

Can't Quit You

by BlendingIn

Can't Quit You

Chapter 1: Milan

Two blocks. Three, if the men behind her were being careful, and they hadn't been careful about anything else tonight.

Sarah stayed in the seam of shadow along the buildings and moved fast without looking like it. The rain had come and gone an hour ago and left the stone slick, throwing the streetlights back up at her in long smears. Good and bad. Bad, because wet ground carried sound. Good, because a woman running on wet stone at this hour was a story anyone could read from a window, and she needed a different story than the one her body wanted to tell.

She turned where the alley fed into a piazza and made herself slow to the pace of someone with nowhere to be.

Café tables stacked and chained for the night. A waiter dragging a shutter down over a doorway, the metal shrieking on its track. Two tourists arguing in low German by a fountain that had been switched off for the season. A delivery driver with his arms full, kicking a door shut behind him. She took the whole square in a single unhurried sweep and kept it unhurried, the way you'd look for a face you were meeting instead of an exit you needed.

On the far side, alone, a tall man in a dark blazer walked with his hands in his pockets like the street belonged to him and he was in no hurry to collect on it.

She watched him for the length of three steps.

He didn't check his phone. He didn't check the arguing tourists, which almost everyone did. He wasn't performing ease as men do when they want to be seen not caring. He just

had it, loose in the shoulders, unbothered. American, she'd have put money on it: something in the cut of the hair, the length of the stride, in how he took up space without apologizing for it or leaning on it. Alone. Sober enough. Big enough to change the shape of whoever walked beside him.

She had the plan finished before she'd finished thinking it.

There was a version of this she knew cold: the smile with a little apology folded into it, the warm hook that got you inside a stranger's evening before he'd decided to let you in. She'd run it in a dozen cities under a dozen names. She reached for it now and found the wind wasn't there, and under that, quieter, a thing she didn't look at directly as she crossed the last of the wet stone toward him: she didn't want to run anything on this one. She just needed him to be where he was.

Her hand closed on his arm as he came level with her.

"Please play along," she said.

The voice reached Chuck a half-second before the words did: low, close, pitched under the ambient hum of the square, the kind of voice you turned your head toward at a party without deciding to. Then the hand on his forearm, warm through the sleeve and certain in a way that strangers' hands were never certain, and then the words themselves, and the arresting fact of a woman he had absolutely never seen before standing very close and looking up at him like they were already deep in a conversation he'd somehow missed the beginning of.

Chuck's brain, which had never once in his life done him the courtesy of shutting up, produced a rapid series of observations. She was beautiful, which was the least useful of them and the loudest. She was frightened, though not in her face; her face was doing something calm and warm and completely convincing. The fear was in the readiness of her, the way a wire is frightened right before it carries the current. And she had said please play along as you'd say it if you'd said it before, if it were a phrase you kept somewhere accessible, and that last one he didn't have anywhere to put, so he set it down to look at later.

"All right," he heard himself say.

Which was insane. He wanted that on the record, with himself, immediately: it was insane to say all right to a stranger who had walked out of a dark street to grab your arm in a foreign country where you didn't speak the language and tell you to play along, and any reasonable audit of the situation would have flagged approximately eleven separate risks, and he was, professionally, a person who audited situations for a living.

He said it anyway. Some older, quieter part of him had already looked at her and decided, and the audit was arriving late to a vote that had closed.

Her shoulders came down a fraction. Not relief exactly (she didn't have the room for relief), but the settling of a person who'd cleared the first of several fences.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

She didn't answer. She just started walking, unhurried, her hand sliding down from his forearm to the crook of his elbow so that they fit together like a couple who'd fit together a thousand times, and after a beat he understood he was supposed to walk too, and did. Her stride was easy. It was so easy it was frightening, once you noticed the thing it was covering, which was that her eyes never stopped. They moved (windows, the mouth of the next street, a parked car, back) in a pattern so even it had clearly stopped being a decision a long time ago.

He talked, because that was what he did when he was scared, and he was scared. He'd learned a while back that his fear came out as words whether he authorized it or not, so the trick was aiming them.

"Okay, so, full disclosure," he said, keeping his voice as low and conversational as hers, aiming it at the side of her head like they were sharing something sweet, "this is easily the most interesting thing that's happened to me in Milan, and I've been to a two-hour dinner about the future of authentication protocols, so the bar was not on the floor, but you have cleared it. I want you to know your work is being recognized."

Something moved at the corner of her mouth. She didn't look at him. But it moved.

"Also," he said, "and I feel like a responsible person would mention this — I have no idea what we're doing, and I'm choosing to find that relaxing, which a therapist would want to talk about. Are we — is this a walking situation, or is there a destination, or —"

"There's a destination," she said.

"Great. Love a destination. Very grounding."

They came out of the piazza onto a street where the lamps stood farther apart and the dark pooled between them. She slowed at the edge of one of those pools, and for the first time she turned her head and looked at him full-on, and up close her face did something he caught and kept: it went, for just a moment, entirely honest. Nothing on it. The warmth she'd been wearing switched off, and what was under it was just tired and human and very direct.

"Your jacket," she said. "Can I have it?"

He didn't ask why. Later he'd wonder about that (about how many times that night he simply hadn't asked why, when why was such an available question), but in the moment his hands were already moving, shrugging out of the blazer, holding it open for her the way you'd hold a coat for someone at the end of an evening, and only as she turned and slid her arms into it did the why arrive on its own, uninvited, and answer itself.

Her silhouette. That was the why. A woman alone in a light dress read one way from a distance; the same woman in a man's dark blazer, close to a tall man, read another way entirely. She was changing what she looked like from across a street.

He filed that too, into the same drawer as please play along, and it was getting full.

The sleeves swallowed her hands. She pushed them back at the cuffs, and he watched her slip something from her own hand into the jacket's inside pocket, a dark phone, before she did up the middle button and folded herself in against his side, one hand back at his elbow, her head tipped down and slightly toward him. The whole adjustment took maybe four seconds and turned them, unmistakably, into two people in love with somewhere warm to be.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. It looks better on you. Genuinely. I've never made it look like anything."

That got the corner of her mouth again.

They'd gone half a block when he heard them.

He felt her hear them first: the arm against his went tight, then smoothed, almost before it happened. Then his own ears caught up: two men, moving fast on the far pavement, not running but eating ground, dark clothes, and something wrong in how one of them held his right arm close against his body, his hand tucked up under the front of his jacket in a way that was not cold and was not casual and that Chuck's whole nervous system identified about a quarter-second before his conscious mind supplied the word.

Gun.

He did not stop walking. He didn't know where the discipline came from (it certainly wasn't experience), but he kept his stride exactly as it had been, kept talking, actually, some low nonsense about the architecture that he would not be able to reconstruct afterward if his life depended on it, and beside him the woman laughed, a soft warm private laugh at his nonsense, and tipped her face further into his shoulder.

One of the men glanced across the street. Chuck felt the look land and travel over them (the couple, the coat, the laughing woman, the tall oblivious tourist telling her something dull) and move on. The men kept going. Their footsteps carried on down the block and around a corner and were gone, and somewhere farther off, back the way she'd come, a siren started up and then a second one, the two of them winding together and pulling toward some center of gravity that had nothing to do with a quiet street and a couple out walking.

She didn't let her breath out until the men were well gone. He heard it when she did: a long, careful exhale through the nose, the sound of someone spending air they'd been rationing.

"Those two," he said, very softly.

"Yes."

"They had guns."

"Yes."

He waited for more, and no more came, and he understood that no more was going to come. She wasn't shocked. She wasn't scrambling to explain. A person for whom two armed men in the dark was a surprise would have said more; she'd said yes twice, like a woman confirming a delivery.

He had a great many questions. He noticed, with the part of him that did this for a living, that the questions had questions under them, and that none of them had settled yet into the clean shape of a conclusion. He knew things about her now (she was in serious trouble, she was frighteningly good at not looking like it, she had done some version of this before), and he knew that the sum of them was not something he could name, not yet, not honestly. It sat just past the reach of the word that would have finished it. He let it sit. He was, whatever else was true tonight, not a man who forced a system to give him an answer it didn't have.

"My hotel's two streets over," he said instead. "If that's — if that helps at all. It's boring and it's clean and nobody there has ever once looked at me twice."

For the first time she looked at him like he'd said something that mattered.

"It helps," she said.

The lobby was doing its level best to look like old money (marble, brass, a chandelier making a confident statement to no one) and mostly getting away with it. The man behind the desk was deep in his phone and did not look up. Chuck was absurdly grateful to him for that, and made a private note to leave an excessive tip he'd have no way to explain.

The elevator was barely big enough for the two of them. She stood with her back to the mirrored wall and watched the floor numbers climb, and he stood beside her and watched the same numbers so he wouldn't watch her, and the space filled up with the fact of how close they were and how quiet it had gotten and the smell of rain still coming off both of them. When the doors opened he put a hand out to hold them and let her go

first, and she went, and clocked the corridor left-and-right in a single glance before she stepped into it, and he clocked her clocking it.

His room was exactly as impersonal as he'd promised. King bed made with hospital corners. Desk, closed laptop, a cable he'd never used. The heavy curtains drawn all the way across the window against a view he had not once looked at in three days of being here, because the room was a place to charge his phone between meetings and the city was a thing that happened to other people. The air had the recycled, faintly floral nothing of every good hotel he'd ever slept alone in.

She took the jacket off and laid it over the back of the desk chair with a care that seemed out of scale with the object, and turned to face him, and he shut the door and leaned on it a second because his body had been running on borrowed calm and the loan was being called.

"So," he said. "You want to tell me what's going on? And — no pressure, and I recognize I don't get a lot of votes here, but I'd genuinely love to know whether I need to be worried about my door."

"I'm in trouble," she said. "The kind that follows you home if you let it. I needed to be off the street. You were the best thing on it."

He turned that over. The best thing on it. Not a kind face, not someone who looked safe. The best option. Assessed and selected. He should have found that colder than he did.

"Are they still looking?"

"Yes."

"Do they know you're in here?"

"No." A fractional pause, honest. "Not yet."

He crossed to the minibar, mostly to have somewhere to put his hands, and cracked the little bottle of water and poured it into the two glasses on the tray and brought her one, and their fingers touched when she took it, and neither of them made anything of it, and both of them noticed. She drank. He watched her hand and saw the tremor she was

keeping out of it. Not out of it, exactly; keeping it low, holding it under the surface the way she'd held her breath, so that it only showed if you were looking, and he was looking.

"You can sit," he said. "There's — I mean there's a bed and a chair and I'm going to be honest, the chair's got your jacket on it. My jacket. The jacket." He heard himself and pressed on regardless. "I'm Chuck, by the way. Chuck Bartowski. This feels like information you should have, given that you've seen the men who are hunting you and I've seen you rummage in my pockets, so, you know. Level playing field." He sat on the edge of the desk so he wasn't looming. "I'm here for work. I run a company that does security audits, the boring kind, the digital kind. We tell large nervous companies how someone might steal their secrets so they can pay us to make it harder. I was at dinner with a fashion house that is worried about exactly that. I walked back because it was close and the wine was making me sentimental about my own footsteps." He spread his hands. "That's the whole file. That's everything. Your turn is going to be a lot more interesting and I've made my peace with that."

She sat on the edge of the bed, and he watched her decide something.

"Sarah," she said.

But there'd been a beat before it. A hair of hesitation, a breath where the name got selected instead of simply arriving, the difference between remembering your name and choosing it, and he caught the beat, and kept it gently, and did not say a word about it.

"Sarah," he repeated. Warm. Like it was the easiest thing in the world and not a thing she'd reached for. "Okay. Hi, Sarah."

"You talk a lot," she said.

"I do. It's a whole thing. When I'm nervous it gets worse, and right now I'm — I want to stress — extremely nervous, so if at any point you need me to stop, you can just say Chuck in a firm tone and I'll —"

"I don't mind it," she said.

That stopped him more effectively than stop would have.

She went quiet, looking at him a beat longer than the moment asked for. Not the warm look from the street; that one he understood now, it had been for the men on the other pavement. This one had no audience but him, and it looked, more than anything, surprised, like she'd found something in the room she hadn't packed.

"You should be more careful," she said. "Bringing a stranger up here. You don't know anything about me."

"I know you needed help and asked for it nicely," he said. "I know you gave a guy with two armed men in the neighborhood a fake laugh good enough to save both our lives. Which, thank you, retroactively, terrifyingly. And I know you put your phone in my pocket instead of your own, which means you didn't have a pocket, which means that's not a night-out dress, which means whatever you were doing earlier you weren't planning to be doing it long." He said it lightly, and watched it land, and watched her recalculate him behind her eyes. "I notice things. It's kind of my whole deal. I'm not going to make you tell me any of them."

The recalculation finished. Something in her let go: not the wariness, the wariness stayed, but the effort of it eased, the labor of managing him, because he'd just told her she didn't have to.

"No," she said quietly. "You're not most people."

"That's what I keep telling my sister. She remains unconvinced."

The corner of her mouth again, and this time she let it become most of a smile, and the smile changed her whole face, took ten years and forty pounds of armor off it, and Chuck felt the floor of the evening tilt very gently toward something else.

She set the glass down on the nightstand. The movement brought her a few inches closer, and he didn't move back, and then they were close, closer than two strangers had any business being, and neither of them did anything about it. He could see the pulse going in her throat, quick and high, the leftover adrenaline still looking for the exit, and he knew his was doing the same because he could feel it in his hands.

"What happens now?" he asked. It came out rougher than he meant it.

"I don't know," she said.

And it had the ring of the truest thing she'd said. She'd known everything up to now: the street, the coat, the men, the room. This she didn't know, and it seemed to unsettle her more than the men had.

He reached out (slow, telegraphed, every inch of it optional) and touched her wrist, where the tremor she was hiding had finally reached the surface. "You're shaking," he said.

"I'm fine."

"You don't have to be. Just so you know. You can put it down for a second in here. Whatever it is. Nobody's grading you."

She looked at his hand on her wrist. Then at his face. And whatever she'd been holding at the top of the stairs all night, she set some of it down, and it was her that moved.

She kissed him.

It was not smooth and it was not a technique and there was nothing worked about it, and it undid him: for a woman who'd done everything else that night with the economy of long practice, she kissed him like someone out of practice at wanting things for their own sake, a little too hard at first, off-center, and then finding it, and then it was very much found. He made a sound he was not proud of and stopped caring about being proud, and his hand came up off her wrist to the back of her neck, into her hair, and he kissed her back like he'd been given something he hadn't known to ask for.

She shifted forward on the bed and he came up off the desk to meet her and the chair legs barked against the carpet and he didn't hear it. Her hands were pulling his shirt loose from his waistband, quick and certain where her mouth had been uncertain, and he let her, and when her palms found the bare skin of his sides his breath went out of him all at once. She pushed the shirt up. He got an arm out of it, then the other, dragged it over his head and lost it somewhere, and her hands were on him, cool and then not cool, and she made a low sound into his mouth when he found the top button of her dress and got it wrong and got the second one right.

He was aware of the room only as weather. The lamp. The drawn curtains. The impersonal dark. And in the middle of it this: her dress sliding off her shoulders and down her arms and the pale line of her collarbone and the fast hammer of her pulse under it where he put his mouth, the salt-and-rain taste of her skin, the broken noise she made that she seemed almost angry to have made, like it had gotten out without clearance.

They went over onto the bed without either of them deciding to. She ended up above him, straddling his lap, her knees at his hips and her weight settling onto him and the heat of her coming through the last thin layers still between them, and he had one hand splayed on the small of her back and the other coming up her ribs and she arched into it with her eyes shut and her hair coming down and for a few long minutes there were no men in the city, there was no city, there was nothing in the entire world but the friction of the two of them and the sound of their breathing and how she kept pausing to look at him, quick disbelieving glances, as if to check he was still the person she'd chosen off a dark street and not something she'd invented on the way up.

His fingers traced the edge of her bra and she pressed into his hand, and he felt her rock down against him, deliberate, and heard the answering rasp of his own breath, and his hands tightened on her hips before he made them gentle, because whatever this was he wanted it to be hers, wanted her to be the one steering, and she felt him make that choice. For a moment she stilled, her forehead dropping to his, and it had nothing to do with heat at all.

She reached for his belt.

The phone buzzed.

It came from across the room, from inside the coat on the chair, muffled and faint and completely wrong, and it went through both of them like cold water. She went still with her hand at his buckle. For a second she plainly didn't know what the sound was. He watched her surface from a long way down, watched the room and the year and the danger come back into her face one layer at a time.

It buzzed again.

She was off him and across the room before the second buzz finished, and the loss of her weight was so sudden and so complete that he actually put a hand out into the empty air where she'd been, which he'd be embarrassed about later, when there was time to be embarrassed about things.

She pulled the phone from the coat pocket. The screen lit her face pale from below. He couldn't see what was on it, and he made himself not try, and he watched her read it, and he watched her read it again, and he watched everything that had softened in her over the last half hour go quietly back behind its wall, board by board, until the woman standing by the desk with his shirt somewhere at her feet was the one who'd crossed the piazza: calm, exact, already gone somewhere he couldn't follow.

She closed her eyes for the length of a breath. When she opened them, she was fully back.

"I have to go," she said.

He sat up. He didn't argue. He wanted to argue with a force that surprised him, and he didn't, because arguing would have been for him, and this clearly wasn't a moment that had room in it for what he wanted.

"Okay," he said.

"They're moving this way. Checking places like this." She was already pulling her dress back up over her shoulders, doing up the buttons with hands that had stopped hiding the shake because there was no one left in the room she needed to hide it from. "If they come here — if they come to this room — and I'm in it, then you're not a tall American who had a nice dinner. You're the man who was with me. Do you understand? You stop being a stranger and you start being a thread they pull."

And there it was. He heard it clearly, later he'd be sure he'd heard it, under the practical words a different thing entirely: she was not just telling him she had to leave. She was leaving before she had to, spending the last of her margin to put distance between him and what was coming for her, when a colder version of her could have gambled on the sweep passing, could have stayed another ten minutes in this warm impossible room.

She was choosing the door. For him.

"I understand," he said. And then, because he couldn't not: "Are you going to be okay?"

She looked at him. It was not a question people asked her. He could see that it was not a question people asked her.

"I'm good at this," she said, which was not an answer, and was.

She picked up the coat. She had it half on before she seemed to notice she was taking it (his coat, the dark blazer, the thing that had saved them both on the street), and she stopped, and looked at it, and there was a second where he thought she'd give it back, and a second where he understood he didn't want her to, and then she finished pulling it on. The sleeves swallowed her hands again. She didn't roll them.

At the door she stopped.

He was standing a few feet back, shirt on, hands loose at his sides, deliberately not closing the distance because closing the distance would have made her manage him again and she didn't have any managing left. The room behind them was a wreck of the last hour: the rucked bed, the two glasses, the chair scraped out of place. He was going to be looking at all of it for a while after she was gone. He already knew that.

"Thank you," she said. "For the coat. For the street. For not asking."

"You don't have to thank me."

"Most people would've wanted something for it." She said it lightly, but her eyes were doing the assessing thing again, and he realized she meant it as a real question wearing a statement's clothes: she was reading him one more time, checking the price, waiting to find out what the tab was, because in her experience there was always a tab.

He thought about it. She'd earned a real answer and he wanted to give her one.

"Yeah," he said. "I know. That's — I've had people want things from me my whole life, and a lot of them dressed it up nicer than they should've, so I get why you're checking." He shrugged, a little helpless. "But that's a pretty grim way to keep the books. Somebody needs a wall to stand behind for an hour, you can just — be the wall. Walls

don't run a tab. I don't need anything, Sarah. I got the best night I've had in a really long time and I didn't even have to finish it, which, I'll be processing that loss for some time, but — no. No charge."

Something crossed her face that he didn't have a name for and would think about for weeks. It was there and gone. It might have been the closest thing to being caught off guard he'd see from her all night, and it undid her far more visibly than anything that had happened on the bed.

She opened the door. Checked the empty corridor left and right, out of habit, that same fast professional sweep, and even now, even leaving, he took it in and had nowhere to put it. Then she looked back at him, once, and for a moment neither of them did anything at all, and the moment stretched past comfortable and kept going, two people in a doorway not saying the thing, because there was no version of it that survived being said out loud tonight.

"Goodbye, Chuck," she said.

Goodbye was a light word, and she set it down like it cost something.

Then she was through the door and the door was closing and she was gone, coat and all, into a corridor and a stairwell and a city he'd spent three days not looking at.

Chuck sat down on the edge of the bed.

He sat there for a long time.

The glasses were still on the nightstand, one of them ringed with the ghost of her lip. The air still held her: something clean and cool underneath the hotel's manufactured nothing, already fading, a scent he was surprised to find he'd memorized without meaning to. The bedspread was warm where they'd been. If he put his hand flat on it he could feel the heat going out of it in real time, and he did put his hand flat on it, and he did feel that, and he made himself stop.

He buttoned his shirt again, wrong and then right. The collar was wrinkled. He smoothed it down with both hands, an old useless gesture his sister used to do for him before things that mattered, and it steadied him about as much as it ever had, which

was to say a little and not enough.

Outside, the sirens were still going somewhere, thinned by distance but not stopping, and he understood without wanting to that whatever had happened tonight (the thing she'd walked out of, the thing the men were sweeping the district to close) was large enough that the city would have a version of it in the morning. It would be a story somewhere. He didn't know which story. He filed that too, the last thing into the full drawer, and shut it.

He crossed to the window and pulled the curtain back an inch.

There it was. Milan. Wet lights, slick rooftops, the amber wash of a city he'd been inside for seventy-two hours and had reduced to a hotel, a conference room, and the inside of a car. Beautiful, probably. Beautiful for the kind of person who got to stand somewhere and look at it, who came here for the thing itself and not for the meeting about the thing. He'd never been that person. Tonight, for about an hour, he'd almost been someone who was: somebody a story happened to, somebody a woman walked out of the dark toward. And now the hour was over and he was a man in a wrinkled shirt looking at a city through a two-inch gap in a curtain.

He let the curtain drop.

"Don't," he said to the empty room. His voice sounded strange in it. "Don't do the thing. It wasn't even a whole night. She was in trouble, you were convenient, she's gone. That's the entire event. That's how these go."

He knew how these went. He was the world's leading expert on how these went: on people arriving lit up in your life and leaving it dark, on the arithmetic of being someone's best option and then someone's loose thread, on the fact that the ones who mattered most were exactly the ones who didn't come back. His mother had taught him the theorem and his father had confirmed it and Bryce had published the paper. He'd stopped expecting the door to open twice a long time ago. It saved a lot of standing around waiting.

He said it like a fact, out loud, because saying it out loud was supposed to make it settle: she's gone, that's how these go.

Then he sat back down on the bed, in the dent her body had left, in the last of the fading warmth, and did not move for a very long time.

Chapter 2: Amsterdam

Somewhere over the Alps, Chuck gave up pretending he was going to sleep.

He hadn't decided to think about her. He noticed, somewhere past the second refill of bad cabin coffee, that he'd been doing it for a while already, the way you catch a song that's been going around in your head only once you hear yourself humming the bridge. The window was black. The engines made their long gray sound. And there she was again, standing in the door of a hotel room in a coat that swallowed her hands, setting the word goodbye down like it weighed something.

He was a little annoyed at himself. He wanted that noted, for the record, in the ongoing internal proceedings of Chuck Bartowski versus his own worse instincts: he knew better than this. He was thirty years old and he had built a company on the principle that wanting something to be true was the single most reliable way to get robbed. And here he was at thirty thousand feet, wanting.

So he did the thing he did when a problem wouldn't leave him alone. He took it apart.

Not to be cold about her. The opposite, if he was honest, which at this altitude he was willing to be: he took it apart because his mind didn't know how to share a room with an unfinished pattern, and because if he could just get the pieces to sit still he might find the one that told him it was safe to feel what he was already feeling. That was the embarrassing part. The reasoning wasn't in service of the truth. It was in service of the hope. He knew that going in and did it anyway.

Start with what he was sure of. The two men.

They hadn't been police. He'd turned that over a hundred times and it held every time. Police announce themselves, even the plainclothes kind, especially the plainclothes kind, because the announcement is half the job. Police have procedure and boredom and a

certain heaviness in how they move, because for them it is always Tuesday. The men in Milan had moved like the cleanest, most alert thing on the street, one of them carrying his right hand under his jacket like it was worth more than the rest of him, and they had not been looking to arrest anyone. He knew the difference between hunting and process the way he knew a phishing email from a real one, in the body, before the reasons caught up. Those men had been hunting.

Which told him something about her, by the shape of the hole she'd left in the middle of it. You didn't get hunted like that by accident.

Then the softer signals, the ones that didn't prove anything alone and started to mean something once he stopped making them stand alone. She'd given him nothing, and she'd given him nothing smoothly, with none of the leaking panic of a person in trouble over their head. She'd used him for cover like a woman reaching for a tool she'd used before, the jacket, the changed silhouette, the exact right amount of leaning into his shoulder, and she'd done it while her pulse was going hard enough that he'd felt it in her wrist. She'd had a second phone. She'd read a hotel corridor before she stepped into it. And she was American, he'd have put the company on it, native and Midwestern-flat under whatever she'd sanded off it, a read he trusted because reading rooms full of foreign accents was a thing he did in eleven time zones a year.

None of it was proof. All of it, leaned together, made a lean-to that stood up. Professional. American. Some flavor of the world where people carry two phones and get hunted through cities by men who don't announce themselves. Some flavor of intelligence, he thought, and the word sat there, and he didn't love it and didn't flinch from it either.

And then the reasoning walked him to the edge and stopped, because that was where the evidence stopped.

Because there were two kinds of person who lived in that world, at least two, and the night hadn't told him which one she was. She'd spent her own safety to get him off the street and she'd walked out early to keep him clear of what was coming, and that read like a protector. But he was not a child, and he knew that the same competence that

shelters can also be the competence that hunts, and that the coat and the calm and the perfect fake laugh would look exactly the same on a woman who was one of the good ones and a woman who was not. The evidence made a fork and then went quiet, and he was good enough at this to know when a problem had gone quiet on him, and to not mistake the quiet for an answer.

Dangerous, certainly. Whatever she was, it lived next door to violence; he'd watched two men carry guns through the dark for her. But whose violence, and pointed which way, the night would not say.

