched eaves. The little boy, no older than three, giggled at each one. A waiter passed with a tray piled high, beads of sweat at his temple as he tried to balance the load. The scent of grilled corn drifted in from the street. Somewhere farther off, a vendor sang his pitch, the words blurred by distance but the tone unmistakable. Ryan shifted again, fingers drumming lightly against the table.

What if the person had changed his mind? What if this turned into a drawn-out, polite disaster? He took a slow breath, trying to let the anxiety ebb. But it stayed.

The door chime rang, soft and brief. Ryan's gaze lifted, noticing his bag, breath hitching in spite of himself.

Ray stepped inside, and Ryan's first impression of him unfolded in a glance. He noticed the loose way Ray carried himself, the easy confidence in his stride, the way his eyes seemed to take in the café all at once. His dark hair was a little messy, his jawline sharp against the soft light, his frame lean beneath the white shirt. And in that instant, Ryan registered that Ray was attractive in a way that caught him off guard, something easy and unforced that drew the eye before he could think to look away.

Ray felt the wave of cooler air brush his skin, the café's shaded quiet wrapping around him after the weight of the street's heat. For a moment he stood still, the scent of coffee and woodsmoke filling his lungs, his body adjusting to the soft dimness compared to the harsh sun outside. His hoodie was gone, replaced by the soft, oversized T-shirt Tama had handed him. The fabric was thin and clung slightly where the humid air touched it, loose in the shoulders but easy on the skin. His hair was salt-dark and tousled, his skin faintly flushed from the walk. His eyes scanned the room once, found Ryan, and stayed there.

For a split second, Ryan felt the weight of that gaze steady and open. It landed on him like warmth, startling in its gentleness. For that instant he felt seen, as if Ray saw past all the careful edges he wore. A smile touched the corner of Ray's mouth, not wide, but real. He brushed a hand through his hair, as if trying to tidy himself for this moment, then crossed the room with unhurried steps.

“Ryan?”

Ryan inclined his head, just a fraction.

“Yes,” His voice sounded quieter than he expected against the café's soft noise.

Ray offered a hand, palm warm and dry despite the heat, his grip firm but not insistent. His eyes were steady on Ryan's face, searching for something beneath the surface. Ryan took it, brief and formal, but there was something in the weight of that contact that neither of them named. When their hands parted, the space between them felt changed, smaller somehow.

They sat across from each other, the rattan table between them, two drinks sweating quietly in the morning heat. The bags were exchanged without ceremony, each sliding across the floor like chess pieces moved with purpose. Ray's fingers brushed the worn canvas as he drew it close, thumb tracing a frayed seam without thinking. Ryan's hand settled on his own bag, the familiar weight grounding him at last. His fingers traced the tag, eyes lingering on his name printed in small, neat letters. A quiet breath escaped him as he unzipped the top just enough to see the familiar fabric inside. Relief mingled with a flicker of worry. He hoped everything was still where it should be, that nothing had shifted or disappeared in the shuffle.

A pause settled between them, thick with the things neither knew how to say yet.

“How did you know my name?” Ryan asked, his voice low but steady.

Ray's smile deepened, a flash of humor in his eyes.

“I'm Ray Kim. Same initials. Same bag. Wrong name.”

Ryan almost smiled. Almost. “Right. That explains it.”

Ray's gaze lingered, thoughtful, as if he saw more than Ryan wanted to show. The silence stretched, not awkward, just waiting. Then Ray broke it, light but sincere.

“You hungry?”

Ryan blinked, as if the question didn't belong here.

“Are you asking me?”

Ray's grin was easy, “Yeah. You.”

Ray didn't even glance at the menu. He waved the waiter over, his grin easy, certain.

“We'll have the nasi campur. Two.”

He caught Ryan's raised brow and shrugged, playful.

"You have to try this while you're here. It's practically a rule."

The plates arrived steaming, bright with color. The nasi campur glistened under fried shallots, the sambal sharp and red at the edges of the plate. The air filled with the rich scent of coconut and charred spice. Ray's fingers toyed with his spoon before digging in, clearly at home. Ryan hesitated, letting the aroma tell its story first, his curiosity piqued despite himself.

Ray laughed when the sambal's heat hit, eyes wide, reaching for his water with a grin. "Okay, that's not messing around."

He reached for the pitcher, poured himself a quick glass, then refilled it again and slid the second one toward Ryan without being asked. Ryan accepted it after a cautious sip brought a sudden flush to his cheeks.

"You always feed strangers?"

