The Taste of
Guaraná

WORKING MANUSCRIPT

Prologue and Chapters 1–3
15th November 2025

Prologue

A Bond Forged in Shadows

SILENCE TRAVELS FASTER THAN SOUND

The Farm

“Ice.”
Harry Loscam stared into the freezer. Empty trays. Again.

He let the door hang open, its hollow clatter echoing through the kitchen. The paddocks outside shimmered under the afternoon heat, dust curling at the edges of the horizon. He poured neat JD into a glass and swallowed. Ice was only ever a distraction—something to dull the burn, never to quench it.

Two weeks home from his last assignment and already the cycle had resumed: drink until dawn, collapse into half-sleep, wake with the hammer of a hangover, repeat. By the third week, he’d usually sink into something resembling hibernation. Recovery, of a kind. Never a cure.

Forgettability was Harry’s weapon. To strangers, he was lean, angular, unremarkable. To Hogarth Cooper, he was indispensable—the man who could slip unseen through boardrooms and border crossings alike. But here, in the farmhouse creaking with silence, even that weapon was useless.

The lighter flicked open and shut in his hand, the metallic snap filling the kitchen. The Zippo never held fuel. It had belonged to a former commander who had died in Harry’s arms on his first deployment, whispering only one word as he held the lighter in Harry’s hand before slipping away: *Destiny.*

The word haunted him still. Sometimes he thought the voice lived in the walls of the farmhouse, rising with the cicadas, whispering when the silence pressed too close. He drank not only for sleep but to drown that echo.

Headlights swept across the veranda. Matt Schultz arrived in his rusting and rattling old Toyota ute, tray hiding the necessary supplies—steaks, ginger ale, ice, and a new bottle of JD.

“Brought the cavalry?” Harry rasped.

Matt tossed the bottle across. “Shower, mate. Then food. You reek.”

Harry laughed, rare and sharp, before stepping inside.

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By nightfall the barbecue hissed, steaks smoking, whiskey poured. Between their laughter and silence, the paddocks exhaled under stars, dew silvering the grass. Matt was gravity—anchor and brother. Harry's shadows lifted, just for a beat.

It must have been somewhere after 10pm when Harry's phone went off. He in typical Harry fashion chose to ignore it. It stopped ringing when it went off again. Harry this time looked over to where it was sitting and decided it wasn't worth answering so took another sip of his drink. As if someone was watching the phone no sooner stopped ringing when it once again set off. Matt looking quietly at Harry could see his mood changing from the first ring until now, as Harry reached out and picked up the phone.

"Yep" was all he said.

"Mr. Loscam, you are required, flights booked for tomorrow night Emirates business class, Sir Thomas is looking forward to seeing you back in London". It wasn't a question, more a statement of expectation. The phone went dead.

Harry drained his glass, typed a short message to a contact named Panda, turned to Matt. "Better drink up mate, we've got a flight first thing."

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Chapter One

Time to Go

Matt Schultz woke to the kind of hangover that arrived with opinions.

The alarm had barely chirped before he slapped it silent and lay there, tasting old JD and country dust. His mouth felt drier than sandpaper left in a ute tray through January. He'd let Harry talk him into "just one more" — again. That was the problem with Harry Loscam: you forgot he was dangerous because he laughed like a bloke, not like a ghost.

Push-ups first. Always. Even with a head like wet cement. He rolled straight to the floor and banged out a set — not because he felt good, but because years of soldiering had welded the routine into his bones. Shower next. Hot. Too long. Worth it.

In the kitchen the vitamin B was fizzing in the glass. No time for proper coffee. He cracked a can of guarana and called it breakfast.

The farm was already breathing. Paddocks pale with early light, a light northerly carrying the eucalyptus off the creek line. Matt swung the ute around the house and took the dirt track to the workshop at the far eastern boundary — the one that doubled as their "tower" for the airstrip. Six klicks of corrugated road to remember this was Harry's place, Harry's money, Harry's ridiculous "hobby farm" that somehow turned a profit because Matt treated it like a real one.

Harry was there ahead of him.

Of course he was.

No hangover, no red eyes, just that infuriating early-mission sharpness he got when London called. He was in jeans, sleeves rolled, lighter already in hand, flicking it on/off with no flame — the dead Zippo with the word Destiny welded to it like a curse.

"No coffee?" Matt said, hopeful.

"No time," Harry said. "Pre-flight's done. Wheels up in ten."

