

# The Ticking Clock

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## CHAPTER I — *THE SYSTEM*

---

Time doesn't move.  
People do.  
That's where most of the problems start.

---

The street sits the way it should  
not empty, not crowded  
just cooperative.  
Lights hold their place.  
Footsteps keep their distance.  
Nothing overlaps unless it has a reason to.  
I prefer it like that.

---

Two minutes early isn't early.  
It's correct.

---

I stop just short of the door.  
Not because I need to.  
Because timing matters more than motion.  
A small adjustment at my cuff  
already straight before I look at it.  
No need to check.

---

Inside, the air shifts.  
Not enough for anyone else to notice.  
Just enough.

---

She's already there.  
Late.  
Not by much.  
Most people wouldn't catch it.  
I do.

---

"You're early."

---

It's not an accusation.  
People hear it that way anyway.

---

She smiles like that fixes it.  
"It's only a minute."

---

A minute.

---

I let that sit.  
Not long enough to be rude.  
Just long enough to exist.

---

"A minute," I repeat.  
Then smoother—  
"It's fine."

---

It isn't.  
But it can be.  
That's the difference.

---

I step forward, adjusting the space between  
us without making it obvious.  
People don't like being moved.  
They like thinking they moved themselves.  
It's easier that way.

---

"You said later hours were better," I say.  
"Less interruption."

---

She nods.  
"Yes. It feels... slower."

---

Slower.

---

"It's not," I tell her. "It just looks like it  
is."

---

She laughs like that was clever.  
It wasn't meant to be.

---

I guide the conversation the same way I guide  
everything else—  
small corrections  
subtle shifts  
Nothing that feels like control unless you're  
looking for it.  
Most people aren't.

---

Timing adjusts.  
Position adjusts.  
Tone adjusts.

---

Everything settles.

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That's the goal.  
Not perfection.  
Not effort.

---

Alignment.

---

She starts talking about schedules—moving things around.  
Most of it doesn't matter.  
I keep what does.  
Let the rest pass.

---

"You prefer tomorrow?" I ask.

---

"Yes, if that's alright."

---

It isn't.  
But it can be.

---

"Tomorrow works."

---

It always does.  
If I place it correctly.

---

I make the note without writing it down.  
There's already a place for it now.

---

A pause follows.  
Not awkward.  
Not heavy.  
Just—  
unplaced.

---

I correct it.

---

"I'll adjust the spacing," I say. "Give you more room between."

---

She nods again.  
More certain this time.  
People like certainty.  
Even when they don't understand it.

---

"Thank you."

---

I give a slight nod.  
Acknowledgment.  
Not acceptance.  
There's a difference.

---

Around us, everything holds.  
Voices stay where they belong.  
Movement follows lines I don't have to see to understand.  
Nothing crosses.  
Nothing clashes.

---

It works.

---

It always works.

---

I check the time without looking.  
Still aligned.

---

Good.

---

She keeps talking.  
Something lighter now.  
doesn't matter.  
I let it pass.  
Not everything needs to be corrected.  
Just contained.

---

"Do you ever take a night off?"

---

I almost smile.  
Almost.

---

"No."

---

Not because I can't.  
Because there's nowhere to put it.

---

"You should."

---

I consider that for exactly as long as it deserves.

---

"If it fits."

---

It won't.

---

Another pause.  
Longer this time.  
Not wrong.  
Just—  
unaccounted for.

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For a second—  
something feels slightly off.

---

Not visible.  
Not clear.  
Just—  
off.

---

I adjust my stance.  
Breath steady.  
Timing recalibrated.

---

It settles.

---

Of course it does.

---

Everything does.

---

I step back.  
Just enough to signal the end.  
Not abrupt.  
Not delayed.  
Exactly where it should be.

---

“I’ll confirm the time.”

---

“Tomorrow?”

---

“Tomorrow.”

---

Already decided.

---

I turn before the moment stretches.  
Don’t rush.  
Don’t linger.

---

Just move.

---

Outside, the night holds.  
Same spacing.  
Same distance.  
Same quiet cooperation.

---

Exactly where it should be.

---

I walk.  
Measured.  
Even.

---

Nothing follows.

---

Nothing needs to.

---

And still—  
for just a moment—  
it feels like something almost did.

---

It passes.

---

I keep walking.

---

Everything is still in place.

---

It always is.

---

## CHAPTER 2 — *PLACEMENT*

---

People think time is the problem.  
It isn’t.  
Time is consistent.  
People aren’t.

---

I don’t manage time.  
I manage where people sit inside it.  
That’s the job.

---

Morning runs tighter.  
Too many variables.  
Too many people trying to move faster than  
they should.  
It creates overlap.  
Overlap creates friction.  
Friction wastes time.

---

I avoid mornings when I can.  
When I can’t—  
I compensate.

---

Three today.  
That’s manageable.  
Not ideal.  
But manageable.

---

Spacing matters more than volume.

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You can fit anything into a day if you place it correctly.

Most people don't understand that.

They try to stack.

Stacking doesn't work.

It bleeds.

---

First one is already off.

Not wrong.

Just—

early in the wrong way.

---

I see it before I reach the door.

Posture.

Pacing.

The way she checks the time like it's going to change for her.

---

It won't.

---

"You're ahead of schedule."

---

She looks up, slightly thrown.

"I thought earlier might be better."

---

Better.

That word does a lot of damage.

---

"Better for you," I say.

Not sharp.

Just accurate.

---

A pause.

Small one.

---

I adjust it.

---

"We can work with it."

---

Relief shows up immediately.

It usually does.

People don't need solutions.

They need the idea that one exists.

---

I step in, already shifting the layout in my head.

If this moves forward—

the second compresses.

If the second compresses—

the third feels it.

---

I won't let that happen.

---

I pull it back.

Not visibly.

Just enough.

---

"Let's keep this contained," I say.

"Shorter window."

---

She nods.

doesn't ask why.

Good.

---

Questions slow things down.

---

We move through it clean.

No overlap.

No drag.

---

That's how it should be.

---

When it ends, I don't linger.

There's no reason to.

The moment is complete.

Anything after that is excess.

---

Outside, I check the spacing again.

Not with a watch.

With feel.

---

Still clean.

---

Second is tighter.

Closer than I prefer.

But workable.

---

I adjust before I arrive.

That's the difference.

Most people react.

I don't.

---

"You're right on time."

---

"I try to be."