That was the honest end of it. I can't know what kind she is.

And Chuck Bartowski, thirty thousand feet over a continent, looked at the fork his own reasoning refused to settle, and did the thing he had spent an entire life training himself never to do.

He decided.

Not concluded. He was careful with himself about the word, even then, even in his own head, because the distinction was the whole ballgame and he knew it. The evidence had not earned him a verdict. He reached past the place where knowing ended and he picked the branch he wanted, the one where the woman who'd traded her own margin to keep a stranger safe was a person on the right side of something, worth the risk of hoping about, and he understood in the same breath that he was choosing it rather than being driven to it. He was the least foolable man he knew. He had built a life on not being talked into things, not even by himself. And he sat in the dark and talked himself into her anyway, with his eyes open, knowing the exact size of what he couldn't see.

He let himself have it, which he'd think about later, when later got complicated. Not that he'd been fooled. That he'd looked straight at the gap in what he knew and stepped across it on purpose.

Then the plane came down through the weather, and the gap closed over the way water closes over a dropped stone, and by the time he was in a cab with his phone lighting up three weeks of the life he'd left running while he was gone, he'd already begun the

quieter, older work of putting her away. He was practiced at it. You met someone in a doorway, the door closed, and you told yourself the version of the story that let you keep walking, because the alternative was to stand in the hallway of your own life waiting for a knock that experience had taught you did not come.

People didn't come back. It wasn't bitterness. It was just the water finding its level.

Three weeks did the rest.

Amsterdam was rain and bicycles and a room on the fourth floor with the heat turned up too high.

He knew the shape of the trip before he landed; he knew all of them now. A car from Schiphol. A hotel that could have been in six other cities, with the same low lobby lighting and the same art that had been chosen by a committee to mean nothing. A client with a data problem and a nervous board, two days of meetings in a glass room above a canal he would look at maybe four times and set foot beside never. He'd been to Amsterdam three times. He could not have told you what it smelled like. He knew it as a commute and a conference table and the exhaustion of being charming about network topology in a second language's worth of jet lag.

That first evening he went out anyway, which was not like him. He told himself it was for air, and for food that wasn't a room-service club sandwich, and both were true, and underneath them was a restlessness he didn't examine because examining it would have meant admitting it had a shape, and the shape was a woman he'd spent three weeks successfully not thinking about, mostly.

The rain had thinned to almost nothing. The canal held the last of the light and the first of the streetlamps and a long wobbling smear of a bicycle's red rear lamp crossing a bridge. The city was doing what it did, being quietly, offhandedly beautiful for the people who lived in it and the people who'd come all this way to see it, neither of which was him. He stood on the step of the hotel and let the cold work into his collar and thought, without much heat, that he had been to most of the beautiful places on the planet and seen the insides of their airports and their boardrooms and almost nothing else.

Then he came down the last step and turned toward the water, and she was there.

He knew it was her before he'd finished the thought that it couldn't be. She was sitting at a small metal table outside a café that was closing up around her, a coffee going cold in front of her, in a dark coat with the collar up, and she was watching him cross the last of the distance with an expression he'd spend the rest of the night trying to name and never quite manage, something that wasn't quite a smile and looked like it had been waiting a while to try being one.

His whole chest did something complicated and total. He stopped a few feet short of her, and the first coherent thing his genius mind produced, after three weeks of careful architecture, was gone in a single quiet swipe, the whole lean-to flattened, because everything he'd talked down to a manageable altitude was suddenly all the way up again and he didn't even have the decency to be embarrassed about it.

"You came back," he said. It wasn't what he'd planned. He hadn't planned anything. That was the point of not expecting people.

"I was in the neighborhood," she said.

Amsterdam was not in anyone's neighborhood. They both knew it. She let it sit there, the impossible joke of it, and he decided not to ask the question stacking up behind his teeth, the how did you know where I was, because asking it would make her answer it, and her answering it would end whatever this was faster than anything the men in Milan could have done. Some things you don't audit. You just let them be true for as long as they'll hold.

"Your coffee's cold," he said instead.

"I know." She stood. The chair scraped. She was close now, close as she'd been in the piazza, except there was no piazza and no men and no reason for it but the one neither of them was saying. "I wasn't drinking it. I was waiting to see if you'd come out."

"And if I hadn't?"

She looked at him. "You did," she said, which was not an answer, and was, and it was the most Sarah thing he had heard in three weeks of remembering the sound of her, and

it undid the last of him.

He didn't remember deciding to bring her upstairs and he didn't remember her deciding to come. There wasn't a decision. There was the elevator, too small again, and this time neither of them pretended to watch the numbers. There was his key card and his unsteady hand and the door of a room that could have been in six cities falling shut behind them on the one thing that had ever happened in any of them.

And then there was the thing Milan had started and the whole world had interrupted, finished.

He would try, later, to hold onto the shape of it, and find that it came back to him not as a sequence but as a handful of things that had gone straight through his ribs without stopping to be understood. The way she came into his hands like she'd been holding her breath for three weeks and was finally allowed to let it out. The way there was no phone this time, no danger in the room, nothing pulling at the edges of her, so that for once she was all the way here, undivided, with none of the alertness that never fully left her anywhere else, and he understood, dimly, in the part of him that never stopped noticing, that this was the one country she had no border in. That whatever it cost her to be a person out loud, it cost her nothing to be a person like this, and so she gave him all of it, everything, freely, the way she gave him nothing else.

He didn't have the word for what that was, that she could hand him her whole undefended self with her body and not a single true sentence with her mouth. He only knew that being wanted by her in the dark felt like being let into a house with every other room locked, and that he was so grateful to be in the one room that he didn't, that night, count the doors.

Afterward she didn't leave.

What went deepest wasn't even something she did. It was something she didn't. She stayed. She lay along the length of him in the overheated dark with her head on his chest and her breathing going slow and even and real, and Chuck Bartowski, whose people did not come back and certainly did not stay, lay very still so as not to wake whatever mercy this was, and looked at the ceiling he hadn't looked at in three days of

sleeping under it, and felt the water he'd worked so hard to let find its level come all the way back up over his head.

The stroopwafel was her idea, or as close to an idea as she offered anything.

Morning had come gray and clean, the rain gone, the canal throwing hard bright coins of light up onto the underside of a bridge. He had a meeting at ten that he could not miss, a room full of nervous executives who were paying his company a sum that embarrassed him to protect them from exactly the kind of person he was fairly sure he'd spent the night with, and the meeting sat at the far end of the morning like a train he had to catch, which meant every minute before it was a minute stolen out from under the day. He was aware of the clock the way you're aware of a tooth. He decided to spend the whole thing anyway.

They walked. He didn't take a route because he didn't know the city well enough to have one, so they just went along the water, and she stopped at a cart where a man in an apron pressed batter in an iron and split the round waffle while it was still soft and painted the inside with syrup that smelled like caramel and church basements, and she bought two and handed him one without asking whether he wanted it, the way she'd taken his jacket in Milan without asking, and he thought, not for the first time, that she was fluent in the physical grammar of taking care of a person and had apparently never once been taught the words.

The stroopwafel was absurd and perfect. The syrup got on his fingers. She ate hers watching the boats, and the light was on the water, and the bicycles came in their unhurried Dutch tide, and for a stretch of maybe fifteen minutes he was inside Amsterdam, actually in it, for the first time in three visits, because she was in it, and she was the reason he was looking up.

And underneath the ease of it there was something else he kept catching at the edge of and couldn't hold. She was happy. He was nearly sure she was happy, in how she let her shoulder stay against his and licked syrup off her thumb and made a low sound at the first bite that was the least guarded noise he'd ever heard her make in daylight. And yet there was something held under it, some fractional carefulness, like a person walking

through a house they've been told is theirs but don't believe it. Like she was somewhere she'd stopped being allowed to be a long time ago and was braced, the whole time, for someone to come and tell her the mistake had been noticed. He didn't know where the read came from, and he didn't reach for a place to put it, as he might have once. He just let it sit next to him, unexplained, a little sad, while the light came off the canal.

He was holding her hand by then. He didn't remember taking it. It had happened the way the elevator had happened, without a vote.

"Can I ask you something that isn't about Milan?" he said.

Her thumb moved once against his knuckle. "You can ask."

"That's not a yes."

"No," she agreed. "It isn't."

He laughed. He couldn't help it; she was so precise about the exact borders of what she'd give that it came out charming instead of cold, and she watched him laugh like his laughing was an event she wanted to see the whole of.

"I'll ask an easy one, then," he said. "About me. You can just receive it, no charge." He turned his stroopwafel over, looking for a dry edge. "My parents didn't finish the job they started. That's the whole biography, more or less. Mom left when I was nine. Dad hung around getting quieter and then went out for pancake stuff when I was fourteen and I guess the store didn't have it, because that was the last data point on him." He said it lightly, because heavy would have been a lie about how he carried it in daylight, and because light was the only way he'd ever found to hand it to somebody without it landing on them like a weight they hadn't agreed to hold. "My sister did the back half of raising me. Ellie. She'd want that on the record, and she'd be right. She was seventeen and she just, decided I was hers, and that was that." He shrugged. "So when I say I notice things, some of it's a gift and some of it's just what happens to a kid who spends a while watching the door to see who's leaving next. You get good at reading the room because the room keeps changing on you."

She was quiet, walking. But he'd learned enough of her quiet in two encounters to know this one was the listening kind. She had turned very slightly toward him without seeming to, as she'd turned toward the men in the piazza, except aimed at him now and soft, and she asked, after a moment, in a voice with nothing pushing in it, "How old was Ellie when your mom left?"

"Twelve."

"So she watched both of them go," Sarah said. "And then she stayed."

And there it was, the thing he'd notice and turn over for a long time afterward, small enough that he almost walked past it. Because that wasn't a question. That was her doing the arithmetic of his family faster and more exactly than most people managed after he'd explained it twice, landing on the one true center of it, that the miracle of his childhood wasn't the two who left but the one who didn't, and getting there in a single sentence with the ease of someone who had spent a great deal of her life reading families for a living. It was tenderness. It was also, he understood, a skill, the same skill exactly, and he could not tell them apart, and that was somehow more intimate than anything else that morning, more than the night, because it meant he was choosing to be moved by her with no proof it was safe. He'd decided about her at thirty thousand feet. This was the same decision, made again, smaller, in daylight, with her hand in his.

"Yeah," he said. "She stayed."

The canal went by. A tour boat slid under the bridge ahead of them with nobody on it.

"Being raised wrong is bad too," Sarah said.

Then she stopped.

Not walking, she kept walking, but something in her stopped, half a step behind her body, and he felt it come through her hand before he understood it, a hitch. Too. The word did something the rest of the sentence hadn't. It put her in it. He'd told her how he'd been raised wrong, the not-enough kind, and she'd answered with too, and the too had a whole person standing behind it, a person who knew the inside of the sentence, who'd been raised wrong in some other direction entirely and was suddenly,

accidentally, in the conversation she'd spent two encounters staying out of.

She heard it the instant it was out. He watched her hear it. Her eyes went to the water and her thumb went still against his hand and she took a breath that was a fraction too measured, and he could see the beginning of the move, the smooth practiced turn of the beam back off herself and onto him or the boats or the syrup on her fingers, the redirect she'd run on him a dozen times already without his catching the machinery of it. She was already reaching for the thing that would make too mean nothing.

He squeezed her hand.

That was all. He didn't say I heard that, because saying it would have chased it, and chasing it would have sent her the rest of the way into the redirect she was three words from completing. He didn't ask what she'd meant. He didn't do the thing every other person in her life had apparently done with a moment like this one, which was pick it up and see what it was worth. He just closed his hand around hers, gently, once, and looked at the canal like she was looking at the canal, and let her feel him do it. I heard it. I'm not going to touch it. Me too, some other shape. It's fine. Keep the syrup.

And the redirect didn't finish.

He watched it not finish. He watched the practiced turn get halfway and stall out in the air, the exit she'd started toward suddenly unnecessary, because he'd met the thing she'd let slip and asked nothing back for it, and there was no leverage in the room for her to defend against, and so the defense had nothing to push on and just, quietly, stopped. She let the word stand. She didn't take it back and she didn't explain it and she didn't run the beam anywhere. She let too sit in the morning between them, true, unretracted, the first thing she had ever given him on purpose that wasn't her body, and she looked at the water and let him hold her hand and did not say a single further word about it.

It lasted maybe four seconds. It was the largest thing that had happened to him in Amsterdam and it happened almost entirely in his peripheral vision.

Then, because he could feel how close they both were to the edge of something with no floor under it, and because it was ten to ten and the meeting was a real thing in the real world, he did them both the kindness of stepping back.

"For the record," he said, "this is the best breakfast I've had in about a decade, and I've had breakfast with actual heads of state." He held up the sticky remains of the stroopwafel. "Don't tell them. They think they're very special."

Her mouth moved at the corner, and the four seconds folded themselves back down under the ordinary morning and were gone, tucked away, which was what everything that mattered between them seemed to want to happen and then immediately pretend it hadn't. They were just two people again, walking a canal, one of them late for work.

"They're not special?" she said.

"Comically not. You'd be amazed."

"I wouldn't," she said, and there was something under it, dry and bottomless, that he chose, again, not to look directly at.

The meeting was where the meeting had to be, and the morning ran out the way stolen things do, all at once, without ceremony.

They came to the corner where his day was waiting for him, the glass building, the nervous board, the version of himself that got paid. He turned to say something, he wasn't sure what, some hinge of a sentence that would keep the morning from closing, and found she'd already made it small and manageable, already half a step into leaving, exactly as she'd been half into his jacket in Milan before she noticed she was taking it.

"Go," she said. "You'll be late."

"Come to dinner," he said, before he could talk himself out of it. "There's a whole evening on the other side of these people. I could show you the four things I know about this city, which is zero things, we could find out together, I'm told there's a museum with a great deal of one specific painter—"

"Go to your meeting, Chuck." Not unkind. She'd stepped back, and her hands had gone into the pockets of her coat, and the not-quite-smile was still there but the rest of her had already started the quiet business of not being available to be kept. "It was good to see you."

It was good to see you. Like a colleague. Like the most ordinary sentence in the language, from a woman for whom no sentence was ordinary, and he was learning her well enough to hear the size of what she'd folded down into it, and not well enough to make her unfold it.

"Yeah," he said. "You too."

She didn't promise to call. There was no number to call. She didn't say she'd find him again, though he understood now, in a way he hadn't after Milan, that finding him was a thing she could apparently do at will, across a continent, with no address and no warning. She just took her hands out of her pockets long enough to press one flat against his chest, once, brief, over the exact spot where he'd lain awake all night being grateful, and then she turned and went, unhurried, into the flow of the morning and the bicycles, and did not look back, because he was starting to suspect she'd been taught somewhere that looking back was a thing you couldn't afford.

He stood on the corner for longer than a man with a ten o'clock had any business standing.

She'd come back. That was the fact he couldn't get his hands all the way around. Everything he knew, everything the water had taught him, said the door closed once and stayed closed, and she had opened it, in Amsterdam, three weeks and a continent later, and stayed the whole night, and eaten a stroopwafel in the light like a person allowed to be happy, and said too, and let it stand. The brace he'd carried his whole life, the one that kept the hallway empty so no knock could disappoint him, was still there. He could feel it. It was just, for the first time he could remember, losing.

He turned the one word over the whole way up in the elevator, gently, the way he'd held her hand. Too. He didn't know what direction she'd been raised wrong in. He knew that she knew the inside of the sentence, and that she'd shown him that on purpose, and that

somewhere under the coat and the calm and the perfect economy of her was a person who'd been made wrong by somebody and had spent a great deal of energy making sure no one ever got to see the seams. He was a man who found the seam in everything. It was his whole job. And he understood, walking into a glass room to be brilliant about other people's secrets, that he had decided, again, without anything like enough evidence, that he wanted to be the one who got to see hers.

He'd think about that later too. That he kept deciding it, and kept knowing he was deciding it, and kept, with his eyes wide open, choosing to be glad.

Chapter 3: Porto Alegre

Porto Alegre didn't keep a nice version of itself out front for the people who flew in.

Chuck had worked that out by the second day. It was a river city that had been built to work and had never seen a reason to pretend otherwise, flat and humid and busy, the Guaíba going wide and brown past the docks, the air thick enough that you wore it. Nobody had put anything here to be looked at. There were no bridges anyone crossed slowly. There was no old quarter with the light coming through it. There was traffic and river haze and the long warehouses along the water and a heat that started before breakfast and stayed, and he found, to his own surprise, that he didn't mind, because it matched him. He came to cities to be inside rooms in them. This one was at least honest about being nothing else.

The work was the work. A payments company with a board that had read one too many articles about breaches and wanted a very expensive man to tell them how scared to be. He spent two days in a glass room that could have been any glass room, drawing the same diagrams he always drew, and in the evenings the client took him out and fed him, because that part, at least, the city did without irony. The gaúchos fed you like an argument they intended to win. There was churrasco the first night, a slow parade of beef off long skewers, and a man beside him with a thermos under his arm and a gourd in his hand who kept the hot water going into the bitter green mate and passed it around the table like a decision everyone had already made together, and Chuck drank from the metal straw when it came to him because refusing seemed rude and because

the warmth of the whole thing got under his guard in a way the city's surfaces never would.

But the warmth belonged to the people, not the place. When they dropped him back at the hotel the second night, late, full, a little undone by the kindness of strangers, the lobby was the same lobby it was everywhere and the room was the same room, and he rode the elevator up thinking about nothing, on purpose.

He opened the door and she was there.

He stopped with his hand still on the handle. She was sitting in the one chair by the window with the lamp off and the city's dishwater glow coming up off the river behind her, in dark clothes, her coat over the arm of the chair, and she was watching the door like she'd been watching it a while, and the whole tired evening fell out of him at once.

Three times.

That was the arithmetic that arrived before anything else, before he'd even said her name, standing in his own doorway looking at a woman who should not have been able to know he was in Brazil, let alone which hotel, let alone which floor. Milan he could call an accident of the world. Amsterdam he'd let himself call a miracle, once, quietly, and then put away. But three was a different kind of number. Three meant it wasn't the world doing this. Three meant her, choosing, again, finding him across an ocean and a hemisphere with no help he could see and no way he could ever return the favor, because he had no idea where she was between these rooms and no way on earth to reach her, and the lopsidedness of that would have frightened a smarter man. He was too glad to be frightened. That was becoming the pattern under the pattern.

"How do you keep doing this," he said, and it wasn't really a question, it was just the nearest word to the feeling.

"You leave a big footprint," she said. "For a man who audits how findable other people are."

"I'm going to take that personally and also as a compliment."

"Take it however you want." She stood. And it was easy, as it had learned to be over three cities, the old current picking back up, her crossing the room and his hands finding her waist and the relief of her being real and here and against him after weeks of a silence he'd had no address to break. She fit against him exactly as she had in Amsterdam. She let him hold her a moment in the dark.

And under it, something was wrong.

He couldn't have said how he knew. It wasn't in anything she did, or it was in everything, some faint over-tightness in her, a wire strung a half-turn past pitch. She held onto him a beat longer than the hello wanted. Her breath wasn't quite even against his neck. There was an alertness coming off her that hadn't switched off when the door closed, when it should have, when there was nothing in this room to be alert about but him. He noticed it and, because he was learning her, he didn't reach for it. He didn't say what's wrong. He'd learned in Amsterdam what happened to a question she wasn't ready for; it sent her somewhere he couldn't follow. So he held what he'd noticed the way you hold a bird, loosely, without closing your hand, and he let her be against him in the dark and waited to be shown whatever he was going to be shown.

"You eaten?" he said. "Because a man with a thermos just tried to adopt me, and I have never been so full in my—"

She kissed him.

And there it was, whatever it was, coming up out of her all at once. There was nothing careful in it. Whatever had been strung too tight let go, and what came through wasn't the warm resuming current of the last two cities but something with its banks broken, urgent and hard and past deciding, her hands already moving like the talking part of the evening was a delay she couldn't afford. He felt the change land in his own chest, the way you feel a wave you didn't see coming lift you off your feet. And he went with it, because a beautiful woman he'd been aching after for weeks had just made it very clear what she'd flown across the world to do, and because this harder, hungrier version of her was its own kind of undoing, something he hadn't known was in her. He didn't stop to read it. There would be time to read it. Now there was only her, needing something

from him with a force that erased the room, and him giving it, gladly, without yet asking what it cost her to need like that.

He would understand the shape of it later. In the moment he only knew that she took what she came for like she was half-furious to be caught wanting it at all, a low sound getting away from her that she seemed to resent the instant it was out, the same as in Amsterdam, as if her own hunger were a lapse in tradecraft. He didn't understand the anger, and he didn't try to, not then, because she was pulling him down into it and there was no version of him that wasn't going.

Then, somewhere in it, the tension went out of her.

It went the way a fever breaks. One moment she was all hard need and the next the hardness simply wasn't there anymore, spent, burned down to nothing, and what came up underneath it was so different that it stopped him. The urgency drained out of her hands. The wire he'd felt strung past pitch went slack all at once. And in its place, rising slow and unguarded into the quiet, was a softness he had not seen from her in three cities, in any light, ever, the whole assertive armored driving thing gone like it had been a costume she could finally take off, and under the costume was a person who was, he understood with a turn of the heart, exhausted. Not tired. Emptied. Like she'd been carrying something heavy up a very long stair and had just, here, in the dark, in his arms, been allowed to set it down.

He understood then, dimly, that the hard part had never been the thing she came for. The hard part had been the toll to get here.

He didn't say any of that. He wasn't even sure of it yet. He just felt the shift and answered it, the way you lower your voice when a child finally stops crying, and he gathered her in against his chest in the wrecked bed and pulled the sheet up over the both of them and held on.

She let him.

It was an hour, he'd know later, the longest and most defenseless he would ever be given of her: she let him hold her, and she stayed, and she didn't reassemble.

The city hummed against the window. The river light came up gray and constant. He talked, because it was what he had to give and because silence would have felt like a question, and he kept it low and easy and aimed nowhere near her, pitched for someone who'd had a fright, filling the dark with warmth that asked her for nothing. He told her about the man with the thermos and the mate going around the table, and how he'd been sure he was drinking it wrong, and how nobody had said so out of what he chose to believe was kindness. He told her the beef had been a religious experience and that he was going to have to be buried in Rio Grande do Sul now, it was only decent, they'd earned him. He told her the diagrams he drew for a living were all the same diagram and he'd been getting away with it for years. None of it mattered. All of it was just the shape his caring took when it had nowhere else to go, and she lay against him with her head over his heart and let it come down over her like weather, and slowly, in increments he could feel but not measure, the last of the tension left her body and she went soft and heavy and real against him.

She was, he realized, letting herself be taken care of. And she was doing it badly, like someone who was never taught how, holding too still at first as though comfort were a test she might fail, and then, degree by degree, giving up and sinking into it. He had the strange and certain sense that this was rarer for her than anything they'd done with the lights off. That the body was easy for her, had always been easy, was a room she walked into without cost. This wasn't the body. This was everything the body wasn't: being held in the dark, being talked to, being asked for nothing. And something in how she received it, greedily and guiltily and like she couldn't quite believe she was allowed, told him it almost never did.

"You don't have to do anything," he said, at one point, into her hair. "You know that. You don't have to be interesting or okay or anywhere. You can just be a person having a Tuesday. I've got it from here."

She was quiet so long he thought she'd gone under. Then, into his chest, so low he felt it more than heard it:

"I had stars on my ceiling once."

He went very still, so as not to scare it.

"Glow-in-the-dark ones," she said. "The little plastic kind. You stick them up and charge them with the lamp and then you turn the lamp off and they're there for a while." A breath. "We didn't get the constellations right. We just put them wherever."

We. He caught the word and didn't touch it, the way he'd caught too in Amsterdam and let it stand. He didn't ask who we was. He didn't ask when once was, or what had happened to the ceiling, or the stars, or the child who'd stuck them up in the wrong shapes and lain under them in the dark wanting the whole universe in the room. He understood, with a certainty that had no evidence under it, that she had just handed him something she did not hand people, something older than whatever she'd walked in carrying tonight, a real piece of a real child who had existed before all the rest of it, and that the size of the gift was measured exactly by how few words she'd wrapped it in.

"Yeah," he said, and his voice came out rougher than he meant. "That sounds about right. You put them wherever. That's the correct way to do stars." He felt her breathe. "I never had those. Ellie would've loved them. She was very into the actual constellations, she had the whole— she'd have made me learn the names. Yours sound better. Yours sound like they were for looking at, not for a quiz."

Something moved in her, against him, that might have been the ghost of a laugh, and she pressed her face a fraction further into his chest, and she didn't say anything else. She didn't have to. She'd given him one true thing out of a whole life of them and then gone quiet again, and he lay there holding a woman who'd let him see a seven-year-old's ceiling for four seconds and kept the rest, and he was so full of tenderness for her that it took him a moment to notice what else had come into the room with it.

Because his mind, which never fully stopped, had started reading backward while his mouth talked about stars.

She had come here wrecked. He was sure of it now: the softness coming up out of the hardness, the toll he'd felt her paying at the door. Something had happened to her before she'd found his hotel. Something out in the life he wasn't allowed into, the life with the men and the guns and the two phones, had reached in and hurt her, and she

had crossed a hemisphere carrying it, and she had brought it here. Not to a safe house. Not to whatever people she had, if she had people. Here. To him. She'd gone through the one door she could open and come out the other side into the one place, apparently, in the entire turning world where she could set the weight down.

And the tenderness in that was almost unbearable, that he was that place, that he was someone to her, real enough to run to, whatever she'd never say. He held it against the dread that came braided into it, because he wasn't a fool and never had been: whatever had hurt her tonight had been real and it had been bad, and she lived in a world where things got drawn on her in the dark, and he was holding the aftermath of something violent he would never see the front of. Both of those were true at once and he held them both, the wonder and the dread, the way he'd learned to hold everything about her, in a hand he refused to close.

And underneath even that, so quiet he almost walked past it, another thing, the faintest possible weight coming to rest on a scale he didn't know he was keeping.

She comes to me broken, and I hold the pieces, and I will never once be allowed to know what broke her.

