The Current

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The church smelled like wet wool and lilies. Adrian sat two rows from the front, his palms damp against his black slacks, watching rain string down the stained-glass windows in slow, uncertain lines. The coffin—sleek, unhelpfully perfect—rested beneath a spray of white roses that kept dropping petals as if even the flowers couldn’t keep it together.

Julian Park, thirty-six, beloved friend, brilliant mess, had run out of time. There’d been talk of an aneurysm, talk of a freak weakness in a vessel no one could predict. There had also been talk—a lot of it, in hurried whispers—about how unfair it was, how “you never know,” how “we should get drinks after this, right?” as if grief required reservations.

The minister told a tidy story about seasons. A cousin told a funny one about binge-watching terrible sci-fi with Julian. A man at the lectern cried so suddenly his body folded like a card table. Adrian watched it all with the steady distance of someone who has trained himself not to be seen needing anything. The choir hummed a hymn that never found its way into his bones. He stared at the coffin and felt a thin wire inside him pull taut: a sensation that was not sadness and not fear but something under both, something that said, quietly, You’ve been skimming.

Reading sample — continued

He caught his reflection in the brass rail—handsome enough, athletic enough, the right haircut, the right jacket—and it was like looking at a mannequin he had dressed to survive a storefront. The wire inside tugged again, harder. You've been skimming your own life.

When the service ended, the doors opened to a gray parking lot and the sound of tires hissing on rain. People organized their umbrellas and their grief. Someone squeezed Adrian's shoulder—"You okay?"—and he nodded automatically, the nod he'd perfected since adolescence. The nod that meant I will not make this your problem.

He stepped out into the rain without opening his umbrella. The cold hit his scalp. Water coursed down the back of his neck and into his shirt collar. His shoes took on weight, soles slapping against the slick asphalt. It felt, unexpectedly, good—undeniable, immediate. Somewhere between the church and the curb his breath changed, deepening as if the air had more value. He had the sudden and almost ridiculous urge to take his shoes off and put his bare feet on the ground.