

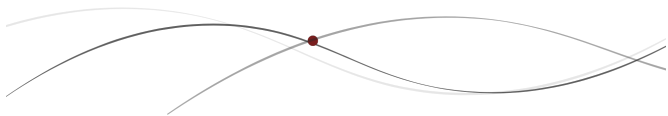
Untitled Forever

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about 500 Pages

Part I

Thursday



Chapter 1

Erik

The red Porsche slid along the rain slicked street, puddles reflecting its glossy frame. Raindrops sparkled on the bonnet like scattered diamonds. The sun had broken through, and the day looked beautiful—on the outside, at least.

Inside the car, Erik Summers felt anything but. Jet-lagged from the overnight haul out of Chicago, he already knew what the mirror would show—red threading through his green eyes that hadn't seen enough sleep. Fortunately, his designer sunglasses concealed the damage. He dragged a hand through his hair, pushing it back without bothering to fix it, still not fully believing he was driving on this road again.

Fourteen years—it had been fourteen years since he'd last set foot in this town. In this *country*. He tilted his head slightly, letting the May air wash over him. It smelled of wet leaves, damp soil, and something faintly floral—linden blossoms. The kind of scent that came after a spring rain in southern Germany. It was soft, earthy, unhurried. Nothing like Chicago, where the air was metallic and restless, always buzzing with ambition.

He passed the roundabout near the old supermarket—how many times had they spun through it drunk, laughing, music blaring from the car stereo? Ahead, a narrow forest path curved off to the left. It led to the lake where they used to swim in summer, sneaking beers and daring each other to jump from the rocks.

And this road—his father used to drive it every morning in the city bus. Erik would tag along sometimes before school, sitting proudly behind the ticket machine, pretending he was

co-pilot. Back then, the world was simple. Predictable. Safe.

Now, it felt like a trap.

Germany had been home for the first twenty-two years of his life. But after that night—*that night*—he left it all behind: the town, the country, his family, his friends.

Some accused him of fleeing. Damn right, he had.

But the music never stopped. It changed shape.

He'd built something—respected in Chicago, revered in Tokyo, whispered about in Berlin. Not stadiums, but sold-out shows. Not fame, but familiarity. His lyrics still meant something to people. That should've been enough.

But lately, it wasn't.

The last two albums felt like echoes—critics said. He didn't argue. He lit another cigarette and tried to write something else.

The album was far from finished yet.

Fragments, half-finished lyrics. Ideas that never became songs. Melodies hummed into his phone.

Ghosts.

At least this time he had a title.

For a while he'd had neither. Couldn't even think of a name. Rebecca had asked him what he was going to call the album and he had laughed in his whisky and said: "Untitled Forever."

Ghosts—that was the title now.

Fitting, considering where he was headed.

The email had come out of nowhere.

Fourteen years of silence, broken by a single line:

"There's something we should talk about."

He hadn't replied. Just stared at the screen for a long time.

Not sure how to react, while something inside him had already decided to go.

Rebecca had jumped at the chance. Booked the flights, mapped out the content strategy, pitched it as a comeback arc. “*Erik Summers returns to where it all began.*” He hadn’t corrected her. Let her spin it into a campaign. Let her believe it was about the album. But it wasn’t. Not really.

Yet as the old linden trees lining the alley to his hometown came into view, a chill ran down his spine.

Ghosts—he was driving straight into them.

The press release had called him Erik Summers. But Erik Sommerfeldt was the one behind the wheel. And he wasn’t ready.

He hadn’t used his real name in years. Not in interviews. Not on stage. Not in hotel check-ins.

Summers was easier-cooler, cleaner, untouchable.

Sommerfeldt was the name on old school reports, on his father’s bus schedule, on the police file from that night.

Damn.

The engine hummed beneath him, steady as a heartbeat. In the distance, faint church bells chimed, slow, deliberate, a sound he hadn’t heard in years. For a moment, he wasn’t sure if they were real or memory bleeding through the noise of the road.

Rebecca was still asleep beside him, curled against the passenger door, one hand resting lightly against her temple.

Rebecca D’Angelo-PR manager, influencer, twenty-five.

Her skin glowed even in sleep, her reddish-brown hair cascading in perfect waves.

She looked like a campaign shoot waiting to happen.