Ryan asked, his voice half a challenge, half genuine curiosity.

"Only if they're cute," Ray said easily. His grin lingered, but his gaze softened.

Ryan's gaze met his, steady, then flicked away, a smile tugging briefly at his mouth. The food's heat eased him. Something about the intensity demanded his focus, pulled him out of himself.

Ray grinned as the sambal hit him again with the second bite, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Okay, I underestimated that twice. Why is it always the red stuff that ruins me?"

Ryan smirked despite himself, and this time, he braved a little more of the sambal on his spoon. The burn flared again, but he let it linger.

"Maybe because you keep doing it to yourself?"

Ray laughed, leaning in slightly.

"Touché. And now you're starting to sound dangerous."

Ryan shook his head, but the tightness in his shoulders eased a little more.

"I don't think anyone's ever called me that."

"First time for everything," Ray winked, playful but not pushing.

Ryan tried the fried tempeh, noting the crunch, the slight bitterness edged with sweet soy glaze. He surprised himself by liking it, the texture grounding. The rice was fragrant, the coconut milk subtle but present. He caught Ray watching him, and for a moment, the table felt too small, the air too charged.

Ray broke the tension with another easy quip.

"If you can handle that tempeh, I'm seriously impressed. I usually choke on it. Like, it's my arch nemesis or something."

Ryan let out a soft laugh, real and unguarded.

"It's just tempeh, like tofu, but fermented and nuttier. You have very specific food enemies."

Ray launched into a story about missing a night train and sleeping on the floor of a station. His words were easy, self-mocking in places, light with practiced charm.

Ryan mostly listened, but he nodded, his posture loosening as the meal went on. When asked, Ryan admitted this was his first time in Bali.

"I keep to myself when I travel," he said, quiet but honest.

As Ray talked about trains, sandals, temples, Ryan found his mind half on the words, half on the man in front of him. The way Ray gestured when he spoke, as if the memory still had him half-there. The light in his eyes when he hit the funny part of the story.

Ryan noticed the way Ray's wrist flexed as he reached for his glass, the way the breeze caught the edges of his hair, lifting it just slightly before it settled again.

Why does this feel... easy? Ryan asked himself. It wasn't supposed to. Meetings like this accidental, awkward were meant to be endured, not enjoyed. And yet here he was, leaning in, wanting to hear the next line.

The café filled and emptied around them, the breeze lifting napkins, the mingled scents of sambal and coconut, salt air and coffee lingering. A musician with a battered guitar passed on the street beyond, his song drifting faintly through the open walls.

Ray asked, "So, what would you have done if I hadn't shown up?"

Ryan hesitated, then shrugged, his mouth quirking at last.

"I probably would have sat here another hour. Then gone back to my hotel and ordered room service. Plain burger. No sambal."

Ray laughed, that easy, bright sound that made the space between them feel less heavy.

"Well, glad I saved you from that fate."

Ryan checked the time on his phone, more out of habit than urgency. There was nowhere he needed to be yet. Still, the number on the screen gave him something solid to point at. He slipped the phone back into his pocket, lingering for half a second longer than necessary.

When he rose at last, slow and sure, Ray stayed seated, watching him with a gaze that didn't ask, just stayed steady.

"I should go," Ryan said.

Ray nodded once, easy. No pressure. No pause meant to hold him back.

"Yeah," he said. "See you around."

Ryan gave a small smile, quieter than the one he'd walked in with.

Ryan stepped into the sun. The brightness outside hit him like a wave, heat gathering at the small of his back, the salt breeze stronger now. He squinted against the sun, the street alive with sound, scooters, voices, the clink of bottles from a nearby stall.

You could turn back. The thought came sharp, unbidden. The corner of his mouth twitched as if considering it. What would he even say? Another coffee? A thank you?

He pictured Ray inside, probably still at the table, probably watching him leave.

You don't do that, Ryan reminded himself. You don't invite more complication.

His feet kept moving, even as his heart tugged at him, that quiet ache of wanting and retreating tangled in the same breath. At the corner, he slowed, the weight of choice pressing at his chest. The breeze teased the edge of his shirt.

The heat of the day began to rise, the street alive with distant voices, the murmur of traffic, and the faint scent of spices from a nearby stall. Ryan felt the key cool and solid in his palm, the texture grounding him as he moved toward his room. He imagined for just a second that the cool air inside might quiet the restlessness he hadn't shaken since the café.