It wasn't a complaint. He turned toward it with nothing but love, actually, in the moment, because in the moment being the room she came to felt like the largest thing he had ever been given permission to be. He noticed the weight and he set it down, as he set everything down, gladly, choosing her again the way he was always choosing her. He didn't feel it as a cost. It would be a long time before he could have told you when the cost started, and if you'd asked him tonight he'd have laughed and said what cost, look at her, look what she trusts me with. But it started here, in a hotel bed in a city with no beauty in it, a man learning to love a woman by the exact shape of the parts of her he'd never get to see. He just didn't have the name for it yet. Tonight it only felt like being trusted.

He held her until her breathing went long and even, and then a while past that, awake in the dark under a ceiling with no stars on it, glad in a way that had a shadow living all the way down at the bottom of it, and he wouldn't have traded the gladness for anything,

not even to be rid of the shadow.

He surfaced once in the night and she was leaving.

The room was still dark. She was up, dressed, or nearly, a shape moving quiet as water between the bed and the door, and his half-asleep body understood before his mind did that this was the part where she went, that she always went, that there had never been a version of any of this where he woke in the morning and she was still there making coffee like a person with a life that touched his. He didn't move. He wasn't sure, afterward, whether he'd been too deep in sleep to move or whether some older instinct had told him that reaching for her now would only cost them both something, that a woman leaving in the dark has decided, and the kind thing, the only thing, is to let her think you didn't see.

But he saw.

He saw her stop at the door with her coat in her hand. He saw her not open it. She stood there a moment longer than a person in a hurry stands, her back to him, her hand not quite reaching for the handle, and then she turned her head, just enough, and looked back at him across the dark room, at the bed, at him in it, and even mostly asleep and reading her from twenty feet away with his eyes half-shut he could tell that it was hard, that it cost her to look back, because a woman who'd been taught not to look back was looking back, and losing something by it, and doing it anyway.

Then she faced the door, and opened it onto the gray hall light, and was gone, and the latch caught behind her with a sound no louder than a held breath letting go.

He lay still for a long time after. The bed was warm on her side and then it wasn't. He didn't get up. There was nowhere to go and no one to go to; she was already down in the humid dark of a city that kept no nice version of itself for anyone, moving toward whatever came next in the life he'd never be shown, and he had no number to call and no door to knock on and no way in the world to follow, and he understood, lying there, that this was the deal. That she would find him. That he would never find her. That she would come to him carrying things he couldn't see and leave before he could ask, and that it would keep happening exactly like this, quiet and total, right after the moments

that meant the most.

In the morning the room was only a room again. Her coffee cup from the night before, the one she'd never touched, sat on the desk where the hotel had left it. The other side of the bed was made by the simple fact of no one having slept in it long enough to unmake it.

He should have felt robbed. That was the strange part, the one he turned over on the long flight out and couldn't quite explain to himself and didn't try very hard to. He didn't feel robbed. He felt like a man who'd been handed one hour of something true and then had it taken quietly back, and who was already, God help him, counting the days until she'd hand it to him again, because an hour of the real her was worth more to him than a whole ordinary lifetime of someone who'd stay.

She'd had stars once. She'd let him hold her until she went soft. She'd looked back.

He'd take it. Whatever it was, whatever it was going to cost him that he couldn't see yet, he'd take it, and he'd take it again, and he already knew he would, which was either the best thing that had ever happened to him or the beginning of something he'd need all his cleverness to survive, and he genuinely could not tell which, and he got on the plane anyway.

Chapter 4: Hong Kong

The fourth time was a tower in Central, some floor in the thirties, a room with a wall of glass that gave onto the harbor and the mountain and the whole impossible density of the place, and Chuck had drawn the curtains against all of it on the first night without once looking, as he drew them everywhere, because a view was a thing other people had time for.

She was there when he got back from the airport-day of it, the flights and the car and the first round of handshakes. He came into the dark room and she was a shape at the window with the curtain held back an inch, watching the water, and the fourth time did not feel smaller than the first three. It felt larger. Three was the number that had told him it wasn't the world doing this. Four told him it wasn't going to stop.

He didn't ask how. He'd given that up. He crossed the room and she turned from the glass and it was the old current, immediate and total, her hands and his and the gravity of her being real in a room he'd expected to be empty, and the night took them, and he fell asleep with her weight along his side thinking about nothing, because thinking would have meant counting the hours until she was gone.

In the morning she was still there, and that, at least, he had a category for now. Amsterdam had taught him she'd sometimes stay the night through. So he let the morning be what it was, which was the best hour of his month: her in his shirt with her hair down, the two of them working through a pot of coffee neither of them hurried, the light coming up gray-gold over a city he still didn't look at because he was looking at her. She had the quiet she got when nothing was pulling at her, and he talked, low and easy, as he'd learned she'd let him, and she drank her coffee and let it come down over her like good weather.

But he knew better than to believe it. A night was generous. A night was more than the pattern promised. The day would take her; the day always took her. He had a client and a schedule and a nine-thirty across the harbor, and when he got up to shower and dress he did it already grieving, in the practiced way he'd gotten good at, saying goodbye to something while it's still in the room so the actual leaving can't catch you flat.

"I've got meetings till God knows when," he said, knotting the tie, watching her in the mirror. "You'll be—" He stopped. He'd been about to say gone, and the word had a stone in it, and he didn't want to hand her the stone. "You do what you need to do," he said instead.

She looked at him from the bed, over the rim of the cup, and didn't answer, and he told himself that was just her, and picked up his bag, and went to be brilliant about somebody else's money with the door already closing on the best thing in his life. He'd trained for this. You got the hour and then you got the aftermath, and the aftermath was yours alone, and the trick was to not let the hour ruin you for the rest of the day. He was very good at the trick.

He ran it the whole way down in the elevator and the whole way across the harbor and straight through a morning of network diagrams, and it held, mostly. It always did.

Then the meetings ran long, as meetings do, and it was dark by the time the car brought him back, the city switched over into its neon self, and he rode up in the elevator too tired to run the trick anymore, bracing for the thing he'd braced for a hundred times: the empty room. The made bed. The cooling nothing where a person had been. He'd gotten so good at the room being empty that he could feel it before he opened the door, the silence of it, and he put the key card to the lock and pushed the door open onto the dark and reached for the light, already alone.

The light was already on.

She was on the couch with her feet up and one of his shirts on and a room-service cart pulled over beside her with the silver covers off the plates and half a pot of coffee gone cold on it, and the curtains were open. All the way open. The whole wall of glass and the whole harbor blazing through it, Kowloon throwing its light back off the black water, the ferries crossing, the city she'd apparently been watching go from afternoon to gold to dark while he was gone, and she looked up at him standing frozen in his own doorway with his hand still on the switch that was already flipped, and she said, "You're late."

He couldn't speak for a second.

Because she was still there. Not still-there-at-dawn, which he had a box for now. Still there. A whole day. She had stayed in this room, alone, static, for the length of an entire working day, waiting for him to come back, and every alarm he didn't know how to hear was going off somewhere under his ribs while the front of him just filled up, helplessly, with the sight of her curled on his couch in his shirt like a person with a life that had his in it.

"They ran long," he managed.

"I know. I ordered." She nodded at the cart. "It's cold now. That's on you."

He set his bag down very carefully, the way you set something down when your hands aren't quite yours, and he did the one thing that would keep her from bolting: he acted

like it was nothing. Like coming home to her was ordinary. Because he knew, the way he knew things about her he'd never been told, that if he said the true sentence out loud, if he said you're still here with any of the wonder in it that was currently rearranging his whole chest, she would hear the size of it, and remember she wasn't supposed to be, and be gone by morning. She was like a wild animal that had wandered into the room, and you didn't point at it. You kept very still and you let it decide on its own to stay.

"Cold room service is a delicacy in some cultures," he said, crossing to the cart, loosening his tie. "Very sophisticated. You've done us a favor."

Something in her eased that he pretended not to see. He sat down next to her feet and ate cold noodles off the cart and told her about the man on the client's board who'd fallen asleep with his eyes open, and she gave him her feet to hold, and outside the curtains she'd opened the whole city burned, and he did not once say the thing, and that was the beginning of it.

She stayed the next day too.

He noticed, dressing again in the gray morning, that he was doing the same thing he'd done the night before, keeping his eyes carefully off the impossible fact of her, and that it had become a job. He would leave and she would be here and he would come back and she would still be here and neither of them would say a word about the fact that a woman who had never in four cities let him watch her sleep past dawn was now living in his hotel room while he went to work. He was complicit in it. He understood that clearly. His silence was half of what let it keep happening, and he spent it gladly, the way you spend anything on the thing you want most, without once doing the math on what it might be costing to run the account this far into the red.

Because there were tells, if you were the kind of man who couldn't stop reading them, and he was.

There was the phone. She had a phone, a flat dark thing she kept near her, and across the days he watched her check it, and he learned the whole grammar of how she checked it. She'd pick it up and go still, and the stillness wasn't idle, it was a calculation, a whole clock running behind her eyes, and something in her would gather like a person

about to stand, some old discipline coming up through her spine, and he'd feel it and hold his breath and keep talking about nothing, and then it would go slack again and she'd set the phone down and stay. Every time. He watched her almost-leave a dozen times across those days and not once complete it, and each time she didn't he understood he was watching evidence of something, some line she'd crossed that she couldn't uncross, though he'd never in his life have named it out loud.

Once, on the third day, the phone lit and buzzed against the glass tabletop, hard, insistent, twice, three times, and he watched her look at it, and he watched something cross her that was almost like fear, and then she reached out and turned it face-down without answering it, and looked back at him, and the thing she'd turned away from went on buzzing under her hand against the table until it stopped. He didn't ask. He put his hand over hers where it lay flat on the phone and left it there, and neither of them said anything, and the unanswered call sat between them like a held breath, and she let him keep her hand on it. He thought, without letting the thought get too loud: whatever that was, she just chose me over it, and she's not allowed to, and she did it anyway.

And there were the scars.

He'd found the first one the second night, in the dark, his mouth moving down her, a thin raised line along the low edge of her ribs that his lips knew before his eyes did, and he'd done the thing he did without thinking about it, which was to stop and put his mouth on it, gently, once, the way you'd press your thumb to something to tell it you'd seen it. She'd gone the smallest bit still under him and then let it pass, and the night had gone on, and he'd thought nothing of it except the tender fact of it, that her body had a history written on it and some of the history had teeth.

But there were others. He kept finding them. A pale seam at her shoulder blade. A knot of old tissue high on her thigh that had no business being the shape it was. Something at her hip that had been stitched once by someone in a hurry. He was a man who noticed, and he was spending days with the whole map of her, and he read it whether he wanted to or not: that the woman in his bed had been hurt, more than once, badly, by a world that used sharp things, and that she had survived all of it and told him none of it and

would not, and that it was all written into her in a language he could feel with his mouth in the dark and would never be allowed to say back to her in words.

So he didn't say it in words.

Every one he found, he kissed. It stopped being incidental somewhere in there and became deliberate, though he'd never have called it a decision, any more than he'd decided to keep breathing. He'd find a scar and he'd put his mouth on it, unhurried, asking nothing, and move on. He never counted them out loud. He never said where did you get this. He understood, with a certainty that lived below reasoning, that the questions were the one thing he could give her by never asking, that a man who demanded the story would be a man she had to manage, and that the whole gift was in not making her manage him. He had watched two men hunt her through a city with guns. He had all of Milan's arithmetic and none of its last number, and he didn't need the last number. He knew enough. He knew she came from somewhere that cut her, and he knew she'd come here, to him, carrying it, and he honored it the only way his hands knew how, which was to press his mouth to the proof of it and let the proof know it had been seen.

He didn't understand, yet, that she was starting to notice what he was doing. He only knew he'd never in his life felt so much like he was telling the truth.

He blew off the prep session on the fourth night.

It was not a thing he did. There was a presentation the next afternoon, the whole reason he was in the hemisphere, and there was a prep call he was supposed to take at eight, and at seven-forty she stood up from the couch and came and took the laptop out of his hands and closed it, and said, "Come with me."

"I have a—"

"I know what you have." She was already handing him his jacket. "Come with me anyway."

And he looked at the closed laptop, at the whole edifice of his discipline, the thing he'd never once set down for anyone, and then he looked at her standing there in the light of

the city she'd opened his curtains onto, holding his jacket, asking him for something for the first time in four cities that had nothing to do with what a room could give them, and he stood up and put the jacket on. He'd think about the prep call later, when later got expensive. Right now she wanted to take him somewhere, and no force he knew of could have kept him in that room.

She took him up the mountain.

There was a tram that climbed it at an angle that made no sense, the city tilting away behind them through the windows, and then there was a terrace at the top of the whole thing with the wind moving and the rail cold under his hands, and below them, spread out and burning and enormous, was Hong Kong.

He had never seen it. He'd been in it for four days and he had never once seen it, and now it was all at once and everywhere, the towers falling in lit cliffs down to the black water, the harbor a moving darkness stitched with the wakes of the ferries, Kowloon answering back from the far shore in a second wall of light, the whole valley of it breathing and blazing under a low sky that threw the glow back down so the clouds themselves were faintly gold. It was too big to take in. It didn't resolve into anything you could read. There were no exits in it and no marks in it and no angle to work, nothing to do with a place like this but stand at a rail in the wind and let it be larger than you.

And he looked at her, because he always looked at her, and she wasn't looking at him.

She was looking at the city. And her face was open.

Not performed-open, not the warm mask she'd worn to fool the men in Milan, and not the careful softness she gave him in the dark after the wall came down. This was something he'd never seen on her in any light, a face with nobody behind the counter, a face just looking, undefended and unhidden and moved, actually moved, the wind pulling at her hair and the whole burning city held in her eyes and something in her expression that he could only have called wonder, plain and total, the look of a person who spent her entire life reading rooms for the exits standing in the one place on earth where there was nothing to read and nothing to fear and nothing to do but see how beautiful it was.

He didn't say anything. He didn't take her hand or make it a moment. He just stood next to her and let her be moved, and let himself watch her be moved, and understood that she was letting him watch, that this was something she was giving him on purpose, the sight of her with the wall all the way down and no reason for it but that the city was beautiful and he was next to her. It wasn't a disclosure. She hadn't told him anything. She'd just, for once, not hidden. And the two of them stood at the rail in the wind and looked at the same enormous thing at the same time and it belonged, for as long as it lasted, to neither of them and both of them, the first beautiful thing in the whole strange history of them that was simply and only theirs.

The whole time, some quiet part of him he wasn't running on purpose kept trying to remind him of the prep call and the presentation and the discipline he'd walked out on, and he kept not caring, and that was its own kind of vertigo, the pleasant terror of a man discovering exactly how much of his life he'd set down without a fight. He'd never done that before. He'd never had a reason. He had one now, and she was standing at a rail with the wind in her hair looking at a city like she'd forgotten she wasn't allowed to want things, and he thought, with a clarity that should have frightened him more than it did: I would give it all up. Whatever she is, whatever this costs. I would give the whole careful thing up for this.

He didn't say that either. Some things you keep even from the person they're about, because saying them makes them real enough to lose.

The catch came on the last night, though he didn't know it was the last night, because he still believed, God help him, that this could just keep going.

She was worn thin by then in a way he'd watched happen across the days without being able to stop it. The phone had buzzed more. The stillnesses had gotten longer. The clock she was fighting had crept up into her face, a tiredness that sleep didn't touch, the look of someone holding a door shut against a rising weight on the other side of it. And she'd been letting him closer as she got more tired, which he understood dimly was backward, that a careful person gets more careful under pressure, not less, and that whatever was eroding in her was eroding the walls too, so that these last nights she'd been softer and

more reachable and more there than he'd ever had her, undefended in a way that a smarter and less besotted man might have recognized as a person coming apart.

They were in the dark and he was moving over her as he had for four nights, unhurried, and his mouth found a scar he hadn't found before, low on her side, a long one, a bad one, the worst of them, raised and old and the kind of thing that had been a very serious day once, and he did what he'd done with all of them. He stopped. He pressed his mouth to it, gently, and let it know he'd seen it.

And she went still.

Not the still from the second night, the flinch-and-let-it-pass. This was a different stillness, total, the stillness of a machine that has been handed an input it has no routine for. Every other night, every other touch, she'd met him with the fluency that was her whole gift, desire answered with desire, her body speaking the one language it had never lost. And now his mouth was on the worst thing that had ever happened to her and it was not asking her body for anything, it was not wanting her, it was only saying I see this, I have seen all of them, I know what you are and I have known for a long time and I am kissing it anyway, and against that she had no move. There was no answer in her repertoire. The fluency simply stopped, all at once, and she lay under him not-breathing, and he felt the exact moment it landed, the moment she understood that he'd been doing this the whole time, deliberately, night after night, city after city, that every gentle unasked question across four countries had been a man who already knew, who'd always known, who had looked at what she was and chosen not to make her say it.

He lifted his head.

Her face, in the city-light coming through the curtains she'd opened, was doing what it had always done in four cities, closing against him at the last inch, the look he'd never once been able to read. Except this time it didn't close. It cracked wide open, all the way to whatever was under it, and he still couldn't read it, and for the first time he understood that he was never going to be able to, because there wasn't a word for what was on her face. It wasn't fear and it wasn't gratitude and it wasn't anything he knew how to answer. It was the face of a person being seen all the way to the bottom by

someone who'd been able to see her the whole time, and finding no floor under her, and no language for it, and nowhere left to stand. He had touched the one thing she guarded past everything else, and she had no country for being known, and it was breaking over her in the dark with her eyes open and her whole trained self gone quiet with nothing to say.

He didn't say you don't have to hide it from me. He'd thought the words, somewhere back in the days, and he understood now that they were too small and also too large, that saying anything at all would turn the gift into a claim, would make her answer, and there was no answer, which was precisely what his mouth had just told her that no sentence could. So he said nothing. He just looked at her looking at him, and let her see that he'd seen her, and let it be true in the silence where it could survive, and after a long moment he lowered his head again and pressed his mouth once more to the long scar on her side, the worst one, the one she'd carried into his bed and let him find, and held it there, and felt her hand come up, slow, and settle in his hair, not pulling him anywhere, just resting there, holding on.

They didn't sleep for a long time. Neither of them said a word about any of it. And he lay in the dark afterward more happy than he had ever been in his life and did not understand, not yet, that he had just cost her the last thing she had.

He was awake when the clock finally won.

It was the gray hour, not dawn yet, the city gone quiet as it ever got. He'd surfaced without knowing why, some animal part of him tuned now to the frequency of her leaving, and he made himself lie still, and this time he watched the whole thing from the start.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her back to him, and she was not moving, and it was the worst stillness he'd ever seen from her, worse than the scar, because the scar had been something happening to her and this was something she was doing to herself. She was making herself go. He could see it in the line of her back, the war of it, the discipline she'd thrown away for five days climbing back up her spine vertebra by vertebra because it had to, because the thing on the other side of the door she'd been

holding shut had finally pushed through, and there was no more staying to be stolen. The phone was in her hand. Whatever was on it had won. She'd fought the clock every day of this and the clock had been going to win the whole time, and now it had, and he was watching her lose.

She got up. She dressed in the dark, quiet as water, exactly as she'd dressed in Porto Alegre, except this was nothing like Porto Alegre, because in Porto Alegre she'd been leaving something behind and now she was leaving everything behind, five days of it, the curtains and the cold room service and the mountain and the worst scar kissed in the dark, walking back out of the one place she'd been a whole person and into the life that didn't allow one, carrying all of it away with her.

And she came back to the bed before she went. That was the part he'd hold onto. She didn't just go. She came and stood over him in the dark, and he kept his eyes almost shut and his breathing even and let her think he was asleep because he understood that she needed him to be, and she stood there a long moment looking down at him, and then she did something she had never done. She bent and put her mouth to his forehead, once, the way you'd say goodbye to someone you weren't going to see again, and he felt a breath go out of her that wasn't steady, and then she straightened and was gone, no sound at the door, no latch, just the fact of the room being emptier than it had been.

He lay still until he was sure. Then he opened his eyes onto the ceiling and the gray light and the curtains she'd opened, still open, the whole silent city sitting out there behind the glass.

He got up eventually and did the presentation and it went fine. He was good at his job even hollowed out; especially hollowed out, maybe. But he stood at the wall of glass that afternoon, before the car came, looking at the harbor he could finally see because she'd taught him to leave the curtains open, and he understood that something had changed and he couldn't quite name the shape of it. The other leavings had been vanishings. This one had been a defeat. She hadn't slipped away clean like she always did; she'd been dragged, she'd fought it and lost, she'd kissed his forehead like a woman closing a door she didn't want closed, and she'd gone worse than she'd come, carrying the whole five

days out into the dark like a wound.

And he was still happy. He stood at the glass and turned it over: he'd had five days. The mountain, the mornings, her face with the wall down, her hand in his hair in the dark. Nobody got that. He'd been given more of her than he'd known there was to be given, and no vanishing could unmake it. He was happy. He was just also, now, for the first time, afraid, because he'd had the whole thing at last, and having the whole thing turned out to be the same as having it to lose.

Chapter 5: Sydney

He came in high. He'd only understand that later, looking back at the whole bright ruin of the day: he'd walked into Sydney carrying Hong Kong, five days of her with the wall down, her hand in his hair on the mountain, and he'd expected to find that woman waiting for him, because why wouldn't he, because she'd let him all the way in and people who do that don't take it back.

She was there when he got to the room, and the body knew her before anything else did. That part never changed. Whatever else was true, when she came into his hands she came all the way, immediate, undefended, the one honest thing about her that had never once been able to lie, and for a few minutes he had all of Hong Kong back and didn't know yet that he only had the half of it that couldn't help itself.

He found out in the after.

Because the after was where they lived, he'd learned that on the mountain, the after was the whole country: the long quiet with her weight along him and her breathing gone slow and her staying, the part where she didn't reassemble. He reached for it now, the way you reach for a step that's always been there in the dark. And it wasn't there. Her body was still catching its breath against him and the rest of her had already gotten up and left the room. He could feel it, the exact place where she used to stay and now didn't, a stillness that had gone from resting to held while he wasn't looking, and he lay there with his hand on the small of her back and felt her be somewhere he couldn't follow, present and gone at the same time, and something in his chest set very carefully down onto a lower shelf.

Jet lag, he told himself. A long flight. Whatever she came off of before she got here. He was good at this. He'd built a whole life out of choosing the version of the story that let him keep walking. She'd stayed five days in Hong Kong. She'd let him kiss the worst thing that had ever happened to her. A woman didn't do that and then go cold three weeks later for no reason, so there was a reason, and the reason was somewhere out in the life he wasn't allowed into, and it would pass. It had to pass. He put his mouth to her shoulder and she let him and didn't turn toward it, and he told himself that was nothing too.

"Let's go out," she said, into the quiet, before the quiet could become anything. "It's supposed to be beautiful today."

He'd have stayed in the room forever. She was already up and finding her clothes.

Sydney was showing off.

That was his first thought coming out into it, and it curdled almost immediately, because the day was so aggressively, indecently gorgeous that it felt like a thing being done at them. The harbour threw the light back in a million moving pieces. The ferries came and went across water so blue it looked dyed. There were people everywhere being happy in the uncomplicated way of people on holiday in a beautiful place, sunburnt and loud and easy, and the Opera House sat out on its point doing its white sails against the blue like the most confident building on earth, and all of it, every square inch of the afternoon, was rubbing something in that Chuck couldn't yet name.

He'd learned, in Hong Kong, to look up. She'd taught him that, on the mountain, taught him a place could be beautiful and that he was allowed to stand in it and let it be. And now here he was in the most open, most beautiful, most available place either of them had ever stood in, sun everywhere, nothing hidden, the whole gorgeous city laid out with nothing to read and nowhere any shadows, and he couldn't see a single bit of it, because the person who'd taught him to look up was walking half a step to his left with a smile on and a wall behind it, going somewhere he wasn't invited.

The dark in Hong Kong had been merciful. It had let the walls down. This light let nothing down and hid nothing, and it showed him, in high relief, minute by minute, a

woman being warm at him from behind glass.

They walked along the water. She talked.

That was new, and it took him a while to feel how wrong it was, because on its face it was the opposite of wrong. She was never a talker; her whole register was the spare true word and the long silence she let you sit in. And now she was filling every silence. She told him about a restaurant she'd read about, somewhere up in the hills over a beach, and how you had to book, and how the ferry to get near it only ran on the odd hours, and whether they should do that tonight or whether it was too far, and there was a market on the weekend but they wouldn't be here for the weekend, would they, and did he like oysters, because this was the place for oysters, apparently, though she personally could take them or leave them. He listened to her build these elaborate structures of logistics in the sun, one after another, and he understood, slowly, that she was doing it so there would be no silence for the real thing to climb into. The talk was a wall too. She'd never needed one before. She'd been able to just be quiet with him. Now the quiet was dangerous, and she was papering over every inch of it, and the effort of it was the loudest thing she'd ever said to him.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do, which was reach. He filled his side too, warm and long, met her logistics with more than they needed, laughed a beat too readily at the dry jokes she was making out of ferry timetables, kept the surface up with both hands from his end because if they both kept it up then nothing underneath had to be true yet. He heard himself doing it. He heard himself explaining her to himself out loud, almost, narrating a version of the afternoon in which everything was fine, and some cold clear part of him that he was working very hard not to listen to noted that he'd never had to do this before, that being with her had never once been work, that the two of them talking had always been the easiest thing in his life and was now the hardest, and he turned that part of himself down and kept reaching.

They stopped for the oysters she could take or leave. An outdoor table, an umbrella that didn't quite cover them, the water slapping the pilings below. She ordered too much and arranged it and didn't eat. He watched her line a fork up square with the edge of a plate

and leave it there.

"You're quiet," she said, which was rich, coming from the most words he'd heard out of her in five cities, and it landed on him as the first true sentence of the day and also as an accusation, and he understood she'd said it to move the attention off herself, and he let her, because that was the game now, apparently, keeping each other from looking directly at it.

"Jet lag," he said, handing her back her own lie, and something crossed her face at hearing it, quick, there and gone, because she knew exactly what it was he was and wasn't saying, they always knew. They could see each other perfectly. It wasn't helping at all.

Once, in the middle of it, she reached back.