---

"You don't have to try," I say.

"Just don't be late."

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She laughs.  
People usually do.

It's not a joke.

This one holds better.  
Less movement.  
Less correction needed.

That's the ideal.  
Not perfection.  
Minimal adjustment.

I guide it through.  
Keep the pace steady.  
Don't let it stretch.

It doesn't.

Good.

That gives me space before the third.  
Not much.  
Enough.

Enough is all I need.

I step out again.  
The street hasn't changed.  
It doesn't.

That's why it works.

Third is the problem.  
It always is.  
Last placement carries everything before it.  
If something slips—  
this is where it shows.

I adjust before I get there.  
Again.  
Always before.

"You're late."

"I know, I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry."

That stops her.

"Just don't do it again."

A pause.  
Longer this time.

Good.  
That one lands.

I let it sit for a second.  
Not to punish.  
To place it.

Then I move forward.

We run it tighter.  
No wasted motion.  
No extra space.

It holds.  
Barely.  
But it holds.

When it ends, I don't say anything.  
There's nothing to say.

I step back out into the street.

Three placed.  
No overlap.  
No bleed.

Clean.

I should feel something.  
Most people would.  
Relief.  
Satisfaction.

I don't.

It's just done.

That's how it should be.

I check the spacing for tomorrow.  
Already shifting things.

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Already placing.

---

Everything has somewhere to go.  
You just have to decide where.

---

For a moment—  
something doesn't sit right.

---

Not wrong.  
Not broken.  
Just—  
slightly out of alignment.

---

I pause.

---

Recalculate.

---

Nothing changed.

---

That's what it feels like.

---

I adjust anyway.

---

It settles.

---

Of course it does.

---

Everything does.

---

I move on.

---

There's always somewhere else to be.

---

## CHAPTER 3 — *COMPRESSION*

---

By the third, it's never the person.  
It's everything before them.

---

Time doesn't stack.  
It compresses.  
If something runs long, it doesn't disappear.  
It shifts forward.  
Carries weight with it.

---

I feel it before I check anything.  
Not heavier.  
Just... closer.

---

The space between things is thinner today.

---

That's fine.  
Thin still works.  
You just don't get room to correct.

---

I adjust before I arrive.  
I always do.

---

The street should open as I move through it.  
It doesn't.  
Not the way it usually does.

---

People hesitate half a second longer.  
Steps don't quite separate clean.  
Nothing obvious.  
Just—  
slight resistance.

---

I keep walking.

---

If it's not visible, it's not a problem.

---

Yet.

---

The door is where it should be.  
The light above it flickers once.  
Stops.

---

I don't look at it.  
No reason to.

---

Inside, the room holds.  
Mostly.

---

She's already there.  
On time.  
That helps.

---

"You're right where you should be."

---

She nods like that matters more than it does.

---

"I try to be."

---

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"You don't have to try," I say. "Just don't drift."

---

She frowns slightly.  
She doesn't understand it.  
That's fine.  
She doesn't need to.

---

I step in.  
Set the distance.  
Adjust the angle.

---

Something doesn't settle.

---

Not wrong.  
Just—  
delayed.

---

Like the room takes a second longer to accept the placement.

---

I wait.

---

It catches up.

---

Good.

---

We move through it.

---

Her timing is clean.  
Her pacing holds.  
No interruptions.  
No overlap.

---

Still—  
something keeps pressing in.

---

Not from her.  
From the edges.

---

I shorten the exchange.  
Not visibly.  
Just enough.

---

She notices.  
Of course she does.

---

"Everything alright?"

---

"Yes."

---

That's enough.

---

Questions don't need answers if they don't change anything.

---

We finish early.  
Not by design.  
By necessity.

---

That gives me space.

---

I step outside.

---

The street should feel wider now.  
It doesn't.

---

Same distance.  
Same layout.

---

Less room.

---

I stop.

---

Just for a second.

---

Look down the line.  
Everything is where it should be.

---

Still—  
it feels like something is sitting just underneath it.

---

Not visible.

---

Waiting.

---

I adjust my breathing.  
Even.  
Measured.

---

Count it without counting.

---

It settles.

---

Of course it does.

---

Everything does.

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I check the next placement.  
Still fits.  
Still clean.

Good.

A sound passes behind me.  
Not loud.  
Not sharp.

Just—  
out of place.

I don't turn.

If it mattered, I would have already known  
what it was.

It doesn't repeat.

That's enough.

I move.

The next block should open.

It does.

Just not immediately.

There's a lag.  
Small.  
But it's there.

I step through it anyway.

You don't wait for things to align.  
You make them.

By the time I reach the corner, it's back.

Spacing holds.  
Movement clears.

Like it never shifted at all.

Good.

That's how it should be.

Still—  
as I move past the last line of light—

it feels like something almost didn't reset.

I don't check.

I don't need to.

If it didn't settle, I'd know.

I keep walking.

Measured.  
Even.

Everything is still in place.

It always is.

...almost.

## CHAPTER 4 — MARGIN

There's always a margin.  
You don't see it.  
You feel it.

It's the space between things going right  
and things holding together.

Most people don't notice when it gets thin.  
They notice when it breaks.

I don't let it break.

Today—  
it's thinner than it should be.

Not by much.  
Still usable.

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---

But I feel it.

---

That's enough.

---

I adjust before the next step.  
Not because something failed.  
Because something might.

---

The route is the same.  
It always is.

---

Left at the corner.  
Straight through the line of lights.  
Past the place where people tend to slow down  
for no reason.

---

They're already slowing.

---

I don't.

---

You don't match hesitation.  
You move through it.

---

That's how you keep it from spreading.

---

I step clean through the shift.  
It resists.

---

Just for a second.

---

Then it gives.

---

Good.

---

Everything still responds.

---

That means it still works.

---

A door opens ahead.  
Too early.

---

Not mine.

---

Someone exits.  
Stops.  
Looks back inside like they forgot  
something.

---

They didn't.

---

They just don't know where to go next.

---

That's not my problem.

---

I move past them.  
They adjust without realizing it.

---

They always do.

---

The next placement is waiting.

---

On time.

---

Good.

---

She watches me as I approach.  
People do that sometimes.  
Like they expect something to change when I  
get closer.

---

Nothing changes.

---

"You're right on time," she says.

---

"I usually am."

---

A small smile.  
Unnecessary.

---

We step inside.

---

The room feels—  
tight.

