

A Little Bit of Space

by Anonymouse

Rated: M · Genre: Hurt/Comfort, Romance

Note: First attempt in this show's universe. Probably not my last. Mature content.

Chapter 1: The Beach

The Pacific didn't care that my life had a hole in it.

It came in and went out. It was loud. It was cold enough that my ankles ached, which I could name, which was more than I could say for the rest of what was happening to me. Late light, the kind that made the water look like metal. A lifeguard tower two hundred yards south, empty. The parking lot behind us a row of windshields catching the sun. Sand in my shoes. Salt on the wind. I had been colder, in worse places, for worse reasons, and I still could not get my pulse to treat this like weather.

Chuck kissed me like he was trying to give me something back.

I felt heat. It started in my mouth and dropped through me like I'd missed a step on a stairwell. My hands were on his face before I authorized the movement. His mouth was familiar. My training sat up and snarled. You didn't get familiar. You got competent. You got out.

I pulled back.

His face. Hope so unguarded it was almost indecent. I had a file on this man. I had a marriage license with my signature on it, verified by three separate analysts who had no reason to lie to me. I had a government psychiatrist who'd used the words *selective retrograde* like they were a kindness.

The paper ended at his name. The rest of him was standing in front of me, and I had no way in.

"Chuck," I said, because that was his name, because my mouth knew it.

"Sarah."

He said it like he'd been holding it.

The wind off the water put salt on my lips. I could still taste him. When my pulse misbehaved I checked the exits: north along the sand, the parking lot, the highway, the water if I wanted to be theatrical about it. A couple with a dog, far enough not to matter. A gull arguing with a wrapper. I wanted my heart rate to come down. I wanted my mouth to stop tingling. I wanted, with a force that embarrassed me, to lean back in.

There was a feeling under the heat that I refused to pick up. Naming it would have been an admission, and I had already admitted enough for one beach.

"I need—" I looked at the water instead of him. "Time. And a little bit of space."

He swallowed. I had to lift my chin to keep his face. I followed the movement down his throat.

"Okay," he said. "Yeah. Of course. Whatever you—" He stopped himself, which I would learn was unusual. Chuck Bartowski did not, as a rule, stop himself. "Okay."

"I'm not saying no." It came out before I could dress it in something more professional, and I couldn't leave it hanging, letting him think the kiss had been nothing. Nothing else made my knees consider mutiny. "I feel something. I don't have a better word. A spark. It's—" I flexed my hands at my sides, wanting a weapon for no reason that would hold up in a briefing. "It's undeniable. I'm still working on the rest."

His smile was bright enough that I had to look away. It also looked like it hurt.

"That's," he said, and then laughed once, like he'd been punched and found it funny. "That's more than I had ten minutes ago. I'll take it. I'll take space. I'm great at space. I mean, I'm terrible at space. But I can learn. I can be a person who learns space."

"Chuck."

"Right. Stopping."

I smiled, then shut it down. That was its own problem.

We walked back to the car without talking. The sand had gotten into everything. My calves ached in the ordinary way of a person who had been standing still too long in cold water, which was almost a relief. Ordinary I could file. The rest of it sat in my mouth and would not go.

He drove like he was afraid of startling me. The coast highway unspooled in a long pale line, ice plant on the banks, the radio off. I sat in the passenger seat and tried to find the place in my head where a marriage should be. There was a blank. Dark I could have worked with. This was white space. A redacted paragraph. I could press on it and feel only the pressure of my own pushing.

He kept both hands on the wheel. I kept both hands on my thighs. The air between us felt occupied. His car smelled like coffee and the dryer sheets I would later recognize in

his bedroom. I did not know that yet. I only knew that my lungs liked it, and that liking it felt like a security problem.

The apartment was on Franklin, Echo Park, a courtyard building I had in a file and in my feet. Spanish plaster, a fountain that did not quite work, other people's windows looking into the same square of sky. Ground floor. The door opened into a living room that had been lived in for years: open to the kitchen, a couch with a dent in one cushion, a blanket over the arm folded by someone who cared about folding. The air was warm and a little stale, as if the day had been waiting in the rooms for someone to come back and use them. Too many photographs. A version of me I hadn't met, in frames, on the fridge, on a shelf over the TV. On the wall by the hall there was a picture of us on a beach that was not this beach. I was laughing. I didn't remember being a person who laughed like that with her mouth all the way open.

I stood in front of it too long. The frame was slightly crooked. I did not straighten it.

"You can stay," Chuck said from the kitchen doorway. He had the posture of a man trying not to crowd a skittish animal, which would have annoyed me if it hadn't also been accurate. Flour on his shirt for no reason I could identify. Later I would learn he baked when he was nervous. In that moment I thought: this man is a mess. This man is looking at me like I invented daylight. "Or I can go to Morgan's. Or a hotel. I don't — Sarah, I don't want you to feel like you have to sleep in a museum of a life you don't remember."

The kitchen behind him was the warmest room. Wood counters. A dish rack with two plates. A wooden spoon in a jar. The smell of something that had been sugar a few hours ago. It wanted me in it. I could feel that the way I could feel a door at my back.

"I'll get my own place," I said. "Nearby." I paused. "I asked for space, and I meant it."

“Nearby is good,” he said, too quickly. “Nearby is — there’s a building on Olive that’s not terrible. I mean, it’s a little terrible. The parking is a war crime. But it’s six minutes. Without traffic. With traffic it’s a cry for help.”

“I’ll find it myself.”

“Right. Yes. Autonomy. Love that for — I’m going to stop talking.”

I packed in the bedroom off the hall.

Ground floor. Courtyard window, the one the file called a security problem and Chuck, in some other life, had probably called a door. The closet was already unpacked. That was the first wrong note. Dresses on hangers. Jeans stacked. A row of boots with the heels even. A spy did not live like that. A spy lived out of a bag and left the bag zipped, because zipped meant you could be gone in ninety seconds and the room would not have an opinion about you. Someone had hung these things. Someone with my hands. I stood there with a suitcase open on the bed, the same hard-sided black one I had taken through a dozen cities, and I put the life back into it one piece at a time, and my throat did a thing I did not authorize.

Chuck stayed in the kitchen. I could hear him not coming down the hall.

I found it myself.

Olive was a street of stucco boxes and jacarandas that dropped purple trash on the sidewalk. The building had a cracked stairwell and a lock that stuck if you were impatient with it. Laundry smell on the second landing, someone else’s detergent, too sweet. Third floor, corner unit, sightlines on the stairwell and the lot. West-facing windows. Beige carpet that had been cleaned by a machine and still remembered every tenant. A kitchen with a fluorescent bar that hummed. A bathroom fan that rattled on a delay. The super didn’t ask questions when I paid six months cash.

I set the suitcase on the bed.

The bed was new. The sheets were new. The whole room had the blankness of a place that had not decided what it was for. Street noise came up through the glass: a bus, a dog, someone laughing two buildings over and then stopping. The light at that hour was flat and a little dirty. I sat on the edge of the mattress with my hands on the suitcase clasps and told myself, the way I had told myself in Prague and in a motel outside Minsk and in a safehouse in Virginia with no windows, that I would live out of the bag.

I unpacked.

I hung three shirts and two jackets. I lined my shoes up with the heels even. I put the empty suitcase on the closet floor and stood there looking at it like I had committed a security violation, because I had. You did not unpack. Unpacking was how you got caught caring about a room. Unpacking was how a room got its hooks in. I had known that before I had known my own cover name. My hands had emptied the bag anyway, neat, efficient, as if they had learned a different rule in a life I could not reach.

I almost put the shirts back in.

I left them hanging.

One mug, black, no writing. A coffee maker. A chair that didn't match anything because there was nothing to match. I stood in the middle of the carpet and told myself this was a life.

My pulse disagreed.

The days in that room had a sound. The fluorescent bar. The fan. The bus on the hour. I ran in the morning before the heat got into the stucco. I trained in the sad gym on the

first floor. I ate standing up at the counter because the chair felt like a decision. At night the west windows held the last of the sun until the whole apartment went orange and then gray, and I would sit on the bed with my back against the wall and look at the closet, at the empty suitcase on the floor, and wait for the urge to pack it again.

The urge came. I did not pack it. That felt like losing.

The money showed up nine days after the beach.

They called both of us. A government building with bad coffee and better HVAC, a conference room that had been designed to make people sign things. A woman from restitution who was better at this than she wanted us to notice. Chuck sat on my left, close enough that I could have touched his sleeve and did not. He had dressed like a person going to court. I had dressed like a person going to a meeting she intended to leave.

The woman opened a folder.

“Assets seized by Director Clyde Decker after he intercepted a Carmichael Industries transaction and froze the offshore network,” she said. “Origin: a wedding gift from Hartley Winterbottom to Charles and Sarah Bartowski, originally valued at approximately eight hundred and seventy-seven million. Carmichael expenditures against that gift: forty-two million. Buy More, Castle, aircraft, equipment. A residential purchase had been initiated and did not close. Remaining balance seized and now released: eight hundred and thirty-five million, various instruments. Director Decker’s actions have been disavowed. The funds are released jointly. Both names. We are not in a position to hold them.”

Eight hundred and thirty-five million. My training supplied the operational uses before anything else could catch up: identities, a disappearance, a life so complete even Casey wouldn’t find me. Hartley Winterbottom. I had the name in a file. British. A scientist.

The man the CIA had overwritten with a Russian arms dealer and then, later, tried to give back to himself. He had given us nearly a billion dollars for a wedding I could not remember. We had spent some of it on a store and a jet and a hole in the ground called Castle. There had been a house. It was in the folder as a purchase that had not closed. Decker had frozen the rest before anyone could sign. Decker had been dirty. Now they wanted to hand eight hundred and thirty-five million back as if a conference table could undo any of that.

Chuck had gone still in the way he did when he was thinking too fast. I could feel it beside me.

"I don't want it," I said.

The woman blinked. "Mrs. Bartowski—"

"Walker is fine."

"The gift is jointly held. We can't release it to one of you without the other."

"Then don't release it."

Chuck turned his head. Not much. Enough. "Sarah."

"I don't remember a wedding," I said, to him, to the room, to the folder. "I don't remember Hartley Winterbottom giving us anything. I don't want eight hundred and thirty-five million dollars attached to a life I can't verify. I don't want a life I have to buy."