He almost missed it. She was mid-sentence about the ferry, and her hand came across the table and found his where it lay by his glass, and closed over it, and for a second there was nothing performed in it at all, her thumb moving once over his knuckles as it had in a doorway in Amsterdam, the wall just gone, her actually there behind her own eyes, reaching for him because she couldn't not. It was the mountain for one second. It was the whole thing, offered.

And he'd already started to pull back.

He felt it happen in himself even as her hand closed on his, felt the defensive flinch of a man who'd been getting warmth from behind glass all afternoon and had begun, without deciding to, to stop trusting it, to hold a little of himself in reserve against the next time it went cold. So her hand found his and his hand was already, by some fraction, on its way to being somewhere she couldn't reach, and he saw her feel that, saw the reach land on a version of him that had started to guard, and saw her understand it, and saw her take her hand back. Gently. Like nothing. They'd been at the same altitude for one second and had managed to be there a half-beat apart, and the window shut, and neither of them said a word, and the sun came off the water in its million happy pieces.

They kept going. There was more afternoon than either of them knew what to do with.

It broke over something trivial, as these things do.

She was talking about the ferry again, whether they'd make the odd-hour one to the restaurant in the hills, checking her phone for the time, and there was a moment, an ordinary moment, nothing in it, where she went to say something about the timetable and just stopped. Her hand had gone flat on the table. It was gripping the edge of it, he saw, the knuckles gone pale, gripping the way you grip something when the floor tips, and her breath had stopped, and her whole face had gone into the terrible stillness of a person holding an enormous weight perfectly level so that no one will see it's there, and the stillness wasn't working, quite, there was a fine tremor running under it, the tremor of a thing held too long about to be too heavy, and for one second, in the full sun, with the ferries crossing and the whole bright city being happy around them, Chuck watched her fight something.

He didn't know what. That was the truth of it, then and after: he didn't know what she was fighting. He only knew that she was, that under the level face and the logistics and the oysters she couldn't eat there was a person in real distress holding a line against a pressure he couldn't see, and that it was costing her something enormous to keep her hand flat on that table, and that she was losing.

And because he had spent five cities learning to read her, and because he loved her past the point where caution could have saved either of them, he stopped keeping the surface up. He put his hand over her gripping one, and he waited until she looked at him, and he said it plain, the way he said the only things he ever fully meant:

"Come back to me."

It came out of him with nothing on it. No joke to catch it if it fell, no logistics around it, just the three of them, come back to me, and he meant all of it and didn't know he meant all of it: come back to the room tonight, come back from wherever you go when your eyes leave, come back, be the woman on the mountain, I saw her, I know she's in there, I know where you went and I'm telling you the way home is right here, it's me, I'm right here, come back.

He didn't know that the word back was a knife. He didn't know that where he was calling her home from was, to her, not a home at all but a mistake she was in the middle of correcting, that Hong Kong hadn't been a country she could return to but a cliff she'd fallen off and spent three weeks climbing back up, and that come back to me landed on her as jump. He only knew he'd offered her the plainest true thing he had, and that he'd offered it with his eyes open, having seen the struggle, having seen the cost, offered it anyway, the last and most informed reach of a man who had decided on a plane a long time ago to believe in her against the evidence and was doing it again now, one more time, out loud, in the sun.

And he watched her try to take it.

What she did instead broke him worse than a refusal would have. She didn't go cold. She didn't pull the hand back. He watched some part of her lunge toward the thing he was offering, watched her want to give him what he was asking for, watched her draw the breath to say it, yes, I'm here, it's okay, don't, watched her mouth start to shape a word, watched her whole self reach for the one sentence that would put it right. And it didn't come. The breath went out without the words on it. Her lips closed on nothing. Her hand turned under his and held on, hard, the body saying the only true thing it knew how to say while the rest of her stood at the edge of the sentence and could not, could not, make the sound. He saw her try to speak and fail to. He saw the reach and he saw it arrive at nothing, a person lunging for a rope that wasn't in her hands, that had never been put in her hands, that someone had made sure a long time ago would never be in her hands. She could take care of him with those hands. She had taken his jacket and fed him and held his feet on a couch. She could not say come back, it's okay, I'm yours. The words were in a language she'd never been allowed to learn.

And Chuck's whole understanding of the last five cities came apart in his chest, quietly, and did not put itself back together as he wanted.

Because he'd braced, if he was honest, somewhere down under the hope, for no. For this was fun, I have to stop. He knew how to survive no; he'd survived it his whole life, people leaving, the door closing once and staying closed. No was clean. You could grieve

it and walk. This wasn't no. This was a woman who wanted to say yes with everything she had and couldn't, who was reaching for him and failing to arrive, and he understood, sitting in the sun with her hand crushing his, that he had been wrong about the shape of the whole thing. It had never been a question of whether she wanted him. She wanted him. He could see it, it was the most naked thing on her, she wanted him and there was a wall inside her she could not get over to reach him and she couldn't even show him where the wall was, and he was reading it right, that was the unbearable part, he was finally reading her exactly right and what he was reading was that the problem was not a rival and not a doubt and not a thing he could fix by loving her harder. The problem was that she had been built unable. And you cannot out-reach a wall that lives inside the person you're reaching for.

A man who had just decided, on a mountain, that he had something to lose, looked at that, and something in him took its first step back from the edge.

She'd won. That was the thing neither of them would ever say.

Whatever she'd flown in here to do to herself, whatever the cold across the water had been in service of, it had worked. She'd held the line. She hadn't said the words. She'd kept the distance she came to keep, and she was safe now, sealed back up, the lapse corrected, and it had cost her only the one man who had ever seen the whole of her and offered, twice now, in two hemispheres, to catch her when she fell. She'd get to keep the wall. She'd just had to give him up to do it.

And he saw her realize it hadn't worked at all.

Because he'd started to withdraw. He couldn't help it any more than her body could help answering his; the flinch had become a lean-away, small, involuntary, the survival reflex of a warm man who'd just been shown a wound he couldn't reach and had begun, on instinct, to protect the soft part of himself from breaking on it forever. He felt himself do it. He felt the warmth he'd been pouring out all afternoon start, for the first time in five cities, to bank itself, to pull back into the house and close a shutter, just one, just the first one. And she read it. She read everything. He watched her watch him begin to leave, watched her see the exact thing she'd engineered arrive across the table wearing

the exact face she couldn't bear, his warmth going quiet, the light in him she'd navigated by starting to turn down, and he watched it land on her like a death.

And she couldn't say that either.

That was the completion of it, the cruelty folded inside the cruelty: she'd failed to say come back and now she failed to say don't go, the second silence stacking onto the first, a woman watching the one person she wanted go dim in front of her and unable to make a single sound to stop it. Her face, in the pitiless sun, went to grief. Open, total, unhidden grief, nowhere for it to go and no shade to hide it, the most legible thing he'd seen on her all day.

And he couldn't read it. Not the grief itself, the grief was plain, but the why of it made no sense to him from where he sat, because from where he sat she had just failed to answer him, pushed him back, chosen the wall over the way home, and people who do that don't then look destroyed about it, that wasn't how it went, you didn't get to keep the distance and grieve the distance in the same breath. He looked at a woman wrecked by getting exactly what she'd come for and he had no idea, none, why she looked like that, and he was too newly, carefully hurt himself to do what he'd have done a day ago, which was reach across and ask.

That was the first thing he didn't do that he'd always done.

They didn't make the ferry to the restaurant in the hills. Neither of them mentioned it. The afternoon ran itself out into a long gold evening, still beautiful, relentlessly, and they walked back the way they'd come with a new careful distance between them, not touching, matching each other's silence now instead of papering it, two people who had finally stopped performing and found the thing underneath was worse than the performance.

At the room she didn't come up. He understood that she wouldn't before she said it; he could feel the shape of the goodbye arriving, heavy, nothing like the clean vanishings of the early cities, both of them wrecked and neither of them able to say a word about why.

"I have to go," she said. The oldest sentence she had.

And here was the place. Here was where, every time, in every city, he'd reached one more time. In Porto Alegre he'd said are you going to be okay to a woman leaving in the dark, and it had been the truest thing he had, the way he'd always reached for her: by caring out loud. He had the sentence right there in his mouth now. Are you going to be okay. He could feel how much she needed someone to ask it, could see that she was leaving with the grief still all over her and no one in the world to say the kind thing to her.

He didn't ask.

He stood there in the last of the ridiculous golden light and held the question behind his teeth and let her go without it, one door in him swinging shut for the first time since a piazza in Milan, protecting something, and he watched her register that too, watched her clock the missing question and understand what its absence meant, and he made himself not care, and mostly failed, and asked her nothing.

"Yeah," he said instead. Short. Closed. A word with a wall behind it, the way hers had been all day. "Take care, Sarah."

Something went out of her at take care. He saw it. He'd said the thing you say to people you're not going to reach for anymore, and she heard it exactly, and for a second he thought she might do it, might finally break and say the sentence, might actually come back to him, and she stood on the pavement in the gold light with her mouth not quite closed and the words right there, right there, and then the discipline came up her spine the way it had on a mountain, and she got herself level, and she nodded, once, and she went.

He didn't watch her all the way this time. That was new too. He turned before she was gone.

Up in the room he opened the curtains, out of the habit she'd taught him, and stood at the glass.

The harbour was doing its unbearable thing, the lights coming on now over the water, the ferries stitching their bright wakes across the dark, the whole gorgeous impossible

city she'd brought him out into laid open in front of him, everything he'd learned in Hong Kong to stand still and let in. He couldn't take any of it. It sat out there being beautiful at him through the glass and none of it reached him, because the one who'd taught him how to receive a place had spent the whole day teaching him something else, which was that you could see a thing perfectly and completely and still not be able to have any of it.

He'd survived people leaving. He was an expert at it. What was new tonight, what he stood at the glass not knowing what to do with, was the thing that had started in his own chest this afternoon in the sun and had not stopped: the first careful, self-protective pull of a warm man beginning to guard himself, for the first time in five cities, against her.

The lights came on all over Sydney. He didn't see them.

Chapter 6: Denver

Ellie had picked the restaurant, which was how Chuck knew it would be warm.

She had a radar for these places, some inherited sense of where a room would hold you, and she'd found one even here, in a city that wasn't anybody's home: low lights and brick and a candle guttering on the table and a waiter who'd stopped by three times already just to top off the bread. Denver had a satellite office of his company in it, four floors of it, and he came out a few times a year to sit in rooms with his own people and pretend the decisions weren't already made, and that was the whole of his claim to the place, a lease and a badge and a hotel he liked. It was the closest thing to home turf he had that wasn't Los Angeles, and Los Angeles was where his company lived, not where he did, so the truth was he didn't really have home turf, he had airports and offices and the loneliness of a man who was welcome everywhere and from nowhere. And then his sister had heard he'd be in town and put herself and her husband on a plane, and now there were candles and bread and people who loved him, and a restaurant in a city he didn't belong to felt, for one evening, almost like a place he was from.

Almost. That was the word for the whole night, it would turn out. Almost.

"Northwestern," Devon was saying, for what might have been the fourth time, and every time he said it his whole face did the thing Chuck loved him for, the total uncomplicated joy of a man whose life was going exactly as he'd worked for it to go. "Cardiothoracic. Attending. I mean — Chuck. Do you understand what that is? That's the show. That's not the minors anymore."

"It's the show," Chuck agreed.

"Chicago in the fall. We already found a place in Lincoln Park, El found it, it's got a — tell him about the light."

"He doesn't care about the light, babe."

"I care about the light," Chuck said, because it was true, because he'd spent enough nights in enough rooms not caring about the light to know it mattered, and Ellie glanced at him when he said it, quick, the same glance she'd been giving him all night, and he looked back down at his plate before the glance could turn into anything.

Because he'd gone quiet, and they'd both noticed, and he couldn't fix it.

He kept failing at it. He was, by every account including his own, a talker; it was the first thing anyone learned about him and usually the last thing they forgave; he filled rooms, he filled silences, he had built an entire personality out of the theory that if he just kept talking nobody would leave. And tonight the talk wasn't there. He'd sit with a sentence half-built and feel the effort of finishing it and just... not. He'd let Devon carry it. He'd let the good news wash over the table and made the right sounds at the right times and watched his sister watch him not be himself, and every time he caught her doing it he looked away, because the alternative was to let her in, and he couldn't let her in, because letting her in would mean saying it out loud, and there was no version of it he could say out loud that didn't end with him crying into the bread basket at his own brother-in-law's celebration dinner.

So he guarded it. That was new too. He'd never guarded anything from Ellie in his life. She'd raised him; she'd paid the light bill she was now decorating a Chicago apartment around; she knew the inside of him better than he did. And he sat there and held the

door shut against her, on purpose, all night, and hated it, and did it anyway, because the thing behind the door had teeth now and he didn't want it getting to her.

She'd been trying to open it since the appetizers.

Nothing you could point to. Ellie didn't interrogate; she'd learned a gentler trade than that, raising a wrecked teenager on a waitress's nerves. She just left him openings. You look tired, Chuck. You working too hard? You eating? The old questions, the ones that used to be a joke between them, and she asked them tonight without the joke in her voice, and each one was a door she was holding open on her side, and each one he stepped around. I'm fine. Just jet lag. Meetings. You know. He watched her believe him less each time, and he watched her decide not to push, not here, not at Devon's dinner, and he was so grateful to her for not pushing and so afraid of the moment she'd stop that he could barely taste the food.

"You'd tell me," she said at one point, low, while Devon was flagging the waiter, "if something was actually wrong."

"Nothing's wrong, El."

"Okay," she said, in the voice that meant not okay, we'll come back to this, and squeezed his forearm once, and let it go, and turned her hostess face back to the table, and Chuck understood he'd bought himself maybe an hour.

He was wrong. He'd bought himself about twenty minutes.

He saw her before she reached the table.

He would think, later, that he'd felt her come in before he saw her, some five-cities-deep animal in him tuned to her frequency now, but that was probably a thing he made up afterward to give the moment a shape. What actually happened was ordinary: the door opened, letting in a knife of cold Denver air, and he glanced up the way you glance up at any door, and it was Sarah.

For one second the whole restaurant reorganized itself around the fact of her. She was in a dark coat with the cold still on it, scanning it as she scanned every room, and he watched her find him, and watched, in the same instant, her find the rest of it. Him, and

then the woman beside him with the same nose and the protective set to her shoulders. Him, and then the big easy man across the table mid-laugh. The candles. The bread. The unmistakable arithmetic of a family. He watched it land on her that she had walked into the wrong movie, that whatever she'd tracked him here expecting (a work dinner, a hotel bar, Chuck alone, which was how he was always supposed to be when she came for him) was not it, and that she was already too far into the room to be anything but seen.

Their eyes caught. Held. A quarter-second, no more, and in it he watched something happen to her that he had never once seen happen to her in five cities: she didn't know what to do. Sarah, who had a play for armed men in the dark, who had walked him through a piazza with a fake laugh good enough to save both their lives, stood ten feet from a family dinner with no move in her hands, and he saw the tiny hitch of a woman recalculating a situation that had refused to be calculated, and then he saw her do the only thing left, which was come forward, because turning around now would be its own kind of announcement.

He didn't have time to feel most of what he felt. That was the restaurant's doing. In a room, alone, he could have crossed to her, could have said the true thing, could have asked how did you find me and what are you doing here and do you have any idea what you just walked into. Here he had a family and a waiter and a social contract, and the social contract won, because it always does, and what came out of him instead was:

"Hey. Hi. This is — everyone, this is Sarah."

And the machine took over.

Because that's what a table does. It absorbs. Devon was already half-standing, already beaming, already sticking out a hand and saying Sarah! Wow, okay, hi, I'm Devon, already turning to the room at large for a chair, and a waiter was materializing with the sixth-sense of waiters, and the whole apparatus of making room kicked into gear around a woman who had spent her entire life making sure there was never a table she couldn't walk away from. Chuck watched them pull a chair over from the two-top behind them. Watched them wedge it in at the corner, between his seat and Devon's, the one open

angle of a table that had been set, an hour ago, for exactly the family it had. Watched a place get improvised for her, a fork found, water poured, the geometry of the evening quietly rearranged to include someone it had not been built to include. She was the extra chair. She sat down in it, in her coat, at the corner, at the seam of a family, and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt," in a voice with nothing in it he could read, and Devon said are you kidding, the more the merrier, we're celebrating, and the trap, though nobody in the room but Chuck knew it was a trap, closed over all of them with a click he felt in his teeth.

"Celebrating?" Sarah said. Polite. Perfect. The operative finding the handhold in an uncontrolled situation, which she could do anywhere.

"Chicago," Devon said. "I got a — it's a job thing, it's boring, but yes, we are absolutely celebrating, and you have to help, both of you, El, tell them we're getting champagne."

Both of you. It went by so warm and so fast that only Chuck felt the edge of it, how both of you assumed a you two, assumed a unit, assumed a future for a thing that was, as far as Chuck knew, in the middle of ending. Devon meant it like sunshine. It landed on Chuck like a thin bright blade, and he made himself smile, and glanced at Sarah to see if it had cut her too, and her face gave him nothing, a smooth warm nothing, and that was when he stopped looking at Sarah and started looking at his sister.

Because Ellie had gone still.

She was doing the math.

He knew the look. He'd been raised by the look. It was the face Ellie made when a situation was resolving in front of her into something worse than she'd thought, the flicker of a very fast mind arriving somewhere it didn't want to be, and she was wearing it now under a hostess smile that was doing heroic work and not quite reaching her eyes, and Chuck could read every step of it because he'd watched her run it his whole life.

Step one: this is a woman, and Chuck introduced her with a hitch in his voice, and Chuck does not have women he introduces with a hitch in his voice, so this is not

nothing. Step two: Chuck lit up when she came through the door. Ellie had seen it, of course she'd seen it, she'd been watching him all night for exactly one flicker of the old brightness and there it had been, involuntary, all over him, the first time all evening he'd looked like himself. And step three, the one he watched cross her face and put the cold in it, the one that turned her hostess smile into something being held up by force: Chuck lit up and then flinched. In the same second. The brightness and the recoil, right on top of each other, and Ellie, who had spent the whole night trying to find the source of whatever had hollowed her brother out and the whole night failing, watched him light up and flinch at the same woman and understood, in one merciless motion, that she'd found it. That the good thing and the bad thing were one and the same. That the woman who'd put the light back in her brother for the first time since before their father walked out for pancake mix was the same woman putting it out, that the best thing that had happened to him and the force dismantling him wore one face, and that face was sitting in a borrowed chair at the corner of the table drinking the water Devon had poured her.

He watched his sister understand that, wordlessly, in about two seconds, and he watched what it did to her, which was to frighten her badly.

Not surprise. Fear. The fear of a woman who had held this exact family together through the last time love had taken Chuck apart, who had watched their mother go and their father go and then, years later, watched Bryce do his surgical little murder of everything Chuck had built at Stanford, who had done the actual labor of putting her brother back together with her own two hands more than once and knew precisely how long it took and how much of him didn't come all the way back. Ellie looked at Sarah and did not see a girlfriend. She saw the shape of every leaving he'd ever survived, walked back through the door in a beautiful coat, and she saw that he was already half gone into it, and that there was nothing she could do about it. That he was a grown man now. That she couldn't stay up nights on a waitress's paycheck and fix this one. And watching his sister get it, in real time, at a celebration dinner, was the part that undid Chuck. That all she could do was sit at a celebration dinner and watch it coming.

And here was the thing he couldn't do anything about: he couldn't argue with her.

Something broke in him then, quietly, at the table, while Devon told Sarah about Lincoln Park. Every other time in his life that Ellie had feared for him, some part of Chuck had risen up to reassure her, to say it's fine, El, you worry too much, I've got this. He had nothing tonight. He looked at his sister reading disaster on his face and he had no counter-argument, because Sydney had happened, because he was sitting here at his own family's table with a door held shut inside him against the woman ten inches to his left, because he had spent five cities and one bright ruined afternoon learning that Ellie was right, that Sarah was going to leave and take a piece of him with her and there was a wall inside her he would break himself against forever, and his sister had just read all of it off his face in the time it took to pour a glass of water. The two people who loved each other most in the world sat at a candlelit table and looked at Sarah and knew the same terrible thing, and neither of them could say a word, because Devon was happy and the champagne was coming and you do not detonate a man's celebration dinner, you behave, you pass the bread, you let the earthquake happen under the tablecloth where the waiter can't see it.

Then Ellie did what Ellie always did, and Chuck felt the ground move.

She turned the full wattage on. She reached across her fear and put both hands around it and set it down somewhere out of sight and became, in the space of a breath, the warmest woman in Denver. "Okay, well, now I'm fascinated," she said to Sarah, leaning in, elbows on the table, her whole body reorganizing toward the newcomer. "Because my brother tells me nothing. Nothing. He calls me every Sunday and talks for an hour and I hang up and realize I know less than when I started. And there is a Sarah. How long has there been a Sarah? No — don't answer that, he'll die. Chuck, you look like you're going to die."

"I'm not going to die," Chuck said.

"He's going to die. What do you do, Sarah? Where'd you two meet? Are you in town long?" And she was off, the questions warm and quick and easy, the perfect performance of a delighted big sister meeting the girlfriend at last, and every single one of them landed like the kind, ordinary thing it was pretending to be, and Chuck heard,

underneath, exactly none of it being ordinary.

Because he knew this play. He'd been on the receiving end of this play. This was Ellie deciding to handle it. The warmth was real and it was also a net; the questions were curiosity and they were also reconnaissance; and behind the whole glittering hostess-performance he could see, clear as if she'd announced it, the decision forming in his sister to insert herself into this, to learn this woman, to get her alone before the night was out and take her measure and, if it came to it, to stand between Sarah and her brother the way she'd stood between Chuck and every hard thing since he was twelve years old. He'd watched her decide it a hundred times, over bullies and over bad grades and over Jill and over the whole Bryce catastrophe. I'll fix it. She had decided to fix it. She had no idea what she was deciding to fix, and she had decided to fix it anyway, on love, on instinct, on the oldest reflex she had.

And Chuck, who should have been afraid, who knew, who could see the whole disaster laid out in front of him like one of his own threat models. There was no one on earth worse to run this play on than Sarah. She read every angle. She'd spent her life being managed by experts. She would clock a protective sister's reconnaissance before the second question and feel it as exactly the scrutiny she could not survive, would feel the net close and do what she always did with a net, which was vanish. Chuck, seeing all of that, feeling the trap he was sitting inside get one turn tighter, was flooded instead, helplessly, with the last thing he had any right to feel.

He was relieved.

It came up in him from somewhere very old and very young, under his judgment, under his fear, from the part of him that was still nine and still waiting in a house that kept emptying out for someone competent to come home and take charge. Ellie was going to handle it. Ellie was reaching for him. For the first time in five cities somebody was reaching for him, instead of him reaching, always reaching, into the dark after a woman who couldn't reach back. And some exhausted, drowning, childish thing in him went loose with gratitude at the sight of his sister rolling up her sleeves. He was so tired of being the one who reached. He was so tired of holding the door. And here was Ellie, who

had never once failed to come when it mattered, deciding to come, and he wanted to be handled, he wanted to be the little brother again, he wanted to set the whole unbearable thing down in his sister's capable hands and let her carry it the way she'd carried everything, and he wanted it so badly it shamed him.

Because he knew better. That was the worst of it, sitting there warm with relief he hadn't chosen: he knew, even now, even glad, that Ellie's help was going to be the thing that finished it. That his sister, reaching for him, was going to reach right through him and close her hand on Sarah, and Sarah was going to feel it and run, and Ellie would only be doing it because she loved him, and it would only speed the end. He was a drowning man watching someone throw him an anchor and feeling, against every instinct he had, glad of the weight. He should have said Ellie, stop. Ellie, stay out of it. Ellie, you'll scare her off. He didn't say any of it. He passed the bread and let his sister interrogate the love of his life under a hostess smile and sat in the warm bath of being, for one evening, taken care of, and was ashamed of himself, and did not stop.

Across the table Sarah answered Ellie's questions. Beautifully. Spare, warm, giving nothing, a woman fielding fire under a flag of truce, and Chuck watched her hold the line the way she held every line and could not, from the outside, for all the cities he'd spent learning her, tell what any of it was costing her. She was a closed door in a beautiful coat at the corner of his family's table. Somewhere behind it a person he loved was doing something he couldn't see. He had spent five cities learning to read her and tonight, when it might have mattered most, she gave him a smooth warm nothing and he had to let her, because Devon was pouring the champagne.

"To Chicago," Devon said, lifting his glass, lit up, oblivious, kind, the only person at the table whose sentence had just one floor. "And to — you know what, to all of us. To everybody being here. I don't know how we all ended up in Denver on the same night but I'm not going to question it."

I know how, Chuck didn't say.

They touched glasses. Ellie's eyes found Chuck's over the rim of hers, one flick, fear and love and a promise to fix it he couldn't stop. Sarah drank, opaque, at the seam. Devon

beamed. And Chuck sat in the middle of it, at a warm table in a city that was almost home, between the sister who was going to save him and the woman it was going to cost him, grateful and doomed and quiet, so quiet, quieter than he'd ever been in his life, and let the candle burn down, and did not say a single one of the true things, and let them all keep the evening a little longer before it broke.

Chapter 7: Denver

She had a good reason to be in Denver. She'd worked on it the whole flight, and it held, mostly, the way a thing holds when you don't press on it.

The reason was this: she needed to know if Sydney had broken it. That was all. She wasn't going to do anything. She wasn't going to touch him, or want him, or let it show; she was going to see him from across a room, read whether the door she'd felt him start to close in the sun had finished closing, and then she was going to leave, and knowing would let her stop. A reconnaissance. A last look, so she could put it down.

She believed it for about the length of the cab ride, which was as long as she needed to.

Underneath, where she didn't look, was the other thing, and the other thing was the shape of the work it had taken to be standing on this cold Denver sidewalk at all. To know his flight. To know the office he'd be sitting in, and the hotel he'd chosen, and the reservation he'd made for one, at a warm place his kind of tired man picks when he wants to be fed and not talked to. That was not the work of a woman leaving. That was the opposite. A woman who was pulling back, who was protecting a good man from the danger she carried, did not cross a hemisphere and take a private dinner apart line by line to find the table she could stand outside of. She knew what the work said. She just kept her eyes off it, the way you keep your eyes off the sun, because it was there whether she looked or not and looking only hurt.