---

Not small.  
Not crowded.

---

Just...  
close.

---

Like the walls decided to move a little  
nearer when no one was looking.

---

I don't acknowledge it.

---

If I don't place it, it doesn't belong.

---

I set the spacing.

---

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---

Distance.

Angle.

Tone.

---

It takes longer to settle.

---

Not much.

Just enough to notice.

---

I wait.

---

It catches.

---

Almost.

---

Good enough.

---

We move.

---

Her pacing drifts.

Not badly.

Just slightly off center.

---

I correct it.

---

“Stay with me,” I say.

---

She nods.

Adjusts.

---

It holds.

---

Barely.

---

Something presses at the edges again.

---

Not sound.

Not movement.

---

Presence.

---

Like something sitting just outside the  
frame—  
waiting for space.

---

I close the moment early.

---

Clean.

Contained.

No excess.

---

She notices.

doesn't say anything.

---

Good.

---

I step out.

---

The air should release.

It doesn't.

---

It stays—  
tight.

---

Like it followed me out.

---

That's not how it works.

---

I stop.

---

Just for a second.

---

Look down the street.

---

Everything is where it should be.

Lights.

Distance.

Movement.

---

All correct.

---

Still—  
there's no margin.

---

None.

---

Everything is sitting right on top of itself.

---

Perfect.

---

Too perfect.

---

I adjust my stance.

Shift weight.

Reset breathing.

---

Give it room.

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---

Nothing moves.

For a second—  
nothing responds.

Then—  
Slowly—  
it loosens.

Not fully.

Enough.

That's all I need.

I step forward.

The ground takes the step.  
The street opens.  
Spacing returns.

Like it never closed.

Good.

That's how it should be.

I move through the next line.

Measured.  
Even.

And then—

something laughs.

Not loud.

Not close.

Not far.

Just—  
there.

I stop.

Not fully.

Just enough that the step doesn't land where  
it should.

Silence follows.

The street holds.

Everything waits.

I listen.

Nothing.

No repeat.

No source.

Just gone.

A beat passes.

I place my foot.

Continue.

Even.  
Measured.

If it mattered—  
it would still be there.

It isn't.

So it doesn't.

Still—  
as I move past the next light—

the margin doesn't come back.

Not all the way.

And for the first time—

I don't correct it.

I just...  
leave it.

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## CHAPTER 5 — *THROUGH* *THE MIDWAY*

---

I don't stop.

---

That's the rule.

---

If something doesn't repeat, it doesn't matter.  
If it doesn't matter, you don't give it time.

---

I keep walking.  
Measured.  
Even.

---

The street holds.  
Not perfectly.  
But enough.

---

The laugh doesn't come back.

---

Good.

---

That means it wasn't anything.

---

I take the next turn.  
Same route.  
Same spacing.

---

It should open.

---

It doesn't.

---

Not fully.

---

There's something sitting in it.

---

Not blocking.  
Not visible.

---

Just—  
there.

---

I step into it anyway.

---

You don't wait for things to clear.  
You move through them.

---

It gives.

---

Slower than it should.

---

I don't adjust.

---

Not yet.

---

Halfway down the stretch—

---

I hear it again.

---

Closer.

---

Not behind me.

---

Beside me.

---

I don't turn.

---

Turning gives it shape.

---

And if it has shape—  
it has a place.

---

It doesn't have one.

---

So I keep moving.

---

"You're ignoring it."

---

The voice isn't loud.  
Isn't sharp.

---

Just—  
exact.

---

Like it's always been there.

---

I stop.

---

That's the mistake.

---

It happens before I decide to do it.

---

The step doesn't land.

---

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Everything else does.

The street continues.  
People pass.  
Lights hold.

Only I—  
stop.

That's new.

I let a second pass.

Then another.

Nothing corrects it.

That's wrong.

Everything corrects.

I turn.

He's already there.

Not stepping into place.  
Not arriving.

Just—  
present.

Leaning like he's been waiting.  
Like he knew exactly when I'd look.

"...running the hours with nowhere to hide..."

That tone—

is familiar.

It shouldn't be.

"...chasing the seconds that dance in your  
head..."

I exhale once.

Controlled.

"Cat..."

The word lands before I decide to say it.

I don't like that.

"Not tonight."

I keep walking.

"I've got places to be."

He's beside me now.

Not approaching.

Not catching up.

Just—  
there.

"Something is shifting beneath all the  
noise..."

His steps don't sound.

That's wrong.

"...hidden in riddles and half-broken toys..."

I don't look at him.

I don't need to.

"I noticed something."

That's enough.

"Doesn't mean I have time to chase it."

"Somebody has to keep things moving."

He laughs—

not loud—

just enough to bend the space slightly.

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"Clockwork runner with velvet control..."

I adjust my pace.

He matches it.

Without trying.

"...never once stopping to see what they show..."

"It's not blindness."

I say it evenly.

"It's responsibility."

The midway shifts as we pass through it.

Not moving—

responding.

"Look at the sky while the lanterns still glow..."

I don't.

"...look at the cracks where the wildflowers grow..."

"I can't slow down now."

The words come sharper.

"There's too much depending on the hour."

He hums softly.

Like he expected that.

"Once there was laughter that followed your feet..."

I tighten my jaw.

"...games in the dust of the midway street..."

That—

lands closer than it should.

"You were the one with the curious eyes..."

I don't respond.

"...dragging the daylight out under the skies..."

I remember that.

I shouldn't.

"Maybe."

That's all I give it.

"But tonight I've got somewhere to be."

He drifts slightly ahead—

then beside me again.

No transition.

No movement.

Just—  
present.

"Running and rushing wherever you roam..."

I keep walking.

"I really don't have time for this tonight."

That should end it.

It doesn't.

"Hey... Cottontail."

I stop.

Too fast.

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Too clean.

That name—

doesn't belong here.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

The question sits in the space—

like it was already waiting.

I don't think.

I don't place it.

I answer.

"Because we're all ink in the mess... Stripes."

Silence—

just for a second.

Then—

he smiles.

Not wider.

Certain.

"Just don't forget to look up."

I step forward.

This time—

I don't stop again.

The midway falls behind me.

The street returns.

Clean.

Ordered.

Correct.

I keep walking.

Measured.

Even.

But now—

I don't need to look back.

I already know—

he's still there.

## CHAPTER 6 — *THE STATIC*

I don't go back.

That's the rule.

If something doesn't belong, you don't revisit it.