Matt stared at him. "You know normal people ease into the day?"

"We're not normal people."

That part, at least, was true.

They taxied the Cessna 172 to the dirt strip as the sun pushed over the boundary trees. Engine up, prop whining, paddocks dropping away. That first rip off the ground always fixed Matt's head — air colder, light cleaner, problems smaller. Below, the farm became a neat patchwork under a high Australian sky, dew still on the grass, the house shrinking to a toy. For Harry, it was something else: weightlessness, the brief illusion that whatever he'd drowned in JD last night had stayed there.

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Melbourne widened ahead of them, city going from haze to hard edges, bay throwing back pale light. They banked toward Essendon.

The private apron was already busy — Gulfstream gleaming, handlers moving luggage with that quiet urgency rich people pay for. Two Russian hostesses — too polished for that hour — leaned on a service cart, laughing. Matt saw them, clocked the perfume, and was off.

The heat off the Essendon apron rose in waves, carrying jet wash, Avgas, and the faint smell of hot rubber. A polished Gulfstream — Russian registry, he was almost sure — sat with its stairs down and two over-dressed hostesses pretending not to be bored. Matt was already angling toward them.

“Well, don’t you two brighten up a dull old hangar,” he said, turning on that surfer-soldier charm that had worked on warlords and backpackers alike. They giggled. One twirled her hair. He was half-telling a story before he’d even finished introducing himself. Harry didn’t need to hear it; he’d heard the Afghanistan/footy/small-farm version of it a hundred times.

Harry didn’t linger.

“Vienna still on?” Matt called without slowing.

“If London behaves,” Harry said. “You and Panda go ahead if I’m a day late.”

“You’re always a day late.”

The black Emirates car door opened. As he slid in, the farm, the hangar, and Matt’s easy grin all stayed on the tarmac. This life — the smooth, silent, chauffeured one — had no dust on it. That was what he liked about business class: no sheep-pens, no check-in, no pretending he was just another traveller. In and straight to the lounge. The driver took his bag. Harry stepped out, paused, read the space the way ex-military do — exits, cameras, sightlines — and let the lighter click once in his palm. Silent oath. Bring everyone home.

Upstairs, in the quiet meeting room off the lounge, Panda was already waiting — Melbourne’s least likely millionaire, thick black-rimmed glasses glowing with reflected data, secure line green. Where Matt charmed and Harry planned, Panda listened. He was the one who stayed up all night after one text, riding caffeine, guaraná and sugar until the code gave up its secrets.

“Good to see you vertical,” Panda said.

“Alright,” Harry said, taking the seat opposite. “What’s London lost sleep over this time?”

“Hogarth Cooper’s moving a lot of weight, Harry. Some of it isn’t theirs.”

They ran through manifests, flight paths, someone else’s encrypted traffic over South America. The word sat there, pulsing: guaraná. Not the sugared-up energy-drink kind — the jungle kind. The kind people killed for.

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When they were done, Matt finally wandered in from Essendon, smelling of aviation fuel and expensive perfume, grinning like a teenager.

“You’re not gonna believe whose jet I just sat in…”

Harry didn’t roll his eyes, but only because he was fond of him.

Matt told them anyway — about the over-appointed Gulfstream, the Russian hostesses, and how he’d “accidentally” left Panda’s black jelly bean bug under the leather seat of what was very clearly a Russian billionaire’s aircraft.

Panda glanced at his tablet.

Green icon. Pulse.

“Signal acquired,” he said. “Our bean is in the jar.”

Harry’s lighter snapped shut. That feeling again — as if a mission had already begun and none of them had been kind enough to tell him. Out on Essendon’s tarmac a low whine rose; heat shimmer bent the lights into halos. Somewhere above, a chain of satellites adjusted for reasons civilians would never be told. The world was watching, even if it didn’t yet know what to watch.

Matt clapped him on the shoulder. “Beer before you fly out?”

“Quick one,” Harry said.

Because London was calling. Because Emirates was waiting. Because, as the three of them knew and never said out loud, whenever Hogarth Cooper started moving secrets as easily as its freight, circles began to close.

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Chapter Two - ORRIS

MILAN, PRIVATE ROOM ABOVE THE ATELIER

Imogen Morozova sat in a private studio above the canal in Navigli, Milan — a space that pretended to belong to the artisan downstairs, and actually belonged to her.

The room was quiet in that particular way expensive rooms are quiet: not silence, but controlled sound. Cut crystal. Paper sliding. Breath held until permission to exhale is implied.