Yet as she exhaled softly through parted lips, a tiny puff of air stirred a strand of hair across her face. She made a faint, irritated sound and brushed it away without waking.

For some reason, the gesture caught him off guard—human, unlike the curated version of her she showed the world.

She'd convinced him this was a good idea. "Raw emotional moments," she'd called it. "A rebranding."

As if grief could be packaged.

As if Daniel's death could be content.

But he'd seen her hesitate once at O'Hare, when the gate attendant recognized him and asked for a selfie. Rebecca had smiled, but afterward she'd looked away, eyes distant for a heartbeat, as if realizing she'd built a story she might not be able to live inside.

Erik still didn't care about Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok. He'd log into Facebook occasionally, only to log out again—too many notifications, too many ghosts. Yes, he had a smartphone. Yes, he knew how to use it. He just didn't want to.

He hadn't told her, that he didn't want to trend.

He wanted to disappear.

He was just glad social media hadn't existed when it all happened. He could imagine the flood of photos, videos, comments.

It was enough that the images were etched into his memory: Alexa sobbing uncontrollably.

Chris punching the floor, the wall, the glass door. Chris's father speaking calmly to the medic, then the police. Kat—frozen on the leather couch.

And Daniel—sweet Daniel—grinning behind his drum kit one moment, lifeless the next. Black curls framing his face. That grin, gone.

And the words Erik had thrown at him earlier that night: *“Then you’re dead to me, man.”*

His hands trembled, just slightly, but enough. He needed a drink. Or a smoke. Or a damn reason to turn the car around. But both his hip flask and cigarettes were in his trench coat, buried in the trunk. And if he stopped now, Rebecca would wake up. Something he wanted to avoid. She’d immediately start complaining about the “boring German landscape.”

Irony, considering it was her idea to come. Fresh off her PR degree, Rebecca had declared this trip her favorite project. Well, second favorite—her own social media career came first.

Damn.

No. He couldn’t go there.

Not in memory.

Not in geography.

To hell with publicity. To hell with this whole idea.

He wouldn’t do it. He’d turn the car around at the next roundabout. No—he’d turn around now.

But first, he needed a drink.

Something to drown the voices. He veered onto a dirt track between the trees and hit the brakes. His foot landed in a muddy puddle as he stepped out, soaking his designer shoes. Rebecca would be furious.

He glanced at her—still asleep—then opened the trunk. His trench coat lay on top of the suitcases. Perfect.

Now, where was the flask?

Chris

The gate recognized Chris Tannenberg's car before he pressed the button. A muted click, a soft whirr, and the iron arms began to part. That was the point of good design—precision, reliability, quality that didn't need supervision.

He'd left his home at the Swiss side of lake Constance after his eight a.m. team call—thirty minutes of status updates, KPI reviews, and reminders that standards don't sleep. Technically, he was off today. The calendar said Out of Office. He'd hosted the meeting anyway. Being the boss didn't stop when the laptop closed.

The Tesla slipped through without sound. Two hundred thirty-eight kilometers from Kreuzlingen in one charge, average consumption under sixteen kilowatt-hours. Flawless. Efficiency wasn't a goal. It was proof of order.

The dashboard clock switched from 11:44 to 11:45. Right on time.

A soft chime sounded in his earpiece—an incoming message. *Hey boss, to confirm: everything's under control. I know you called the Zurich client and checked on the Singen paperwork—multitasking as always—but now it's time to switch off your phone and enjoy the weekend. Don't make it a meeting.*

He almost smiled. Switch off. As if that was an option.

"Perfect," he dictated, the message sending instantly. Then he opened his email feed on the car display.

Twelve new mails.

He skimmed the headers, flagged two, deleted the rest. Efficiency wasn't a policy; it was reflex.

A second ping in his ear—his son had sent a photo: a billboard at a highway gas station, a rival real-estate company's ad. *Guess they're still losing clients to the real thing. Navi says we'll be there around by four.*

Chris felt a flicker of satisfaction, small but real. *My son*, he thought—half amused, half proud. The kid had his instincts right: precision, craft, the things that built reputation. He smiled.

"Drive carefully," he murmured. Then hesitated—too sentimental.

But he sent it, took out the earpiece, placed it neatly in the center console, and got out of the car.

