Optional: When Justice Was Optional

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

Friday had a way of making people forget their own instincts.

It was the day the city forgave itself—at least for a few hours—because lunch was coming, the sun was bright, and whatever you were carrying inside your chest could be postponed until after five.

She knew that. She built her life on it.

Mara Quinn stood near the edge of the crowd like she belonged there, like the sidewalk was a stage and every passerby was a camera that could be turned on. She wore the kind of confidence that didn't come from peace—she didn't have peace—she wore the kind of confidence that came from winning small battles every day: attention, approval, reaction.

She was twenty-eight, Dallas-born, and hungry in a way her followers called "driven" because it sounded nicer.

Her phone was mounted on a slim gimbal in her left hand. In her right, a small bottle with a clean label and a name that sounded expensive enough to trust. The bottle looked like it belonged in a department store display, under soft lights, next to a glossy card that promised a life upgrade.

Reading sample — continued

A second person—Trey, the videographer—walked beside her, stepping backwards, framing her face, catching the little smile she used when she wanted people to say yes.

A third—Kiya, the “brand assistant”—held a stack of flyers like they were VIP passes.

They’d practiced the routine until it was effortless.

Mara stopped a woman with a tote bag and a badge lanyard—office worker, likely, the kind that ate lunch in twenty minutes and pretended it was self-care.

“Hey—quick question,” Mara said, voice warm, casual, like she was asking for directions instead of permission to cross someone’s boundaries. “We’re doing a street test for a new fragrance launch. It’s super light. Would you be okay with a tiny spray on your wrist? Totally optional.”

The woman hesitated, instinct flickering across her face like a shadow.

Mara gave her the smile. The smile said: I’m safe. I’m normal. I’m just like you, only prettier and better lit.

The woman laughed a little, as if her hesitation was silly. “Sure,” she said. “Why not?”

Mara leaned in, keeping her hand visible, performing transparency. The bottle never felt like an intrusion because Mara made it feel like an invitation.