On the table: six Orris bottle prototypes.

All circular. Mouth-blown glass, each one intentionally unique — not "handcrafted" in the way marketing teams say it, but truly unrepeatable. You couldn't scale this. You couldn't order a pallet. That was the point.

Imogen rejected four as soon as she saw them.

"This cut is vulgar," she said of one. "It looks like something you'd see behind a nightclub bar."

She tapped a fingernail lightly against the second. "Too feminine. Orris is not sweet."

The third: "Trying too hard to look expensive."

The fourth she didn't insult. She just turned its base half a degree and shook her head.

The fifth, she lifted.

The glassmaker — a man whose name lived quietly in the notebooks of yacht wives and old families — watched her like a priest watching for omens.

That fifth bottle caught the low light in a way that made it look like a droplet suspended in air. The liquid was flawless, colourless, cold. Not flashy. Not ostentatious. Quietly absolute.

The stopper was a matte black sphere, heavy in the palm — not lacquer-black, not plastic, but that soft, impossible black like a true pearl dredged up from somewhere that should not have produced one. The "black pearl," as whispers had already started to call it in certain circles.

Closer, she could feel a faint texture under her thumb where the stopper met the collar. A ridge. She didn't bother to hide her dislike.

"The collar," she said.

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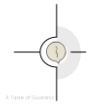

“We reinforced the seal,” the glassmaker said gently. “It remembers who opened it. If it’s passed to anyone else, the bond breaks. The stopper will refuse to sit properly. It’s… a signature, signorina.”

So if you weren’t chosen, you couldn’t fake it.

Imogen considered. Then: “You’ll shave that ridge. Barely. I don’t want anyone to see it’s there unless they’re looking for it. Orris does not advertise its own locks.”

“Understood.”

He waited, respectful. No one in this room called her “dedushka’s granddaughter.” No one in this room thought of her as an ornament. They dealt with her the way men historically dealt with heads of houses. Carefully.

“Profile holds?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Still leatherwood-led. You get the Tasmanian resin and raw honey first — wild sweet, alpine, clean. Then the Peru balsam curls in behind it. Warm. Human. It lingers on the skin but not on the air. Anyone who gets close will know what it is. Anyone across the room won’t.”

Her scent. Her signature. Controlled proximity.

Imogen lifted the bottle and drew in a careful breath above the neck.

Leatherwood hit first: that high, bright resin, like cut sap and cold mountain air. A note from somewhere distant, almost mythic — a place you can’t buy your way into, only be allowed.

Underneath was the balsam. Deeper. Smoky amber, polished wood, heat. The aftertaste of touch. Control, made fragrant.

Good.

“This,” she said. “This is Orris.”

The glassmaker inclined his head. “How many shall we prepare for Milan, signorina? For distribution at the launch?”

Imogen turned her head, eyes flicking to him in a way that said be very, very precise.

“Distribution?” she echoed, softly.

He swallowed. “Your— I assumed your grandfather would wish—”

She smiled without showing teeth.

“Ah,” she said. “No. You misunderstand. Orris is not passed out like a canapé.”

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He flushed a fraction. “Of course, signorina.”

Setting the bottle down with care. “There will only be one bottle visible in that room” she said. “One. And I will advise who will receive a glass beforehand. A single glass may be given to a selected few, but no one will leave with a bottle. I will not explain it. I will not name it. I will let them make their own mythology. That’s how you build hunger.”

Now his eyes sharpened. He understood. Not a family token. A public ritual.

“And the others?” he asked quietly.

“One,” she said. “To go home ahead of me. Wrapped in matte black. Unmarked. Hand delivery only.”

He waited for the name.

“Bianchi,” she said.

His brow lifted a hair. “Family?”

Imogen finally looked straight at him then — and though her expression was mild, the temperature in the room dropped.

“Don’t presume to map my definitions,” she said.

He bowed his head immediately. “Forgive me, signorina. Address?”

She gave it. The apartment in Milan, the grandmother’s flat. It sounded domestic and unthreatening spoken aloud, but in practice it was a reveal. Giving a bottle like Orris to someone who did not sit in that Milan room was… loud.

He made a careful note. *CELESTINA BIANCHI.*

“And with it,” Imogen continued, “include one Orris glass. Just one. The round base, the thin lip. No engraving. And the card.”

“Yes,” he said. “What would you like the card to say?”