You let it fall out of place on its own.

I keep moving.

The street opens.

It should.

It does.

...just a second late.

I don't adjust.

Not yet.

People move the way they're supposed to.

Spacing holds.

Distance keeps.

Still—

something sits in it.

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Not visible.  
Not defined.

Just—  
residual.

Like a sound that already happened  
but didn't finish.

I take the next turn.

The market should be louder.

It is.

But not evenly.

Voices rise in pockets.  
Drop in others.

Like the space between them matters more  
than the sound itself.

I move through it.

Measured.  
Even.

Everything reacts.

Just not immediately.

A man steps into my path—  
then corrects.  
Too late.

We adjust around each other.

Clean enough.

Still—  
not clean.

"You're late."

The words come out before I decide to say  
them.

He looks at me, confused.

"I'm not with you."

That's—  
correct.

I nod once.

"Right."

I keep walking.

That doesn't happen.

I don't misplace people.

I place them.

The next stall shifts as I pass.

Too much.

Like it needed me to move first.

That's not how it works.

I slow.

No—  
I don't.

I maintain pace.

The ground feels—  
uneven.

Not physically.

Just—  
timed wrong.

Steps land where they should.

They just don't feel like they do.

I correct my breathing.

Even.  
Measured.

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That helps.

It should.

A voice cuts across the market.

Laughter.

Not the same.

Not him.

But—  
close.

I don't turn.

Turning gives it placement.

I'm not doing that again.

A woman reaches out as I pass.

"Can you—"

I step past her.

She wasn't part of anything.

Still—  
the space she occupied lingers.

Like it doesn't close behind me.

That's new.

I stop.

No.

I slow.

That's better.

I look at the ground.

Everything is where it should be.

Lines.  
Edges.  
Spacing.

All correct.

I step forward.

It doesn't land clean.

Just—  
slightly off.

I adjust.

The next step lands.

Better.

Not right.

Better.

I keep moving.

You don't stop for things you can correct.

You correct them.

That's the difference.

Another voice—  
closer this time.

"Careful."

I stop.

This time—  
I know I did.

The sound sits there.

Not attached to anything.

No source.

No direction.

# The Ticking Clock

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Just—  
present.

I wait.

One second.  
Two.

Nothing follows.

Nothing repeats.

That should mean something.

It doesn't.

I move again.

Faster now.

Not visibly.

Just enough to get ahead of it.

The market opens toward the exit.

Finally.

Space.

Clean lines.

Distance returns.

Good.

That's how it should feel.

I step out of it.

The noise drops.

Even.

Consistent.

Correct.

I stop.

Fully.

Just for a moment.

I look back.

Everything looks normal.

People move.  
Voices rise.  
Stalls shift.

All of it—  
exactly where it should be.

Still—

it doesn't feel like it did before.

I turn forward.

Continue.

Measured.  
Even.

Everything is still in place.

It has to be.

...right?

## CHAPTER 7 — AN OLD TUNE

---

The market doesn't follow me out.

That helps.

Sound settles.  
Spacing returns.  
Distance holds.

Not perfectly.

# The Ticking Clock

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---

But close enough to work with.

I keep moving.

Measured.

Even.

No corrections needed.

That's better.

The next stretch should be quiet.

It is.

Almost empty.

A few people along the edge.

Not moving much.

Listening.

That's—  
new.

I slow.

No—  
I don't.

I maintain pace.

The sound reaches me before I place it.

Soft.

Not weak.

Controlled.

Like it doesn't need to be louder to be heard.

Strings.

Not clean.

Not rough.

Something between.

It doesn't pull.

It waits.

That's the difference.

I move closer.

Not because I need to.

Because the space is already shifting that way.

A small crowd sits around him.

Not packed.

Not loose.

Placed.

Older faces.

Still.

A few younger ones—  
leaning forward like they're trying to  
understand something that isn't meant to be  
understood all at once.

He doesn't look at them.

He looks past them.

Through them.

I step into the edge of it.

No one reacts.

That's unusual.

People adjust.

They always adjust.

Here—  
they don't.

The sound changes slightly.

# The Ticking Clock

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---

Not direction.  
Not tone.

Just—  
focus.

Like it noticed me.

That's not possible.

He lifts his head.

Just enough.

And for a second—

he looks directly at me.

Not searching.  
Not questioning.

Certain.

Then—

he looks away.

Back to the crowd.

Like nothing happened.

The sound continues.

Soft.  
Even.

But now—

the words start to form.

Not fully.

Not all at once.

Just enough to catch.

"Something moves where it shouldn't..."

The rhythm doesn't change.

The people don't react.

They're already inside it.

I stay where I am.

No reason to step closer.

No reason to leave.

"...not breaking... just bending..."

The words don't demand attention.

They settle.

Like they were always there.

"...you don't see it first..."

A pause.

Not empty.

Waiting.

"...you feel it where you stand..."

I've heard things like this before.

Not like this.

Not—  
directed.

The sound dips.

Not quieter.

Closer.

"...and when it looks back..."

My breath adjusts.

I don't tell it to.

It just does.

# The Ticking Clock

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---

“...you won’t know what moved first...”

The space tightens.

Not like before.

Not pressure.

Focus.

Everything else falls out of it.

For a moment—

it’s just the sound.

And the words.

And the space between them.

Then—

he stops.

No final note.

No finish.

Just—

done.

The crowd doesn't move.

Not right away.

Like they’re waiting for something that isn’t coming.

Then—

slowly—

they shift.

One by one.

Spacing returns.

Movement resumes.

Like nothing happened.

I step forward.

He’s still there.

Sitting.

Looking at something that isn’t in front of him.

I should keep moving.

There’s no reason to stop.

Still—

I do.

“You were speaking to me.”

It’s not a question.

He doesn't look up.

“Was I?”

That’s not an answer.

“You knew I was there.”

A small pause.

Then—

“I always know who’s listening.”

That doesn't make sense.

“You said something moved.”

“I said a lot of things.”

I don’t like that.

“Be specific.”

Now he looks at me.

# The Ticking Clock

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Slow.

Measured.

Like he's deciding if I belong in the moment.

"You're asking for something that doesn't sit still."

Everything sits still.

If it doesn't—  
you haven't placed it yet.

"What moved?"

He studies me for a second.

Then—

"Not what."

A beat.

"...who."

That lands.

Not clean.

But it lands.

I straighten slightly.