The door sealed with a clean electric click.

The air smelled faintly of rain and cut grass. He checked the watch on his wrist, adjusted his cuff, and glanced at the house again.

This weekend would close two loops at once. Kat's fortieth—and the end of their shared ownership of the villa.

Forty. His baby sister.

He'd insisted she keep it. Half a million euros written off for peace—and for her.

Logic, not sentiment, he told himself.

Kats fiancé Mark knew, of course. The notary appointment was set for next week—she thought it was paperwork. She'd find out then it was his gift to her.

Katherine had done the work—the renovation, the restoration. Turned the old place into something that breathed again.

He told himself it was good to let it go.

He didn't need a house full of memory.

His father had loved this place—the symmetry, the legacy, the way the name Tannenberg fit the stone.

He'd wanted Chris to take over the family law firm, to print Tannenberg & Son on the letterhead.

It was Mark who took Chris's place in the company in the end. Chris still remembered the first time they met—tall, slim, a little too neat. All those brown curls that caught gold and copper in the light, the thick glasses.

"This is Mark, my intern," his father said. "He'll probably take over the company one day. I'm glad I found him."

They shook hands, both polite but uninterested.

Then his father added, "As you have no interest in it," giving Mark a friendly pat on the shoulder.

That line stung.

His parents had always supported his music—the guitar, the lessons—but when he chose architecture over law, something in his father's pride cracked. After Mark came along, the older man finally had someone else to pour his approval into.

Honestly, that was fine by Chris. It took the pressure off.

And over time, he'd even come to like Mark.

Sure, he was a touch too controlled. But reliable.

Chris had lasted two semesters in law before switching to architecture. His father saw rebellion; Chris saw relief. Law had never made sense. Architecture did.

Then Alexa got pregnant with Adrian. They married before he was born. Plans became deadlines. He dropped out and went into real estate. It made sense—structure, profit, control. Within five years he'd founded his company ORigins.

A decade later, it was a name people respected.

Precision. Quality. Predictability.

Everything his father's temper hadn't been.

His family would have supported him, of course. Tuition, housing, a head start—all within reach. But he couldn't take it. Not out of pride, he told himself, but principle. A man built his own weight. He wasn't going to live off anyone's name, least of all his father's.

He adjusted his cuff again. The movement sent a pulse of pain through his right hand. He flexed the fingers automatically, then stopped, pressing the base of his thumb into the faint ridge of scar tissue.

The doctors had called it psychosomatic. He disagreed. Pain was information.

He remembered shards on the floor, blood on his skin, the GP's voice saying time of death. He'd tried to argue. Daniel couldn't be dead—not five minutes after laughing behind his drums.

He'd went at the glass door with his fist, felt it give way, the shock and burn.

The surgeon called it a miracle that he could move his hand at all. The flexor tendon in his right ring finger tore clean through—even after reconstruction, he could only bend it halfway.

Not enough to play guitar again.

Enough to remember every time he tried.

Miracle. He hated that word. Miracles implied chaos.

Adrian wanted to join ORigins someday. He'd said it like a challenge. Chris had felt something settle in his chest—pride,

relief, both. His son saw the world in systems and standards. Quality wasn't taught; it was inherited.

For the first time, Chris thought he might understand his father's silence. He wondered what he'd leave behind for Adrian. Not money or property, but something built to last.

Kat was turning forty—he still could not believe it. In his mind, she was the red-haired menace who stole his toys and followed him everywhere, her curls bouncing, her laugh too loud for the house. He'd teased her, protected her, fought with her—sometimes in the same breath.

She'd built a life here.

He'd moved on to Lake Constance.

She grew into a woman who made things work. Renovations, relationships, people.

Maybe that's why he trusted her with the villa. It would stay in the family—her project, his gift, their father's name carved in stone above the door.

He turned back to the Tesla. The gate was still open.

He pressed the remote.

The iron arms began to swing shut, slow and precise, until they met in perfect alignment.

Order restored.

He adjusted his jacket, straightened the line of his sleeve, and started toward the door.

Katherine

"It's too late to change the plan now—and there's no need to," Katherine said, watching the grey Tesla glide into the drive and stop beneath the chestnut tree.