The woman looked at Chuck. Chuck looked at me. His mouth did a complicated thing and then settled.

"We're not buying anything," he said, quietly, for me. Then, to her: "Can it sit. A holding account. Both names. Nobody spends it. Nobody seizes it again because some other Decker has a theory."

"We can do that," she said. "We cannot take a name off without both signatures."

"Good," Chuck said. "Because I'm not taking hers off."

I looked at him. He looked back, and there was no triumph in it. Only the same readiness from the beach, the same unguarded hope, turned into a legal position.

"I don't want it," I said again.

"I know." His voice stayed in the space between us. "Hartley gave it to us so we could have a start. I'm not spending a dime of a start you didn't agree to. It can sit until you're old. It can sit until I'm old. I am not erasing you because Decker was a bastard and your memory is. That's — I'm going to stop before I make a speech in a federal conference room."

I signed what I had to sign to make them stop talking. Joint holding. Both names. I did not look at the total again. In the parking lot the afternoon was too bright. Chuck stood by his car with his hands in his pockets, giving me the lot, giving me the exit.

"You can be angry," he said. "That's allowed. Hartley was a good man. The gift was a good gift. None of that has to land today."

"I'm not angry at Hartley." I didn't know who I was angry at. Decker. The CIA. The version of me who had accepted a fortune and a husband and a house we had not even bought yet and then lost the receipt. "I meant it. I don't want it."

"I heard you." He nodded at my car. "Drive safe. The Olive parking is still offensive."

I almost smiled. I didn't. I got in the car and I drove past Franklin without stopping, because the lights were on in the ground-floor windows and I could see his shape in the kitchen, moving, existing, being a person who had just sat in a room and refused to take my name off eight hundred and thirty-five million dollars, and I wanted.

I went home to the chair and the mug and the empty suitcase and the bed I had not yet slept in for more than four hours at a stretch, and I didn't call him.

I lasted eleven days.

On the twelfth night I woke up already reaching.

The sheets were cold. My *feet* were cold. The apartment had no history in it. The quiet sat in the corners the way dust did, settled, claiming. My skin felt tight. The fluorescent bar in the kitchen was off and still I could hear the ghost of its hum. I lay there and did a breathing count I had learned in a basement in Virginia and it did nothing except make me aware of my own mouth, which wanted a mouth that was not mine. Under that, lower, a pull I would not name. Naming it would have made it a reason. I got up. I dressed without turning on the light. I skipped the bra. I thought about putting on a gun and didn't, which was its own confession.

I looked at the closet. The shirts on the hangers. The suitcase on the floor, empty, a mouth left open.

Olive was empty. Franklin was empty. I parked on the street and sat with my hands on the wheel until sitting became more cowardly than walking through the courtyard. The fountain made its tired sound. Someone's window was a blue television square. His door was dark.

I knocked.

It was 12:40 in the morning. I had no cover story. I had no plan except the one my body had written without copying me.

A light came on behind the door. A chain slid. He opened it in a T-shirt and pajama pants with little robots on them, hair from another planet, and the look of a man who had not been asleep so much as waiting with his eyes closed.

“Sarah,” he said, and then he saw my face. His shoulders dropped a fraction. Readiness. Like he’d always known I might show up like this, furious about it. “Hi. Come in. Or don’t. You can — whatever you want. That’s — I mean that.”

I stepped inside.

The apartment at night was a different animal than the apartment in the afternoon. Quieter. Warmer. The beach photograph a dark rectangle. The kitchen a mouth of shadow through the open plan. It had been waiting again. I shut the door with my heel.

I had been trained to assess a room in under two seconds. I assessed him instead. The pulse in his throat. How his hands hung open at his sides, not reaching. How badly he wanted to.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” I said.

His voice went gentle. “Okay.”

“That’s a lie. I know why I’m here. I don’t like that I know.”

“Okay.”

“If you say okay again I’m going to—”

I kissed him.

The beach kiss had been his to give. This one I took. I walked him back into his own hallway with my mouth already open, my hands already under the hem of that stupid T-shirt, and the sound he made went straight down my spine and lit every fuse I had left.

Chapter 2: The Door

He tasted like toothpaste and sleep. He kissed like he'd been saving it.

I had his shirt off before we cleared the hallway. Palms on his chest, the heat of him, a scatter of freckles I did not remember and recognized anyway. My body put them under *mine* without asking me. I bit his lower lip for that, and he made that sound again, helpless, like I'd taken something apart he didn't know was assembled.

"Sarah—"

"Don't." I was breathing too fast. I could hear it. I never let anyone hear it. "Don't make this a conversation."

"Not a conversation," he said against my mouth. "Got it. I'm a — mmph — I'm a vault. A sexy vault. I'm going to stop."

"Please."

We hit the living room. The lamp by the couch was still on, a low warm pool that made the dented cushion look like someone had just gotten up. The blanket over the arm. A stack of mail on the table he had not opened. The back of my legs found the arm of the couch and I could have let it happen there, upright, efficient, a thing I could leave

without looking at a bed. His hands were on my waist, holding me in the world, and I made a noise I did not authorize and dragged him toward the hall.

The apartment at night wanted this. I could feel it in the boards, in the way the open room narrowed toward the photograph I was not going to look at. I knew the way.

That stopped me at the bedroom door. Ground floor. Courtyard window. My hand on the frame, his mouth on the back of my neck because I had tilted without meaning to, and the floor plan sitting in my muscles like a planted device. The bed would be on the wall opposite the window because that's where it was, because that's where *we* had put it, and I had not been consulted.

"Sarah?" He'd felt me freeze. He was breathing hard, but he'd stopped on a dime, hands already looser. "We can go back to the couch. We can sit. We can not do any of this. You knocked. That's already — you can still leave. I'm not going to be a guy who makes this weird. Well. Weirder."

I turned in the doorway. We were too close to eye level, which was a problem, because his eyes were doing that thing again. The thing from the beach. Like I was the answer to a question he'd been asking for years.

"You're my husband," I said. It came out flat. A briefing fact. "I read the file."

Pain moved across his face. He hid it badly. "Yeah."

"So I'm not using you." I needed that to be true. I wasn't sure it was true. "I need this. I don't have a pretty way to say it. My body is — it's not taking orders. And you said whatever I want."

"I did." His hands came back, slow, telegraphing, and settled at my hips like they'd been cut for the job. "I meant it. You want to leave, we leave it. You want coffee, I will make

the loudest, most aggressively normal coffee of all time. You want—" He swallowed. "You want me. You have me. You're my wife. That's not a trap. That's just the truest thing I know."

I took his wrist and put his hand higher, under my shirt, onto bare skin, and his pupils blew.

"This," I said. "I want this."

The bedroom was dim. Courtyard light through the blinds in stripes, falling across a bed that had been made by a person who believed in making a bed even when no one was coming. The window that was also a door. Fountain sound, faint, through the glass. Two nightstands. His side had a glass of water and a book face-down, the spine cracked. The other side was clear, as if it had been waiting and had gotten tired of waiting and had decided to be empty on purpose. The room smelled like him, soap and dryer sheets and sleep, and my lungs liked it. Traitors, my lungs.

There was a feeling in that room I would not pick up. If I picked it up I would have to admit I had been here, in my body, for years, and the white space would have to answer for itself.

He undressed me like I might shatter and like he might die if he went too slow. Both at once. My shirt, my jeans. His mouth on my collarbone, my shoulder, the underside of my breast with a reverence that would have been funny if I could have found the air to laugh. When he got my nipple into his mouth I made a sound that didn't belong to a spy. It belonged to a woman on a bed she didn't remember buying, with a man she didn't remember marrying, and my back arched off the mattress anyway.

"Sorry," I said, which was insane.

He lifted his head. His mouth was wet. "For what?"

“I don’t — keep going.”

He kept going.

He knew things. That was the first real terror, bigger than the spark, bigger than the doorway. He knew that if he dragged his teeth lightly along the tendon in my neck I would tip my head to give him more. He knew the spot just above my hip that made my thigh fall open. He knew to put his palm there, low on my stomach, not quite where I needed it, until I grabbed his hand and put it where I needed it, and he made a sound like I’d given him a gift.

I was wet. Embarrassingly, obviously wet, and when his fingers slid through me I could hear it, and I turned my face into the pillow because I was not a person who got this way from a hallway kiss and twenty feet of apartment.

“Hey.” His mouth at my ear. Two fingers, slow, not clever yet, just there, and my hips were already trying to work against him. “I’ve got you. You don’t have to hide. There’s no one here but us.”

“That’s the problem,” I said into the pillow, and then his fingers curled and I stopped having language.

He found it like he’d left it there. A place inside me that lit up so sharply I could have drawn a map, and maybe I had, for him, in a life I couldn’t reach. He rubbed, patient, filthy in how well he listened, and when he added his thumb to my clit I came with no warning and almost no sound, shaking, one hand fisted in his hair hard enough to hurt. He didn’t stop me. He rode me through it with his mouth on my jaw and his fingers stroking me past the point of sense, and I heard myself say *please* and his name, once, punched out of me.

It wasn't supposed to be like that.

I knew how to keep a piece of myself out of the room. I knew how to be in a body and not belong to what it was doing. I had never, in any version of myself I could get to, come apart in under five minutes because a man with robot pajama pants had put his hands on me like I was a country he'd already lived in.

I pulled him up by the hair and kissed him, tasting myself on his mouth, and reached for him. He was hard, heavy in my hand, and the noise he made when I stroked him was going to live in my spine. I didn't have the patience to be kind about it. I shoved his pants the rest of the way down and rolled, or he rolled me, or the bed decided, and then he was between my thighs and the head of him was pressing where I was still fluttering from the first one, and he stopped.

He stopped.

"Sarah." Forehead against mine. Shaking. "Look at me. Just — are we okay? I need you to say it. I need the words. I will not be the guy who gets this wrong."

I looked at him. I could have lied. I was excellent at lying.

"We're okay," I said. "I want you inside me. Now. I want you to stop being careful."

He pushed in on a groan that sounded like it hurt.