"That doesn't help."

"It wasn't meant to."

Of course it wasn't.

I take a step back.

The space shifts.

Not resisting.

Just—  
acknowledging.

"If you have something to say, say it clearly."

He smiles.

Not wide.

Not like the other one.

Contained.

"You won't hear it clearly yet."

That's not how hearing works.

"It either is or it isn't."

He shakes his head slightly.

"Not where you're standing."

That—

doesn't fit.

I don't respond.

There's nothing to place.

No structure.

No position.

I turn.

That should end it.

It doesn't.

"Careful where you step next."

I stop.

Again.

That's twice.

Too many.

I don't turn.

# The Ticking Clock

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"If it matters, say it properly."

A pause.

Then—

softly—

"It already does."

I wait.

Nothing follows.

Of course it doesn't.

I move.

This time—

I don't slow.

I don't look back.

The street opens.

Spacing returns.

Everything settles.

Like it always does.

Still—

as I move past the next line of light—

something stays with me.

Not a thought.

Not a sound.

Just—

a place I can't quite step out of.

I adjust.

It doesn't move.

That's—

new.

## CHAPTER 8 —

*THE*

### *TRIP THROUGH ONEDARELAND*

I don't stop walking.

That's important.

Movement keeps things aligned.

If you stop—  
things catch up.

I don't let them.

The street opens.

It should.

It does.

...just not evenly.

The spacing is right.

The timing isn't.

Steps land.

They don't feel like they land when they should.

Like there's a delay—  
not in motion—  
in recognition.

I adjust my pace.

# The Ticking Clock

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Slower.

---

No—

---

More precise.

---

That's better.

---

It should correct.

---

It doesn't.

---

Not fully.

---

I check the time.

---

I don't need to.

---

Still—

I do.

---

The watch sits where it always does.

---

Clean.

Exact.

---

The second hand moves.

---

Consistent.

---

Good.

---

That means this is external.

---

Not me.

---

I let that settle.

---

It doesn't.

---

I keep walking.

---

The street stretches ahead.

---

Same distance.

Same lines.

---

But it feels—

---

longer.

---

Not farther.

---

Just—

extended.

---

Like the space between one step and the next has more in it than it should.

---

I shorten the step.

---

That should fix it.

---

It doesn't.

---

I lengthen it.

---

Still—

no.

---

The timing doesn't match.

---

That's not possible.

---

Time doesn't drift.

---

People do.

---

I stop.

---

No.

---

I pause.

---

That's different.

---

I stand still just long enough to reset.

---

Breath in.

---

Even.

---

Measured.

---

Count it without counting.

---

One.

# The Ticking Clock

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---

Two.

The space between them—

isn't the same.

I look at the watch again.

The second hand moves.

Exact.

Consistent.

Unquestionable.

Good.

That's the anchor.

I focus on it.

Tick.

Step.

Tick.

Step.

Align to it.

Force the rest to follow.

That's how this works.

Tick.

Step.

Tick—

The step lands early.

No.

The tick comes late.

No.

Both happen.

Just not together.

That—

doesn't fit.

I tighten my jaw.

Focus

The watch is right.

It has to be.

Everything else adjusts to it.

That's the rule.

Tick.

Step.

Tick.

Step.

It starts to line up.

Not perfectly.

Better.

That's enough.

I move forward.

Faster now

Not visibly.

Just enough to stay ahead of the delay.

The street narrows

# The Ticking Clock

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No—

It doesn't.

It feels like it does.

Walls closer.

Air tighter.

Not real.

I don't acknowledge it.

If I don't place it—

it doesn't belong.

I keep the rhythm.

Tick.

Step.

Tick.

Step.

Something crosses my path.

Too fast.

Too close.

I stop.

This time—  
fully.

Everything else keeps moving.

That's wrong.

If I stop—  
the moment should hold.

It doesn't.

People pass.

Spacing continues.

Time—

doesn't wait.

I feel it.

Not around me.

Through me.

Like I'm the part that's out of place now.

That—

isn't acceptable.

I force a breath.

Even.

Measured.

Look at the watch.

Tick.

Still steady.

Still correct.

Good.

That means I can fix this.

I step forward.

Deliberate.

Aligned to the tick.

Everything resists—

then—

locks.

The street settles.

# The Ticking Clock

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Spacing returns.

Movement aligns.

Like it snaps back into place

Good.

That's how it should be.

I keep walking.

Measured.

Even.

Tick.

Step.

Tick.

Step.

It holds.

Finally.

The pressure fades.

Not gone.

Reduced.

Manageable.

That's enough.

I don't look back.

There's nothing behind me that needs placing.

There's only forward.

Always forward.

The watch ticks.

Consistent.

Reliable.

Unmoving.

Everything else—

can adjust.

It has to.

I keep walking.

And this time—

the step lands where it should.

## CHAPTER 9 —

*CLEAR*

### *PERCEPTION*

I don't rush.

That's important.

Rushing breaks things.

It creates gaps.

And gaps—

let things in.

I don't allow gaps.

The street holds again.

Spacing is clean.

Movement aligns.

Not perfectly.

But enough that it responds when I move.

# The Ticking Clock

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That's all I need.

I adjust before the next turn.

Not because something is wrong.

Because something was.

That's the difference.

The path to the castle is quieter.

It should be.

Less interference.

Fewer variables.

More predictable.

Good.

I slow—

deliberately.

Not hesitation.

Control.

Each step lands where I place it.

No delay.

No drift.

The watch ticks.

Steady.

Exact.

I don't check it.

I don't need to.

I feel it now.

Better than before.

Stronger.

That's good.

That means it holds.

The gates stand ahead.

Unmoved.

Unquestioned.

They open when I reach them.

Not early.

Not late.

Exactly when they should.

Good.

That matters.

Inside—

everything sharpens.

Lines straighten.

Voices lower.

Movement tightens.

This place doesn't allow drift.

That's why it works.

I step through.

The pressure from before—

doesn't follow.

It stops at the threshold.

Of course it does.

It doesn't belong here.

Nothing does unless it's placed.

# The Ticking Clock

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And everything here—

is.

I adjust my posture.

Not visibly.

Just enough.

The mask settles.

It's not something I put on.

It's something I return to.

Where things make sense.

Where everything has a place.

I move through the hall.

People step aside.

Not out of fear.

Out of understanding.

They know where they don't belong.

That's rare.

That's useful.

I don't acknowledge them.