Her thumb traced the black-pearl stopper, the way Harry’s thumb rolled the Zippo lid. Her own small vow.

“‘Welcome inside,’” she said. “In Italian.”

He nodded without blinking, but she saw the understanding land. Not a flirt. An initiation.

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Chapter Three

MEL → DXB: The Kindness and the Shadow

The cabin lights slid to amber, softening the hard geometry of aluminium into a low honey glow. Harry Loscam took 21D preferring the aisle over a window view that framed the last of Melbourne: runway beads in patient rows, the bay a dull graphite plate beyond. Belts clicked. Trolleys whispered. The big Airbus built that quiet, tidal pressure that means the earth is about to let go of you.

"Good evening, Mr Loscam."
Ellie stood there with a calm that smoothed the aisle. Blonde hair in a neat bob, badge straight, lipstick set to "assurance," she seemed to organise the air around her without trying. "Sparkling water to start—a thick slice of lime. I'll lower the lamp a notch."

She'd remembered. Professional, precise, and -there it was -gently attentive. He didn't smile, but something in his chest eased. There was an echo in her poise: not the weaponised polish of Imogen, but the recurring thought of how Imogen must have been *before* the steel -young, exact, a touch too kind for the room. A memory's outline, not the person. Harry accepted the glass.

Opposite in 21B, a man arrived like a weather front: watch loud, grin louder. "Doug Johnson," he declared to no one in particular. "Venture. New York, London—everywhere." He pressed the call bell with the same finger that flicked his phone screen.

Ellie reached him with unfussy grace. "Good evening."

"Can you chill this?" He produced a boutique bottle. "Two glasses. More ice. A lemon. And—this menu needs English."

"We'll take care of you," Ellie said, the words landing like solved arithmetic.

Pushback. Taxi. Rotation. Melbourne fell into sodium and distance; the climb steadied into the long night. Harry drew the battered Zippo out of his pocket and did not open it. *Destiny* wasn't a creed; it was a weight. He palmed it once, then let it rest.

The aisle moved on its rails: a child's brief, hiccupping cry; the minute clicks of an overhead bin settling as the fuselage flexed; the faint chime of glass on ice. Ellie ran the cabin like a proof -anticipating, absorbing, never flustered. When she returned to 21D, she set down a hot towel and adjusted his reading lamp the half-click he hadn't asked for.

"If you sleep, I'll wake you for breakfast," she said. "If you don't, I'll find you coffee that earns the name."

"Coffee near descent sounds great," he said. "Strong."

Across the aisle, Doug multiplied requests the way some men multiply anecdotes. "Different glass. More ice. What's your good gin? Do you have—no, the other one." He turned to Harry, genial as a freight train. "You in venture?"

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"A passenger," Harry said.

"Ha," Doug grinned, already beckoning another attendant. "Guy after my own heart."

Across the aisle, Harry just kept quiet. "Ice," Doug said, then, "No, more ice," and later, "This glass is cloudy," followed by, "Can you angle this lamp? Not that way." He ate quickly, then complained of the portion, then praised the bread, then asked if the butter was Irish. Hours sluiced away. Harry didn't sleep so much as stand down—eyes closed, posture alert, that particular soldier's rest that looks like peace from outside and isn't. Twice he woke to the soft percussion of the call bell; twice he watched Ellie handle Doug with grace, as if translating a language no one else spoke.

Somewhere over the Timor Sea, cabin night song: a child whimpering, an overhead latch ticking as the fuselage flexed, the small chorus of ice in glasses. Harry reached for the lighter, turned it once in his palm, and set it down again. *Destiny*, the word that had followed him like a shadow. To the left, Doug murmured into his phone in airplane mode as if willpower could pull signal from vacuum. He had just returned from the bathroom when he caught the voices: two men at the galley curtain behind his seat, vodka ordered with the casual entitlement of long practice. The vowels were northern, the consonants a clipped metal. St. Petersburg. They laughed once, not kindly. One said, in English that didn't bother hiding its origin, "If they're on this route, they'll show in Dubai." Harry didn't look at them; he made a mental note. Jackets that tried to be quiet. Shoes that weren't. Faces trained out of reaction. He filed it and let it go.

The cabin lights slid from night to pearl grey as the A380 began its long descent. Filters hummed, coffee bloomed somewhere forward, and the aisle filled with the soft choreography of buckles and blankets. Harry hadn't really slept—he rarely did—but he'd let the darkness sit on his eyes and listened to the aircraft think.