You can cry about it or you can get back in the car. She'd been getting back in the car her whole life. It was the most reliable thing she knew how to do.

The cold was clean and high and the light was going gold over the mountains behind the city, and she felt, walking toward the door, the feeling she only ever let herself have on

the way to him and never named: that she was, for these few minutes, moving toward the one place in the turning world where she got to be a person. Her heart was a fist opening. She hated how much she wanted it. She had been taught, before she could spell, that wanting was the leak that sank you, that the thing you couldn't do without was the thing they'd use to take you apart, and she believed it, she believed it in her body, and she wanted him anyway, and it felt like a weakness she should have mastered years ago and hadn't. That was how she carried it. Not as love. As a failure of discipline she was too far gone to fix.

She pulled the door and went in to see him alone.

He was not alone.

She had the room before the door finished closing behind her, as she had every room, without deciding to, and it came back wrong, with too many people in it. Him. And a woman beside him with his exact jaw and something fierce and settled in her shoulders. And a big easy man across from them, mid-story, his hands going. Candles. A bottle. Bread half gone. The unmistakable geometry of people who belonged to each other.

A family.

Something went very still in her, the stillness that came when a situation refused to resolve into anything she could work, and for a second she had nothing, a whole second, which for her was a long time. No move. She had a move for men with guns. She had a move for a blown meeting and a border at three in the morning. She did not have a move for a family dinner, because a family dinner was the one country she had never been given papers to, the one room she could not read her way out of, and she stood inside the door of it with the cold still on her coat and no idea what a person did.

Then he looked up.

And she watched him see her, and watched him see her see the rest of it, and there was a half-second where his face did the thing that undid her every time, the involuntary opening, the light coming up in him at the sight of her before he could stop it. And then, right behind it, so fast almost anyone else would have missed it, the flinch. The recoil.

The door she'd come to check on, closing again, right there, in front of her, at the sight of her, and she felt it land in her chest like cold water.

There it is. That's your answer. Now you can go.

She should have gone. Turning around and walking back out into the cold was the clean exit, the only one; she'd done harder in her sleep. But the woman with his jaw was already turning, already tracking his glance to the door, already finding her, and to leave now, under that gaze, would be to announce herself as something worth watching leave. So she did the other thing. She came forward. Into the warmth, into the candlelight, into the one situation on earth she couldn't control, because the reflex that ran her did not permit the more honest cowardice of running, only the disciplined kind that walked in smiling.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, and heard how smooth it came out, how warm, the voice doing its work while the rest of her stood off to the side and watched it lie.

And then the table absorbed her.

She had no armor for this. The big man was up and beaming and pulling a chair from somewhere, and the sister was making a place, moving a glass, and a fork appeared, and water, and the whole warm machine of a family closing around a guest kicked into motion, and she sat down in the borrowed chair at the corner where they'd wedged it, at the seam, in the one open angle of a table that had been set, an hour before she got here, for exactly the people it already had. She was the extra chair. They'd had to take the family apart a little to fit her in, and they'd done it gladly, and every gracious inch they made for her told her what her whole body already knew: this was built without her. This closed without her. She was the thing you accommodate, and then, when the night is over, the thing you fold the chair back up from and forget.

She had never in her life wanted so badly to be somewhere she so completely did not belong.

The dinner went on around her, warm and terrible.

She sat at the corner of it and couldn't stop reading the room, and what it told her was a family that had chosen each other on purpose and kept choosing. The sister, Ellie, poured for everyone before herself. The husband told a story about their new place in Chicago, some apartment with light he clearly loved because Ellie loved it, and the two of them had a whole silent conversation over the table about who got to tell which part, and it was so easy, so worn-in, so much the private language of two people who were going to grow old in the same house, that Sarah had to look at her water glass.

Chicago. They were moving. Planting. Choosing a city together and a building together and, God, a life, deciding out loud in front of everyone where home would be. She sat there in her beautiful coat and understood that she was watching the exact thing that had been taken out of the middle of her when she was seven years old, the one she'd stopped being able to picture so long ago that seeing it whole and real across a candle was like a language she'd once spoken and lost. People got to do this. People got to pick a home and mean it. She had a phone in her pocket that could put her on a plane to anywhere by morning and no address in the world that was hers, and she looked at Ellie deciding where to hang curtains and felt something open in her chest that she had spent decades keeping shut, and she shut it.

Things get left behind. You couldn't grieve every one. You'd never get out of the parking lot.

And Ellie kept looking at her. Warm, quick, a hostess's attention (what do you do, where'd you two meet, how long has there been a Sarah), and under the warmth Sarah felt the other thing running, felt herself being taken apart and weighed by a woman who was better at it than almost anyone she'd ever gone up against, because Ellie wasn't working an angle, Ellie was reading a threat to the brother she'd raised, and there is no colder eye on earth than that. Sarah answered everything. Beautifully. Gave her nothing. And hated, in some starved back room of herself she'd have died before showing, that she was giving this woman nothing, because some part of her, some seven-year-old part that had waited on a fire escape for a mother who came home too tired to speak, wanted this. Wanted Ellie to like her. Wanted to be a woman Ellie would be glad her brother found. Wanted, humanly, stupidly, to be let in.

She was exactly the thing Ellie was afraid of. She knew it. Ellie had looked across a table and seen a danger to her brother, and she was right, and there was no version of the evening where Sarah got to be anything else. The one blessing she found herself wanting she had already disqualified herself from, walking in the door.

And Chuck was gone quiet.

She'd have seen it from space. He was a talker; it was the first true thing she'd ever learned about him, in a piazza, the nervous flood of a man who filled silence so no one would leave it. And tonight the flood was a trickle. He sat beside her and let his sister carry it and gave short answers and did not once reach for her hand under the table the way he had on a canal in Amsterdam, and she read it as she read everything, with a precision that left no room for hope: he had pulled back. The door she'd felt him start to close in the sun had closed. He was guarding himself from her, here, at his own family's table, and he was doing it on purpose, and it was finished.

She was right about the pull-back. She was right about all of it except the only part that mattered, which she had no way to reach, sitting where she sat, reading what she could read: that the quiet wasn't the end of his wanting. But she couldn't get inside him to know that. She could only see the door closing, and a closing door, in her whole experience of the world, meant one thing, meant leaving, meant the part where you find out what you already knew, which was that it doesn't last, that nothing does, that the warm rooms are always somebody else's and you are always, in the end, the extra chair. She read grief as rejection because rejection was the only language her life had ever taught her to read a closing door in. And she began, quietly, at the corner of a celebration dinner, to grieve him.

She excused herself to the restroom before it could show on her face.

Ellie followed her.

Of course she did. Sarah heard the door and knew who it was before she turned, and something in her went to the resigned stillness of a cornered animal that has decided not to run because running would cost more than staying. She'd have preferred the men with guns. She had answers for the men with guns.

Ellie didn't come in hot. That was the worst of it. She came in warm, and tired, and honest, and leaned against the counter beside the sink like a woman who'd had this kind of talk in this kind of room a hundred times, which she probably had, raising the brother she'd raised.

"He didn't tell me about you," Ellie said. "You should know that's not a small thing. He tells me everything. He's told me things I begged him to stop telling me." A breath. "So you're either nothing, or you're the biggest thing that's happened to him in years, and I've been watching him all night, and you're not nothing."

Sarah said something. She didn't know what. The smooth warm nothing, on its own, while she stood behind it.

"I'm not going to ask you what your intentions are," Ellie said, and there was a tired kindness in it that was so much worse than anger. "You're a grown woman, I'm not his mother, even though I raised him, which is a whole thing you don't need. I'll just tell you one thing, because he won't, because he's too decent and too far gone." She looked at Sarah in the mirror, not unkindly, and it landed like a hand closing around her throat. "Whatever this is, don't do it halfway. He can survive almost anything except halfway. He's had a lifetime of people who kept one foot out the door — our mom, our dad, his best friend, all of it, people who loved him with a bag already packed. It broke something in him that I spent years fixing. So if you're in, be in. And if you're not, then be a person and tell him, clean, so he can grieve it and go. But don't be another one who stays close enough to keep him hoping and far enough to keep him bleeding. He'll let you do it. He'll let you do it for years, because he'd rather have a piece of someone than nobody. Don't."

Sarah stood very still and let the mother she never had tell her, without knowing she was doing it, the exact and complete truth about the thing Sarah did to Chuck. Don't do it halfway. She had a name for it now, a name from outside, spoken in the voice of the woman whose approval she'd have given a year of her life for: halfway. The come and the go. The thing she'd been doing to him across six cities. Named.

And then Ellie handed her the knife by handing her the way out.

"He's not complicated, whatever he pretends," Ellie said, softer now, gathering herself to go, thinking she was being kind, having no idea. "He doesn't need promises. He doesn't need you to have it figured out. Just — if there's anything true you can tell him, tell him. He'll take almost anything, if it's true. That's all he's ever wanted from anybody. Just something true."

Just tell him something true.

There it was. The solution. The whole solution, said out loud in a restaurant bathroom by a woman who thought she was giving relationship advice and was in fact reaching into the exact center of Sarah and naming the one thing she could not do. Because Sarah had something true. She'd had it since the sun in Sydney. She could feel it in her right now, whole, easy, the true words that would hold him, and she could no more say them than she could stop her own heart by wanting to, and Ellie had just stood in front of her and said just tell him something true, and the unsaid other half of it, the half Ellie was too kind to say and too protective not to think, rang in Sarah's ears in Ellie's voice: and you can't, can you.

"I should get back," Sarah said.

Ellie looked at her for a long moment, and whatever she saw made her face do something sad, and she nodded, and squeezed Sarah's arm on the way out the way she'd probably squeezed a thousand frightened people's arms, and left her alone in the bright little room with her own reflection and the truth she was carrying and could not put down anywhere.

She got Chuck alone outside. She didn't plan it. Or she planned it the way she planned everything now, without admitting she was doing it, letting her feet do what the story wouldn't sign off on.

The night had gone properly cold, the mountain kind, the air with teeth in it, and they stood in it around the side of the building where the light from the windows didn't quite reach, and for a minute it was almost the old thing. He was here. She was here. His breath came white and hers came white and the warm impossible fact of him was close enough to touch, and she felt her body do what her body always did, answer him before

the rest of her got a vote, lean the fractional lean toward the one place it had ever been safe.

And she couldn't get in.

She hadn't known that until she was standing in it. In Hong Kong there'd been a room she could disappear all the way into, a warmth with the door open, and she'd walked into it and set the whole weight down. This was the same man and the same cold and the same pull, and the door was shut, and after a confused second of trying to find the handle she understood that the lock was on her side. She'd thrown it herself, somewhere over the last weeks, without a decision she could point to. She was already leaving him. She was standing six inches from him in the dark and already grieving him, already half a step gone, already holding herself back from the warmth because the warmth was the thing she'd come to give up. She'd built the wall since Sydney out of her own reflexes and here she was on the cold side of it, and the terrible thing wasn't that he'd closed a door. It was that she had, and she was the only one who couldn't get through it.

"You okay?" he said. Quiet. Guarded. Not reaching the way he used to reach.

And the sentence came up in her whole.

She felt it arrive, felt it sitting in her mouth, small and true and enough: I'm working through something. I'll come back. It'll be slow. That was all. A handful of true words, no promises she couldn't keep, no story, just the one honest thing that would tell him she was still in it, would keep the door from closing all the way, would buy them both the time she needed and hold him through it. She knew it would work. She knew him down to the floor; she knew exactly what those words would do, could see it, the relief coming up in his face, the door easing back open. It was right there. It cost nothing. It was true.

She opened her mouth and nothing came out.

Not nothing, and that was the horror of it. Standing in the cold she finally understood: this was not a silence, this was a reaching, she was reaching for the words with everything she had and her body would not make them, the way a hand won't close on a burn, the way you cannot make yourself fall. The words were true and that was exactly

why they wouldn't come, because saying them out loud was looking back, and you never look back, it's a confession, and to say them was to confess, and something older than her, something she'd been made out of before she had a name that lasted, reached up out of the grain of her and closed her throat, gently, the way it had a thousand times before, and it had kept her alive every time. She stood there with the true thing whole in her mouth and could not open her hand and let it out, and she knew, this time, completely, exactly what she was failing to do and exactly what it would have bought her, and that was the only difference between this and every other time. She wasn't confused anymore. She could see the whole thing. She just couldn't move.

Coward, she told herself, because she'd never once let herself off with anything softer. Not I was trained to this. Not it isn't my fault. There was no seam in her between the reflex and herself; the reflex was how she'd been taught to be a person, not a trick she'd been taught to run, and so it didn't feel like a wall winning. It felt like her. It felt like she wouldn't. A braver woman would open her mouth. She was not that woman. She had the true words in her mouth and the guts of a child hiding in a stairwell, and she said, instead, in the smooth warm voice that never failed her, the voice that could do anything except the one thing that mattered:

"I'm fine. Long week."

And watched the door finish closing, and told herself she'd done it for him.

Because that was the drug, and she took it standing there in the cold, and she knew it was a drug going down.

She reached for the story the way you reach for the bottle when the true thing is unbearable to look at sober, and the story was: I don't belong in his life. True. I'm a danger to him. Also true. The loving thing is to go, before I take him apart the way I take everything apart. And that one was the lie, the beautiful clean lie, the one she built out of two true bricks so it would hold her weight, and she leaned on it and felt it hold and knew, the whole time, exactly what she was doing. She was not fooled. She had never once been fooled. She knew that the loving thing was the sentence she couldn't say and that going was the cowardice, she knew it in flashes she wouldn't hold still long enough

to read, and she picked up the lie anyway because the lie let her keep walking and the truth left her standing in a parking lot she'd never get out of.

She was very good at this. Her father had been very good at it too. It was, when you got all the way down to it, the family trade: the con you run last and best, the one you run on yourself, the story good enough to let you leave the scene of the thing you did. She was going to disappear. She could feel the decision settling, cool and familiar, the old machinery turning over. Vienna, maybe. Somewhere with a reason attached. She'd let the calls she'd been ignoring pull her back under, let the work close over her head, let the silence leave for her so she'd never have to say a word, because saying nothing was the one thing she could always, always do. She'd go quiet. He'd reach, at first, because he was Chuck. And then he'd stop, because everyone stopped, because she would make sure of it, because a woman with a bag already packed is a thing you can teach a man to give up on if you're patient and cruel enough, and she had been taught by the best.

The true thing didn't go anywhere. Nobody ever warned you about that. You could bury it and it didn't die; it just went in the ground alive and waited. Keeping him means saying the thing I can't say. She knew it, clean, entire, the exact shape of the exit and the exact distance to it, and she carried it away from that cold building the way she'd carried everything she couldn't hold and couldn't drop, down under the ribs where the locket used to be, where the elephant used to be, where all of it went.

He walked her partway to the corner. Neither of them said much. At the end he didn't ask when he'd see her, and she understood he'd learned not to, and she'd taught him, and it was working, and it felt like dying.

"Goodnight, Sarah," he said, and the name he called her wasn't even hers, and he didn't know that either, and someday that was going to be one more true thing she'd failed to hand him.

"Goodnight."

She got back in the car. She always got back in the car. She watched the warm windows of the restaurant slide away behind her, the family still in there, the light still on them, the extra chair already folded and gone, and she faced forward, because you never look

back, it's a confession, and she had nothing left to confess to anyone that she'd ever be able to say out loud.

Chapter 8: Vienna

Vienna in January was a city built for waiting, and she was good at waiting, and for four days it had almost been enough.

She had a room on the third floor of a building that had been grand a hundred years ago and was now just old, and from the window, through a gap in a curtain she never touched, she could see the café across the square and the door the man used and the table he preferred, and she watched all of it and felt nothing, which was the point, which had always been the point. The snow came down over the statues and the trams went by ringing and the whole imperial pastry of the city sat there being beautiful and none of it reached her, because when she was working nothing reached her. That was the gift. That was the room she'd been built to go into, the clean sealed place with no windows to the rest of her, and she had gone into it four days ago the way you lower yourself into cold water, all at once, on purpose, and she had not thought about him.

That was not quite true. But it was true in the sense she needed, which was true enough to work.

She had come back to the work because the work was the one thing that had never once asked her for anything she didn't have. It didn't want her to stay. It didn't want her to open. It wanted her steady and empty and exact, and she could be all three in her sleep; they were the oldest parts of her, older than any name she'd worn. Kimberly's voice came through the earpiece at intervals, flat and useful, giving her the man's movements, his patterns, the shape of his days, and she took the information as she took everything on a job, cleanly, without residue. This was hers. This had always been hers. Nobody had ever gotten into this room. She had run to it precisely because it was the one place he couldn't follow.

On the fifth day the man came out of the café at the wrong time, and it was better than the window, and she moved.

She was set up by early afternoon where she needed to be, still, patient, the cold coming up through everything, her breath slowed to almost nothing, the emptiness she went into at the end of a job spreading through her like anesthetic. This was the deepest part of the sealed room, the part with no person in it at all, just the work and the geometry of the work. She found him. She settled. The world narrowed as it was supposed to, down to a circle and a man inside it, and everything that was not the job fell away, and there was nobody home in her but the thing that did this, which was the plan, which was safety, which was the only self she had ever fully trusted.

The man wore a good coat. Charcoal, heavy, well cut, the kind of thing that outlived the person in it.

Chuck would look good in that.

It came from nowhere. It came from the deepest inside of the sealed room, the one room she'd have sworn on her life had no door he could reach, and it was warm and domestic and absurd, a thought about a coat, about how the color would sit against him, about walking past a shop window somewhere with him and stopping and making him try it on and him doing the thing he did where he pretended to model it to make her laugh. A homemaking thought. The thought of a woman who had someone. The thought of a woman who dressed a man in her head because she'd knitted him so far into her days that he came unbidden even here, in the one place she was supposed to be nothing but a weapon, standing over a stranger's life with her whole self narrowed to a task.

And the alarm went off under it, cold and total, because she knew exactly what it was.

It was the flaw. It was the soft place. It was the exact thing she had watched get people like her killed, the half-second where the person came back into the weapon and the weapon hesitated, and she had spent her whole life making sure there was no person in her when it counted, and here was the person, in the last room, at the worst possible moment, thinking about a coat. Feeling had gotten into her competence. Not her heart, not her nights, not the soft civilian hours she could afford to lose. Her competence, what kept her breathing, the one instrument she could not let him touch. He had touched it. He was inside the scope. He was inside the last clean thing she had.

She thought, distantly, of a blazer in Milan, thrown over her shoulders in an airport by a stranger she was using for cover, a coat that had meant nothing but a story she was telling to stay alive. She had worn a man's coat to disappear. Now she stood dressing a man in a coat to keep him, in her head, at the exact instant she was supposed to be no one. The garment had traveled the whole distance while she wasn't looking. It had started as a lie she wrapped herself in and become the truest thing she had, and it had surfaced here, of all the places it could have surfaced, in the crosshairs, which told her everything about how far gone she was and how little of her was still sealed.

She did the work anyway. She was too good for a thought to stop her hand; that was the horror of it and the proof of it both. She did what she'd come to Vienna to do, cleanly, without a wasted motion, the way she'd been raised to do it, and it was done, and she felt nothing about the man, which was how she had always felt about the men, because that room still worked, that room would always work. She could end a stranger's life without a flutter and she could not keep her lover out of the scope while she did it. Both of those were true at the same time and she carried both of them down the back stairs and out into the snow.

She had run here to be free of him. It wouldn't sit right, walking away through the white afternoon with the job behind her. Leaving was supposed to work.

It had always worked before. That was the whole architecture of her, the thing under everything, load-bearing: you left, and that closed it, and the closed thing stopped hurting because it was behind you and you were in the car and the car was already somewhere else. She had left a woman in a parking lot with an envelope of newspaper and never felt her again. She had left a grieving old woman in a house full of photographs and mailed the guilt back in a padded envelope and driven on. She had left a boy in a support group who was going to die and she had survived it, she had put it in the ground and the ground had held. Every leaving in her life had been a door that shut and stayed shut. That was the promise. That was the only promise she'd ever been given that had never once been broken: get back in the car, and the car takes you away, and away is a place that exists.

She'd gotten back in the car after Denver. She'd done everything right. She'd let the silence do its work and she'd come to the coldest city she knew and gone down into the sealed room and done a job, and he was in the sealed room. The car had driven her four countries away and he was in the scope. For the first time in a life built entirely on the reliability of exits, she had left, and arrived, and found the thing she left standing there waiting for her when she got out.

She didn't have a word for what that meant. She wasn't going to look for one. She just felt the ground move under the one thing that had never moved, a sick shift, like a stair that isn't where your foot expects it, and she kept walking, because the alternative to walking was standing still in the snow and feeling it, and she had never once in her life chosen that.

And then her reflex, which was the fastest part of her, which had always been the fastest part of her, took the whole thing and turned it into what it needed.

See, it said, in the worn voice she trusted more than her own. See what he does to you. You were right. You stood in the crosshairs and thought about a coat. That is the compromise. That is the liability. That is the exact thing you always knew he'd become, the soft place that gets you killed, and it has come for you in the one room you can't afford to lose. This is not a sign to go back to him. This is the proof you were right to run. Feel it get into your hands on a job and tell yourself again that staying was ever an option. You cannot afford him. You never could. This is why.

And she believed it, the way she believed everything that voice told her, instantly and in her body, because it had never yet been wrong about the thing that kept her alive. The most tender thought she'd had in years, him in a coat, him laughing, a life with a man in it who she dressed in her mind, went into the machine and came out the other side as a reason to stay gone. Her love for him, caught red-handed in the scope, got read as a threat assessment. The proof of how much she wanted him became the case for never seeing him again. A whole person, feeling that, would have gone straight to the airport and flown to wherever he was and told him she couldn't do this anymore, this leaving, it wasn't working, come here. She went the other way. She always went the other way.

Wanting him was the danger, and the danger was the reason, and the reason was to go, and the circle closed as smoothly as it had closed her whole life, and she never saw that she'd taken the best thing in her and fed it to the worst.

Kimberly found her that night, the way Kimberly found her, which was without seeming to look.

They met in the back of a place near the Naschmarkt that stayed open late, and Kimberly slid into the booth across from her with a coffee she wasn't going to drink and the flat competent calm of a woman who spent her life on the outside of glass, watching people do the things she never did. She ran the debrief in her low even voice, the loose ends, the extraction, the paperwork that made a thing that happened into a thing that hadn't. Sarah gave her the clean answers. It was easy. It was the easiest conversation she'd have all year, two professionals closing a box.

Then Kimberly set a second file on the table, thin, and didn't slide it over, just set it down between them.

"The other target," she said. "Next two months. Movements, best estimates, the usual confidence intervals." A beat. "Thought you'd want to have it."

Sarah looked at the file and did not pick it up.

She knew what it was. There was no other target. There was the man in Vienna, closed now, and there was the only other person Kimberly could possibly mean, the one whose movements Sarah had asked for eleven times in six months, the one she had no operational reason on earth to be tracking, laundered here into the one word the work had for a person you keep locating. Target. The only slot her job kept for a man you couldn't stop finding. She loved him in the single grammar her whole life had given her, and the grammar was a hunt, and Kimberly had just handed her two months of him in it and called him a target because that was the only way he was allowed to exist in this room, and both of them knew it.

She looked up and Kimberly was looking at her, and it went a half-second past what the moment needed.

Not sympathy. Sarah would have known what to do with sympathy; you deflect it, you close it down, it's just another kind of pressure. This was worse. This was recognition. This was the face of a woman who had sat on the outside of the glass for twenty years watching operators let one person in, and who knew the shape of what happened next the way a doctor knows a scan, who had watched this exact thing hollow out people better than Sarah and had mourned them and could not stop it and would not insult either of them by pretending to. There was no advice in it. There was no be careful and no I understand and no you should call him. There was just a woman who'd seen this movie handing over the reel, because withholding it would not stop Sarah, it would only make her do it the hard way, and the mercy and the dread were the same thing in her eyes, foreknowledge with no power in it, and it said, without a word, I know, and I know what it costs, and here it is anyway.

Sarah took the file.

"Thanks," she said. "Got it."

And gave her nothing. Took the information and left the seeing on the table, because it was a door and she did not open doors, not even this one, not even to the one person in the building who might have understood, because the reflex ran all the way down, past the job, past her defenses, past the last place a kinder woman would have let something in. Someone had offered her the smallest possible grace, I see you and I'm not going to make you say it, and she could not take the grace, she could only take the file. She picked up two months of the man she loved rendered as a hunt and put it in her coat and said got it and watched Kimberly's face close back down into the operational, disappointed in a way that had no surprise in it, and that was the mercy she couldn't receive, and Kimberly let her not receive it, because Kimberly saw, and Kimberly never saved.

She walked back to the old grand ruined building through the snow with the file against her chest.

Two months. Sixty days of exactly where he would be, laid out in confidence intervals in her inside pocket, close enough to feel. She would not use it. She understood that as she

walked, and it made the going-quiet turn into something worse than it had been. Until tonight the silence had been a kind of absence, something she was letting happen. Now it had coordinates. Now every single day for two months she would wake up knowing precisely where in the world he was, close enough to be standing in front of him by evening, and every single day she would choose not to go, on purpose, with the map in her pocket. It was not that she couldn't find him. She could find him in her sleep. It was that she was going to know where he was and stay away anyway, every day, as a decision, and that was the real shape of what she'd chosen in Denver, stripped of the story she'd wrapped it in: not I can't, but I won't, and I'll know exactly what I'm refusing every time I refuse it.

She had done the thing that always ended it. She had left, and gone to the ends of her competence, and it had not ended. He was in the scope and in her pocket and in the last sealed room, and the car had driven her all the way to Vienna and not taken her one inch away from him, and she didn't yet know what a person did with a leaving that wouldn't close, because there had never been one before, because the promise had never broken before, and she was too tired and too far inside the work to do anything tonight but the next cold correct thing.

She let herself into the dark room and did not turn on the light. Across the square the café was shut, the table empty, the snow filling in the tracks in the square where a man had walked that afternoon and would not walk tomorrow. She stood at the gap in the curtain she never touched and put her hand flat against the inside pocket of her coat, over the two months, and stood there a long time in the cold, knowing where he was, not going, getting very good at the one thing she'd always been best at, which had never cost her like this before and was starting to.