Acknowledgment creates interaction.

Interaction creates variables.

I avoid variables.

The door ahead is already open.

Of course it is.

I step inside.

The room holds perfectly.

No delay.

No pressure.

No resistance.

Everything responds.

Immediately.

Good.

She stands near the far side.

Exactly where she should be.

Not early.

Not late.

Placed.

I stop at the correct distance.

No adjustment needed.

That's rare.

"You're on time."

"I usually am."

A slight shift in her expression.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

She notices things.

Of course she does.

That's why this works.

"You've been busy."

"Manageable."

That's enough detail.

# The Ticking Clock

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Anything more—

is unnecessary.

She studies me for a moment.

Not openly.

Just enough to register.

“You notice more than most.”

That—

lands.

Not hard.

Not soft.

Just—  
accurate.

“I place what needs placing.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

It is.

It has to be.

I don’t respond.

There’s no value in expanding that.

The moment holds.

Clean.

Structured.

She steps slightly closer.

Not enough to break spacing.

Just enough to test it.

I don’t move.

It holds.

Good.

“You adjust quickly.”

“I don’t wait to.”

That almost sounds like something else.

I let it pass.

She nods once.

Understanding—

or something like it.

“You’ll be needed again soon.”

“I’m available.”

Always.

There’s no reason not to be.

Her gaze lingers—

just a second longer than necessary.

Then it’s gone.

Replaced.

By position.

By control.

By what she is here.

That’s—

correct.

That’s how it should be.

The moment closes.

# The Ticking Clock

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Clean.

No excess.

No drift.

“I’ll have word sent.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Of course I will.

That’s the job.

I step back.

Turn.

Leave the room before anything stretches.

The hall receives me the same way.

Structured.

Ordered.

Unquestioned.

Good.

I move toward the exit.

Measured.

Even.

Everything holds.

Everything responds.

Exactly as it should.

And still—

as I pass through the gates—

I feel it again.

Faint.

Not inside.

Outside.

Waiting.

I don’t acknowledge it.

There’s no place for it here.

And if it doesn’t have a place—

it doesn’t belong.

I step forward.

The street opens.

And the mask—

holds.

## CHAPTER 10 —

**IN**

### *HER PRESENCE*

I don’t leave.

Not yet.

The instruction wasn’t given.

And timing—

hasn’t closed.

The hall stays still.

Not empty.

Contained.

Movement exists.

# The Ticking Clock

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It just doesn't interfere.

That's the difference here.

I remain where I'm placed.

Not idle.

Waiting.

There's a structure to that too.

Most people don't understand it.

Waiting isn't inactivity.

It's held positioning.

The door opens again.

Not quickly.

Not slowly.

Correctly.

She steps out.

Not the same as before.

Not different.

Just—  
shifted.

Something follows her.

Not a presence.

A weight.

Subtle.

Carried well.

I don't react.

I register.

That's enough.

"You stayed."

"I wasn't dismissed."

A pause.

Small.

Measured.

"That's not always why people leave."

No.

It isn't.

But it should be.

"I prefer clarity."

"I know."

Of course she does.

She steps past me.

Not close enough to break distance.

Close enough to change it.

I adjust—

internally.

Externally—

I don't move.

We walk.

Not together.

Not separate.

Aligned.

# The Ticking Clock

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The corridor stretches ahead.

Same as before.

Still—

it feels longer now.

Not visibly.

Just—  
held differently.

“You were quiet.”

“I wasn’t asked to speak.”

“That’s never stopped anyone.”

It stops me.

That’s the point.

“I don’t speak without placement.”

“And when there isn’t one?”

“There always is.”

She glances at me.

Not directly.

Just enough.

“Is there?”

Yes.

There has to be.

I don’t say it.

I don’t need to.

We reach the balcony.

The doors are already open.

The night sits outside.

Different from the street.

Higher.

Quieter.

Less—  
defined.

She steps out.

I follow.

Not because I’m told to.

Because the space allows it.

The air moves differently here.

Not wrong.

Just—  
uncontained.

The city stretches below.

Lights.  
Spacing.  
Movement.

All correct.

Still—

there’s something in it.

Faint.

I don’t focus on it.

I stay present.

That’s the job.

“You notice it.”

# The Ticking Clock

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Not a question.

I don't answer.

She turns slightly.

Now she looks at me.

Fully.

That's—  
rare.

"It doesn't sit the same, does it?"

There's no reason to answer that.

And still—

"Yes."

The word leaves before I place it.

That's new.

She doesn't react.

Not visibly.

But something—

acknowledges it.

"It won't."

A pause.

Not empty.

Measured.

"Not anymore."

That—

doesn't fit.

It should.

But it doesn't.

I straighten slightly.

"That doesn't change function."

"No," she says softly.

"It doesn't."

Agreement.

That's good.

That keeps things stable.

She turns back toward the city.

The moment stretches.

Not incorrectly.

Just—  
longer than it needs to be.

I don't close it.

I should.

I don't.

Something in the air shifts.

Not like before.

Not pressure.

Awareness.

Then—

it's gone.

Replaced.

Her posture resets.

Distance returns.

# The Ticking Clock

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The moment closes.

Clean.

Professional.

“I’ll have you called when needed.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Of course I will.

That doesn't change.

She nods once.

Dismissal.

Clear.

Correct.

I step back.

Turn.

Leave.

The doors close behind me.

The hall receives me again.

Structured.

Ordered.

Still.

Good.

I move toward the exit.

Measured.

Even.

Everything holds.

Everything responds.

Exactly as it should.

And still—

as I pass through the final threshold—

something from that moment doesn't leave.

Not her.

Not the space.

Just—

a slight shift.

In where I stand inside it.

I adjust.

It doesn't move.

I keep walking.

The system holds.

It has to.

## CHAPTER II — *THE MOMENT*

I don't leave immediately.

Not because I hesitate.

Because the space hasn't closed.

That matters.

Movement without closure creates overlap.

I don't allow overlap.

# The Ticking Clock

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The hall remains still.

Not empty.

Occupied.

Just—  
quiet.

I adjust my position slightly.

Not enough to change placement.

Just enough to remain within it.

Voices carry differently here.

They don't travel.

They settle.

Which means—

if something is said—

it stays.

The door further down opens.

Not for me.

Not meant to be heard.

Still—

it is.

“...it's already begun.”

The voice is low.

Controlled.

Familiar in the way all voices here are.