I was tight, even as wet as I was, and the stretch made my mouth fall open on nothing. He went slow because he was a liar, because I'd told him to stop being careful and he was still being careful, inch by inch, until he was all the way in and I could feel him everywhere, too deep, too much, right. My legs came up around his waist without a meeting. My body knew the lock. I locked my ankles anyway.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. “Oh my God, Sarah.”

“Move.”

He moved.

I didn't want elegant. I wanted the weight of him, the drag out, the slide back in, how he hit that same lighted place his fingers had found like the two of them had a union. I wanted my brain to shut up. It would not shut up. It kept offering reports: *he knows the angle; he knows when to grind; he knows you're going to come again if he keeps doing that with his hips; you know the sound he makes when you scratch his back; you have not been told the sound he makes when you scratch his back.*

I scratched his back.

He made the sound.

“Chuck—” It broke. I was going to come again, too fast, too easy, and I was angry about it, and I was rolling my hips to get there faster anyway. “Don't you dare stop.”

“Not stopping. Never stopping. You feel — you have no idea, you have no idea how you feel—”

I kissed him to make him stop saying things that were going to follow me home.

The second one took me under. Different from the first, bigger, a wave that started where he was buried and wrecked everything on the way out. I clenched around him and heard him curse, sweet and filthy, and then he was coming too, hips stuttering, my name in his mouth like a prayer he wasn't embarrassed to say in front of me.

After, the room went quiet. The courtyard light held. Somewhere in the apartment a pipe ticked as it cooled. His book was still face-down on the nightstand. The empty side of the bed was not empty anymore, and I could feel that in my ribs, a pressure I refused to call by its name.

He didn't collapse on me. He braked, shaking, and rolled us so I was on my side facing him, still joined, his hand a warm span at the small of my back. I should have gotten up. That was the old rule. Don't stay. Don't sleep. Don't let the night become morning.

I stayed.

My heart was trying to kick its way out of my chest. His was doing the same against my palm. I had the unhinged thought that they were trying to have a conversation the rest of us hadn't been cleared for.

"Hi," he said, after a minute, stupidly.

I laughed. It startled both of us. "Hi."

"That was—" He stopped. He chose. Chuck Bartowski, not saying the enormous thing. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Honesty felt like taking off a second set of clothes. "That was — I don't have a scale. I've had sex. I've had good sex. That wasn't — Chuck, how do you know how to do that."

It wasn't a question that wanted a technical answer. He gave me a careful one anyway.

"I've had a lot of time to learn you," he said. "I'm not going to recap it unless you ask. You didn't come here for a briefing."

“No.”

His thumb moved on my back, absent. I should have told him to stop. I moved closer instead, my face finding the place at the base of his throat like a key sliding into a lock it had been cut for. He smelled like sex and soap and that warm thing. His arm came around me, heavier. I tested it, a shift, and he loosened immediately, and that was worse than the orgasm. He would let me go. He would hold me like this and still let me go.

I stayed while our breathing evened out. I stayed while he pulled the blanket up with his foot in a move so clumsy I had to swallow. I stayed while his hand found my hair and rested there, present. I slept. I didn't mean to sleep. I dropped into it like a black bag over the head, except the bag was his chest and his heartbeat and the comfort of being held by someone who knew the weight of me.

I woke at 4:12 with my face still in his throat and one of his legs hooked loosely over mine.

For a long time I didn't move. The window was a pale square. He was dead asleep, mouth open, one hand slack on my hip. He looked younger. He looked like someone I could ruin.

I knew how to get out of a bed without waking the occupant. I did it. I found my jeans in the stripe of courtyard light. I found my shirt on the chair. I skipped the photograph on the wall. I didn't leave a note, because a note was a promise, and I had only asked for space.

The door clicked shut behind me.

In the car I sat until my hands stopped shaking. His street was starting to think about morning. I drove to Olive with the windows down, cold air, the city still mostly asleep, and I climbed the sticking lock and the sweet-detergent landing and I stood in the

shower of a bathroom that rattled its fan and did not know my name, until the water ran cold.

I could still feel him. Inside. On my skin. In the shape of his hand on my back. The tile was cheap and a little mildewed at the grout. I put my forehead on it.

The closet door was open a crack. The empty suitcase on the floor. The shirts on the hangers, still there, still a violation.

I said, to the tile, “What the hell was that.”

The tile, like the Pacific, did not care.

Chapter 3: Two Mugs

I trained at five because five was a time that belonged to no one.

The building had a sad little gym on the first floor: a treadmill that squeaked on the left belt, a rack of dumbbells with the 25s missing, a bag that had been taped so many times it was more tape than bag. The fluorescent here was worse than the one in my kitchen, greener, a color that made everyone look like they owed the room money. It smelled like rubber and old sweat and the lemon stuff the super used on Tuesdays. I wrapped my hands and hit the bag until my shoulders burned and my brain went quiet, except my brain would not go quiet. It kept serving me the inside of his wrist. The sound he made when I scratched him. How he'd stopped in the doorway. The stripes of courtyard light on his ceiling.

I hit the bag harder. The chain rattled. Someone on the second floor thumped the floor in protest. I did not stop.

My body was a system I had spent my entire adult life dominating. Pain was information. Hunger was a schedule. Exhaustion was a tactic. Want was a liability you redirected into the work. I had been recruited at sixteen. The work had gotten there before anyone else had a chance to teach me differently. A father who taught you to run did not teach you what to do with a man who held you like you were not a weapon. The CIA did not have a module on waking up with your mouth against someone's throat and wanting, desperately, to stay there.

The CIA had taught me that attachment was how you got people killed. Bryce had taught me that even the ones who loved you would lie to you for the mission. My father, the one with the aliases, had taught me that affection was a con with better lighting.

Chuck had taught me, in one night I could actually remember, that my body would betray every single one of them for the privilege of being known.

I hated him a little for it. I hated myself more.

I didn't go back the next night. Or the next. The apartment kept its own hours. Morning was the bus and the rattling fan. Afternoon was the west windows turning the beige carpet the color of weak tea. Evening was the fluorescent bar and the empty suitcase, which I had started closing and then opening again, as if the clasps were a conversation I could win. I bought a second mug by accident, standing in a grocery aisle under light that was too white, staring at a shelf like it had insulted me, and then I left the second mug in the bag on the counter for two days because one mug was a principle and two mugs was a crack. The bag sat next to the coffee maker. I walked around it. The apartment noticed. Rooms always noticed.

Carina called on the fourth day.

I hadn't told her about the beach, or the apartment, or 4:12 a.m. She called anyway, because Carina Miller had always had a talent for showing up where the blast radius was worst.

"Tell me you are not living in a sad box with one fork," she said, instead of hello.

I looked at the drawer. Two forks. I had a problem. "I'm fine."

"You sound like a person who has had sex and is angry about it."

I closed my eyes. "I'm hanging up."

"Please. I invented that voice. I have used that voice. Sarah." Her tone dropped the sequins. "Talk to me. Or don't talk to me and I'll book a flight, and you know I will wear something inappropriate on the plane just to punish you."

I sat in the chair that didn't match. The vinyl stuck to the back of my thighs. The parking lot through the window was a grid of ordinary cars, a dumpster, a jacaranda dropping purple on a windshield that was not mine. His street was six minutes away without traffic. I had timed it twice more, at different hours, for no operational reason I could defend. There was a feeling in the timing I would not name. Naming it would have made the apartment smaller.

"I kissed him," I said. "He kissed me. At the beach. They thought a kiss would hand me the years. It handed me this instead."

"But."

"But I felt it. In my body. Like a wire I didn't install." I pressed my thumb into the wrap-bruise on my knuckle. "I got an apartment. I asked for space. He gave it to me, which is — he's not what I expected from the file."

"The file is a comedy," Carina said. "I have met the file. The file does not make you eggs. Continue."

I stared at the second mug in its bag. "I went over there. Late. I didn't plan to. I knocked. We—" I stopped. I was not a person who told sex stories. I was a person who let Carina tell them and offered tactical notes. "It was good."

Carina let the silence sit, which she never did.

"It was—" I let out a breath. "He knew things, Carina. Things I didn't tell him. And I knew things. I knew how he wanted to be touched. I knew the sound he was going to make. I slept there. I don't sleep in other people's beds. I left before he woke up and I have been hitting a bag at five in the morning like it personally erased my memory."

"Mami," she said, quietly.

"Don't."

"I am not going to do the thing where I tell you you're in love. You will hang up, and I like your voice." A rustle, a lighter, the exhale of a woman who had never been afraid of a feeling in her life. "I will say this. You were the coldest, most beautiful professional I have ever worked with. You could lie with your whole face and then inventory a room. I was the other kind. If the objective required a man, I gave him myself and I did not apologize in the morning. I still would. You never would. You kept that off the work. You would rather shoot him. So if your body is refusing the inventory now, that is not a mission leftover. That is the only part of you they didn't know how to wipe."

"That's not comforting."

"It isn't meant to be comforting. It's meant to be true. The comforting part is that he is Chuck. He will wait until you are old and mean and still wearing that face you wear when you don't want to be seen. He waited when you remembered him. He will wait now." She paused. "Did you come?"

"Carina."

"I'm taking that as a yes. Multiple. You're welcome, by the way, for all the years I told you to sleep with men who actually liked you."

I smiled, and it pulled at a raw place. "I asked him for space."

"And then you showed up at his door in the middle of the night and let him make you see God. Sarah. Space is not a convent. Space is a door you can walk back through. You installed it. You can use it."

After she hung up I sat with the phone in my lap and did not drive to Franklin. I made coffee in the one mug I had committed to and left the second one in the bag. I trained. I ran the stairs until the super came out and asked if there was a fire. I stood in the shower and put my own hand between my legs and took it away again because it was wrong, because it wasn't his, because that was a sentence I was now living with.

On the eighth day I saw him at the grocery store.

The store was the loud kind, the kind with a bakery fan and a child crying in cereal and a floor that had been waxed until it was a hazard. I couldn't blame him for the coincidence. He was in produce, under the misters, holding an avocado like it had asked him a hard question. The air there was wet and cold and smelled like cut stems. He looked up and found me at the far end of the aisle, and his face did a complicated thing: joy, then the clamping down of joy, then a smile that was trying to be neighborly and failing because he had never been neighborly a day in his life.