Chapter 9: The Second Ghost

Time did what time did, which was pass, and she let it.

She could not have said, afterward, how long she'd been gone. There had been cities. There had been a job in a place with a river and a job in a place with none and long grey stretches of airports between them where she was no one in particular, which was the

closest thing to rest she knew. She was more worn than she'd been in Vienna, in the way a stone in a stream is more worn, not dramatically, just smoothed down further toward whatever it was going to end up being. The two months were still in her coat. She'd moved them from pocket to pocket across three coats by now, the folded pages soft at the creases from being carried and not read, and she knew every coordinate on them without looking, and she had gone to none of them. That was the shape her days had taken. Wake up. Know exactly where he was. Not go. Do it again.

She'd stopped telling herself it was getting easier. It wasn't a thing she looked at directly enough to lie about anymore.

And then, on an ordinary afternoon, in a city she'd already half forgotten the name of, she walked past a shop.

It was nothing. A men's shop, the good kind, and in the window on a headless form there was a coat. Charcoal, heavy, well cut. She stopped without deciding to, the way you stop when your body recognizes something before you do, and she stood on the pavement in the cold looking at a coat on a mannequin and thought, with her whole chest, before she could get the lid on it: Chuck would look good in that.

And then the rest of it came, as it always came now, in a flood she couldn't dam. Not a thought, a whole little life: walking him past this window, the face he'd make, the way he'd say the coat cost more than his first car and then let her talk him into it anyway, him modeling it in the shop to make the salesman laugh, how it would look on him in the ordinary mornings of a life she was never going to have with him. She stood there and dressed him and built the apartment they'd hang the coat in and filled it with a version of herself who got to do this, who got to stand in shops with the man she loved and argue about wool, and it was so clean and so domestic that it took the breath out of her on a public street.

This was the new thing, and she hated it more than she'd hated any of it. In Vienna he had gotten into the work, which was terrible, but the work was one room and she could at least name the emergency. This was worse, because this was nothing, this was a Tuesday, this was a shop window on an errand, and he was in it. He was in shop

windows now. He was in strangers who had his height, in how certain men held certain doors, in coats, in coffee she didn't order, in the whole ordinary furniture of being alive. There was no sealed room anymore because there was no room at all; there was just the world, and he was loose in all of it, all the time, and she carried him through every unremarkable hour like a stone she'd swallowed.

She made herself walk. She was good at making herself walk.

But it had cracked something open, and through the crack, uninvited, came the other one.

Because she had wanted a home before. The coat had opened that, and she'd have paid anything to keep it shut. She had stood at the edge of a home once and been let in and run, and the memory of it did not arrive as a memory, warm, with edges. It arrived as it always did, the only way she could survive it arriving, which was as a list. Facts in a row. The sealed room, turned on herself.

Here were the facts. She kept them in order.

There had been a job before Milan, in Budapest. A package to retrieve. The package was a baby.

The parents were already dead by the time she understood what she was looking at; the men who'd done it were the men she'd been sent to the city to end, and she had ended them, and that had been the job, and it had left no residue, because those she'd done from the sealed room, clean, nobody home. The baby was the daughter. There was money in it, a great deal of money, the kind that made a child inconvenient, and the man who held her leash, the man who had made her out of a fourteen-year-old with a knife and a grudge, had explained what was going to happen to the baby the way he explained everything, patiently, as a matter of logistics.

She had said no.

She recited that one carefully, because it was the hinge, and because even now, even flat, it had a heat under it she didn't trust. She had said no to Ryker. She had never said no to Ryker. And then she had done the rest of it in an order she still knew by heart:

kept the child, hid the child, and killed the man who'd given the order, up close, with her hands, as herself.

That was the one that stayed. That was the difference she'd learned about herself in a stairwell in Budapest and never unlearned: the others left nothing, but that one she had done present, awake, all the way there, the realest she had ever been in her life, and she remembered every second of it and always would, because it was the only kill that had ever been hers. She had thought, somewhere under everything, that there was a clean version of her the work had never gotten to, a Sam it hadn't touched, waiting. Budapest told her there wasn't. The most present she had ever been, the most a person, had killed as well as the empty room ever did. Better. Because this time it had a reason.

She had done it out of love for the child. She recited that one last, when she recited it at all, which was almost never, because it was the fact that turned all the others into a verdict. She had loved something, and it had armed her and cut her loose from every line that held her, and she had gone against her handler and her agency and a foreign government all in one night, alone, for one baby, and gotten away with it clean, and no one had ever come. Which sounded like triumph and was the opposite. A woman nothing can hold is a woman who can leave anyone. She had learned that about herself for certain that night, the way you learn a thing you can never give back, and everything since had only confirmed it.

The old voice had a use for Budapest, the way the old voice had a use for everything. You see. You loved something and it walked you out of your own life at gunpoint. That is what the soft place does. That is not a story about how brave you can be. That is a story about what you cannot afford. She had believed it then. She had let the most redemptive thing she'd ever done curdle, in real time, into proof she must never do the thing love actually asked, which was stay. She had saved a child and read it as a warning.

And she had needed somewhere to put the baby.

The facts thinned out here, got harder to keep flat, and she kept them flat anyway. The baby would not stop crying. She could defeat armed men in the dark and she could not make an infant stop crying, and something in that, the sheer helplessness of it, the one

crisis her whole self was useless against, had cracked her the rest of the way, and she had done the thing she had not done since a motel in Kansas when she was thirteen. She had called her mother.

And her mother had come. Not in person, not yet; over a bad line, from an ocean away, at whatever hour it was there, on the first ring, with no hesitation and no lecture and no where have you been: just okay, baby, okay, here's what you do. The mother who was never there, there, the one time in twenty years her daughter actually reached. They had gotten the baby quiet together. Her mother had sung, over the phone, and she had known the song, and she had let herself hear it for as long as it played, and days later she had brought the baby to her mother's door and put her mother in the middle of the most dangerous secret of her life and left her holding all of it, the child and the crime and the target painted on both of them, and she had gone.

She had given her mother a catastrophe and called it trust and left before the sun was properly up, because she'd gotten what she came for, which was the baby safe, and she'd gotten what she hadn't dared come for, which was her mother's voice and a song and the warm unbearable proof that all of it had been reachable the entire time, and the warmth was the thing she couldn't stay in the room with. It always had been. She had tasted the whole of what she'd starved for her entire life, for about the length of one song, and then she had left it on a doorstep and run, because being held was the one thing that had ever been able to finish her.

She had left the child with a good woman. The child was safe. The child was loved; she knew that the way she knew the coordinates, without checking. Her mother would have made it a home. Her mother was making it a home right now, somewhere, this afternoon, while Sarah stood in a foreign street with a swallowed stone where her life should be.

And she did not know the child's name.

The flat voice caught on it. Just there, just for a second, the level thing she'd been holding jumped in her hands, because that fact was not like the others. Killing was necessity and the song was grief and both of those she could set in a row and hold, but

this one was a choice, and it was a present one, and it was hers. Her mother had named the baby. Of course she had; you name a child; that's the first thing love does, it gives the child a name to keep. And Sarah had made sure never to learn it. It would have taken thirty seconds, any day in the years since, one question to the one person who'd answer it, and she had not asked, would not ask, because a name was a door and she did not open doors, and she had been present for the child's death, Ryker's, the violence, the thing love made her destroy, and absent for the child's name, the thing love made her mother build. She could show up for what love burned down. She could not show up for what it made.

And under that, rising, uninvited, wrong, came the shape she would not look at: that there was another door, folded soft in her coat pocket, two months of a man she would not go to, and that a name she wouldn't learn and coordinates she wouldn't use were the same refusal wearing two faces, and that she had done this before, exactly this, that the baby on the doorstep and the coat in the window were not two aches but one, that Chuck was not the first person she had loved enough to save and abandon in the same breath, he was only the —

She sealed it. Fast, hard, the way you close a wound with your hand because there's nothing else, before the sentence could finish itself, before the word pattern could arrive and make it true. She was very good at not finishing that sentence. She'd spent her whole life not finishing it. She put the level back on her voice and set the last fact down where it went, flat, no door, no rhyme, just a thing that was true: I don't know her name. And she left it there.

She walked back to wherever she was staying through the blue end of the afternoon with two ghosts keeping pace.

She held them apart. She was careful to hold them apart, though she could not have said she was doing it on purpose, because a coat in a window and a child on a doorstep years ago had nothing to do with each other, one was a man she'd met after Milan and one was a baby she'd saved before it, they were separate, they were unrelated, they were two different aches and she carried one in her chest and one in a list and there was no

line between them she was willing to see. That the same three words fit both of them, saved, loved, left, was not something she let assemble. That both of them were, at this exact moment, reachable, a pocket away, a phone call away, and refused, was not something she let assemble either. She kept them in separate hands and told herself her hands were full of separate things.

The coat was still in the window when she passed it going back. She didn't stop this time. She looked at it and let herself want it and did not let herself work out why wanting it felt so much older than the man, and she kept walking, and somewhere a good woman was raising a girl with a name, and somewhere a man was standing at a coordinate she had memorized and would not walk to, and she was the door that had closed on both of them, and she carried them home through the cold the way she carried everything, side by side, not touching, both of them saved, both of them left, and she did not look at the space between them, because looking at the space between them was the one thing in the world she still could not make herself do.

Chapter 10: The Turn

Kimberly came back in March.

She had been gone five months. The woman who came back was the same woman in the operational sense, the same flat useful voice, the same competence, and in every other sense she was not. She had gotten heavier through the face and lighter everywhere else. She smiled at things that did not require it. She was, Sarah observed without comment, happy, in the plain unguarded way of a person who has stopped waiting for something and started having it.

They met in an airport hotel outside a city that didn't matter, in a room with the curtains shut, and did the handoff as they always did. Sarah gave her the closeout. Kimberly took it and gave her the next thing. It ran nine minutes.

At the end of it Kimberly's phone lit face-up on the table, and Sarah saw, because she saw everything, a photograph of an infant in a yellow blanket, and Kimberly turned it over without hurry and said, "Sorry."

"It's fine."

"She's four months." Kimberly put the phone in her bag. "Everybody says it gets easier. It does not get easier. It gets different."

Sarah made the sound people make.

"My mother came out for the first six weeks," Kimberly said, gathering her folders, not looking up, saying it the way you say the weather. "I don't know what we'd have done. Honestly, I don't. I couldn't have gotten through it alone. You think you can and then it turns out you can't, and then somebody's mother shows up and takes the baby at four in the morning and you sleep for three hours and you're a person again." She snapped the case shut and smiled at nothing, at the memory of being handed three hours. "That's the whole trick. There isn't a trick. It's just easier if somebody's there."

"Sure," Sarah said.

"Anyway." Kimberly stood. "Wheels up at six. Yours is in the packet."

"Got it."

And that was all of it. Eleven minutes and a photograph and a woman describing, in operational neutrality, in a hotel room with the curtains shut, the exact life Sarah had built with her own hands and left on a doorstep before sunrise. Somebody's mother shows up and takes the baby at four in the morning. Her mother had shown up. Her mother had taken the baby. It had happened; it was documented; it had been hers, that arrangement, that ordinary miracle, and she had handed it over and gone to the airport before the light came, and now a colleague was telling her about it as though it were news, as though it were a thing that happened to other people.

She did not say any of that. She took the packet and thanked her and went out into the corridor and down to the car, and the thing went in under the ribs where everything went, and stayed there.

She was in transit for two days after that.

Two flights and a long connection and a night somewhere she didn't unpack. This was the country she actually lived in, the one with no address: the moving walkways, the announcements in three languages, the carpet, the light that was the same light at eleven in the morning and eleven at night. She was very tired in the way she was always tired now, the kind sleep didn't touch. The two months were in her coat pocket. She'd stopped noticing them the way you stop noticing a ring.

The splinter sat where it had gone in and did not dissolve.

She got to the last airport near midnight and the connection was four hours out and there was nothing to do, which was the state she was worst at. She walked the length of the terminal twice. She bought a coffee she didn't want. And then she did what she always did in the dead hours, which was find a piece of glass and stand at it, because standing at glass was restful to her in a way she'd never examined. You could see the whole room in it and nobody could see you looking. It was the only kind of looking she'd ever been comfortable with.

The gate at the far end was dark and empty, no flight on the board, and the window there went floor to ceiling and gave onto the black apron outside, the tarmac lights, the rain coming down through them in long orange threads. Beyond the glass there was nothing to see. Inside the glass there was the whole terminal, reflected, in perfect detail, the way a dark window at night turns into a mirror of the lit room behind it.

She stood at it with the coffee going cold in her hand and let her eyes rest on the reflection the way you rest your eyes on running water.

And in the glass, forty feet behind her, a family was sitting at the empty gate.

A man, a woman, a child.

The man was tall. It went through her before anything else did, the automatic wrong signal she'd stopped being able to switch off, as certain heights and certain shoulders had been triggering it for months now in airports and shops and crowds. Not him. It was never him. But her chest did the thing anyway before her mind could stop it, and by the time she'd finished not-caring she was already looking at the rest of them.

The woman was blonde. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the row of chairs and her legs straight out in front of her, which was not something you did in a terminal unless you had passed the point of caring what a terminal thought of you. Her hair had come half down out of whatever had been holding it. There was a bag open beside her with a child's things spilling out of it, a stuffed rabbit, a sippy cup, a plastic thing with buttons.

The child was two, or three. Small enough to be carried and heavy enough that carrying was a decision. She was standing between her parents in a rumpled dress with her fists at her sides doing the whine of a child past exhaustion, not crying yet, just producing a continuous flat complaint at the world, and the mother had stopped trying to stop it. The father was holding two boarding passes and a phone and looking at a board that had nothing on it. Nobody was talking. Nobody looked happy. They looked like people in hour eleven of a day that had been supposed to be six, and the delay was open-ended, and the kid was going to melt down inside of ten minutes, and everyone in that little triangle knew it.

And then the man crouched down without being asked and got the child under the arms and hoisted her up against his chest, and she put her face in his neck and stopped whining, and he settled her there with one arm under her and put his free hand flat on the top of the blonde woman's head where she sat on the floor, and left it there, and the woman leaned into it, and neither of them said anything or looked at each other, and then he walked the kid slowly up and down in front of the dark window with his palm spread on the back of her head.

Sarah watched it in the glass.

It was nothing. It was the least remarkable thing happening in that airport. Nobody in it was enjoying themselves. There was no love scene in it, no gesture anyone would remember, no moment; it was just three tired people in the dull middle of a bad night, staying. They were tired and stuck and out of patience and they had not gone anywhere, and it wasn't even a decision they were making, it was just what they were, a thing so ordinary it didn't cost them anything to do, and she stood forty feet away with a cold

coffee and could not look away from it.

Because the glass had put her in it.

She hadn't braced for it. There was no bracing for it; it wasn't a thought, it was optics. The window at night reflects the lit room, and she was standing in the lit room, and her own reflection was there in the glass with the rest of it, laid over the top of them. A tall man. A blonde woman. A small child. And a fourth shape, blonde, transparent, standing in the same frame, hung across the family like something that hadn't finished arriving. She could see the tarmac lights through her own face. She was the least solid thing in the picture. The window had done it by itself, the way a window does, without arranging anything, and there they all were in one piece of glass: the tall man, the child, the blonde woman on the floor, and Sarah's ghost lying over them.

She had been very careful, for a long time, never to put those things in the same frame.

The glass didn't ask her permission.

She was still standing there when the woman on the floor looked up.

She wasn't looking at anything. She was doing what you do at the end of a long night, letting her head fall back against the seat and her eyes go wherever, and her eyes went to the dark window, and in the dark window they found Sarah's.

Not Sarah. Sarah's reflection. The two of them met in the glass, mediated, at a remove, the only way Sarah had ever met anyone.

And Sarah understood, in the half second before she could do anything about it, that her face was not doing what she thought it was doing. She had assumed the glass hid her. The glass was the whole reason she stood at glass. But her face was wide open and it had been open for a while, and what was on it was not curiosity or boredom or the flat professional nothing she wore like skin. It was want. Naked, unguarded, undefended want, the barest thing she had, and it was hanging there in a window in an international terminal where anyone could read it, and the tired woman on the floor read it in about a second and a half.

And she didn't look away.

That was all she did. She didn't smile, exactly. She didn't do anything with her face that could be called a message. She looked at the stranger at the far window with the naked want all over her and she declined to pretend she hadn't seen it, and there was something in her expression that was not pity, because pity looks down. It was closer to the thing you feel when you catch someone in the middle of a private grief in public and choose not to make it worse by performing blindness. I see you. I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm not going to pretend. It lasted maybe two seconds.

Then the child made a noise, and the woman's eyes went off Sarah's like a hand coming off a shoulder, and she got up off the floor with a grunt and went to take her daughter off her husband's shoulder, and that was the end of it, because she had a flight and a kid and a life and no attention to spare on a strange woman in a coat at the end of the terminal.

Sarah stood absolutely still.

It was the exposure. She would think about that afterward, on the other side of everything, and the thing she'd come back to was that the woman had done nothing at all. She hadn't offered her anything. She'd just seen her, and then gone back to her own night, and it should have been survivable, and it wasn't, because for more than a decade Sarah Walker had been the most unreadable woman in every room she had ever entered and a tired stranger in an airport had read her off a reflection in under two seconds. Not read her danger. Not read what she did for a living, which she could have borne, which she had trained her whole life to make bearable. Read that she wanted something. The one thing that had never been permitted, that Jack had taken out of her before she was eight years old, the leak that sinks you. It had been sitting on her face in public.

Chuck had seen her. She had survived Chuck seeing her, barely, by leaving. Ellie had seen her, and she'd survived that by leaving too. Kimberly had seen her, and she'd taken the file and left the seeing on the table. It had been getting harder each time and she had gotten out each time, and now a woman whose name she would never know, who would board a plane in twenty minutes and never think of her again, had looked into a piece of glass and seen the whole of it, and there was nowhere to take that, no exit that

fixed it, because it meant the thing she was hiding was no longer hideable. If a stranger could see it across forty feet of terminal, it was more real than her ability to conceal it.

Something in her let go. It didn't crack; it wasn't dramatic. It was more like a hand that had been holding something far too long opening because the arm had finally given out.

And she stood there in the fluorescent light of an international terminal at midnight, in public, in front of strangers, with a cold coffee in her hand, and came apart.

Not visibly. Nothing on the outside; nobody looked. But the thing she had held level through Budapest and Vienna and every room she'd walked out of let go, all at once, and did not come back, and she felt it go with a kind of terror, because that lid had been the only thing between her and the whole of it since she was seven years old. She had been undone before. Twice, three times, in the dark, in a bed, with him, where it was safe and could be sealed up again by morning. She had never once been undone in the light.

She did not seal it back.

She stood in the light with her chest wide open and let it stay open, because there was nothing left to close it with.

She had to look away from the window.

It was the entire next thing required of her: stop looking at the reflection. And the only way to stop looking at the reflection was to turn around, because the reflection was of the room, and the room was behind her, and the family was behind her, and to look at them for real she had to put her body around.

She could not do it.

She stood there and gave herself the instruction and nothing happened. Her feet did not move. Her head did not move. She was a woman who had gone through a door in Budapest with a knife and no plan and she could not turn her head forty degrees in an airport, and she stood there with her heart going and understood, from somewhere far off, that this was not reluctance. Her body was refusing. Something under the level of choice had reached up and taken the wheel and would not let her turn around, and it was the same hand that had closed her throat in Denver, and it was old, and it had been

there so long she had never once, in her entire life, tested it.

Because you don't turn around.

It came up in the worn voice that had never been wrong, the first law, the one under all the others, the one she'd been given at seven years old in a car going west out of Columbus with everything she loved shrinking in a piece of glass behind her, and she remembered the feeling of that, the physical fact of it, sitting up straight and facing the windshield while the whole of her life went small in the mirror and a man's voice told her the rule that would organize the next three decades: you never look back. Looking back is a confession. You watch it go in the mirror if you have to watch it at all. You keep your face forward. You do not turn around.

She had built everything on that. Every exit she'd ever made clean, every room she'd walked out of, every person she'd left standing in a parking lot or a doorway or a driveway: she had done all of it facing forward, watching them recede in glass, never once turning her head.

And here it was, offered backward. The thing she wanted was behind her. The glass was in front. All she had to do was turn.

She turned.

It took a long time. It took, in the actual world, something under two seconds, and it was the hardest physical act of her life, harder than the stairwell, harder than anything she had ever made her body do, because everything in her was screaming that this was the one forbidden direction and she put her shoulders around anyway, by force, against a lifetime of grain, and made herself face the room.

And they were just people.

That was all. The glass-moment was over and gone and what was actually there, in the flesh, forty feet away, was a tired man in a fleece with a toddler's face mashed into his neck, and a blonde woman on her feet now with her hair falling down, digging in a bag for something, saying something short to her husband about the rabbit, and a small girl grizzling about being awake. Nobody was looking at her. Nobody had noticed her turn.

Nobody in that family would remember the night, and they had no idea, and would never have any idea, that a woman at the end of the terminal had just broken her whole life open by putting her shoulders around to look at them.

They were ordinary. They were the most ordinary thing in the building, and she had not been able to face that: not a vision, not a radiant version of a life, just three exhausted people at a delayed gate at midnight who were still there.

Nobody had turned her. There had been no hand on her shoulder, no voice, no one who knew her within a thousand miles. She had stood in an airport and made her own body do the one thing it had been built never to do.

And once she had done it, the rest of it came in.

He was only the latest.

The sentence finished itself. It had been sitting cut in half inside her since a street in a city she couldn't remember the name of, and it finished now, quietly, without her permission, the way the window had put her in the frame without her permission.

Chuck was not the first. There was a woman who had raised her and lost her and picked up a telephone on the first ring anyway, twenty years later, with no lecture in her voice. There was a child in that woman's house with a name Sarah had never let herself learn. And there was a man on the other side of the world with a map of him going soft in her pocket. Three people. One move. She had loved all three of them and gotten them to safety and then gone out the door before dawn while they were still warm from it, and she had a word for what she did, and the word was protection, and she had been using it her whole adult life the way you use a coat that isn't yours.

It wasn't protection. She saw it whole, standing in the terminal, in a wave that had nowhere to go: it was the oldest trick in the family, the one her father had taught her before he taught her anything else, the con so good she'd run it on herself since she was a child without ever once catching it. You leave to protect them. It let her go. That was its entire function. It was the only story that would let a person walk out of a room where somebody loved her and feel like the good guy on the way to the car, and Jack

had installed it in her before she had anything to measure it against, and she had carried it out of every single life she'd ever had, and there was not one person in the world she had ever protected by leaving them. Not Emma. Not the baby. Not Chuck. She had protected herself. She had protected herself from being stayed with, which was the only thing in the world that had ever actually frightened her, and she had called it love and taken it with her.

She stood in the terminal with her hand over her mouth.

She was going to stop.

The decision came in under everything else, quiet, without ceremony, and it did not feel like relief. It felt like standing at the edge of the roof. She was going to stop running. She was going to turn her life the way she had just turned her body, and she had no idea how to do it and no reason to believe she could, except that ninety seconds ago she had also had no reason to believe she could turn her head, and she had.

She had nothing else. It was more than she'd had this morning.

And she was going to go home first. Not to him. That was the order, and she knew it without working it out, the way you know which wound to close first: she could not walk up to Chuck Bartowski's door carrying this and ask him to hold any of it, because the thing that was wrong with her had not started with him, it had started in a car going west with a seven-year-old in the passenger seat, and the woman who'd stood on that sidewalk and raised one hand was still alive, and was raising a child Sarah had left her, and Sarah knew the address by heart and had never once gone back to it. That was the ground floor. Everything else in her life was built on top of what happened between her and that woman, and she was going to go there, and she was terrified in a way she had never once been terrified on a job, because a job could only kill her.

Then, because she'd been doing it for as long as she'd had the job and the hands do what they do, she reached into her coat for the two months.

The pages had gone soft as cloth. She unfolded them under the terminal lights and looked at the dates, and the dates were behind her. All of them. The window had closed

while she was carrying it around, day after day, knowing exactly where he was and choosing not to go, and the last coordinate on it had come and gone eleven days ago while she was standing in another airport in another country not going, and the paper in her hands was worth nothing at all.

She stood holding it, and something in her went very quiet.

She had spent six months finding him. She had crossed hemispheres on nothing. She had always known where he was, and she had made a discipline out of not using it, and the discipline had run so long that it had eaten its own object; she had refused him right through the last day it was possible to refuse, and now the map was dead in her hands, and she had lost him. Actually lost him. For the first time since a piazza in Milan, she did not know where in the world Chuck Bartowski was, and there was no page in her pocket that would tell her.

She'd have to look for him. Blind, asking, not knowing, the way he had spent six cities looking at every door she walked out of with no way on earth to follow. She'd have to find out what that was like.

She folded the dead map back up and put it in her pocket anyway, and it did not stop her, because she had already turned around and there wasn't a version of this where she turned back.

Her connection boarded at four. She didn't take it.

She stood at the departures board in the middle of the empty terminal and looked at the cities the way you look at a menu in a language you're learning, and the ordinary machinery of her life kept trying to start up, kept offering her the next job, the next flight, the next clean forward-facing nowhere, and she stood there and let it run down.

Everything in her was pointed the wrong way. She'd have no name for the feeling until much later: a whole body organized around going, every part of it strung to face front, and she was now aimed backward down the length of her own life at the one door she'd been running from since she was seven. Nothing about it felt good. She was not lighter. She was a woman standing in an airport at four in the morning with a dead map in her

pocket and no lid on anything, so frightened she could feel it in her hands, pointed for the first time in her life at something instead of away from it.

The board flickered and reset. She found the city she needed and went to buy the ticket.

Chapter 11: Emma

She landed a little after four in the morning and drove east into the dark with the windows down because the rental smelled like somebody else's cigarettes.

The freeway emptied out past the last of the city and then it was just the road and the hills going up on either side, black at first and then, as the sky started to go grey behind her, brown. Dry brown, burnt brown, the scrub and the rock and the long spines of the ridges with nothing on them, and eucalyptus standing in ragged lines at the edges of the fields, and the smell of dust and something like pepper coming in the window. It had been snowing the last time she stood still anywhere. She had crossed the whole world to get to a place where the ground had never once been cold.