I don't turn.

Turning creates intent.

I don't have intent here.

I listen.

“...containment failed sooner than expected.”

Containment.

That's a word with placement.

That's a word that matters.

Another voice—

sharper.

“Because it was allowed to.”

That—

doesn't fit.

Allowed implies choice.

Choice implies deviation.

Deviation implies—

failure.

I don't move.

“...the twins pushed it further than planned.”

The twins.

That places it.

Not clearly.

But enough.

“...they always do.”

A third voice.

Calmer.

# The Ticking Clock

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Less reactive.

“Then you should have accounted for it.”

Silence follows.

Not empty.

Measured.

Like it's being placed.

“...and the Dormouse?”

A pause.

Longer.

“...unreliable.”

That word lands differently.

Not inaccurate.

But—

incomplete.

“Unreliable isn't a condition. It's a failure to control.”

That's closer.

That makes sense.

“...he's not the problem.”

Another shift.

“He's a symptom.”

That—

doesn't sit clean.

Symptoms don't act.

They reflect.

Which means—

something else moved first.

I feel that.

Before I think it.

“...and now it's spreading.”

Spreading.

That word doesn't belong here.

Things don't spread here.

They're placed.

They're contained.

They're managed.

“...not yet.”

That voice—

steady.

Final.

Hers.

Everything else stops.

Not because it's silent.

Because it yields.

“The Hound will handle it.”

The Hound.

The word doesn't echo.

It settles.

Heavy.

# The Ticking Clock

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Placed.

Final.

No one responds.

They don't need to.

The decision is already made.

"...we don't know where it will surface."

A smaller voice.

Careful.

Controlled.

"We don't need to."

Hers again.

"It will be where it needs to be."

That—

should make sense.

It doesn't.

Not completely.

There's something in it—

that doesn't align.

Not wrong.

Just—

not fully placed.

The door closes.

Soft.

Final.

The voices stop.

Not fading.

Gone.

The hall returns.

Still.

Structured.

As if nothing moved.

I remain where I am.

For a second longer than necessary.

That's twice now.

Too many.

I adjust.

Step forward.

Movement resumes.

Clean.

But now—

there's something sitting in it.

Not visible.

Not audible.

Just—

understood.

The Hound.

I don't know what that means.

Not fully.

# The Ticking Clock

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But I know—

it matters.

That's enough.

I move toward the exit.

Measured.  
Even.

Everything holds.

Everything responds.

Exactly as it should.

And still—

as I pass through the final threshold—

something about the way it was said—

doesn't settle.

Not the words.

The certainty.

Like something was already decided—

before it happened.

That doesn't fit.

Things happen.

Then they're decided.

That's how it works.

I step outside.

The night receives me.

Spacing returns.

Distance holds.

Everything aligns.

It should feel clean.

It doesn't.

I keep walking.

The system still works.

It has to.

But now—

I know something inside it—

doesn't.

## CHAPTER 12 —

*THAT*

*WILL BE ALL*

I don't leave.

Not yet.

The hall has closed.

But something hasn't.

That matters.

I remain where I should be.

Not waiting.

Placed.

The air shifts.

Subtle.

Familiar.

# The Ticking Clock

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The door opens.

I don't turn.

I don't need to.

She's there.

I can feel it before I see it.

Everything adjusts—

just enough.

Then—

she steps into place.

I turn.

Not immediately.

At the correct moment.

She's already moving toward me.

Not quickly.

Not slowly.

Controlled.

The same.

And not.

There's something carried in her posture.

Not visible.

Just—

present.

I don't place it.

I acknowledge it.

That's enough.

"You stayed."

"I wasn't dismissed."

A pause.

Soft.

Measured.

"Not everything requires dismissal."

No.

It doesn't.

But it should.

Clarity matters.

I don't say that.

I don't need to.

She studies me for a moment.

Not fully.

Just enough to register something—

and let it sit.

"You heard."

Not a question.

There's no reason to deny it.

"Yes."

That lands cleaner than it should.

I don't adjust it.

She nods once.

Acceptance.

# The Ticking Clock

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Not approval.

“You understand what that means.”

I don't.

Not fully.

But—

“I understand that it matters.”

That's accurate.

That's enough.

Her gaze lingers.

A second longer than necessary.

Then—

softens.

Not visibly.

But enough to feel.

“That's all you need to understand.”

A boundary.

Clear.

Correct.

I accept it.

There's no value in pushing past placement.

We stand in it.

The moment—

holds.

Not stretched.

Not forced.

Just—

present.

There's something in it.

Not structure.

Not function.

Something else.

I don't name it.

I don't need to.

She steps slightly closer.

Not enough to break distance.

Just enough to—

change it.

I don't move.

I hold position.

That's the job.

“You've always been precise.”

“I have to be.”

“You choose to be.”

That—

doesn't fit.

It should.

But it doesn't.

“I don't see the difference.”

# The Ticking Clock

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Her expression shifts.

Small.

Almost—

something like a smile.

“You will.”

No.

I won’t.

There’s no reason to.

Everything works as it is.

It has to.

The moment tightens.

Not pressure.

Definition.

Then—

it releases.

Clean.

Professional.

She steps back.

Distance returns.

Correct.

“I have things to attend to.”

Of course she does.

That’s expected.

“I won’t need you for the rest of the evening.”

That lands—

normal.

Correct.

And still—

something in it—

isn’t.

“I understand.”

“I know you do.”

A pause.

Then—

softer—

“That will be all.”

Final.

Placed.

I nod.

“Goodnight.”

I step back.

Turn.

Leave before anything stretches.

The hall receives me again.

Structured.

Ordered.

Nothing out of place.

Good.

That’s how it should be.

# The Ticking Clock

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I move toward the exit.

Measured.  
Even.

The doors open.

The night waits.

I step through.

And this time—

it doesn't feel the same.

Not wrong.

Not broken.

Just—

not the same.

I adjust.

It doesn't move.

That's—

new.

I keep walking.

There's no reason to stop.

There's never a reason to stop.

Still—

as the distance settles behind me—

I feel it.

Not from the hall.  
Not from her.

From the space between.

Like something stayed open.

Not enough to matter.

Just enough to notice.

I don't place it.

I let it sit.

That's new too.

I keep walking.

Measured.  
Even.

And for the first time—

I don't try to correct it.

## CHAPTER 13 — A REMINDER

The night should open.

It doesn't.

Not the way it usually does.