“Hi,” he said, when I’d had no choice but to walk closer or look like I was fleeing a melon. “You — shopping. Me too. This avocado is a liar. It has a good face and a bad interior. I feel betrayed.”

“Throw it back.”

“I can’t. I’ve already bonded with it.” He glanced at my basket. Coffee. Eggs. Apples. The groceries of a person who refused to have a personality in her kitchen. “How are you?”

How was I. I could still feel the ghost of his thigh between mine when I slept, which was not often. I had looked up the marriage license again at two in the morning like the ink might have changed. I had stood in the courtyard in the dark two nights ago and not knocked.

“Fine,” I said.

He nodded, like fine was a report he’d accept without interrogation. “Good. That’s — good. I’m around. Not in a looming way. In a geographically unfortunate way. The avocado and I live six minutes from you. Without traffic.”

“I remember.”

His eyes flicked. *I remember*. I hadn’t meant it as a gift.

“Sarah.” He shifted the basket to his other arm. “The other night. I don’t need you to explain it. I don’t need you to come back. I mean, I want you to come back. I’m not going to pretend I don’t. But you don’t owe me a schedule. You don’t owe me breakfast. You wanted space, and then you wanted — and then you left, and that’s allowed. All of it is allowed.”

People did not talk to me like that. People gave me orders, or lies, or a want that came with a receipt.

"I know it's allowed," I said. "That's not the part I'm stuck on."

"What's the part?"

I looked at the liar avocado. I looked at his hands. I knew those hands. I knew what they could do to me in the dark.

"How well you know me," I said. "And how well I know you. I don't have the memories, Chuck. I checked. They're not hiding. They're gone. So I don't have an explanation for the rest of it that doesn't make me feel like I'm losing my mind. And I don't like losing."

"You're not losing." His voice had gone grocery-store quiet, the voice of a man who would have taken this conversation into a parking lot if I'd let him. "You're in it."

I took an avocado off the pile at random. It was probably also a liar. "I have to go."

"Okay."

I left him in produce. I paid. The cashier asked if I had found everything. I said yes, which was a lie with a receipt. I sat in the car in the lot with the bags on the passenger seat and put my forehead on the wheel and said, calmly, "I am not going over there tonight."

The apartment that night was worse. The fluorescent bar. The second mug still in its bag. The suitcase on the closet floor, open again, because I had opened it and then not packed it, again. I sat on the bed and ate an apple over the sink because the chair still felt like a decision, and the pull in my body had a schedule now, and I hated the

schedule, and I would not give it a word.

I went over there on night eleven, which I counted as a victory until I was in the courtyard again with my pulse in my teeth. The fountain. His door dark. I had parked on the street. I had sat for a shorter count.

This time he opened the door faster. This time I didn't pretend I didn't know why I'd come.

"I need you," I said, and watched it land in him like a blow he was grateful for. "Can it be just that."

He stepped back to let me in. The apartment took a breath. "It can be anything, Sarah. Come here."

Chapter 4: The Plan

I tried to be in charge.

The first time I had been a live wire looking for somewhere to ground. This time I had spent eleven days building a theory: if I ran it, I could survive it. If I stayed on top, if I kept my eyes open, if I treated his body like a terrain I could master, I would not end up with my face in his throat at 4 a.m. wondering who I was. I had practiced the theory in the Olive apartment, in the shower with the rattling fan, in the chair that stuck to my legs. The theory had looked sound under fluorescent light. Theories always did.

I had come in through the living room this time. Courtyard behind me, fountain doing its tired work. A pan in the sink from whatever he had eaten alone. The apartment smelled like dish soap and the ghost of garlic. He had said hi as if he were a whole paragraph. I

had kissed him in the kitchen doorway and then I had taken his hand down the hall, because if I stayed in the kitchen I was going to have to admit Ellie's sentence, and I was here for a theory, not a marriage.

His bedroom at midnight was the same animal as before. Courtyard light. The book on the nightstand, a different page. The glass of water. The empty side that was not going to stay empty. A sock on the floor he had missed. The window cracked an inch, night air, the fountain. I could have turned around at the door. I did not.

He let me.

I had him on his back in that bed I knew and didn't know, his hands where I'd put them on the headboard, my thighs bracketing his hips, and he looked at me like I was a religious experience he was trying to be respectful of. I sank down on him in one slow, shaking slide, and my theory lasted as long as it took to bottom out.

"God," I whispered.

"Yeah," he said, strangled. "Hi. Hello. You're — God, you're incredible. You don't have to — you can just — Sarah."

I put a hand on his chest to shut him up and started to move.

It should have worked. I knew how to stay in my own head. I knew how to set the pace and keep a corner of the room for myself. I rolled my hips like I was the one running this, and Chuck's mouth fell open, wrists flexing under my palm on the headboard, but I lost the plot too. The angle was merciless. He was deep, and every grind dragged him over that place he'd already mapped, and my thighs started shaking like I was new at this.

“You can let go of the headboard,” I said, because I was a hypocrite, because I wanted his hands.

They landed on my hips like they’d been waiting in a lobby. He didn’t take over. He followed. He lifted into me when I came down and I heard myself gasp, sharp, unpretty. I leaned forward to brace on the mattress and that made it worse, my clit catching on him, my hair in his face, his mouth finding my breast because it was there, because he could, because I let him.

“This doesn’t mean I’m staying,” I said, riding him, already shaking.

“I know.” He kissed the hinge of my jaw. “Stay anyway. Just for this. Just for now.”

Just for now was a door. I went through it.

I came with my forehead on his, breathing his air, my hips stuttering through it while he held me together with both hands and murmured things I was not going to survive: *that’s it, I’ve got you, you’re so — Sarah, you’re so —* I put my mouth on his to steal the rest of it. He came not long after, watching me, like he didn’t want to miss the version of my face I had not given him permission to see.

I should have gotten up then. Used the bathroom. Found my jeans. Left.

I sat on him instead, still joined, and stared at his mouth.

“You’re doing it again,” I said.

“Doing what?”

“Knowing me.” I moved, a circle, and his eyelashes fluttered. He was still half-hard. I was still sensitive. It was obscene, how much I wanted to go again. “I had a plan. It was

a good plan. It lasted four minutes.”

He laughed, out of air. “Your plans are usually better than that. I’ve seen your plans. They’re terrifying. This one got ambushed by, uh. Physics. Chemistry. The entire STEM department.”

“Don’t be cute.”

“I don’t know how to turn it off.” His hands slid up my back, slow. I let them. “You don’t have to tell me why you came back. I’m just glad you did. In a non-pressuring, very cool, avocado-liar kind of way.”

“The avocado was bad, wasn’t it.”

“It was a crime scene, Sarah.”

I smiled at him and climbed off before it could become anything else and went to the bathroom because I needed a door between me and his face.

His bathroom was the one room in the apartment that did not try to be charming. White tile, a crack in the grout by the faucet, a shower curtain with a pattern I refused to identify. Two toothbrushes. I stood there staring at them like they were a hostile cell. One was new, still in a package, in the drawer, as if he’d bought it and then lost his nerve. I opened the package. I used it. The mint was too much. I looked at myself in the mirror: hair, mouth, a red mark on my throat I didn’t remember asking for and didn’t want covered. The fan in this bathroom ran quieter than mine. That felt like an insult and a kindness at the same time. I said, “You are in control.”

The professional went back to bed.

He had pulled on the robot pants. I hated the robot pants. I crawled into them anyway, into the circle of him, and he opened his arms like this was just what we did, like I hadn't fled this exact configuration eleven days ago.

"Can I ask one thing," he said into my hair.

"You can ask."

"Are you eating? That's my one creepy husband thing. Ellie made me swear I wouldn't do a list. So that's the list. One item. Food."

I thought about the eggs, the apples, the coffee, the second mug in the bag. "I'm eating."

"Okay." He was quiet a second. "If you ever want company for that. Eating. Not — I'm not inviting myself to your sad fork apartment—"

"Carina told you about the fork."

"Carina told Morgan about the fork. Morgan told me about the fork in the style of a Greek chorus. I told Morgan to stop talking. It was a whole thing. You don't have sad forks. Forget I said forks."

I turned my face into his chest so he wouldn't see me laugh. His skin was warm. His hand found the back of my neck and stayed, a weight I could have shrugged off. I could have slept. I could have stayed until the pale window and the 4 a.m. math.

I stayed later than 4.

I stayed until the sky had opinions about morning and his breathing had gone deep and even and my body put down its weapons and curled into him like it had been trying to

get here for years. I traced his scars in the gray light. One on his shoulder, pale, the size of a fingernail. Something paler along his ribs. I didn't know the stories. My fingers knew the terrain.

At 5:51 I got up.

He made a sound, still asleep, and reached. I stood by the bed with my jeans in my hand and his hand found the place I'd been and spread there, empty, and I wanted to get back in. The want was physical, a hook behind my navel.

I dressed in the hallway. I closed the door quieter than the last time.

On the street the morning was already warm on the hood. A newspaper on a stoop. I sat in the car and watched the sun come up on the courtyard, his kitchen window going from dark to ordinary, and I thought about Carina saying *space is a door you can walk back through*, and I thought about his voice in the produce aisle saying *you're in it*, and I started the engine because if I didn't start the engine I was going to go back inside and wake him up and ask him to say my name until the white space filled in.

I drove.

I went home and stood in the kitchen under the humming bar and took the second mug out of the bag and washed it and put it next to the first one. The counter was the cheap laminate that came with the unit. The two mugs made it look like a person lived here. I looked at them together. My throat went tight. I would not name what that was. Naming it would have been an admission that the suitcase on the closet floor had been right to stay empty, and I was not ready to let a piece of luggage win.

I left them there.

Chapter 5: The Kitchen

Ellie called on a Sunday.

I had her in the phone as ELLIE WOODCOMB, which was how the file had her, which was cowardice, because she had sat with me in a hospital corridor after the beach and spoken to me like I was a person and not a classified incident. She had not asked me to remember her brother on a timetable. She had given me her number and said, *for whatever, Sarah, I mean it*, and I had not used it.

I picked up on the fourth ring because I was a coward, but I was not a liar to women who had been kind to me.