A shadow paused at his shoulder. "Mr Loscam?" Ellie—gold pin, steady smile, that precise kindness he'd clocked at boarding—set a tray on his armrest: black coffee, croissant still warm, a little jar of apricot jam. "You usually take it without milk," she said, as if they'd done this a dozen times.

He studied her for half a breath. The angle of her jaw, the composed economy of movement—something in it echoed Vienna, echoed Imogen—but where Imogen had always arrived like weather, Ellie felt like shelter. Warmth instead of voltage. He nodded, a rare softness at the edge of his mouth. "Perfect. Thank you."

"Wheels down in twenty," she said. "You'll make your connection easily." A glance at his still-closed notebook, at the Zippo under his thumb. She didn't ask. She didn't need the story to do her job well. As she turned to go, she added, almost conspiratorially, "Hope we see you when you circle back."

Circle and you live, Harry thought. He let the coffee sit against the dry of his mouth, tasted citrus and metal from the long night, then flicked the Zippo open and shut once under the blanket—a metronome only he could hear.

Touchdown. Reverse thrust unspooled into a velvet roar; the great machine sighed itself onto the taxiway. At the door, Ellie was there again, professional to the last. "Safe travels," she

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said, and because it was true rather than routine, he believed it. He moved with the early wave through the jet bridge, neither first nor last, a man-shaped absence inside a river of bodies.

Dubai's morning was all glass and conditioned air, a desert sun diluted by architecture. He let the terminal carry him—left at perfume, right at watches—then bled out of the stream in a gentle curve to nowhere in particular. A family with wheeled dinosaurs clogged an aisle; he used their chaos as a screen and paused by a pillar.

Two men stood at an espresso stand beyond the glare. Suits cut an inch too sharp for transit, hairlines that had been argued with. One ordered vodka in careful English. The other answered in Russian—St. Petersburg's rounded vowels, the city's soft r's like felt on stone. Not loud. Not secret either.

"If he's on this route, he shows here," the taller one said, gaze never hunting, only grazing the crowd. "We don't touch. We confirm."

Harry watched the polished floor, not the men, and saw their reflections move as if the light itself were tracking his gate. He adjusted nothing. The lesson of terminals: to vanish, walk exactly where you're expected—until you don't.

He rejoined the flow. Security, escalator, the lullaby of departure boards. No sharp turns. No drama. At the fork for his London connection he gave himself one extra beat—just enough to know the Petersburger's head didn't lift—and went on.

In the satellite concourse, a new crew assembled behind smoked glass and fresh smiles. Ellie would be elsewhere now, back through the swing doors where time resets. Harry cupped the last of the coffee heat in his palm, felt the Zippo's weight answer from his pocket, and stepped toward the gate that would carry the problem forward. London would be weather. He'd pack a raincoat.

THE SKY MAKES EVERY PATH LOOK STRAIGHT.
ONLY THE GROUND REMEMBERS THE BENDS YOU TOOK TO GET HERE

DXB → LHR

Transit was polished floors and curated air. Harry shifted his path by a degree at a junction (habit), then another (test). At a duty-free arch of vodka and perfume, the two Russians surfaced from the crowd like sharks pretending to be shadows. He adjusted once more, let a family with wheeled dinosaurs wash between them, then took a quieter corridor to his gate. The men didn't press. Either they weren't for him, or they weren't ready to admit they were.

New crew on DXB → LHR. New smiles, new notes in the choreography. Doug had migrated one row forward and upgraded his geniality to a minor performance about *capital stacks* and *deal velocity*, talking as if words could throw weight.

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Harry ate like a man who expects to move immediately after, declined dessert, and rebuilt London from memory instead of sleep: the soft, tea-coloured light of Heathrow corridors; tyres sighing on wet tarmac; the way Knightsbridge feels like a contract someone already signed for you. The descent bit. The runway answered. Brakes, reverse thrust, the forward bend of a plane admitting gravity.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to London.”

The jet bridge embraced them with its bland, blessed smell of carpet and tea.

He stepped into the corridor. Behind him, the American’s voice rose like a minor weather front—“No, I need to be *first* through, I have a connection”—and then dissolved into the larger climate of Heathrow: announcements, wheelie bags, the low bass of big engines thinking about their next departure.

Harry didn’t hurry. He didn’t slow. The Zippo pressed its familiar coin of weight into his pocket.

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