Spacing holds.  
Distance stays.

Everything is where it should be.

Still—

something sits in it.

Not new.

Not the same as before.

# The Ticking Clock

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Heavier.

I keep walking.

Measured.

Even.

No reason to adjust.

No reason to stop.

The street ahead clears.

Not naturally.

Deliberately.

People shift before I reach them.

Not away from me.

Away from something else.

I don't look for it.

If it matters—

it will place itself.

The air tightens.

Not pressure.

Recognition.

Like something the space understands—

before I do.

A door opens ahead.

Not with sound.

With absence.

The kind of opening that doesn't need to be heard.

Movement follows.

Heavy.

Even.

Unquestioned.

I don't stop.

I don't slow.

Still—

something in me—

does.

He steps into the street.

Not quickly.

Not slowly.

Exactly—

as he should.

No hesitation.

No adjustment.

The space doesn't resist him.

It yields.

Immediately.

That—

is wrong.

Everything resists something.

Everything adjusts.

He doesn't.

The ground takes his steps—

# The Ticking Clock

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like it was waiting for them.

No correction.  
No delay.

Perfect placement.

Too perfect.

I don't look directly at him.

I don't need to.

I know where he is.

Everyone does.

No one says anything.

No one moves incorrectly.

No one crosses.

The entire street—

holds.

Not still.

Contained.

Like it understands something I don't.

Or—

something I haven't placed yet.

I pass him.

That's what I'm supposed to do.

That's what keeps things clean.

Still—

as I do—

the air shifts.

Not around me.

Through me.

Cold.

Not temperature.

Recognition.

Like something already decided—

what I am.

I don't react.

I don't change pace.

I don't acknowledge it.

There's no reason to.

It's not for me.

I know that.

I don't know how.

I just—

do.

Behind me—

nothing follows.

No sound.

No shift.

That's worse.

It should.

Things like that—

should leave something.

He doesn't.

# The Ticking Clock

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The street closes behind him.

Not gradually.

Immediately.

Like he was never there.

Except—

he was.

I keep walking.

Measured.

Even.

Everything returns.

Spacing holds.

Distance aligns.

The night resumes.

Correct.

And still—

something stays.

Not with him.

With the space he moved through.

Like it remembers.

I feel it.

Not strongly.

Just enough.

Like a story I was told once—

and didn't understand.

But remembered anyway.

I adjust my breathing.

Even.

Measured.

It doesn't move.

I keep walking.

There's no reason to stop.

There's never a reason to stop.

Still—

as I pass the next line of light—

I feel it again.

Not fear.

Something—

close to it.

Something that doesn't belong in placement.

Something—

instinctive.

I don't name it.

I don't place it.

I let it pass.

That's new.

I keep moving.

Measured. Even.

Everything is still in place.

It has to be.

But now—

# The Ticking Clock

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I know—

something else is too.

## CHAPTER 14 — *WHO IS THAT?*

I keep walking.

That's what holds everything together.

Movement.

Placement.

Forward.

The street settles behind me.

The weight from before—

doesn't follow.

Not the same way.

The space feels—

open again.

Not wide.

Just—  
available.

That's better.

That's how it should be.

I adjust my pace.

Not to correct.

To return.

Measured.  
Even.

The rhythm holds.

Tick—

Step—

Tick—

Step—

Aligned.

Good.

That's enough.

The next stretch is quiet.

Not empty.

Just—  
unoccupied.

People move at the edges.

Not interfering.

Not crossing.

Everything where it belongs.

I don't need to adjust anything.

That's rare.

That's—

good.

Then—

# The Ticking Clock

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something shifts.

Not like before.

Not pressure.

Not delay.

Something—

lighter.

I don't stop.

I don't slow.

Still—

the rhythm changes.

Not the watch.

Not the step.

The space between them.

I notice it—

before I decide to.

That's new.

I look up.

She's already there.

Not arriving.

Not placed.

Just—

in it.

Standing where nothing was—

and somehow—

where something should have been.

That doesn't make sense.

It should.

Everything should.

She moves.

Not forward.

Not away.

Just—

through.

Like direction doesn't matter—

and still—

lands exactly where it needs to.

That—

isn't possible.

I slow.

No—

I stop.

Fully.

Everything else continues.

People pass.

Movement holds.

The world doesn't react.

Only—

me.

That's wrong.

# The Ticking Clock

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I should move.

I don't.

I watch.

There's something in the way she steps.

Not placed.

Not corrected.

Not adjusted.

It just—

is.

And everything around it—

allows it.

Not yields.

Not resists.

Just—

exists with it.

I don't understand that.

I should.

There should be a place for it.

There isn't.

She turns.

Not toward me.

Not intentionally.

Still—

it feels like it lands.

Like the moment shifts—

to include me in it.

I don't move.

I don't speak.

I don't need to.

This isn't something you interact with.

This is something you—

observe.

The watch ticks.

Steady.

Correct.

Still—

it doesn't hold the moment.

For the first time—

it doesn't define it.

That's—

not acceptable.

I focus on it.

Tick—

Step—

No.

There's no step.

I'm not moving.

Tick—

# The Ticking Clock

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The moment doesn't align.

It doesn't follow.

It doesn't—

need to.

I lower my hand.

Let the watch sit.

That's new.

I don't rely on it.

I don't need to.

Something else—

holds the space.

I don't understand it.

I don't try to.

She moves again.

And the world—

doesn't change.

But it—

feels like it does.

Like everything has more in it.

More space.

More meaning.

More—

something.

I stay where I am.

No reason to approach.

No reason to leave.

Just—

watch.

That's enough.

She doesn't see me.

Doesn't acknowledge me.

Doesn't need to.

Still—

something shifts.

Not in her.

In me.

Not enough to break.

Just enough—

to move.

I take a step.

It lands.

Not forced.

Not corrected.

Just—

natural.

That's new.

I don't fix it.

I don't question it.

I let it happen.

# The Ticking Clock

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That's new too.

She moves further into the street.

And for a moment—

everything feels—

aligned.

Not by control.

Not by placement.

Just—

aligned.

I don't understand that.

I don't need to.

Not yet.

I stand there—

longer than I should.

Then—

I move.

Not because I have to.

Because I choose to.

That's—

different.

I continue forward.

Measured.

Even.

But something—

has changed.

Not the system.

Not the structure.

Me.

And for the first time—

I don't try to place it.

I just—

let it stay.