“Sarah. Hi. Is this an okay time? I can call later. I shouldn’t have called on a Sunday, Sundays are weird, I don’t know why I think Sundays are less invasive, that’s a construct—”

“Ellie,” I said, and heard fondness in it. “It’s fine.”

“Okay. Good. Hi.” She exhaled. In the background, a baby made a short complaint and then settled. Clara. I had a niece. The word sat in my mouth like a stone I wasn’t ready to spit or swallow. “I’m going to be a little bit direct, because I have a toddler and no remaining social grace. Chuck hasn’t told me anything specific. Which is how I know it’s bad. He tells me things when they’re fine. When they’re not, he bakes and says he’s fine, and I am a doctor, and also his sister, and I know what fine looks like on him. It doesn’t look like this.”

I stood at my window. The west glass was warm from the afternoon that had already gone. His neighborhood was a smudge of trees from here, a smear of roofs, the idea of a yellow kitchen square I could not actually see. A bus went by below. The apartment

smelled like coffee I had made three hours ago and not finished. “I didn’t stay close to hurt him.”

“I know that.” Soft. Immediate. “Sarah, I know that. I’m not calling to scold you. I’m calling because you’re in this too, and nobody is asking you how you are except maybe Carina, and Carina’s advice is always to take your clothes off, which, look, sometimes that’s correct, but it’s not a complete medical plan.”

I laughed, once. “We’ve spoken.”

“I figured.” A pause. “How are you?”

How was I. I had been to his bed three times if I counted the first, which I did, because I was trying to be honest in at least one room of my life. The third time had been four days after the second. The gap was shrinking and I could do the math. I had let him go down on me on the third visit, which was a piece of information I was not going to give his sister, and I had cried, which I was also not going to give his sister, and he had not made a speech about it. He had kissed my temple and pulled the blanket up and let me pretend I had something in my eye until I actually fell asleep, furious and held.

“I’m confused,” I said. “That’s the short version. I don’t remember him the way he remembers me. I remember how to put a man on the ground in three moves. I remember the inside of a Prague safehouse from 2007. I remember my mother’s perfume and I don’t remember my wedding. And my body is sure that the wedding happened. That he happened. It’s—” I searched. “It’s undignified.”

Ellie made a sound in her throat that wanted to be a laugh and didn’t get there. “Love is undignified. That’s the worst part. I wanted Awesome to be a fling I could file. He showed up with that smile and a medical degree and a nickname I still can’t say in professional settings, and I was done. I kept trying to be a person who had options. I had one option. It was him.”

"You remember choosing."

"Do you think you didn't choose him?" She waited. I didn't fill it. "I was there, Sarah. Not for all of it. Enough. You fought it like it was a hostile extraction. You were the most committed non-chooser I have ever met. And then you chose him anyway. Over the CIA. Over a clean cover. Over a version of yourself that never had to need anyone. I'm not telling you that to trap you in a decision you can't feel. I'm telling you because the woman who did that is still in there. I see her when you say his name, even now. You say it like it costs you."

I had nothing for that. A dog walker passed on the street below. I envied the dog, which had a job and a leash and a simple set of wants.

"He's patient," I said.

"He is. He will also let you break his heart in installments if you ask him to, because he thinks that's what loving you looks like. I'm his sister. I get to want more for him than that. I also get to want more for you. You were family. You are family. That didn't get wiped just because the memories did." Her voice wobbled and then steadied. She was a surgeon. She knew how to make a cut and leave it. "I'm in Chicago. I cannot put a plate in front of you. I can tell you this. You can have dinner with him. You can not. You can keep doing whatever you're doing at one in the morning, don't confirm, I don't need it, but if you're going to keep showing up in the dark, Sarah, consider staying for the kitchen. That's where he is. That's where you used to be. The bed is the easy part, if you'll forgive me for knowing that. The kitchen is the marriage."

I closed my eyes. I saw his kitchen through the courtyard, the ground-floor glass. Flour on a shirt. A liar avocado.

"I don't know how to want a kitchen," I said.

“Start by wanting coffee you didn’t make alone.” Ellie exhaled. Clara made a happier noise. “I’m not angry at you. I need you to hear that. I was, a little, after the beach, because I’m human and he’s my baby brother and you looked at him like he was a beautiful stranger. Then I remembered what they did to you. Then I remembered what you did for him, for years, when you had the memories and they hurt. You get time. You asked for space. Take it. Just — don’t use the space to build a life that’s smaller than the one you already bled for. Even if you can’t see the blood.”

After we hung up I sat on the floor with my back against the chair and my phone on the wood beside me. The vinyl of the chair was cool through my shirt. The fluorescent bar buzzed. Clara’s noise was gone and the apartment had rushed back in to fill the space, beige, humming, the suitcase in the closet like a held breath. I sat there until my legs hurt. I did not go to him. Not for dinner. Not in the light. I did not name the thing that had sat down on my chest when she said *the kitchen is the marriage*. It was too large. It had a shape I recognized from the beach, and from his throat at 4 a.m., and from two mugs on a cheap counter.

I went to him that night, earlier than the others, still dusk, which felt like a concession I wasn’t going to name. The sky over Echo Park was that dirty pink California did in October. A light was on behind his door. I could hear a pan from the courtyard. He opened the door in a hoodie, surprised, a wooden spoon in his hand, and tomato and garlic hit me like a problem. The apartment had been cooking. The apartment was pleased with itself.

“You’re cooking,” I said.

“I’m aggressively boiling pasta and hoping it becomes food. You — hi. You’re here. It’s not midnight. I’m trying not to make that a whole thing.”

I stepped inside. I didn’t kiss him yet. I looked at the kitchen.

It was the warmest room, open to the living room, no door to hide behind. I had known that the first afternoon and I knew it now, in my body. Wood counters with a burn mark by the stove. The jar of spoons. A dishtowel that had been a joke once, faded now, hanging off the oven door. The window over the sink held the last of the dusk and a slice of courtyard and someone else's balcony. Two plates on the counter. He'd only set one. The other was in the cabinet; I knew which cabinet. Steam on the glass. Sauce popping in the pan. The room wanted a second person the way a table wanted a second plate. I could feel that and I would not say it.

"Ellie called me," I said.

He winced. "I'm going to need you to be specific about how much I should apologize for my sister."

"She didn't tell me to come here." I took the spoon out of his hand because he was going to drip sauce on the floor and I could not watch it. I stirred. The sauce was actually good. "She told me the kitchen is the marriage."

Chuck went still. I could feel it beside me, the held breath.

"That's," he said, "a lot of pressure to put on marinara, but okay."

I kept stirring. "I'm not staying for dinner."

"Okay."

"I might stay for dinner."

He leaned his hip against the counter, not touching me, close enough that I could have leaned back into him if I were a different woman. "Sarah. You can eat and leave. You can eat and stay. You can throw the spoon at me and go back to your fork situation. I'm

making too much either way. I always make too much. It's a cry for help disguised as leftovers."

I turned the burner down. I set the spoon on the rest. I looked at him, really looked, in the kitchen light that made him ordinary and devastating.

"I'm scared," I said. It came out low. It came out true. "Of how easy this is. Of how good it is. Of the fact that I left twice and my body started counting the hours like a mission clock. That isn't how I'm built. I was built to leave. I was built to not need the thing I just left. And you keep handing it back to me like I didn't drop it on purpose."

His eyes were wet. He didn't hide it. I wanted him to hide it. I wanted him to never hide it.

"You can drop it," he said. "I'll keep handing it back. That's not a trick. That's the job. That's the only job I want." He swallowed. "For the record, you were built to do a lot of things they told you were the whole list. They were wrong about the list. I have data. I'm a nerd. I love data. I love you. You don't have to say it. You don't have to feel it the way I do. I'm saying it because it's Sunday and you're in my kitchen and I promised myself I wouldn't ambush you with it, and I'm ambushing you with it. Sorry. Not sorry. Mostly sorry."

I stared at him.

I had read *I love you* in the file. Witness statements. Intercepts. A voicemail transcript that had made a junior analyst use the word *devotional*. Hearing it in his kitchen with sauce on the air landed in the body, the same place the kiss had, the same place his hands had. It did not fill the white space. It lit the edges of it.

"I can't say it back," I said.

“I know.”

“I feel the spark. I felt it at the beach. I feel it when you—” I stopped. “I feel it. I’m working on the rest. That’s still true.”

“Okay.”

“Stop being okay with everything.”

He smiled, crooked. “No.”

I kissed him in his kitchen with the pasta threatening to overcook. The kiss had room in it. His hands came up to my face like he’d been waiting to be allowed, and I let him, and the same tightness that had looked at two mugs on a counter and recognized a pair showed up in my throat again.

We ate at the counter because the table in the next room had mail on it and he had not wanted to make a production. The pasta was a little overcooked. The sauce was not. He talked about Morgan, and a client who thought Carmichael Industries still had a helicopter, and Clara putting a crayon in a heating vent. I listened. I ate. My knee found his under the wood and stayed, which I counted as an accident until it wasn’t.

I went home after, which I counted as discipline and which felt, on Franklin, like cowardice. His kitchen window was lit again. I sat in the car with the taste of his sauce in my mouth and the courtyard fountain in the side mirror and my phone in my hand, and I typed to Ellie:

The kitchen is a problem.

She wrote back almost immediately:

Good.

Chapter 6: Ten O'Clock

I let him take me apart on purpose.

A decision, made in the shower at my apartment, looking at my own mouth in the mirror like it belonged to someone braver. The fan rattling. The grout. Hot water that went lukewarm if you were greedy, which I was. I stood there until the room filled with steam and the mirror gave me back a blur, and I knew what I was going to ask him for, and I knew that asking for it was going to cost me something I still would not name.

I dressed. I looked at the closet. The shirts. The suitcase, shut for once. I left it shut.

I knocked at ten. A human hour. A light was on behind his door as if he had been hoping. The courtyard was still alive: a television through an open window, someone taking a trash can to the gate. Ordinary. I had come here in ordinary light, which felt more dangerous than midnight.

He opened the door and checked my face, and I saw him get it. He didn't joke. He held out his hand, and I took it, and he led me down the hall like I might change my mind at the bedroom door. The apartment at ten was softer than the apartment at 12:40. Lamps. The kitchen still holding the ghost of dinner. I didn't change my mind.

