Chapter One

The Chair

Elias Harrington leaned back in his cracked leather chair and exhaled softly. The lights flickered again, as they did most evenings when the grid couldn't keep up with demand.

He was seventy-two years old, and he was thinking about the dead.

Dr. Elias Harrington had spent fifty years thinking about the dead. As an archaeologist, that was his job. He had earned his doctorate at Leiden, built his reputation excavating Roman provincial sites across three continents, and published more books than he could remember. For decades he had been one of the most respected researchers at the Atlantic Institute for Ancient Studies. His specialty was ordinary people, not emperors or generals, but bakers, farmers, and craftsmen. The ones who left no monuments. The ones history forgot.

Now history seemed ready to forget him too.

Three weeks earlier, the Institute had notified him that all fieldwork funding had been suspended. When the financial system collapsed, the donations dried up. At his age, the polite language felt less like an update and more like a quiet dismissal.

He had never married. Never had children. The work had always come first, and now the work was gone. All that remained were notebooks, survey maps, and this Manhattan apartment he'd inherited from his mother, which was the one piece of stability he had left in a city that was falling apart around him.

But lately, despite everything, he found himself thinking about one last excavation. Not a grand project. Not a donor site. Something small. Something ordinary. The third century, when the silver vanished from Roman coins and ordinary people struggled to survive. The kind of people he had always cared about most.

He did not know where yet. But the thought would not leave him alone.



His stomach then growled. He opened the refrigerator to find the same three options he'd seen at breakfast: aging eggs, a hard wedge of cheese, and a half-slab of butter. He closed the door and reached for his coat and would go out searching for a meal.

The elevator had broken months ago, and no one expected it to be repaired. He descended the stairwell carefully, stepping past trash bags left from the reduced collection schedule. Once outside, he noted that the street seemed much quieter than years ago. With high fuel and electricity costs, cars were fewer, ride-shares rare, and taxis nearly extinct. People walked much more now because they had to.

He passed the old Merchant Federal building on the corner of 78th. This was his bank for over forty years. The brass doors were now chained, the windows papered over with a sign directing customers to download the bank's app onto their phones. He remembered a time when he could walk in on a Friday afternoon and Margaret at the third window would wave him over, ask about his latest dig and then slide his cash across the marble counter with a smile. "Bringing back any treasure this time, Dr. Harrington?" she'd ask. He always told her the real treasure was the story, not the gold. She'd laugh and say that's why he'd never be rich.

Now Margaret was gone. The marble counter was gone, and the whole idea of walking into a bank and being recognized was gone. Simply an app now, numbers on a screen, his savings bleeding out in silence with no one to witness it.

He kept walking. A few blocks further down the street, he slowed without meaning to.