The corridor's hush wrapped around him as he passed muted doors, his footsteps soft on the carpet. The key turned in the lock with a small click, and as the door opened, a wave of cool air met his skin, a brief relief from the weight of the afternoon heat.

The bag, now his again, rested at his side. He set it down on the bed, the familiar sight of the worn tag with his name bringing a subtle exhale of tension. His fingers lingered on the stitching as if confirming it was real. Slowly, he unzipped it, the sound of the teeth parting loud in the quiet room. The scent of his clothes greeted him, faint detergent and the paper of his notebook.

Relief bloomed, not just for the return of familiar objects but for the fragile sense of control and safety they represented. His mind flashed to the morning he packed it, methodical and precise, a small defense against the unknown.

His world clicked back into shape, small piece by small piece, and the tightness in his chest loosened, if only slightly.

At the bottom of the bag, beneath the last folded shirt, his fingers found it, the slim, leather-bound book he always packed first. Not for reading, though the pages were filled with notes, sketches, thoughts he never voiced. A habit he'd started years ago, when the silence of hotel rooms felt too wide. The cover was worn soft at the edges, the elastic band stretched from use.

Ryan held it for a moment, thumb brushing the faded corner, as if the small weight of it could steady him. A quiet companion, when he let no one else close enough.

He set it down gently on the nightstand, beside the charger, aligned as carefully. A reminder of all the things he kept inside.

He paused by the window, curtain drawn back just enough to see the pulse of the street below. Scooters wove through narrow gaps in traffic, horns bleating sharp in the humid air. A vendor called out, his voice steady, holding up a skewer of grilled corn to tempt passersby.

Ryan's gaze lingered on a woman trying to juggle her bags and a child, the boy clinging to her hand, his laughter rising above the street noise as he pointed at a balloon tied to a vendor's cart. The woman smiled at him, tired but soft, brushing his hair from his forehead as they moved on. He wondered if they felt it, the simple grace of belonging. If the mother ever paused, heart caught in her throat, wondering how long such moments lasted before life asked too much of them. He wondered if he'd ever let himself want something so fragile.

The sight left Ryan still, caught for a breath between wanting and retreat.

A small, ordinary moment. The kind that belonged to other people.

Ryan's fingers tightened slightly on the curtain's edge. He told himself he didn't need it, didn't want it. Safer that way. But the ache was there, uninvited, as steady as his heartbeat.

He let the curtain fall, the room's quiet closing around him again.

Across town, Ray pushed the door of his villa closed with the heel of his foot, the heat inside hitting him like a wall. The afternoon light spilled across the polished floor, warm and golden, the open doors framing the pool's still blue beyond.

"God, it's hot," Ray muttered, barely inside before snatching up the room phone.

His fingers slipped slightly on the receiver, already damp with sweat.

"Can I get an ice bucket? Big one. Please make it fast."

His voice stayed easy, but his body thrummed with the need for relief.

Only then did he drop his bag by the chair, more a gesture than placement and peel his damp t-shirt over his head, the fabric clinging before it finally gave. He stood there for a moment, bare skin flushed, sweat tracking slow at the curve of his back. The villa's air kissed at the heat along his shoulders, but it wasn't enough.

He grabbed the empty glass from the table, filled it at the sink, and gulped the water fast, the cold shocking, the chill slipping down his throat. For a second it helped, but not enough. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, already listening for the knock that would bring the ice. As he passed the glass door, his reflection caught his eye. Flushed skin, hair damp and sticking up at odd angles, the easy mess of him.

Ray huffed a soft laugh, shaking his head at the sight.

“What a look,” he muttered, amused. The heat had undone him, and he let it.

His fingers brushed his bag as he passed it, glancing down but not opening it yet. The heat had stripped away even that small curiosity.

The knock came quicker than expected. Ray swung the door open, still in the pants he’d worn all day, heat radiating off his skin. His grin was small, grateful, not flashy.

“Thanks,” he said simply, grabbing the bucket from the staffer, ice already clinking as he closed the door with his foot.

The chill spread through his hands, sharp and welcome. He set the bucket on the table, tipped a cube into his mouth, the cold biting hard as he held them there. A low breath escaped him, half a laugh at the relief.

And then, without thinking, he stripped pants, briefs, the lot. Letting them fall in a loose heap on the cool floorboards. The weight of the heat, the day, the clothes, all gone in a few easy movements. The air felt better now, freer.