"I want you to—" I stopped, standing in his bedroom with my jacket still on. Language, for this, felt like disarming. "The last time. After. I thought about it. I want your mouth. I want you to not be careful about it. I want—" I exhaled. "I keep leaving. I know I keep leaving. Don't make this a reason for me to stay. Make it good. That's what I'm asking."

Chuck Bartowski, who could not stop talking in a grocery store, went quiet and focused.

"I can do that," he said. "I would like to do that very much. Can I take your jacket?"

I let him take my jacket.

He undressed me standing up, slower than the first night. Careful, like a man who was going to remember this in case I didn't come back. I held his head when he knelt to get my jeans and he looked up at me from the floor of his own bedroom and I had to sit on the bed because my knees had an opinion.

"Lie back," he said, gentle. "I've got you."

I lay back. The ceiling had a crack I had not noticed the first two nights, a hairline from the fixture to the corner. Streetlight. His book. The glass of water. I put my hands in the duvet and held on.

He kissed the inside of my knee like it was a mouth. The inside of my thigh like it was a secret. I stared at the ceiling and tried to be a person who received this without shaking, and then he put my thigh over his shoulder and put his mouth on me, and I stopped trying.

He knew this too. The flat of his tongue, then the point, then he sealed his lips around my clit and sucked in a rhythm I could have signed a confession about. Two fingers, in, the same curl as the first night, and I heard myself make a sound I would never have let anyone hear. My hand found his hair. I held him there.

"Chuck—"

He hummed. The hum went through me. I came faster than I wanted to, embarrassed, gasping, and he didn't stop, and I tried to wriggle back because it was too much, and his

arm hooked around my hips and held me where I was, and I came again with my wrist over my eyes and my mouth open on a sob I did not recognize as mine.

That was when I cried.

My chest hitched and my face got wet and I was furious, immediately, because this was not the deal. The deal was sex. The deal was a spark. I was crying anyway, with my husband's mouth still on me, my nervous system dumping a decade I couldn't remember out of my eyes.

He came up. He didn't ask what was wrong. He wiped his mouth on his own shoulder and gathered me into him, sitting back against the headboard, me in his lap, and I hid in his throat because that was the place, and I hated that I knew it now as a fact of this life.

"I'm not sad," I said, wet, angry. "This is not sad."

"Okay."

"I mean it. Don't soothe me like I'm sad."

His hand moved in my hair. "I'm not soothing you because you're sad. I'm holding you because you let me. That's my favorite category."

I laughed, ugly, into his skin. "You're impossible."

"I've been told." A kiss at my temple. "We can stop. We can keep going. You can take a shower and steal my hoodie and leave. All options are on the table. The table is very pro-Sarah."

I sat back enough to see his face. I must have looked like hell. He looked like he would have handed me his bones if I'd asked.

"I want you in me," I said. "And then I want you to hold me like this after. That's the ask. Both of them."

"Both is easy," he said, and his voice cracked on *easy*.

He laid me down. He got inside me with my legs around him and my face still wet. Slower. I could see him. I kept my eyes open on purpose. He rocked into me like we had time. I dragged my nails down his back to have him. I was close, the long kind, the kind that starts low, and I would have gotten there on the angle alone.

He watched my face. His mouth was at my ear.

"That's my girl," he said. Quiet. Certain. "My good girl. Come for me."

I had no file for that. No training. Nothing in me that was supposed to like being anyone's girl, let alone a good one, and my body took it as an order it had been waiting for. I came so hard I lost the room. Long. A pull that emptied me out. I heard myself make a sound I did not authorize, and I had no defense for how much it had worked, none, and that was its own problem I was going to have to live with.

He followed with his mouth on my cheek, tasting salt, saying my name like it was the only word he'd kept.

After, he held me. I had asked, and he treated the ask like a mission brief. My back to his chest, his arm around my waist, his mouth in my hair. The room had settled around us. The crack in the ceiling. The book. The glass of water, catching a stripe of courtyard light. His heartbeat against my spine, stubborn, unprofessional. I waited for the urge to leave to arrive on schedule.

It arrived. It always did, a click in the old machinery, the part of me that had been built to be gone before dawn. I stayed in the bed. I put my hand over his on my stomach and I did not give the staying a name. If I named it I would have to take it home to Olive, and Olive was not built to hold it.

“Tell me something I don’t have in the file,” I said to the dark.

He was quiet long enough that I thought he’d fallen asleep. Then: “You hate raisins. Not in a casual way. In a betrayal way. Someone put them in a salad at our wedding reception and you looked at me like I’d personally planted them.”

I smiled. “That sounds right.”

“You do this thing when you’re actually happy. Not spy-happy. Not cover-happy. Your mouth goes — I don’t know if I should tell you. You’ll stop doing it if you know.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“One side. It’s not even a smile yet. It’s like your face forgets its job for a second.” His thumb moved on my stomach, absent. “You did it in the kitchen. With the spoon.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to. He could feel my face from where he was. I was probably doing it.

“Your turn,” he said. “Doesn’t have to be a memory. Can be a now-thing.”

I thought about Prague. I thought about Bryce. I thought about a seven-year-old with a suitcase, counting exits. I thought about the second mug.

“I bought two mugs,” I said. “I only needed one. I keep looking at the other one like it did something to me.”

His breath went out of him, slow. He didn't pounce.

"That's a good mug," he said, solemn. "I support that mug."

I slept. Dropped, held, my body doing what my training had never accounted for. I woke once, near two, and his arm was still there, and I put my hand over his and fell back under.

At 6:20 the light was honest. He was still asleep. I lay there and watched him and let myself, for one full minute, imagine staying. Coffee. Two mugs, but his, the ones in the cupboard I had not opened and knew the contents of anyway. Dinner that was not at midnight. The kitchen. The marriage.

The minute ended.

I got up. Quieter than the first two times. Slower. I stood at the edge of the bed with my jacket in my hand and I whispered, because I was a coward and I was also trying, "I'm working on it."

He didn't wake.

I drove home in morning traffic. Olive in daylight was just a street. The lock stuck. The landing smelled like detergent. I put my keys down next to two mugs. The apartment looked smaller after his bedroom, which was a problem I was going to have to live with. I showered and I could still feel his mouth, and I didn't wash my face immediately, because I could still feel the salt, and I looked at myself in a mirror that had stopped steaming and said, "You're in it."

Chuck's voice. Grocery store. Produce. A liar avocado.

I called Carina before I could talk myself out of it.

“I need you to come,” I said. “For me. I don’t know how to do this and I am not asking Chuck to teach me, because he will, and it will ruin me, and I need to be ruined by someone whose face I can still yell at.”

Carina was quiet. Then, delighted and serious at once: “I will be on a plane today. I will wear something inappropriate. You will pick me up and you will tell me everything, including the parts you think are too filthy for the phone. I have been waiting years for you to be disgusting and sincere at the same time. Do not disappoint me.”

“Carina.”

“I know, mami. I know. I’m coming.”

Chapter 7: Family

Carina arrived in sunglasses that cost more than my chair and a dress that made the baggage claim a security issue.

She hugged me like we were in a war. We had been, sometimes. This was worse. She held me at arm’s length, looked me up and down, and said, “You have been having excellent sex. Don’t lie to me, your shoulders are different.”

“Get in the car.”

“That is not a denial.”

I drove. Burbank in the afternoon, the 5 a glittering mess, her perfume filling the car as if the upholstery had been waiting for it. She put her feet on the dash in violation of several personal rules and all sense. She talked about the flight, a man in first class, a bartender in Miami who had tried to propose with a lime wedge. I let her. The noise of Carina was a structure. I could stand up inside it.

She went silent when she saw the apartment.

She walked through it like we used to walk through rooms we were about to burn. The beige carpet. The humming bar. The chair that didn't match. The bed with the cheap sheets. The two mugs on the counter, a pair whether I liked it or not. She opened the closet without asking, because Carina had never asked, and she looked at the three shirts and the two jackets and the empty suitcase on the floor, clasps undone, and she went still.

"You unpacked," she said.

"I live here."

"You unpacked." She turned. The sunglasses had come off. "Sarah. I have shared hotel rooms with you on four continents. That bag stays shut. It stayed shut in Prague. It stayed shut in a villa with a very nice minibar and a very boring mark. It stayed shut until you moved in with the nerd, and then you unpacked, and I thought the world was ending. And now you have done it again, in a sad box, for a life you claim you are not living."

My hands went cold. I did not have that memory. I had the empty suitcase. I had the shirts. I had the night I had almost put them back and had not.

"I don't remember unpacking for him," I said.

“Of course you don’t. Your hands do.” She tapped a fingernail on the counter. “Does he know you live like this?”

“He knows I asked for space.”

“Space is a couch you hate and a plant you forget to water. This is a woman who still thinks love is a breach.” She sat in the chair, crossed her legs, and pointed at the bed. “Sit. Talk. If you try to give me the professional version I will start describing my sex life in chronological order and we will be here until Thursday.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. I talked.

I told her about the beach. The spark. The conference room, Hartley Winterbottom, eight hundred and thirty-five million sitting in an account with both our names because Chuck would not take mine off. How I’d wanted to be sick on the table anyway. I told her about knocking at 12:40 in robot-pajama light. I told her, because I’d promised filthy and sincere, what he did with his hands and his mouth and how my body opened for him like it already knew the way. I told her about leaving. About the grocery store. About Ellie, from Chicago, telling me the kitchen was the marriage. About crying with his mouth still on me and hating him for being kind about it.

Carina listened like it was intel. When I was done she took a breath, long, and some of the theater went out of her.

“My mother,” she said, “used to tell me that spies don’t get families. She said it to be cruel, and also because she was right about her own life. She had me and she had the work, and the work ate me until I was old enough to be delicious to the same people.” She turned the ring on her finger I had never asked about. It was new. Or I had never been looking. “I used to believe her. It made the job easier. You believe it too. You were better at believing it than I was. That’s why they loved you. That’s why Bryce could promise you a life and still choose the mission. That’s why you could stand in that

apartment with your own wedding pictures and call it a museum.”

“Your point.”