„Chris is here. Alexa and Adrian are on their way from Lake Constance. Luca is coming later too—I'll be with family and my best friend. You couldn't pick a safer weekend to leave me unsupervised. Plus, you'll be back on Sunday—my birthday. We'll have plenty of time to celebrate together.”

Behind her, Mark's reflection hovered in the window, faint in the midday glare. “This conference could hardly have come at a worse time. I don't like leaving when I know you're unsettled.” His hand found her shoulder, fingers resting lightly. “I can still cancel.”

She drew in a slow breath. “No,” her voice was calm but clipped. “Don't. Your career has priority.”

Amusement flickered across Mark's face. “You sound like your mother.”

Her fingers stilled briefly against the curtain hem. “Well,” she sighed, “you know what she taught me.”

“And yet you still became more than someone standing beside a successful man.” His expression softened slightly. “You built something of your own with the event agency.” He kissed the top of her head. “And for the record, I'm very proud of you.”

His voice dropped. “You've been tense all week though.”

“That's normal,” she replied, still watching the car below. Chris was out, closing the door with that smooth, modern click. His left hand wrapped around his right—the old reflex, the scar still dictating motion.

She adjusted the curtain hem by a fraction; symmetry steadied her breath. “I have a birthday coming up—the next round one. That's enough to make anyone tense.”

Mark gave a short, soft laugh. “Forty isn’t a crisis.”

“Depends on who you ask.” Her lips curved faintly, not quite a smile. “Some people call it perspective; others call it panic.”

She turned her head enough to meet his eyes. “You’ll miss your flight if you keep worrying. And you promised—you’ll be back on time for the important day.”

He smiled, but his gaze drifted toward the window. “Is that Chris?”

“Looks like it,”

She started moving out of the room.

“Come on—let’s say hello.”

Mark nodded, picked up his case, and followed her to the foyer.

Chris was coming up the path toward the open door, expression unreadable.

“Chris,” Mark called, tone easy. “Right on time, as always.”

Chris smiled—the genuine kind. “Couldn’t risk being late to my sister’s weekend.”

He hugged Katherine, then he reached out a hand; Mark took it, and they pulled into the brief, practiced half-embrace of men who had once measured each other and no longer needed to. Two claps on the back—the sound of old rivalry worn into something steadier, almost protective.

“Off to Berlin?” Chris asked, nodding at the suitcase.

“Conference. Three nights. My taxi should be here any minute now.”

“Good timing,” Chris smiled. “Enjoy it—I’ll make sure your fiancée doesn’t burn the place down.”

They shared a small look of amusement and trust—something like agreement. Katherine caught it and felt a loosening in her chest she hadn't known she was holding. Whatever understanding they'd reached between them still held, quiet and solid, like the foundation of the house around them.

Outside, tires crunched over gravel.

"That'll be my taxi," Mark looked at his watch.

Then he stepped closer and kissed her—not the casual brush of a goodbye, but the slow, lingering kiss of a man who knew he wouldn't touch the woman he loved again until Sunday.

There was tenderness in it, a trace of longing that might once have moved her. But with Chris standing only a few steps away, she kept still, returning the gesture without deepening it. Too much intimacy in daylight, too much of herself revealed—that wasn't her.

Then she placed a hand lightly against Mark's chest. "You'll be back Sunday."

"Yes, your honor," he made a small bow. Then, with the faintest smile added: "As promised."

When he stepped back, she held his gaze with the practiced warmth of someone who knew how to keep peace looking effortless.

Chris shifted his weight, eyes flicking away.

The same reflex he'd had since they were teenagers, when the sudden reminder that his baby sister had grown into a woman embarrassed him in ways neither of them ever acknowledged aloud. She caught the movement, filed it under expected.

She kept her smile in place as Mark disappeared down the driveway beside the waiting car.

The moment the gate closed behind him, the air changed—lighter, unguarded, honest.

Chris watched until the taillights vanished, then turned to her with the half-smile he used when he didn't quite approve but wouldn't start a fight.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Perfect," she lied. "Come in."

He followed her inside, talking—something about traffic, the efficiency of his car, a story from Adrian. She nodded in the right places, not really listening.

He didn't deserve the silence she was carrying, but she wasn't ready to break it.

Not yet.