Ray stood still for a moment, bare skin tingling from the sudden cool, before finally turning to the bag, as if only now remembering it existed. He unzipped it with one hand, rummaging until his fingers found what he wanted, a pair of swim trunks, bright and easy, and beneath them, a slim, dark brief that had seen more fun nights than it probably should have. His hand brushed past a worn wristband from some club on the mainland, its edges frayed, the logo half-faded. He didn’t even remember which night it was from anymore, just that it had been loud, crowded, easy.

Ray smirked to himself, holding up the suits, but the smirk didn’t last. The villa’s quiet felt louder by contrast. He glanced at the pool through the open doors. He would’ve jumped in yesterday if he’d had his stuff. Funny. It was his. Private.

“No one’s here,” he murmured, tossing both suits to the floor without a second thought.

Ray slid in with a low sigh, the water wrapping him in clean, cool silence. The heat left him, and with it, the weight of the day. He floated on his back, arms loose at his sides, the sky above pale and endless, palm fronds swaying slow in the breeze.

The villa was quiet. Too quiet. No music, no laughter from a neighbor’s terrace. Just the soft lap of water against stone and the whisper of wind through leaves.

Ray let his eyes close, but the quiet pressed in rather than comforted. Another night alone. Another space too big for one person, too still. He’d told himself he liked it that way, freedom, no plans, no strings. But right now, it felt like standing at the edge of a party that had already moved on without him.

The water cooled his skin, but did nothing for the restlessness that pulsed just beneath it.

Ray exhaled, long and slow, and let the pool carry him anyway. The water held him, weightless, but the stillness clung, quiet and unshared. The last time he floated like this, there’d been someone beside him, laughing as they splashed water at his face, a voice that still echoed when nights grew too quiet.

Meanwhile, in a quiet room not far from there. Ryan sat on the edge of the bed, the bag at his feet forgotten for a moment. His phone rested on the nightstand, screen dark. His fingers drummed once on the wood, then stilled. His breath caught in his throat for a moment longer than he meant it to. He stared at the phone as if waiting for it to speak first. For a breath, he pictured a message lighting the screen, a simple “hey” or something careless and easy, something that would make the choice for him. A flicker of hesitation caught him, the urge to type, delete, type again.

He thought of the moment at the café, the quiet pull in his chest that made him want to stay, and the instinct that had sent him walking away instead. That quiet voice always warned him off, telling him closeness meant risk. He hated how familiar that feeling was, the need to get out before something could start. Instead, he reached for the strap of his bag, running his thumb along its edge, grounding himself in the feel of it as if that small connection could hold him steady. It reminded him of stability, kept him from reaching out for a voice he wasn't ready to hear, a voice that might be kind or might want more than he knew how to give.

The room felt too large, too empty. The space between his breath and the walls was louder than it should have been, filled with the distant click of a door closing somewhere down the hall and the low hum of the air conditioning. The faint scent of linen and wood polish lingered in the air. The texture of the bedspread was rough beneath his fingers. The memory of the café's light glinting off Ray's glass lingered like an echo.

Across town, Ray cut through the villa courtyard. He wore one of his own faded tank tops at last, with low-slung swim shorts. In one hand, he carried the shirt Tama had given him earlier, loosely folded. His bare feet padded softly over the warm stone path. The main pool shimmered ahead, catching the last light of the day.

His gaze flicked toward the villa's open doorway where Tama stood behind the bar. Their eyes met familiar now, easy. That quiet, assessing glance sent a faint tug through Ray's chest, a warmth he didn't mind.

"Still working? Thought you said you were off."

Tama's eyes glinted, "Few more minutes left, sir"

Ray leaned on the bar, close enough to catch the citrus on the air. He lifted the shirt slightly with a smirk.

"Thanks for this, by the way."

Tama took it from him, fingers brushing, "It was my pleasure helping you, sir."

Ray's smile deepened.

"Figured I could keep you company. You can make me that lifesaver drink again."

Tama didn't move right away, just gave him a look.

"So... was the person who took your bag cute?"

Ray just lifted his glass in a slow salute, the smile answering for him. Their conversation settled into the hush of evening. Low, easy.

Ray tilted his head, voice softer.

"Knock on my villa. Bring two of these. We'll toast to bad luck and good timing."

Tama's gaze didn't waver. "We'll see, sir."

Ray winked, turned, and walked off into the night.

The path to his villa was dimly lit, the warmth of the stone under his feet grounding him. The sound of the bar faded behind him, replaced by the hush of night. The invitation still hung in the air, fragile as the quiet. He told himself it was nothing, just a joke, just a drink but his heart ticked faster, waiting.

He just stepped inside his villa, slow and quiet.