The phone went off on the passenger seat at four-forty and again at five-ten and again at five-fifty.

She looked at it and did not pick it up. She had not picked it up at the airport and she had not picked it up on the plane and there was a growing weight on the other end of that silence, people whose calls did not go unanswered, an absence that would already be a line in somebody's file. She let it ring. She had turned her body around in a terminal by main force and it turned out the same muscle worked on this: you simply did not do the thing you had always done. The phone stopped, and lit again, and she watched the road.

She had the speech by then.

She'd built it somewhere over the middle of the country, in the flat ordered way she built everything unbearable, the facts in a row where they couldn't touch her. It had a shape. It opened with I know you don't owe me anything. It had the two leavings in it, the first one and the second one, laid out in sequence, with the reasons attached, because there were reasons and she intended to give them. It acknowledged the danger

she'd brought to the door. It made no request. She had gone over it four or five times, as she'd gone over approaches to buildings, tightening it, cutting what was self-serving, until it was clean and complete and defensible.

She expected the door to be a border. She expected a pause on the other side of it, an appraisal, the woman's face doing arithmetic; she expected to have to say her piece standing on a step with the screen between them. It was what she'd have done. It was what anyone would do.

The town when she got to it was still asleep, stucco and streetlights and the flat quiet of a place where nothing had ever happened, and the address she had never once used was a beige house on a corner with a chain-link fence around a patch of yard and a jacaranda in it dropping its flowers all over the driveway. There was a plastic tricycle on its side by the steps. There was a light on in the kitchen window.

Sarah sat in the car with her hands on the wheel and could not make herself get out.

It took her a long time. Longer than the terminal. Nobody drove past. The sky came up grey and then pink over the ridge behind the house and the streetlights went off all at once down the block, and she sat there with the engine ticking and her speech assembled and ready in her mouth like a mouthful of stones, and then she got out of the car and went up the path and knocked on the screen door, because there wasn't anything else left to do with her life.

The inside door opened.

Her mother was smaller than she should have been and older in a way that Sarah's mind refused, for a second, to accept: grey through the hair she'd pinned up any old way, glasses pushed onto her head, a cardigan over a nightshirt, a dish towel in one hand at six in the morning because she'd been up with a kid since five-thirty. She stood behind the screen and looked out at her daughter on the step.

She didn't hesitate. There was no pause, no scan, nothing crossing her face that had to be worked out. She pushed the screen open with the back of the hand holding the towel and said:

"You came back."

Not a question. There was no doubt anywhere in it, and no surprise either, and no relief, which was the part that took Sarah apart; it was said the way you'd say it's raining, a fact reported by someone who had been expecting rain. And then her mother's arms came around her, immediately, before Sarah had moved or answered or done anything at all.

Her mother smelled the same.

The speech went out of her like water out of a cracked glass. All of it, at once, in the doorway, gone: the two leavings in sequence, the reasons attached, the acknowledgment of danger, the careful thing with no request in it. She stood on a concrete step in the pink light with her face in her mother's neck and a dish towel pressed against her back and every ordered word she'd built across nine thousand miles came apart, and she was not an operative or a woman with a plan or anyone who had ever run anything, and she made a sound she had not made since she was seven years old.

"Okay," her mother said, up into her ear, in the voice from the hallway, from before, unchanged. "Okay, baby. Okay."

She did not say I forgive you. She did not say it's all right. She stood on her own front step at six in the morning with her arms around a daughter she hadn't touched in years and held on, and let it go on as long as it went on, and behind her in the house a small voice said Mom? and Emma said just a minute, honey, over Sarah's shoulder, without letting go.

The kitchen had a table with four chairs and only two of them pulled out, and a paper turkey made of a handprint stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet, and a mug tree, and a window over the sink looking out at the yard where the jacaranda was dropping.

Sarah sat where she was put. She could not have said what her hands were doing. Her mother made coffee and did not ask her a single question, not one, not where she'd come from or how long she was staying or what had happened or why now, and the absence of the interrogation was so total that Sarah kept bracing for it and kept not

getting it, over and over, like reaching for a stair that wasn't there.

"You want eggs?"

"You don't have to—"

"I'm making them anyway." Her mother got the pan down. "She'll want some."

She. Sarah's whole body went still around the word.

And then the child came in.

She was three, or near enough; she came into the kitchen sideways with a stuffed rabbit by one ear, dragging it, and she had a nightgown with a faded cartoon on it that had been washed a hundred times and she had her hair in the wreck that a night's sleep makes of a toddler's hair, and she was not a baby. Sarah had been carrying a fifteen-pound weight in her arms for years, and here was a person, upright, with opinions, walking into a kitchen.

She stopped when she saw Sarah. Looked at her for a moment with the frank unembarrassed stare of the very young.

"Sarah's here," she said, to her grandmother, in a tone of mild interest, and went to the chair she wanted and started climbing it.

Sarah did not move.

The child had used her name. Nobody had introduced them. Nobody had said this is Sarah, nobody had crouched down to explain, nobody had done any of the work that would have been required if this were a stranger arriving at a house, and the child had glanced at her and produced her name like a fact she'd always had, and gone back to the more pressing business of getting into a chair.

She had been in this house the whole time.

Not as a person. As a name. Somebody had been saying her name in this kitchen, over years, in the ordinary course of things, until a child who had never seen her face knew exactly who she was, and had a place ready for her, and was not remotely surprised to find it filled at six in the morning on a Tuesday. She looked at her mother's back at the

stove and understood that the door had been open in more places than the front of the house.

"Rabbit doesn't sit at the table," Emma said.

"He does."

"He doesn't."

The rabbit sat at the table.

She learned the name at seven-fifteen.

It came in the middle of nothing at all. The eggs were on the table and the child had gotten hold of the salt and was tipping it in a long white stream onto the oilcloth to see what it would do, and her mother, not even looking up, reaching over with the spatula still in her hand, said:

"Molly, don't."

Molly.

Sarah sat very still with her coffee going cold in her hands.

Two syllables. It had cost her mother nothing. It had cost her mother less than nothing; it had been an interruption in the middle of scrambled eggs, said the way it must have been said four hundred thousand times in this kitchen, over spills and stairs and the dog next door, the most ordinary word in the house, free, constantly, aloud, for years.

She had built a wall out of that word. She had made a discipline of not asking. One question, to the one person on earth who would have answered it, thirty seconds, any day for three years, and she had held the line and called it necessary, and she had been proud of holding it in the terrible way she was proud of every wall she'd ever kept, and all that time the word had been sitting in this room being shouted over the sound of a kitchen tap.

"Molly," she said, out loud, without meaning to. It came out wrong. It came out like a question in a language she didn't speak.

Her mother said, "She's a menace with the salt," and put the pan in the sink.

The morning went on.

She was not prepared for it, and it kept happening; the morning simply went on. The child ate about a third of what was in front of her and then wanted down. There was a negotiation about shoes. Emma took a load out of the dryer and folded it on the table with the salt still on it, and asked Sarah about the flight in the way you ask a person about a flight, and Sarah answered in sentences that came out too short and too flat because she had no other register available, and her mother didn't seem to need her to be any good at it.

Nobody asked her to account for anything.

She kept waiting for it and it kept not coming, and somewhere around eight she understood that it was not being withheld as a kindness or held back for later. It genuinely was not going to happen. Her mother was not going to make her explain, because her mother had done all the explaining she needed to do a long time ago, alone, and had come out the other side of it and gotten on with raising a child.

The child called her Mom.

Sarah had known it would happen and had not known what it would be like. It came at eight-something, over the folded laundry, in the middle of a complaint about a sock, and it was the correct word. There was nothing to object to anywhere in it. Emma had done the nights and the fevers and the naming, Emma had been up at five-thirty this morning and every morning, and the child had used the true word for the person who did those things, and the true word was not available to Sarah and never would be, and she had chosen that herself in the dark before dawn in a doorway on the other side of the world.

She sat in a kitchen and let it go through her and did not put anything on her face, and her mother went on folding.

At nine she stood up to go.

She hadn't decided to. She was on her feet with her keys in her hand before the thought had finished forming, and the thought, when it caught up, was entirely reasonable: she'd

done it. She'd knocked on the door and been held and seen the child and heard the name, she had gotten what she came for, and there was a car outside and a road and the whole clean world beyond it, and every single thing in her body was pointed at the door. It was not even a temptation. It was a pressure, like water behind a wall.

Go now. You got what you came for. This is the part where you go.

She stood in the middle of her mother's kitchen with her keys in her hand and her heart going like she was under fire.

"There's a room in the back," Emma said. She hadn't turned around. She was rinsing something. "It's got boxes in it, but the bed's made up."

There was no plea in it. She didn't say don't go and she didn't say stay and she did not make it a request, because a request could have been refused and then there'd be a scene, and Emma did not do scenes. She reported the existence of a bed and went on rinsing, and left the whole thing lying there on the counter for her daughter to pick up or not.

Sarah stood there for a long moment.

Then she put the keys back down on the table, next to the salt.

She did that four more times before noon. The door pulled at her about every twenty minutes, a physical pull, and each time she was up and moving before she caught it, and each time she made herself stop and put her hand on something, the back of a chair, the counter, the frame of the hall door, and stand still until it passed. Nobody watched her do it. It was the whole substance of the morning, the actual event of the day, and it took place entirely inside a woman standing in a kitchen doing nothing at all while a toddler put stickers on a cupboard.

The confession came out at eleven, badly, over the dishes, because there was nothing else left to ride.

Emma was washing and Sarah was drying because she'd asked for something to do, and Molly was in the front room with the television doing its noise, and the water was running, and Sarah heard herself say:

"I left you."

Her mother kept washing.

"I left you. At the — I was seven, and I got in the car, and I chose him, and then I never came back, and I could have. There were years when I could have. I knew the number. And then I—" She stopped. Started again in a different place, which was not how she had built it, which was not the order at all. "And then I did it to you again. With her. I put her in your arms at four in the morning and I put all of it on you, everything that could come after her, and I left before it was light. I didn't even. I didn't leave a number. I made you take a baby and a — and I went."

The plate she was drying had been dry for a while.

"And I told myself it was to protect you. Both times. That's what I said. That's what I've said about everybody." Her voice was doing something she couldn't govern. "It wasn't. It was never that. I just can't stay. There's something in me that can't do it, and I dress it up, and I've been dressing it up my whole life, and I'm — I'm sorry. Mom. I'm sorry."

It was the worst-made thing she had ever said. There was no shape to it; she'd started in the wrong place and doubled back and left half of it out and said I'm sorry at the end like a child who's been told to. Her father could have delivered this to a stranger in a bar and had them weeping and reaching for a checkbook inside four minutes. She stood in her mother's kitchen holding a dry plate and could not get the words in the right order, and that was the only version of it that had ever been true.

Emma turned the tap off.

She was quiet for a while. She dried her hands on the towel over her shoulder, taking her time about it, and she didn't look at Sarah, which turned out to be a mercy.

"I know," she said.

That was it. Not it's all right. Not you were a child. Not I forgive you, which Sarah understood, standing there, she would not have been able to survive being handed. Just the two words, in the flat voice of a woman confirming a thing she had known for twenty-odd years and had already finished having feelings about in private, on her own

time, without any help.

Then she took the plate out of Sarah's hands and put it in the cupboard.

"You should eat something," she said. "You look terrible."

The child went down for a nap at one.

She went badly. She was overtired and furious about it, and there was fifteen minutes of increasingly unreasonable negotiation from the back bedroom, and then Sarah, sitting on the couch in the front room where she had been put with a cup of tea she hadn't asked for, heard her mother start to sing.

It came through the wall in pieces. It was not a performance; it was somebody's tuneless patient half-humming, the same eight bars over and over, the words going soft in the middle where the singer had stopped bothering with them years ago.

Sarah knew it before the second line.

She sat on a stranger's couch in a house in the dry hills with a cup of tea going cold on her knee and heard the song that had been sung over her own head in an apartment in Columbus when the radiator hissed and the ceiling had plastic stars on it, and then, later, once, over a bad line from nine thousand miles away, at three in the morning, into a phone she was holding against a screaming infant's ear in a room she'd already decided to leave.

She had heard it that night and she had gotten what she needed from it and she had put the baby in her mother's arms and been gone before the light. She had never heard the end of it. Not once in her life, either time, had she been in the room when the song finished.

She stayed where she was.

That was all she did. She sat on the couch in the ordinary afternoon light with her hands around a cup, and the song went on through the wall, the same eight bars, going quieter, and the complaining behind it wound down into snuffling and then into nothing, and still it went on a little, the way you keep singing after they're out because you're not

sure yet, and then it stopped.

The house was quiet.

Her mother came out and pulled the bedroom door to and said, "That took some doing," and went to put the kettle back on.

The afternoon was nothing, and it was the hardest part of the day. Molly slept an hour and got up cranky and recovered. There was a stretch where Emma sat in the chair with a crossword and Sarah sat on the couch and neither of them said anything for twenty minutes, and Sarah thought she might come out of her skin. There was a stretch where she was given a bowl of green beans to snap because Emma was making something for dinner and it was easier to hand the job over than explain it. There was a long involved business with the tricycle and the front path.

Nobody needed anything from her. Nobody wanted anything from her. There was no exchange under way, no debt being accrued, no arrangement she was being drawn into, and every hour of it violated a law she'd lived by so long that she had never once seen it written down: that you pay for warmth, always, in money or leverage or performance or truth, and if you can't see the price then you haven't found it yet, and the ones you can't find are the expensive ones.

She kept looking for the price. It wasn't there. Her mother made a pot of coffee and drank most of it and let her daughter sit in a chair in her house doing nothing, and did not send her a bill, and did not seem to be keeping any accounts at all.

Around four the light came in low and orange through the front window and lay in a long bar across the carpet, and Molly, who had been driving the rabbit around the coffee table for some time, climbed up onto the couch to be nearer the television and sat down against Sarah's side because that was where the couch was warm.

She didn't ask. She didn't look up. She backed into the space between Sarah's arm and the cushion the way you'd back a car into a familiar garage and settled there with the rabbit under her chin, and eight or nine minutes later she was asleep, entirely, boneless, with her mouth open and her head going heavier and heavier against Sarah's ribs.

Sarah sat absolutely still.

The weight was wrong. She had carried this child down a stairwell in the dark with the noise still in her ears, and what she'd had in her arms then weighed nothing at all, a bundle, a task, a thing to be gotten out of a building. This was a person. There was heft to her, real heft, a solid warm mass with a heartbeat going against Sarah's arm and a hand fisted in the hem of her shirt, and the difference between what she'd carried out of Budapest and what was lying against her now was three years of somebody getting up in the night, and she could feel every ounce of it. It was in her arm. She could measure it.

She had no idea what to do with her face and there was nobody looking at it.

Emma came through and saw them and stopped for a second on her way to the kitchen. She smiled, the way you'd smile at a nice thing, and made a small sound that was not a word, and said, "She'll be out for a while now," and went and started running water in the sink.

She didn't stand there. She didn't look across the room in a way that meant anything. She was not a woman being tactful in the presence of an enormous moment; she was a grandmother who had seen a kid fall asleep on a warm adult approximately nine thousand times and had not registered anything remarkable in the ninth thousand and first, and she had gone to do the dishes, because the dishes were there.

The tap ran. A plate knocked against another plate.

And Sarah sat in the low orange light with a sleeping child on her arm and came apart completely, silently, with nothing showing, because she had nowhere at all to put it. She couldn't stand up. She couldn't put her hands over her face; one arm was pinned and the other was holding the weight. She could not have spoken without waking her. She was immobilized in the middle of a warm room by the least significant event of anyone's day, and there was nothing to do with what was happening to her except sit in it and let it go through and keep breathing evenly so the head against her ribs would stay where it was.

Because she had never once been given anything that came for free.

Every warm thing in her life had arrived with a reason attached. Jack's pride was wages for a job well run. Eleanor's love was bought with a story. Chuck's tenderness was extraordinary, wondering, hard-won, given to a woman he'd crossed the world to see. Even the song, both times, had been summoned by an emergency; somebody had needed something. Nothing had ever come to her for no cause. And this child had not chosen her, or forgiven her, or seen anything in her, or thought about her at all; she had gotten tired at four in the afternoon and gone to the nearest warm thing and stopped being awake. There was no gratitude in it. There was no acknowledgment. There was not even attention. It was the most ordinary event in the house and it had cost every person involved precisely nothing.

Nobody had ever fallen asleep on her.

She sat with that for a long time while the water ran and the light went from orange to something thinner and the television talked to nobody. Nothing was fixed. Chuck was somewhere she couldn't find, three years were gone out of the small heavy body against her side and no amount of sitting still would bring one hour of them back, there was a phone in the car that would start again in the morning, and she did not know, she had absolutely no idea, whether she could do this again tomorrow.

She only knew that if she stood up now she would wake her.

So she didn't. She stayed where she was, in the chair-shape she'd been pressed into, with her arm going numb under the weight and her mother's back turned at the sink and the last of the afternoon going down the wall, and she did not move, and she did not move, and she did not get up.

Chapter 12: The House (I)

She made the call from the back step of her mother's house, in the afternoon, with the screen door open behind her and Molly banging something against something in the front room.

It rang four times. She had time to think about hanging up, and she thought about it, and she didn't.

"Kimberly."

"It's me."

A pause on the other end, and in it Sarah could hear an office, a printer somewhere, the ordinary sound of a building where people knew where she was supposed to be and she wasn't. She had been off the board for weeks. There were people who would want to know about this call.

"You're a topic of conversation," Kimberly said.

"I know."

"Are you calling me because you need something operational?"

"No."

Sarah stopped. This was the part. She'd known it was coming since she picked up the phone and she had still not worked out how to get around it, and there wasn't a way around it, and that was the whole point of it.

"I need to find Chuck Bartowski," she said. "I don't have anything. The dates you gave me are dead. I let them run out." Her voice was doing something. She kept going. "It isn't work. It was never work. I want to find him. I'm asking you to help me find him, because I want to, and I don't have any other reason, and I don't know how to do this."

The silence on the line went on longer than it needed to.

She stood on the step with the sun coming down over the neighbor's fence and did not fill it, did not explain, did not construct one single word of the surrounding architecture that would have made it sound like something else. She had said it out loud into a phone. I want to find him. It was the barest sentence she had ever produced in front of another human being, and she had produced it on purpose, and now it was out in the world where somebody else could have it.

"Give me twenty minutes," Kimberly said.

That was all. No are you sure. No I always thought. No I'm glad. She did not say the thing that had been in her face across a table in Vienna, and Sarah understood, holding

the phone, that this was deliberate, that Kimberly had decided a long time ago what she was and wasn't for and had never once broken the rule.

The text came in nineteen minutes. An address in Pasadena, and under it, one line:

It's a house. Not a hotel.

Nothing else. No good luck. No be careful. She had asked for one thing and been given exactly that thing and left to go do it herself.

She drove up in the late afternoon with the sun going down over her left shoulder, out of the dry hills and into the sprawl, and somewhere around the interchange she caught herself building it.

You don't owe me anything. I need to tell you what I am, and then—

She stopped. She heard the shape of it starting to lock in, the clean thing with the reasons attached, and she made herself stop, and she drove the rest of the way with nothing in her mouth. It was the hardest driving she had ever done. Twice her mind reached for the speech the way a tongue goes to a broken tooth and both times she took it away and left the space empty, and by the time she came off the freeway into the old streets she was carrying nothing at all, which was the only honest thing she had ever brought him.

The neighborhood surprised her.

She had expected glass. She had expected the version of money she knew from the men she worked around, a tower with a doorman, something with security in the lobby. This was a street with oaks over it, real ones, sixty or eighty years of them, and low walls, and houses set back on actual lots with grass and hedges and porch lights coming on in the blue hour.

The house was a Craftsman. Wide and low and dark-shingled, a deep porch across the whole front with square columns, leaded glass either side of the door, a stone chimney. Somebody's grandmother's roses along the walk, tended. It was beautiful. It had been built ninety years ago by people who assumed a family would wear it out.

Every window was dark except one.

She stood at the bottom of the steps and looked at it for a while. There was a car in the drive and a light on somewhere at the back, one room, and the rest of the house stood there in the dark under its oaks with nobody in it.

She went up and knocked.

It took him a long time to come. When the porch light went on she had to stop herself from stepping out of it.

The door opened.

He had gotten thinner. It went into her like a blade before anything else did, because he was a big man and he had less on him than he should have, and there was grey at his temple that she did not think had been there in Denver, and he was in a shirt he'd been wearing since morning with the sleeves shoved up and his hair doing what it did when he hadn't thought about it in fourteen hours. He looked like a man who had been working. He looked like a man who had been working for months, on purpose, the way you work when the work is load-bearing.

He looked at her.

And what was on his face was the thing she had not prepared for, because she had prepared for anger, and she had prepared for the door closing, and she had even let herself prepare, in a corner of herself she wasn't proud of, for gladness. This was none of them. He looked at her the way you look at something you have finished with. There was no leap in it. There was no light coming up in him the way it had come up in a restaurant in Denver, involuntary, before he could get to it; whatever had done that had been switched off at the wall. He simply stood there and absorbed the fact of her, and she watched him not know where to put it, and she understood that she was looking at a man who had done all of his grieving already, alone, in this house, over months, and had gotten to the end of it, and was now being handed back the thing he'd finished burying.

"Sarah," he said.

Nothing else. Her name, flat, like a fact he was confirming.

"Can I—" Her voice went. She started again. "I need to talk to you. If you'll let me."

He looked at her a moment longer.

Then he stepped back and held the door.

She had a whole speech she wasn't giving about why he should hear her out, and she didn't need any of it, because he stepped back from his own door and let her walk into his house before he knew a single thing, and that was the most frightening thing that had happened to her in a very long time.

Inside, the house was worse.

Not worse. She stood in the front hall and could not have named what was wrong with it, only that something was, the way you know a room is wrong before you know why. It was gorgeous. Dark beams across a low ceiling, built-in cabinetry with leaded glass, a fireplace with tile around it, floors that somebody had refinished properly. There was a staircase going up into the dark with a landing and a window seat under a window.

Nobody lived here.

There was furniture, good furniture, chosen by someone with an eye. There was a dining room off the hall with a long table in it and eight chairs, and the table had nothing on it, not a bowl, not a stack of mail, nothing, and the chairs were pushed in square all the way around, all eight of them, in a room where the light fixture had not been turned on in a long time. There was a living room with a couch nobody had sat on hard enough to dent. The curtains were pulled across the big front windows, all of them, floor to ceiling, in a room built to be looked out of.

Upstairs was dark. She could feel the size of it over her head, four bedrooms, five, a whole floor of a house designed to be filled with people, sitting up there in the dark above a man who came home and went to one room.

He led her to the one room. It was a study at the back, off the kitchen, and it was the only place in the house with any evidence of a human being in it: a lamp on, a laptop open with a document up, a second screen with something running, three coffee cups, a jacket on the back of the chair, papers in stacks that meant something to somebody. The

rest of the house was a photograph and this was where he lived.

She thought, standing in the doorway of it: he bought a house for a family.

He had never once said that to her. In six cities, in all that time, he had never asked her for anything, never said stay, never said what is this, never made a single claim on her, and while he was doing all that not-asking he had gone home and bought a nine-decade-old house with four bedrooms and a dining table for eight and a porch swing, and then he had put himself in the back room with a laptop and pulled every curtain in the place.

She had done that. Not the house. The rest.

"You want to sit down?" he said.

"No."

"Okay." He didn't sit either. He moved a stack of paper off a chair and then didn't do anything with it, just held it, and then put it back where it had been. His hands wanted a task. "Okay."

She had planned to start at the beginning and there wasn't one, so she started in the middle.

"I kill people," she said.

It came out of her in the flattest voice she owned and it was completely wrong, it was the worst possible first sentence, and she heard it hit the room and could not take it back.

"That's not—" She stopped. Pressed her hand over her mouth for a second and took it away. "I'm doing this badly. I'm going to do all of this badly. I don't know how to say any of it in the right order, so I'm just going to say it."

He didn't move.

"I work for the government. The CIA. I've worked for them since I was sixteen, since before I had this name, and what I do for them is not analysis and it isn't security. They send me at people and the people stop existing. That's the job. That's what I was doing in Milan when I got in your car. That's what I'd been doing three days before Amsterdam

and a week before Hong Kong and I came to you out of it every single time and let you think whatever you were going to think."

Something went through his face and she made herself keep going.

"There was a job in Budapest. Before Milan. A retrieval." Her voice was already coming apart in the wrong places, the words arriving out of sequence, and she let them. "The people were dead when I got there. The men who did it were mine to take and I took them, and that was the job, that part was the job. And then there was the thing I was retrieving, and it was a baby. It was a four-month-old girl in a room at the end of a hall."

She had to stop.

"They wanted her gone. My handler. Ryker. It was money, there was a lot of money and a child was a complication, and he explained what was going to happen to her the way he explained everything, like it was a schedule. And I said no." She heard her own voice do something on the word. "I'd never said no to him. Not once, not in ten years, and I said no, and then I took her out of the building and hid her and I went back and I killed him."

The room was very quiet.

"Up close," she said. "With my hands. Not from anywhere. I was standing in front of him and he knew it was me and I did it anyway, and it wasn't the job, and I wasn't empty, I was all the way there, and I remember every second of it and I always will. Everything else I've ever done I did from somewhere far away where there's nobody home. That one was me."

He hadn't said anything. He hadn't moved. She had the sensation, absurd and unmistakable, of hearing a lock give somewhere: not in the house, in herself, some door she'd had shut so long the hinge had rusted into the frame swinging open into a room she'd never let anyone stand in, and then, worse, another one behind it, and the words kept coming and every one of them opened another.

"Then I went rogue for eleven days. My agency, the Hungarians, all of them. I got her out of the country and I got her somewhere safe and nobody has ever come for either of

us, and that's not luck, that's what I'm good at." She was crying, she registered distantly, without any of the accompanying feeling. "The somewhere safe was my mother. I hadn't spoken to my mother since I was thirteen years old and I called her at three in the morning from a country she'd never heard of because the baby wouldn't stop crying and I couldn't make it stop, and she picked up on the first ring and talked me through it like I'd called her the day before. And then I got that child out of the country and across an ocean and I put her in my mother's arms on her own doorstep, and I put every single thing that could ever come after that child onto a fifty-eight-year-old woman in a house with no fence, and I was gone before it was light."