Mark

Marks gaze stayed fixed on Katherine and Chris in the side mirror until the iron gate disappeared behind the chestnut trees.

The driver glanced at him. "Airport?"

"Yes," Mark said automatically, then added, "Stuttgart."

His thoughts returned automatically to Katherine.

The clipped way she'd said *don't*.

The curtain hem between her fingers. The careful calm in her voice that usually meant the opposite. He'd noticed the tension building all week - the subtle rigidity in her shoulders, the restless symmetry corrections around the house, the way she'd gone quiet whenever her birthday came up.

Most people missed those things about her. Mark never did. He remembered other versions of her.

Katherine barefoot in the kitchen at seventeen, laughing at one of his terrible dry jokes so hard she nearly spilled coffee over one of her father's case files.

Her getting tipsy at a charity gala, daring him to dance with her, until her mother intervened with a tight smile and a sharp whisper.

Her teasing him about spending even more time buried in books than she did, moving his bookmarks around and teasing him for colour coordinating his lecture notes.

But that was before.

Afterward, it was Katherine sitting upright in bed at three in the morning, skin damp with sweat, breathing too fast while trying to insist she was fine.

Katherine reorganizing kitchen cabinets after panic attacks because aligned objects steadied her pulse.

Katherine counting breaths against his chest while he held her wrists gently enough not to make her feel trapped.

The therapists had called it trauma processing.

Mark had approached it like everything else: attentively, methodically, patiently. And over time, it had worked. Mostly.

His thumb hovered briefly over the conference confirmation mail. He still could have cancelled. A ridiculous impulse, probably. Chris was with her. Luca would arrive soon.

Rationally, she wasn't alone. Rationally, this weekend would pass like every other difficult anniversary eventually had.

Still, unease lingered beneath the logic.

His phone vibrated again. Christoph Tannenberg this time.

Katherine's father, his mentor, and his partner at Tannenberg, Brahms and Partner.

Have a successful panel. Make us proud.

Mark's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. Even now, after all these years, Christoph's messages still carried the strange ability to pull him immediately back into performance mode.

Focus. Precision. Expectation.

He leaned his head briefly against the seat. A memory surfaced uninvited: Heidelberg. Second year. Seminar room windows open against the summer heat. Mark staying afterward to argue a constitutional interpretation no one else seemed interested in getting right.

Dr. Christoph Tannenberg had gathered his notes slowly, then looked at him across the table and said:

"Your mind is wasted on small ambitions, Brahms. Great things lie ahead of you — if you choose your path wisely."

No one had ever spoken to him like that before. Not with that certainty. Not acknowledging him like that. Treating his ambition as something admirable instead of something vaguely unsettling.

Christoph handed him a business card.

"Call me when you're back from your semester in Toronto."

Mark had slipped the card into his notebook and kept it there for the rest of the year.

For the first time, someone seemed to understand his ambition. His hunger for something larger. The refusal to settle simply because everyone else had. His parents had looked almost uneasy when he announced he wanted to study law.

Back then, home had still meant train rides to a perfectly

respectable semi-detached house where his brother discussed football results with their father while his mother asked whether university really needed to take quite so long.

His brother's life had always made sense to them: Bank job. Marriage. Barbecue evenings with neighbours.

Mark wanted something else.

Universities. Academic titles.

A world larger than the one he'd grown up in.

Prestige. Recognition. Possibility.

The taxi slowed at a red light.

His gaze drifted briefly to his reflection in the window: controlled posture, the life he'd once imagined from impossibly far away.

Partner at Tannenbergs. Katherine. The villa.

Speaker at a conference...

The sight of his picture on the conference agenda had filled him with quiet pride. The accompanying article had been perfectly worded. Clean. Authoritative. The kind of professional summary that fit him like a well-tailored suit.

Yet as the city slid past outside, the quiet satisfaction dissolved as his thoughts returned to Katherine. Standing behind the curtain upstairs, adjusting the fabric into perfect alignment while pretending she wasn't afraid of something he still could not name.

Katherine

It had started as something small.

Four weeks ago, though it felt longer. Mark left early, picked up by his associate for a courthouse appointment —

“No point driving, I’ll never find parking,” he said, coffee in hand, briefcase half-zipped.