“My point, mami, is that you were seven and you chose the fun parent, and you left your mother behind, and he taught you to run a con before anyone taught you to stay, and the CIA bought what was left, and none of them taught you what to do when a stupid, beautiful man looks at you like you hung the moon and also like he would let you take the moon down if you needed it back.” She leaned forward. “You think the sex is the confusing part. The sex is the only part that is telling you the truth. I have taken men to bed for an objective on four continents and I slept fine after. I am not ashamed of that. This is not that. You never did that, and you are still coming apart in his sheets. Your training is the liar. Your training says this much pleasure with this much safety is a trap. I am telling you that Chuck Bartowski is not a trap. He is a door. You keep walking through it in the dark so you can pretend you didn’t choose the room.”

I stared at my hands. There was a bruise on my knuckle from the bag. There was a faint mark on my wrist from his mouth. I had not covered it.

“I don’t remember loving him,” I said.

“So love him now.” Carina shrugged. “Memories are a luxury. I do not remember every man I have loved. I remember what I did next. You are already doing it. You bought the mug. You stayed for the sauce. You called me, which, for you, is basically a marriage proposal to the truth.”

“I’m scared it will go away. The spark. If I take it as a life, if I move back into that apartment, if I say the words, what if the body is just muscle memory. What if I wake up in six months and I’m empty again and I’ve made him promises I can’t feel.”

Carina’s eyes went bright. Respect, I thought. Then I wasn’t sure.

“Then you will have given him six months of you, choosing him, which is more than most people get from anyone.” She stood up, came over, and put her hand on my cheek like I was someone she had the right to touch. I let her. “But that is not what is going to happen. You want to know how I know? Because you have not, once, in this entire sad little confession, talked about the sex like it was just sex. You talked about his throat. You talked about his kitchen. You talked about how well he knows you like it was a ghost story. Sarah. You are not haunted by his dick. You are haunted by the fact that he is home, and your body got there first, and your brain is having a tantrum about chain of command.”

The word landed.

Home.

It hit the same place the kiss had. The same place *I love you* had, in a kitchen with a wooden spoon. A shape. A place the white space kept trying to become.

I must have looked like I’d been hit. Carina’s mouth softened.

“Ah,” she said. “There it is. You said it before, you know. To him. Years ago. He never told you that, did he.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t have spoken.

“Of course he didn’t. He would wait until you found it yourself if it took until the heat death of the universe. That idiot.” She kissed my forehead, sudden, fierce. “I am staying three days. I am buying you a plant you will resent. Ellie is in Chicago, which is inconvenient of her, so I am doing the glaring. We are going to his table. In the light. If you try to sit at the far end I will tell everyone about Prague and the fountain. Tonight, after, you will go back to him or you will not, but you will not sit in this safehouse and

call it a life. I won't allow it. I am your family, even if you are bad at having any."

We went to dinner.

Chuck's apartment in the evening was the opposite of Olive. Lamps. The fountain through the open window. The kitchen doing what it always did, wanting a second plate, except tonight there were three. He had made too much, which he admitted before we sat down, as if Carina might arrest him for it. She poured wine like it was a skill. Photographs on the shelf, the honest kind, nobody posed. Clara in a frame on the fridge, Chicago, a smear of something orange on her cheek. I sat next to Chuck because Carina took the chair that faced the door, which was a kindness and a trap.

Carina told a story about Miami that made Chuck choke on his water. He talked with his hands. I ate. I passed the bread. His knee touched mine under the table and stayed, asking, and I left it there. I did not count exits. That last part sat in me without a name, and I let it.

He walked us out after. The courtyard stones were still holding the day's heat. Carina went ahead through the gate and made a performance of checking her phone.

"You don't have to come back," he said. "Tonight. That's not — I'm not angling. I just. You were here. In the light. I want you to know that was — Sarah, that was a really good night for me. Independently. No midnight required."

I looked at him in the courtyard. He had sauce on his sleeve. He had looked at me all evening like he was trying not to look at me too much, and failing, and not minding that he was failing.

"I'm going to go home and let Carina insult my chair," I said. "And then I'm going to come over. Because I want to. I want you. That's still the true thing. There's more. I'm getting the more. Don't ask me to name it in a courtyard."

He smiled like he had at the beach, the same unguarded hope, except this time I didn't have to look away.

"I would never," he said, solemn, "ask a spy to name a feeling in a courtyard. That's just bad tactics."

I kissed him. In a courtyard. In the light. With the fountain ticking like a clock.

I went home. Carina looked at my mouth and toasted me with a mug. The second one.

"Go," she said.

I went.

Chapter 8: The Courtyard

He was waiting in the courtyard this time.

Sitting on the step by his door with two beers he wasn't drinking, like he'd come outside because the apartment had too much air in it. The fountain doing its tired work. A yellow circle of light from his kitchen window on the plaster. Night insects at the bulb. When I came through the gate he stood, and he didn't come across the stones. He was still giving me the distance I'd asked for even now, even after pasta at his table and my mouth in the courtyard. The apartment behind him was lit in the kitchen and dark everywhere else, a face with one eye open.

I walked to him.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi.”

I took one of the beers, set both of them on the step, and put my hands on his face. I had done this at the beach. I had not known what I was doing at the beach. I knew now, not all of it, enough.

“I’m not going to run in the morning,” I said. “I’m going to try not to. I might fail. If I fail, I’m coming back tomorrow, in the daylight, like a person. I need you to know the difference. Leaving was never about not wanting you.”

His hands covered mine. He was shaking. I was shaking.

“Okay,” he said, and then he laughed, wet. “Sorry. Okay is banned. I hear you. I want you to stay. I also want you to have a way out that isn’t disappearing. So: stay. And if you need to go, go. And then come back in the daylight like a person. That’s — that’s a really beautiful sentence, Sarah. I’m going to need a minute with that sentence.”

“Take a minute later.” I kissed him. “Take me to bed now.”

We didn’t make it to the bed immediately. We made it to the inside of the door, where he pressed me against it and kissed me like the courtyard had been a draft. I got his shirt off in the living room again. I put my mouth on his chest, on the scar I didn’t have the story for, and he leaned his head back against his own wall and let me. I undid his jeans. I slid down to my knees on the floor of the apartment he had lived in since before I had a file on him and looked up, and his expression almost stopped me, because there was sex in it and there was also a nakedness I could have been looking at on the beach.

“You don’t have to,” he said, hoarse.

"I know." I put my mouth on him.

I didn't remember ever doing this for him. My body remembered the weight, the taste, his hand hovering at the back of my head and not pushing. I took him as deep as I wanted and he swore, cracked, said *Sarah, Sarah, that's — you feel —* and I hummed because he'd hummed, because we were in a conversation that didn't need the memories. When I pulled off he hauled me up like I weighed nothing and I locked my legs around his waist and he carried me down the hall, stumbling, laughing into my mouth, and I was laughing too, actual laughter, the open-mouth kind from the photograph in the hallway, and I heard it and I didn't shut it down.

On the bed he got my clothes off. His mouth on my breasts, my stomach, the inside of my thigh, getting there. When he pushed into me I was so ready it was almost humiliating, and I didn't care. I met him. I said his name on purpose. I said *harder* and he gave it to me, and then I said *wait, wait, slower*, and he gave me that too, shaking with the effort of being exactly what I asked.

"Look at me," I said.

He looked at me.

I came like that, watching him watch me, and there was nowhere to put it except on him. He followed, buried, my name in his mouth, his hand laced with mine on the sheet.

We lay there in the wreck of it. He was half on me, heavy, and I didn't push him off. I breathed under the weight. I could take the weight. I had always been able to take weight. This was the first time I had wanted it.

"Chuck."

"Mm."

“The money.” I had it in my mouth and I needed it out. “I still don’t want it. I need you to know that wasn’t about you. Hartley gave it to us. You sat there and you wouldn’t take my name off it, and I meant what I said in that room. I don’t want a life I have to buy. If you need it, it’s yours too. I know that. I just — I can’t spend a wedding I don’t remember.”

He lifted his head. His hair was a disaster. “Sarah. I heard you the first time. I’m not spending it. Hartley wanted us to have a start. The start I want is you in the kitchen stealing the spoon. The money can sit until it grows moss. I want you in this kitchen. I want you to keep the place on Olive if you need Olive. I’ll wait. I told you. That’s the job.”

“I know what I told you,” I said, and then stopped, because that wasn’t right, not yet, that was the edge of it. “I know what I *would* have told you. There’s a sentence. I can almost see the shape of it. Don’t help me.”

He smiled, incredulous. “I would rather die.”

“Dramatic.”

“Have you met me.”

I pulled him down and kissed him, slow. We dozed. We woke and did it again, lazier, my leg hooked over his hip, his hand between us, his mouth at my ear telling me I was here, I was here, I was here. I came with my face in his throat. I stayed there.

Near dawn I felt the old urge. Leave. The door. My heart rate climbed and my training sat up, bright, useful, cruel.

I put my hand on his chest and felt him breathing.

"I'm still here," I whispered, to myself, to the room, to the sixteen-year-old who had learned to count exits. "Stand down."

He stirred. "Sarah?"

"Go back to sleep."

"Are you leaving?"

A silence. I could have said no and made it a lie in an hour. I could have said I don't know and made it his problem.

"No," I said. "Not this time."

His arm tightened. A thank you. He kissed my shoulder, already half under again, and the window went from black to gray to that stupid California gold, and I stayed in the bed.

I fell asleep in it.

I woke to the smell of coffee and the empty half of the bed still warm, and for a second the fear was huge, a white flash: *he left, you stayed, you broke the rule and the world punished you*. Then I heard him in the kitchen, talking to himself about whether eggs were an ambush, and I put my face in his pillow and laughed, once, quietly, like a person with a life.

He appeared in the doorway with two mugs. The cupboard ones.

"Hi," he said. "I made coffee. You can throw it at me. You can drink it. You can tell me to get out of my own bedroom, which would be logistically confusing but I'll honor it."

I sat up. The sheet slipped. I didn't catch it. His eyes tried to be polite and failed. I felt the spark from the beach, except it had been running under everything the whole time, and I was only now admitting the current.

I took the mug. I drank. It was good. The window was full of morning, the kind that made the rumpled sheet look expensive. Birds in the courtyard tree. His coffee was too strong, which I was beginning to suspect I liked. In the kitchen a pan landed on a burner and then he remembered he had brought the coffee in, and the pan sat. The apartment at this hour was a different animal again: ordinary, unguarded, a place where a person made eggs and talked to himself about whether eggs were an ambush.

"I like the kitchen," I said.

Chuck Bartowski sat down on the edge of the bed like his knees had been considering it all year. He smiled at me and didn't say *I love you*, because he had already said it, and he was waiting, and I was almost there.

I reached out and put my fingers through his hair, messy, mine.

"Don't go to work yet," I said.

"I work for myself. I can be very unethical about my hours."

"Then be unethical."

He set the mugs on the nightstand. He crawled back into the bed, and I let him, and I let myself, and the morning went slow and explicit and kind, and when I came I said his name like a person who intended to say it again.

I didn't go back to the apartment until the afternoon. Olive in hard light. The lock. The landing. The room looking, more than it had the day before, like a place I had already

left.

Carina opened the door, looked at my hair, and said, “Finally.”

“Don’t.”

“I bought you a plant. It’s ugly. You’re going to love him in the daylight now, which is much harder, so you’re welcome.” She shoved the plant into my hands. “Ellie wants you to call her. Not at one in the morning. I want a drink. You want to tell me you almost said it.”

I looked at the plant. It was, in fact, ugly.

“I almost said it,” I said.

Carina clinked her mug to nothing. “Then we drink, and you go back tomorrow in the daylight like a person, and we stop pretending this apartment is anything but a hallway.”

Chapter 9: Home

The last gap was a day. A breath.

I spent it walking. Not the gym. The neighborhood, the longer loop, past the Buy More that was still a Buy More, the parking lot a glitter of windshields, a kid on a bike cutting through with no respect for cars. Past the taco place Chuck had mentioned in a ramble I had stored without meaning to, the smell of oil and lime on the sidewalk. Past a strip of grass the city had forgotten to water. My body was sore from a night I had not extracted from. Heat on the back of my neck. A bus. The ordinary machinery of a town that did not

care that I was trying to finish a sentence.

I kept waiting for the regret. It didn't come. What came was the sentence, closer, like it had been walking toward me from the white space with its hands visible.

Carina left on a noon flight. She hugged me at security and said, "If you run now I will fly back and be very disappointing in your chair." She paused. "You won't run. You already didn't. I'm proud of you, which I hate, so I'm leaving before I become sincere again."

I texted Ellie: *You were right about the kitchen.*

She wrote: *Good. Call me when you can. Not at 1 a.m.*

I stood in the apartment at three o'clock with the ugly plant on the counter between the two mugs. The fluorescent bar. The beige carpet. The west windows full of a day that had no patience left. I looked at the bed I had barely used, and the chair, and the closet.

I opened the closet.

The shirts. The jackets. The suitcase on the floor, empty, clasps undone, the way it had been since the first night I had refused my own training. Carina had been right. My hands had known something my head was only now willing to stand still for.

I understood what she had seen in ninety seconds.

I had moved here because space was a word I knew how to ask for, and *stay* was a word that had gotten people killed in every version of my life except one, and the one was the one I couldn't remember, so I had defaulted to the rest.

The spark had never been the mystery.

The mystery was that I had spent years, the years I could remember, the years in files, the years with Bryce and a gun in the nightstand, believing that the safest version of me was the one who could walk out of any room without her pulse changing. And then a man in robot pajama pants had opened a door at 12:40 in the morning and my pulse had changed, and it had kept changing, and the sex was unbelievable because I wanted him to know my body.

I knew his. I slept. I had sat in a government conference room with him and refused a fortune Hartley had meant as a start, because I did not want to be bought, and I had still, helplessly, wanted to be kept. He kept handing me the thing I dropped, and I wanted that. He loved me without the memories as collateral. He had said *you're my wife* like a fact that didn't need my permission to be true and still waited for my permission for everything else.

He was patient.

I had told him, once, in a life that had been wiped, that he was home, and my body had been trying to tell me the same sentence since the beach, and I had called it a spark because a spark was portable and a home was a thing you could lose.

I packed the suitcase.

It took four minutes. Shirts, jackets, the shoes with the heels even. The ugly plant I left on the counter for the super, or for Thursday, or for no one. The two mugs I wrapped in a shirt and put in last, which was sentimental, and I did it anyway. The bag zipped. Ninety seconds if I had been in a hurry. I was not in a hurry.

I picked up my keys.

I didn't wait for dark.

His car was on the street. I parked behind it, badly. I went through the courtyard and I knocked, and then I opened the door because I knew it would be unlocked because he was a man who wanted me to be able to come in, and that was going to terrify me for a while, and I was going to let it.

He was in the kitchen. He looked up from the counter with a bag of coffee in his hand and lit up, then got careful, then lit up again when he saw my face.

“Hi,” he said. “You’re — it’s three-thirty. That’s a real time. That’s a grocery store time. I’m a huge fan of this time.”

I put my keys on the counter. I set the suitcase down by the fridge, upright, zipped, a fact.

Two mugs in the drain rack. His.

“I need to say this in the kitchen,” I said. “Ellie was right. Don’t make a joke yet.”

He set the coffee down. He gave me his whole attention, which had always been the most dangerous thing about him. A man who looked at me like I was the only mission.

“I don’t remember the wedding,” I said. “I don’t remember the first time I said it. Carina told me I said it. I almost want to be angry at her for that, but she was right to. I’ve been trying to find a version of this that doesn’t require me to be the woman in the photographs. I thought if I just took the part my body understood, I could leave the rest in the white space and still be honest.”

I stepped closer. He didn’t reach yet. He was shaking again. I loved that he couldn’t hide it. I loved — I stopped, and started, on purpose.

"The sex is so good because I love you." My voice didn't break. I was almost disappointed; I had earned a break. "It's disgusting how good you are at it. I love that you love me. I love that you have been wholly committed to a woman who couldn't give you back the years. I love that you let me leave and still made pasta. I love that you stopped in the doorway. I love that you bought a toothbrush and hid it in a drawer like a secret agent with one job."

He made a sound. His hands came up and then waited.

I took them. I put them on my waist.

"I told you I needed time and a little bit of space. I meant it. I also meant the spark. I have been walking the space like it was a perimeter and it was just the long way back to you." I swallowed. There it was. The sentence, in my mouth, mine now. "You are home. I can live in an apartment with two mugs and an ugly plant and it will never be true like this kitchen is true. I don't have all of you back in my head. I have enough. I have you. I want the rest of it. The daylight. The dinners. The bed in the morning. I want to stop running from a life I already chose."

Chuck cried. He pulled me in and I went, and he buried his face in my hair and said my name like he'd been holding his breath since the beach, because he had.

"Say it again," he whispered.

"You're home."

"One more."

"I love you." I said it into his shirt. I said it again, clearer, because he deserved it in the air. "I love you. I'm still working on some of the rest. The memories might never come. I'm not waiting for them to make this real. It's real. I felt it on the beach. I felt it when I

knocked. I felt it when I left, which is why I couldn't stop leaving and why I couldn't stop coming back. You are — Chuck. You are my home."

He kissed me. Heat, the physical yes, and under it the thing the beach kiss had been trying to give me. A kitchen. A man. A choice I was making with my eyes open in the middle of the afternoon.

We didn't go down the hall immediately. We stood there and I let him hold me, except the light was on and anyone in the courtyard could have seen us through the window, and I left the courtyard alone. I paid attention to him. The heartbeat. No flour today. How his hands spread on my back like they were checking that I was solid.

"Stay," he said.

"Yes."

"The apartment—"

"Is a hallway. Carina already wrote the report." I pulled back enough to see him. "I'll keep it for a while. As a fact of how I got here. Then I'll give it up. I'm not doing ninety-second rooms anymore."

He nodded, solemn, then ruined it by smiling so hard it made him stupid. "I love you. I'm going to say that a lot. You can still ask for space. Space can be the courtyard. Space can be twenty minutes with the ugly plant. Space does not have to be a different address."

"I know." I kissed his mouth, once, like a seal. "Take me down the hall anyway. I want my husband in the daylight."

His eyes went dark and bright at once.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and then, immediately, “Sorry. That’s. I know you have a thing about ma’am. Or you used to. Or Casey has a thing. I’m shutting up and carrying you.”

He carried me. He made it farther than the door this time. The bed was unmade from the morning, and I let myself be laid down in the mess of it, and I undressed him in the light, and I looked. I looked at all of him. I put my mouth where I wanted. I let him put his mouth where he wanted. When he slid into me I kept my eyes open and I kept saying it, as a true thing I could finally afford: *I love you, I love you, home, there, don’t stop, Chuck, Chuck—*

I came with my legs around him and my hands on his face.

After, the window let in golden light that had nothing to do with its hue and everything to do with the man illuminated by it. The street was the way to that man, to home. He held me and I held him back, my arm a decision across his ribs.

“Hi,” he said, after a long time, stupidly.

I smiled. My mouth moved on one side. I let him see it.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m here.”

“Yeah.” His voice was hoarse and happy. “Yeah, you are.”

I slept in the afternoon, in a bed I remembered choosing today even if I didn’t remember choosing it the first time. I woke to the sound of someone in the kitchen, probably him, probably making too much food, and I lay there and felt the perimeter collapse inward until it was this room, this apartment, this man.

I got up. I put on his hoodie. I went down the hall to the kitchen and took the suitcase from beside the fridge. He was at the stove. He started to say something and I shook my head, not unkind, and took the bag back to the bedroom.

I set it on the bed. I unzipped it. His closet still had a gap on the left where I had taken my things out. His shirts on the right, a little crowded, as if they had been trying not to notice the empty half. I hung mine next to his. Shoes on the floor beside his. The two mugs I left on the dresser for the kitchen. The bag I put on the closet floor, empty, clasps open, a mouth that did not need to close.

I took the mugs and went toward the sauce, toward him, and when he turned around and saw me in the kitchen doorway like I lived there, his face did the hope from the beach. His eyes went to the mugs, then down the hall, and back to me.

“Sarah,” he said.

I smiled. One side. I let him see it.

This time I walked all the way in.