"Sarah—"

"Her name is Molly." Her voice broke all the way across it. "I didn't know that until eleven weeks ago. I never asked. For three years I never asked, and I could have asked any day, and I didn't, and I told myself that was—"

She stopped, because the next word was going to be protecting, and she wasn't there yet, and it was coming.

She had gotten it out. All of it, in the wrong order, in a study in a house in Pasadena, and she was standing four feet from him with her face wet and nothing left to hold up in front of herself and no idea in the world what to do next.

So she did the thing she knew how to do.

She moved toward him. It wasn't a decision; it was her whole self going where it went when words had failed, which was every time, which was the entire history of the two of them: a doorway in Amsterdam, a dark room in Porto Alegre, a bed in Hong Kong where she had said the truest thing she'd ever said to anybody without opening her mouth once. She reached for him because it was the only language she had ever been fluent in and because she was drowning in the other one.

He stepped back.

Not hard. He didn't put a hand up or say anything sharp. He moved one step away from her and it was enough, and it was terrible, and she stopped with her hand half out

between them.

"No," he said. Quietly. "Not that. You don't get to do that this time."

And she stood there with her hand in the air in front of a man she loved and understood, all at once, exactly what it was going to cost to be here: that the one thing she could do had just been taken off the table, and that everything left in her was in a language she couldn't speak, and she was going to have to speak it anyway.

She put her hand down.

He was quiet for a long time.

He'd sat down at some point, on the arm of the chair with the jacket on it, and he was looking at the floor between his shoes, and she could see him working. She had never once in her life been as afraid as she was standing in that room waiting to find out what a person did with what she'd handed him.

"Okay," he said, at last.

"Okay?"

"I believe you."

She hadn't known what she was braced for until it wasn't that. "You don't have to. You shouldn't. I lie for a living, Chuck, I'm better at it than anyone you've ever met, you have no way to—"

"I know." He looked up. "I know exactly what you are. I've known you were something like this since a piazza in Milan, and I've had a long time to think about it, and I'm not stupid, and no, I can't verify a word of it." His voice was flat and tired. "I believe you anyway. Because I'm choosing to. That's the only way anybody ever believes anybody about anything, and I made this decision a long time ago on an airplane."

She could not speak.

"You want to know what I actually think?" He rubbed his face with one hand. "I think you just told me the worst things about yourself in the worst possible order because you couldn't stand to leave any of them out. That's not how people lie. People lie well." He

let his hand drop. "And you told me about the stars."

She went completely still.

"In Brazil," he said. "You had stars on your ceiling. The glow-in-the-dark ones, and you didn't get the constellations right, you just put them wherever." He said it without any weight on it at all, the way you'd hand somebody back something they dropped. "I've had that ever since. You gave me that. Whatever else you are, that's in there too, and I've never once needed you to prove it to me."

The room went out of focus.

He had held a child on a ceiling in a country she'd said four sentences to him in, all that time, without asking her a single question about it. She had spent every day of it certain that if he knew what she was he'd be gone, and he had been carrying the other thing the whole time, the small piece under all of it, and he had never once put it down.

"Chuck—"

"So that's not the part I can't get past." He said it slowly, like he was finding it as he went. "You want to know what I can't get past."

"Yes."

"Why did you go?"

She could have made it good. She'd understand that later, and it was the closest she came to failing in that room. She had a version. She had the shape she'd built and unbuilt on the freeway, the reasons attached, the danger, the life she couldn't offer, all of it defensible and every word of it true and the whole of it a lie in the way that mattered.

"I told myself I was protecting you," she said.

He came off the chair arm like she'd pulled him.

"Don't."

It came out of him with a violence that had nothing in it she recognized, and she took a step back before she could stop herself, and he was already moving, three steps to the window and three back, his hands up in his hair, and when he turned around the tiredness was gone out of his face and something else had come up under it that had been down there a very long time.

"Don't say that to me. Do you have any idea. Do you have any idea how many people have said that exact sentence to me?"

"Chuck—"

"My mother left when I was nine." He wasn't shouting. He was somewhere past shouting, in the fast bright register of a man who has finally been handed the thing he's been carrying words about for twenty years. "Nobody has ever told me why. Ellie thinks it was to keep us out of something. My father went out for pancake mix when I was fourteen and did not come back, and he kept paying the mortgage, do you understand that? He kept paying. For years. From wherever he was. He was taking care of us. That was him protecting us, that's the version, that's what everybody says when it comes up, which is never, because we don't talk about it."

"I know—"

"Bryce Larkin was the best friend I ever had and he got me thrown out of Stanford three weeks before I graduated. Framed me for cheating. Killed the whole thing, my degree, my job, all of it, and I found out years later it was so I wouldn't get recruited. He wrecked my life to keep me out of a building." He was breathing hard. "And every single one of them loved me. That's the part. Not one of those people hated me. Every one of them looked at me and decided what I could handle and then went ahead and did it, and not one of them asked. Not one. Not once. Nobody has ever once asked me what I wanted to be protected from."

He stopped in the middle of the room.

"And now you," he said. "You're the fourth."

She stood there and took it, because it was true, and because there was nothing on earth she could have said.

"How long?" he said.

"What?"

"How long have you known what you were doing to me." His voice had come down. It was worse down there. "Not the job. Not any of that. How long have you known that you could have said something and didn't."

And there it was. She could have given him a soft number. She could have said I don't know and it would have been survivable and he would have let it go.

"Denver," she said. "Six months ago."

He looked at her.

"Your sister took me into the restroom at that restaurant," Sarah said. "She told me not to do it halfway. She said you'd survive almost anything except somebody with one foot out the door, because you'd already had a lifetime of that. And then she told me the way out. She said if there's anything true I could tell you, tell you, that you'd take almost anything if it was true." Her voice was going flat and level the way it did when the alternative was collapse. "I had something true. I had it right there. It was one sentence and I knew exactly what it would do and I stood outside in the cold and I couldn't get it out of my mouth, and then I got in the car."

The silence in that room had a floor to it.

"She was right," Sarah said. "She was right about all of it, she told me exactly what to do, and I heard her, and I got in the car anyway."

He turned away from her.

He stood with his back to her at the dark window, and she watched his shoulders go, once, and then get taken hold of.

"I was glad," he said. "That night. When Ellie went at you." He laughed, one syllable, at nothing. "I knew it was going to blow the whole thing up. I sat at that table and watched

my sister decide to get involved and I knew, and I was so tired of being the only one reaching that I let her do it anyway, and I've spent six months wondering whether it made any difference." He turned around. "And it turns out it did. It turns out she got you alone and said the exact right thing, the thing I could never have said myself, and it didn't matter at all."

"Chuck."

"Six months." His voice cracked all the way open. "Six months, Sarah. I've had six months of not knowing whether you were dead. Do you understand what that is? You'd disappear for a month and I'd tell myself, okay, that's the job, and then it was two, and then Denver, and then nothing. Nothing. No number, no name, no way on God's earth to find you, and I couldn't even file a report, because who do you file it with? I don't know your job. I didn't know your job." He was crying and didn't appear to know it. "I've spent a year in this house doing the only thing I know how to do, which is work, because if I stopped working I had to think about the fact that the best thing that ever happened to me decided, unilaterally, without asking, that I was better off without it."

He hit the doorframe with the flat of his hand, once, not hard, the sound of a man with nowhere to put anything.

"I need people around me to stop protecting me by hurting me."

It went through her like a current.

Because he wasn't talking about her. She heard it as it came out of him, heard the shape of it, the people, the plural, all of them, his mother and his father and Bryce and the woman standing in his study, gathered together into one exhausted sentence by a man who was not making a distinction, and he had put her in with them, and he didn't know he'd done it.

She was in the circle. She was one of the people he loved, named in the same breath as the ones who'd made the hole in him, and he had said it without noticing, and it was the largest thing anyone had ever said to her.

And then it went out of him.

She watched it go, the whole hot column of it dropping away at once, the way a wave pulls back off a beach, and what was left standing in the middle of the room was just a very tired man in a shirt he'd had on since morning.

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Stop protecting me, Sarah," he said. "Love me."

Quiet. Plain. No weight on any word.

He didn't say anything else. He didn't explain it or soften it or take it back. He stood in the middle of his beautiful empty house with the curtains drawn and the whole dark upstairs over his head and asked her, in six words, to be the first person in his life who did not decide on his behalf.

And Sarah, who had never in her life been able to do this, felt the answer come up whole.

It was right there. All of it, complete, in order, true, the sentence she had been carrying since a cold street in Denver and every day since, and her lungs filled, and her mouth opened, and everything in her went toward it.

Chapter 13: The House (II)

"I'm working through something."

It came out in the wrong voice, too flat and too loud, the voice she used on the phone with people who didn't matter, and she heard it happen and could not correct it. Her throat had closed to about the width of a straw. Every word had to be pushed through by hand.

And then the machinery stopped, exactly the way it had stopped on a cold street outside a restaurant in Denver, exactly the way it had stopped in the sun at a table in Sydney with his hand over hers, the whole apparatus locking up mid-sentence with the rest of it sitting right there behind her teeth.

She stood in it.

She could feel the shape of what came next and she could feel the old thing rising underneath to stop it, not as a thought, not as a voice, just the pure physical no she had been made out of, the hand that had closed her throat a thousand times and been right about it every time, and she stood in the middle of that man's study and did not let it win.

"But I won't leave."

It came out broken across the middle. Her voice went on leave and she had to take the last of it on a breath she didn't have.

She waited to find out what it felt like to have said it. It didn't feel like anything. Her hands were shaking.

"It'll be slow," she said.

Then nothing happened.

He didn't move and he didn't speak. The lamp on the desk made its circle of light and past the edge of it the doorway was dark, and past the doorway the kitchen, and past the kitchen the whole of that beautiful house standing empty around the two of them with its curtains pulled and its eight chairs pushed in and its dark upstairs. Somewhere a refrigerator cycled on.

She had never in her life let a silence go on.

She had filled ten thousand of them. It was the first thing she'd been taught and the best thing she did; you fill the space before the other person can put anything in it, you keep the shape of the conversation in your own hands, you never, ever let a room go quiet around a thing you've said. Every instinct she had was up and screaming to say more. To explain what she'd meant by slow. To tell him what she was working through and how, to give him the plan, to lay the reasons out where he could inspect them and be reassured by the workmanship.

She didn't.

She stood there with her hands shaking and let the silence be as long as he needed it to be, and it went on, and it went on, and it was the hardest thing she had done since she turned around in an airport.

He looked at the floor. Then at her. He didn't help her.

"I'm sorry."

It arrived nowhere near where it should have. It came after the silence had already gone on too long, attached to nothing, out of sequence, in a room where the last thing said had been a promise about being slow, and it landed in the middle of the floor between them like something dropped.

Two words. Against a stairwell in Budapest and a baby on a doorstep and a year of a man not knowing whether she was dead. Against a house with the curtains shut.

She knew exactly how small it was. She said it anyway, because it was true and it was the only thing she had left that hadn't been asked for, and she did not put a single word after it. No for all of it. No I know that doesn't fix anything. She had spent her whole life building the frame around a sentence so it would land where she wanted it to land, and she left this one lying there without any frame at all, and stopped.

He didn't answer it.

He didn't say it's okay. He didn't say I know, which her mother had said in a kitchen eleven weeks ago and which had cost her mother nothing to say, because that had been a mother, and this was not that, and there was nothing free in this room. He heard it. She watched him hear it. Something went across his face that had grief in it and no absolution anywhere, and he let it sit there on the floor where she'd dropped it, and did not pick it up.

Then it hit her.

It came up from underneath with no warning at all, the way the ground goes, and it was not the thing that had happened to her half an hour ago while she was talking about Ryker. That had been a leak. She had been somewhere else entirely, up and behind and to the left of herself, watching a woman's face get wet while the woman went on

producing information, and she had noted it the way you note weather through a window.

This was not that. This was happening to her, in her body, where she was, and there was nobody up in the corner of the room watching it from a distance. She was present for it. Everything in her chest came apart at once and she was there for the whole thing.

She had cried perhaps three times since she was seven years old.

She did nothing about it. That was the strangest part, and she understood it only later: she had no procedure. She didn't turn away from him. She didn't put her hands over her face or get herself under control or step back into the dark part of the room. Every other person on earth had learned by ten years old what you do with your face when this happens in front of somebody, and she had learned instead how to make it never happen, and now that it was happening she had absolutely nothing to do with her hands. They hung there. Her breathing came apart into pieces that didn't fit together. She stood in the middle of the light from the desk lamp and came apart in front of him with her arms at her sides, completely undefended, making a sound she'd never heard herself make.

And she did not apologize for it. It didn't occur to her, then or afterward, to manage what it was doing to him.

He watched her.

He didn't come. He stood four feet away with his hands at his sides and watched the whole of it and did not move one inch toward her, and she understood, in whatever part of her was still able to understand anything, that he wasn't being cruel. He was letting her finish. There was something left she hadn't paid and he wasn't going to take it off her by putting his arms around her before she got there.

She got there.

"Can I stay."

It came out of her quiet and flat, no rise at the end of it, the smallest question she knew how to ask. She had asked it in six cities without ever once using words: a hotel room in

Milan with two men in the street below, a canal in Amsterdam, a bad night in Porto Alegre, five days in Hong Kong. Let me in for a while. I'll be gone by morning. It was the only shape of asking her whole life had given her and it fit in her mouth like something worn smooth.

And then the machinery locked up again.

Because there was another word, and it was one syllable long, and it was the entire remaining architecture of the person her father had made. Every rule he'd handed her existed to prevent it. You do not plan past the exit. You do not put down anything you can't leave in three minutes. You never look back, and you get back in the car, and the reason you can walk out of any room on earth is that you never once told anybody you weren't going to.

She stood there and shook and pushed it out.

"Forever."

He made a sound. It wasn't a word.

She kept going, because he had to understand, because the woman who did what she did and had left every single person who had ever loved her had just asked a man for permanence and he was owed some account of how that was possible.

"I can't quit you."

It was not a declaration. She was not able to make declarations; the language for that had been taken out of her before she was eight and she had never gotten it back. It was a report. She was telling him that the thing she was best at in the world, the one skill that had never failed her, the clean walk-away she had performed on a woman in a parking lot and a widow in a garden and a dying boy in Phoenix and her own mother twice and a four-month-old girl on a doorstep, had stopped working on him. She had tried it. She had used the full instrument, six months of silence and four countries and the whole discipline, and it had not worked, and she had come back, and it was never going to work, and she was telling him so.

That was the closest she could get. She did not say the other thing. She had never once said it out loud to anybody in her life and she did not say it now.

He crossed the room.

He came at her fast and got his arms around her and pulled her in against him so hard it took the air out of her.

There was nothing careful in it. That was what went through her, dimly, with her face against his shirt and her feet not entirely under her: he had always been careful. Every single time. A hand closed around hers on a bridge, gently, once, and then let go before it could mean too much. A whole night in a wrecked bed in Brazil where he barely moved, holding on to her like a man holding water. Five days in Hong Kong where he never said the word stay out loud because saying it might have ended it. All of it measured. All of it calibrated down to the size he'd judged she could survive, by a man who had spent a year in six cities keeping his hands open so she would not bolt.

He wasn't measuring anything now. He had one arm all the way around her back and the other hand at the back of her head and he was holding on to her the way you hold on to somebody who's going over the side, hard enough to hurt, hard enough that she could feel his whole body deciding it, and he did not say a word. He didn't have to. It was the same sentence she'd said, in the only language he'd ever really used with her.

I'm not letting go.

She stood in it and let it happen to her.

Her arms came up eventually and closed around him, and she put her face into his shoulder, and she was still crying, and it was not getting better yet.

Nothing was fixed. She could feel that as plainly as she could feel his hands. The thing in her that had made her get in the car was not gone; it was right there, running its arithmetic in the background as it always had, the door and the distance to it and the car in the drive and the clean simple relief of the road, laid out and available and costing nothing. It had not stopped. She understood, with his heart going against her ear, that it might never stop.

She stayed where she was.

It was one room, on one night, and she had absolutely no idea whether she could do it again tomorrow.

She did it now.

Chapter 14: The Landing

She resigned on a Thursday, in a building in Virginia, in a room with no windows.

There was paperwork. There is always paperwork; the machine that had made her out of a girl with a knife had a form for unmaking her, and she filled it in and signed the name they'd given her at the bottom of it.

Graham took the meeting himself.

He tried Budapest, which was the correct move and the only one he had. He had all of it: the order she'd refused, Ryker dead by her hand, a retrieval that had never come in and a child nobody had laid eyes on since, eleven days off the board and then, later, six months of silence with her file open on somebody's desk. It was enough to end her. It was enough to end her badly, in a way that involved a room like this one and no more paperwork at all.

It didn't move her, and they both understood why before he'd finished saying it. He was threatening to take a career she was in the act of handing him across the table. There was nothing in his hand. Everything he could reach for, she had already put down.

She told him she'd prepared for this conversation a long time ago. She didn't say how. He asked, twice, in two different shapes, and both times she refused, and that refusal was the whole of it: he had trained her himself, and he knew what she was capable of, and she let him sit with his own estimate of her thoroughness instead of giving him something to check. Anything she could have named would have been a handle. She named nothing.

Then she told him a fact, and attached nothing to it.

She had been sixteen. They had never had her real name, or her father's; they had taken a girl out of a folder and never once looked underneath it, so there had been no way on earth for any of them to find her mother even if it had occurred to somebody to try.

It hadn't occurred to anybody. Nobody had asked. There had been a man by a tree in an empty lot and a girl who had just watched her father go to prison and had nowhere left to be, and in the whole of it not one person had said is there anyone. If anybody had said it she'd have answered. She was sixteen years old. She'd have answered in four seconds.

And she hadn't been the only one.

She left it there. She didn't say think about how that would look. She didn't need to. He sat across from her and did his own arithmetic in his own head, in his own time, and she watched him do it and said nothing at all, which was better than anything she could have said.

The terms were boring. She goes quietly. Nobody hears anything from anybody. She stays away from him and he stays away from her, and nothing happens, forever. It wasn't a demand. It was a description of a stable arrangement, offered by someone who had no further use for him.

He asked her, near the end, whether she understood what she was giving up.

"You can bury me," she said. "You can put whatever you want in the file. I don't care. I'm done."

She'd said it before, almost word for word, at fourteen, in a rented kitchen in New Mexico, to a different man who had also believed he owned her. It had worked then for the same reason it worked now, which was that there was no angle in it. There was nothing to push against. You cannot negotiate with somebody who has stopped wanting anything you have.

At the door she stopped, because there was one more thing and it wasn't a threat.

"You never had me," she said. "You had a sixteen-year-old you didn't send home."

Then she left the building, and it held. Nobody came. Nobody has ever come.

She drove down to Temecula most weekends after that.

There was no arrangement about it and nobody had asked her to. The screen door was unlatched, and Molly had reached the age where she narrated her entire life at volume to whoever was nearest, and Emma had started saying when you come Sunday instead of if, which was the closest either of them got to discussing it.

Nothing was fixed. Her mother still didn't ask questions and Sarah still couldn't have answered most of them, and there were whole afternoons that were awkward in the way of people who love each other and have no shared vocabulary. They were getting a vocabulary. It was slow.

What she was going to do with the rest of her life, she had no idea. People kept asking, in the polite way, and she kept saying she hadn't decided, which was true, and which nobody found alarming except her.

The house had a sound to it now, and Chuck still wasn't used to it.

He noticed it coming in from the garage on an ordinary evening with a bag of groceries and his laptop under his arm: the house made noise. There was water running somewhere upstairs. There was a radio on in the kitchen, tuned to something he wouldn't have picked. For as long as he'd owned the place the only sound in it had been whatever he was doing in one room at the back, and now the building was audibly occupied, and every single time he came through the door his chest did something he had no plans to mention to anybody.

He'd stopped keeping his phone face-up. That was one of the things. For months it had lived screen-up on every surface he put it on, at dinner, in meetings, on the nightstand, angled where he could see it light, and he'd told himself that was work. He'd stopped, and he'd only noticed that he'd stopped about a week after the fact.

There were other residues. He still, some mornings, in the half-second before he was properly awake, ran the check. He still did a thing with hotel lobbies that he was fairly sure he was going to do for the rest of his life. And he had not, yet, entirely stopped bracing on the drive home.

He put the groceries down. The radio was doing something with horns.

She was on the floor in the front room with her back against the couch and her legs out in front of her and a bowl of something in her lap, and the curtains behind her were open onto the dark, and the lamp on the piano was on, and the light from upstairs came down the staircase and lay in a long stripe across the hall floor.

He looked at her for a second from the doorway, the way you do.

She'd had a hard day. He could see that before she said anything, and he could see roughly what kind of hard: not the bad kind, the tiring kind, something to do with the phone call she'd been dreading from a lawyer about the Temecula house and Emma's paperwork. Her shoulders were down. She'd taken her hair out of whatever she'd had it in. She was eating standing food sitting on the floor, which meant she'd gotten home and not been able to face the additional project of a plate.

"That bad?" he said.

She made a noise that meant it was fine, and then a second noise, a beat later, that meant it hadn't been fine but was now over, and he got both of them and went to put the milk away.

He came back with two beers and sat down on the floor beside her, because the floor was where she was.

He asked about the picture somewhere in the second hour.

They'd been talking about nothing much. The horns had given way to something with a piano in it. And it came into his head the way ordinary questions come into your head when you're sitting on a floor with somebody, and he asked it without weighing it first, which was itself a change he didn't notice.

"Do you have a picture of her?"

Sarah went still for about a second.

Then she reached over for her phone, and something happened in her face that he watched all the way through: a flicker of the old thing, the assessment, gone almost

before it arrived, and then under it something much worse and much better, which was that she was pleased, and appalled at being pleased, and trying to do all of that with her face while unlocking a telephone.

She scrolled for a while. Not long. She found it fast, actually, faster than a person finds a photograph they don't look at, and she turned the phone around and held it out to him.

It was a bad picture.

It went into him sideways. It was blurry and badly framed and taken from too far away and at an angle, the sort of photo you get when somebody who does not take photographs raises a phone quickly and doesn't check afterward. Molly was in the middle of it and in the middle of moving, a small blonde smear in a nightgown climbing onto something, her face turned away. Emma was half out of the left edge, in profile, cut off at the shoulder, looking down at the kid with an expression he couldn't fully see. There was a kitchen behind them. The light was wrong.

It was the only one. He scrolled a little, gently, and there was nothing on either side of it. One photograph, in a phone that had almost nothing else in it, of two people in a kitchen in Temecula on some Sunday, taken quickly by somebody who had then, apparently, kept it.

"She's got your chin," he said, which was probably not true and was the only thing he could get out.

"She's got my mother's chin."

"Okay. Then I withdraw it." He looked at it a while longer. "She looks like an absolute menace."

"She is."

He gave the phone back and she took it and put it face-down on the carpet beside her hip, near enough to touch, and he registered that too and had no idea what it meant, and let it go.

Later she leaned into him.

She'd been sitting closer for a while, in increments, as she did, and at some point her weight came against his side and his arm went around her without either of them making a production of it, and they sat like that in a house with the curtains open and the light coming down the stairs.

She let out a breath.

"Home," she said.

That was all. She didn't say it to him, exactly, and she didn't say it about anything, and there was no sentence around it. It arrived on its own the way the important things always arrived out of her, one word at a time, forced out under pressure from somewhere he would never be shown.

He didn't answer it. There was no answer to it; anything he said would have been smaller than the word. He put his mouth against the top of her head and left it there, and the radio played, and neither of them said anything for a while.

And then, twenty minutes later, over nothing at all, he watched it happen.

Nothing caused it. He'd think about that afterward. No phone rang. No car came down the street. She was in the middle of a sentence about a garbage disposal, and it arrived anyway, from wherever it lived, and he felt it before he saw it: her whole body going into that stillness he could have picked out of a crowd from fifty yards.

He watched her eyes go to the front door.

It took no time at all. If he hadn't spent six cities learning the vocabulary he'd have called it nothing, a glance, a woman losing her thread. He knew exactly what it was. He'd seen it in a restaurant in Denver and in a hotel room above a harbour, and he knew the whole sequence, the stillness, the flick to the exit, the fractional shift in her shoulders where the weight comes forward and the body gets ready to be somewhere else, and he knew what came after it too, because he'd watched what came after it four or five times, and the last time it had cost him six months.

He sat absolutely still with his arm around her and did not say one word.

He didn't say don't. He didn't say I see you doing that. He didn't make a joke, which was what he'd have done in Amsterdam, or ask if she was okay, which was what he'd have done in Porto Alegre, or hold the question behind his teeth and go cold, which was what he'd done in Sydney. He just let it be hers. It was the only thing he'd ever had to give her that nobody else had ever thought to give her, and he'd been giving it since a piazza in Milan, and he gave it now.

The shift in her shoulders held for a second.

Then it went out of her. Her weight came back against him, and her thumb started moving again on the neck of the bottle she was holding, and she picked up the sentence about the garbage disposal exactly where she'd dropped it, one syllable off, and never gave any sign that anything had happened at all.

He looked at the room over the top of her head. The lamp. The open curtains with the dark behind them. The stairs going up into a lit house. The phone face-down on the carpet with two people in a kitchen on it. Her, on the floor, against his side, talking about plumbing.

He had buried this. He wanted to be honest with himself about that, sitting there: he had done the whole thing, the grieving and the accepting and the putting away, and he'd finished it, and he'd been getting on with a smaller life in one room at the back of a house he'd bought for a bigger one. He didn't feel proven right about anything. There was nothing in him that wanted to be right. He felt like a man holding something he had put in the ground with his own hands, and there was no part of that which was triumph; it was closer to the feeling you get on a staircase in the dark when there's one fewer step than you counted on.

She was going to do that again. He understood that perfectly. She'd do it tomorrow and next month and probably in ten years, in a kitchen, in a car, in the middle of some ordinary sentence, and the door would be right there and it would always be right there.

And she was going to keep not going.

He tightened his arm a little and let her keep talking.