His car still sat in the driveway, angled enough to block the turn. The event delivery was due within the hour — new linens, vases, a few dozen glass votives she ordered for a client dinner next week — and the van would need the space.

She went into his study to grab the spare key. It should have been in the leather tray on his desk, where he kept loose change and cuff links. Empty. She frowned.

He must have tucked it into the top drawer again. She pulled it open, meaning only to check.

Something shifted — a whisper of paper against wood — and a grey envelope slid forward, catching on her wrist before dropping soundlessly to the floor. No stamp. No return address.

Two words written in blue ink, faintly blurred.

Fallen Destiny.

The rest unfolded in silence — the slow burn of recognition, the grounding exercise, the breath-counting, the long moment on the floor as her pulse steadied, and the world tilted back into shape.

She unfolded it once. That was all it took to know what it was. To know Mark had opened it before her and never told her.

She didn’t read the whole letter. But she read enough to know they’d been wrong about that night.

Completely.

Mark saw it before her. And he didn’t even tell her.

Protection, yes. Love, yes.

But mainly, an assumption — she could not be trusted with the weight of her own history.

She knew his reasons. She could list them. But they didn't make it fair. Injustice was a burr; once it caught, it did not let go.

Hiding the letter had crossed a line. It was not his to keep. It was addressed to the band: to the four people who had made noise in the room she had remade into quiet.

He decided what truth she could bear and when. Protection was not permission. Her plan came together almost at once. Invite them. Control the pace of whatever this was.

And make sure Mark was not around. Not because she didn't love him, but because she needed to breathe without someone measuring her breaths.

And Erik was coming.

The thought of those two men in the same room made something inside her tighten. She hadn't seen Erik in over a decade. She did not know what his face would do to her. What his voice would remember. Whether one look would pull open everything she had spent years forcing shut.

She could not see Erik again with Mark beside her, analyzing every flicker across her face.

Even now, she could hardly believe she broke fourteen years of silence with four words.

We need to talk.

She typed it late one night, after the shock had dulled into a low, persistent ache. She sent it to an old email address she wasn't even sure was still active — an address she kept buried in a folder she was supposed to have deleted years ago.

She hadn't expected a reply. Part of her hadn't wanted one. But the next morning, his management answered.

The message undid her: *He'll be in Germany. He'd like to come.*

She didn't tell a single soul. Not Mark, for obvious reasons. Not Chris, who would read too much into it. Not even Luca, who would ask questions she was not ready to answer.

Some secrets were chosen. Others began as hesitation and hardened into habit.

She kept telling herself Erik's presence was practical. That the letter concerned him. Inviting him changed nothing.

But she knew better.

The moment she pressed send, she had not merely invited the past back in, she asked it to answer.

"Ninnie?" Chris's voice pulled her back. He stood in the kitchen doorway now, one brow lifted in quiet inquiry.

She turned, steadying her tone. "Sorry, I was... somewhere else."

"You need anything?" he asked, watching her closely.

"I'm maintaining."

He smiled a little at that. "Is that your new word for fine?"

"It's the accurate one."

He studied her face. "Okay," he said slowly. "What's going on, Ninnie?"

For a moment, she looked at him — the way his eyes searched hers, quiet, careful, seeing more than she wanted him to. He'd always known how to read her silences, even when she tried to disguise them.

Chris — and someone else, once. His former best friend.

The man she had just invited back into their lives.

Something in her chest shifted — not panic, but decision.

“There’s something I need to show you,” she said.

Chris straightened, the easy humor leaving his face. “What is it?”

“Something important,” she said finally. “And I’d rather you see it before the others arrive.”

For a breath, neither of them moved. Then she turned toward the hall, the first motion of a choice made.

She knew it the moment the words left her mouth — this was it.

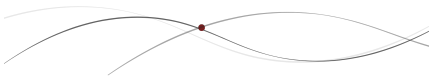
The first ripple.

The first domino.

Whatever came next was in motion.

Curious what happens next?

Untitled Forever is coming soon.



What beta readers are saying:

»I had to know how it ended. I skipped to the end —
otherwise I wouldn't have been able to sleep.«

» The way your
characters unfold and
develop fascinates me.«

» It doesn't read like a
debut novel. It reads like
the work of an
established author.«

Find out more about *Untitled Forever* here:

