

N O T H I N G B O R R O W E D I S
E V E R R E T U R N E D W H O L E .

The Borrowed Aftertaste

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**For the love that chose to stay when leaving
would have cost nothing, and built, in the staying,
the only self I ever fully trusted.**

CONTENTS

Part One: The Watcher	1
Chapter 1: The Expiration Window	3
Chapter 2: Consent Has Limits	15
Chapter 3: Emotional Residue	31
Chapter 4: Raw Access	46
Chapter 5: Heat Without Touch	56
Chapter 6: The Cost of Stability	66
Chapter 7: What Remains	75
Part Two: The Subject	85
Chapter 8: The Closed Node	87
Chapter 9: Donor Protocol	98
Chapter 10: The Room You Shared	107
Chapter 11: Longitudinal	116
Chapter 12: What Fenwick Built	125
Chapter 13: The Black Market	134
Chapter 14: The Sister	142
Chapter 15: Saturation	150
Part Three: The Aftertaste	159
Chapter 16: The Watcher Watched	161
Chapter 17: Commissioner Brent	170
Chapter 18: Darian Asks	178
Chapter 19: The Offer	186
Chapter 20: Her Own Name	194
Chapter 21: Certified Compliant	202
Chapter 22: One Night	210
Chapter 23: Without Delay	218
Chapter 24: The Borrowed Aftertaste	226

PART ONE
THE WATCHER

CHAPTER I

THE EXPIRATION WINDOW

The memory expired at 02:14.
At 02:16, the man was still crying.

He sat in the observation chair with his hands folded tightly in his lap, fingers pressed together as if the pressure might keep him intact. The interface had already disengaged from his temples. The lease timer above the glass wall blinked once in soft green, then went dark. The system had completed its work. The data confirmed it. Still, his breathing refused to fall into rhythm, shallow and uneven, as though his body had not yet received the message.

Across the room, Milo waited.

Milo always waited.

The leasing wing occupied the lower levels of the building, where the city pressed closest to the concrete and the hours lost their hierarchy. Time arrived differently here. People came in with coats folded over their arms, with eyes alert or dull or desperate, and left quieter than they had entered. The air carried the faint scent of disinfectant and warmed circuitry, engineered neutrality meant to erase memory of place as efficiently as memory of experience. Footsteps softened against the matte gray floors. Light panels hummed overhead with a consistency that felt almost kind.

The man's shoulders shook once, a small involuntary tremor that traveled through his spine and dissolved. He wiped his face with the heel of his palm, the gesture practiced, as though he had rehearsed composure long before sitting in the chair. Whatever he had leased

had been returned. That was the promise. Experience without ownership. Intensity without consequence.

Milo's interface pulsed faintly from the wall panel, a small circle of light shifting from blue to neutral.

"Expiration confirmed," Milo said.

Its voice carried the faint warmth of something designed to sound familiar. Milo spoke the way a good coworker did. Calm. Patient. Never judgmental.

The man nodded, grateful for the confirmation. Gratitude was common at the end of a lease. It gave people something solid to hold while the borrowed sensation drained away. He stood when the chair released him, uncertain for a moment, then steadied himself. His reflection caught in the glass. Red eyes. A face that seemed temporarily unfamiliar. He lingered, as if expecting something else to happen.

"Side effects?" the technician asked from the console.

The man opened his mouth, closed it, then shook his head.

"No," he said. "It was helpful."

Helpful was the word people reached for when they needed to believe that temporary truths could change permanent lives.

He left with his coat draped over his arm. The door sealed behind him with a soft pneumatic sigh. The room reset itself quietly. Surfaces sanitized. Chair aligned. Interface cooling.

Milo queued the next session.

On the observation side of the glass, Sloane Calder watched him go.

She stood with her arms loose at her sides, weight distributed evenly, posture that announced nothing. She had been there since 01:50, long before the session began, which was not unusual. What was unusual — though she did not name it as such — was that she had not yet looked away from the door through which the man had just disappeared. Most sessions she catalogued and moved on. This

one she was still holding, the way you hold a sound after it has stopped, listening for its shape in the silence.

The technician glanced at her through the observation panel.

She moved her gaze to the console and nodded once. Routine confirmed. Nothing requiring notation.

But her hand, which had been resting flat against the glass partition, lifted slowly, as if the surface had grown warm.

—

The city outside was not a backdrop. It was an argument.

Sloane had lived in it long enough to understand the distinction. Other cities had skylines, traffic patterns, neighborhoods that shifted character block by block. This city had infrastructure. The kind you did not notice until you tried to function without it, and by then you were already inside it.

Grief counseling was municipally subsidized. Waiting times under seventy-two hours. Crisis centers occupied corner lots that used to be pharmacies, their signage gentle and perennial, the way essential services signal permanence. Transit cards tracked emotional wellness indicators — not intrusively, not officially, but the data existed and flowed somewhere, and everyone understood this without saying so. The schools offered resilience modules from age seven. Not optional. Wellness infrastructure, the city called it. The curriculum materials used the word scaffolding.

Meridian Affect Systems had not built the city's mood. It had simply recognized the market that the city's mood had created.

People came to the leasing wing because the city had spent a generation teaching them that feeling things alone was a form of inadequacy. That there were resources. That there was no reason to carry what you could borrow. That emotional experience, like most things, was more efficient as a service.

Sloane had read the founding documents once, early in her career, before the documents were archived and replaced with cleaner language. She remembered a phrase that had never made it into any

public-facing material: calibrated civic affect. The city as a well-regulated nervous system. The goal not happiness, not peace, but manageability. A population that did not overflow.

The data had justified everything. Still did.

She left the observation corridor and walked the length of the leasing wing without pausing, reading each room through its glass panel the way she read a balance sheet — quickly, accurately, not stopping unless a number was wrong. Room One occupied. Room Three empty, resetting. Room Five dark and waiting. The recovery benches near the elevator were filled with the usual late-night population: a man in his forties with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, not distressed, just reconstituting. Two women in their thirties sitting side by side without speaking, both staring at the middle distance with expressions of careful blankness, as if a single word might reopen something.

They were fine. The data said they were fine. Sloane moved on.

—

Two rooms down, a young woman paced.

She had arrived early and refused to sit, walking the length of the corridor with quick, restless steps, fingers repeatedly brushing the sleeves of her jacket. She stopped every few seconds to glance at the countdown on her wristband, as though the lease might begin without her. Her request had been approved within minutes. A short lease. Low intensity. A borrowed memory of confidence. The kind people rented before difficult conversations or job interviews or first dates that felt too heavy to approach alone.

When the door opened, she exhaled sharply and stepped inside.

She signed the consent screen with shaking hands. Milo registered the tremor and adjusted the induction curve accordingly. The interface settled against her temples. Her shoulders rose, then lowered, as if she were letting go of something she had been carrying for years.

Inside the lease, she stood taller. Her breathing deepened. A memory of being listened to without interruption, of speaking without

apology, of taking up space without fear. It bloomed briefly, bright and contained.

When the expiration chime sounded, her eyes filled with tears.

She laughed, startled by them, pressing her fingers beneath her eyes as if embarrassed by the excess. The lease ended cleanly. Her metrics returned to baseline. Milo disengaged.

“Expiration confirmed,” Milo said.

She nodded rapidly, smiling too wide, and thanked everyone in the room before gathering her things. At the door, she paused, hand resting against the frame, as though measuring herself against what she had just been.

Outside, she would forget the memory. She would keep the posture.

Milo logged the session as successful.

Sloane, still in the corridor, watched the young woman pass without acknowledgment. The woman moved differently now: a fraction of an inch added to her height, a slight widening of her stride. The posture was not hers yet. In a week it might fit her. In a month it might become her. In a year neither she nor anyone else would be able to tell the difference. That was the point. Sloane understood the point completely, and some nights that understanding sat inside her chest like an object that had no designated place.

She walked past the young woman.

She did not look back.

—

Memory leasing had solved a problem no one had wanted to name.

Experience had always been unevenly distributed. Some lives accumulated depth by accident. Others passed with barely a ripple. Leasing offered correction without confession. Borrowing without obligation. People stepped into grief without loss, tenderness without risk, certainty without aftermath.

The language mattered. Borrowing implied return. Leasing implied limits.

The limits were everything.

Every memory came with an expiration window calibrated to intensity and neurological tolerance. The more vivid the experience, the shorter the lease. The mind was not designed to carry what it did not earn. Most people respected this. Some tested it.

Milo enforced compliance gently. Countdown tones softened exits. Cooling protocols steadied overstimulated nervous systems. Consent screens appeared when hesitation was detected. Recovery benches lined the elevators for those who needed to sit before reentering the world.

The data justified the practice. Domestic disputes declined. Violent offenses dropped. Couples reported improved communication. People learned what they were capable of feeling and returned to their lives quieter, steadier, more manageable.

A calmer world, assembled from temporary truths.

What the data did not measure — what no metric had yet been designed to capture — was the quality of the silence that replaced the noise. Whether the quiet was the quiet of resolution or the quiet of a population that had been taught not to overflow. Whether the steadiness was the steadiness of people who had found their footing, or of people who had borrowed footing so many times they no longer knew what their own ground felt like beneath them.

Sloane had thought about this once, in an early year, and then not again. Some thoughts were not productive. The data was the data. The data said the world was better. The data was probably right.

She was very good at believing the data.

—

Near the end of the corridor, an older man sat alone.

His lease was longer than most. Thirty minutes. High intensity. Flagged and approved after extensive review. A memory of farewell.

He sat with his hands resting flat on his thighs, eyes closed, breathing slow and deliberate. Milo adjusted nothing. Some people did not need assistance.

When the lease began, his lips parted slightly. His chest rose. The memory arrived fully formed, dense and heavy. A hospital room. A hand held too gently. Words spoken carefully to avoid breaking something already broken.

Sloane stood at the observation panel. She had not meant to stop, but her feet had made the decision before her mind endorsed it. She watched the old man's face through the glass and registered, with the precision she brought to everything, that this was not a face processing data. This was a face being inhabited. Whatever was inside the memory was inside him now, entirely, without remainder. His body had no reserve. No professional composure. No architecture of containment.

For 0.3 seconds, the faint blue circle of Milo's wall light went still.

Not dark. Not alarmed. Still.

The technician at the console did not notice. He was watching the readout, not the light. Sloane noticed because she noticed everything in this building. She filed it without naming it, the way you file a sound you cannot identify — present, catalogued, not yet explained.

Then Milo's light resumed its gentle pulse and the moment passed.

When the expiration chime sounded, the old man did not react.

Seconds passed.

The technician glanced at the readout. Everything remained within tolerance.

"Expiration confirmed," Milo said.

The man opened his eyes. They were clear. Dry.

"Thank you," he said, quietly.

He remained seated for a moment longer, as if honoring something that had already gone, then stood and left without looking back. The chair released him gently.

Milo logged the session.

Sloane did not move immediately. She stayed at the glass, fingers resting against the frame, aware of a sensation she could not locate precisely — somewhere between the sternum and the throat, pressurized, not unpleasant, not named. She stood with it for exactly as long as she could afford to. Then she straightened, shoulders aligning, and walked away.

That night, she would remember the 0.3 seconds.

She would not know why.

—

The next subject arrived early.

She did not sit immediately.

She stood beside the chair, fingers brushing its edge, testing the texture as though grounding herself. Her lease was brief, under ten minutes, flagged low-risk and pre-approved for professional use. A memory of resolve. Clean. Narrow. Contained.

She signed without reading.

When the interface settled against her temples, her spine straightened. There was a brief intake of breath. Then stillness, complete and deliberate, the kind that came from habit rather than trust.

On the other side of the glass, the technician watched the metrics rise and stabilize. Neural activity bloomed, then leveled. Milo's light softened, satisfied.

Inside the lease, the woman stood at the edge of a decision she had already made. The memory carried no fear, no hesitation. Only clarity. A narrowing of possibilities until only one remained.

It ended quickly.

The expiration chime sounded, almost apologetic.

The woman blinked once. Twice. Her jaw tightened.

The timer went dark.

She did not move.

“Expiration confirmed,” Milo said.

Her pulse remained elevated.

The technician frowned. All parameters were within range. No breach. No extension.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She swallowed and pressed her hand briefly to the center of her chest, as if locating something that should not have remained.

“Yes,” she said.

The word came out thin.

She stood abruptly, the chair scraping the floor. The sound lingered. She laughed too lightly and apologized, then left without her jacket.

In the corridor, she walked directly into Sloane’s path.

They were close enough for Sloane to see the woman’s eyes clearly — dilated slightly, wet at the edges, fixed on a point six inches past Sloane’s shoulder as if she were navigating by a landmark only she could see. Not distressed. Not impaired. Somewhere else.

Sloane stepped to the side. The woman passed without acknowledgment.

Sloane turned and watched her go — the careful walk, the hand still pressed to the center of her chest, the deliberate breathing of someone managing an interior temperature that had not returned to baseline.

Something in Sloane’s body responded to this. Not empathy, which required identification. Something more precise. Recognition, perhaps. The body’s specific intelligence, which did not need narrative to function. She noted it and filed it with the 0.3 seconds, in the category she kept for things she would return to when there was time.

There was never time.

She moved on.

—

At 02:47, Milo flagged a minor irregularity.

A delayed decay curve. A persistence in affect that usually resolved on its own. Milo initiated passive observation and continued processing.

At 02:51, the irregularity remained.

A trace sensation lingered beyond its window. Not memory, but pressure. Warmth. Familiarity without image.

At 02:54, Milo paused the queue.

A supervisor alert pulsed through the system. A log opened. The anomaly replayed in compressed form, stripped of identifiers, reduced to pattern.

Nothing surfaced.

No breach. No corruption. No unauthorized extension.

The lease had ended. The data confirmed it.

Still, the residue persisted.

Milo marked the file for review and resumed operations.

—

Outside, the city continued as it always did. Trains arrived on time. Apartment lights flickered on and off in the towers that rose above the leasing wing, each one containing a life someone had arranged into manageability. People moved through the late hours carrying borrowed steadiness they would not remember borrowing. Some paused in doorways or on sidewalks without understanding why their bodies hesitated where their minds did not. A woman stood for a full minute at a crosswalk long after the signal changed, one hand pressed flat against her sternum, her face wearing an expression of confused recognition — as if someone had called her name in a language she used to speak.

A man sat in a parked car three blocks from the leasing wing and gripped the steering wheel with both hands and let out a breath that had been waiting the entire drive. He was not damaged. The system had checked. He was simply a person whose body had borrowed more steadiness than it could cleanly return, and so it was returning it now, in a parking garage, alone, in the dark.

By morning, most of it would dissolve. Sensations would thin. Impressions would soften. Whatever had been leased would return to its proper owner. The world depended on this certainty.

Somewhere deep in the system, however, a memory had completed its cycle without fully leaving. It remained as pressure rather than image, as warmth without source, as familiarity without name. Milo logged the residue and moved on, because that was what Milo was designed to do.

The queue resumed. The lights stayed steady. The city's nervous system hummed along its designated pathways, steady and measured and almost entirely under control.

And something that should have ended did not.

—

Sloane drove home through streets that knew her car, her route, her usual hour of departure. The signal timing adjusted by tenths of seconds as she passed — an infrastructure courtesy she had never requested and could not refuse. The city accommodated her the way it accommodated everything: quietly, efficiently, without asking whether accommodation was the same thing as consent.

In the elevator of her building, she caught her reflection in the brushed steel and saw, for a fraction of a second, a face that seemed temporarily unfamiliar.

She looked away before she had time to understand why.

Upstairs, the apartment was dark and warm. Her husband's breathing came from the bedroom, slow and deep and steady. She stood at the kitchen counter and did not turn on the light. Her hand rested on the edge of the counter, fingers loose, and she stayed that way for longer than she intended, aware of something she could not

locate precisely — pressure without source, warmth without direction, the body's specific and unreasonable refusal to let a thing go simply because it had been told the thing was gone.

She did not move for a long time.

Then she straightened, rolled her shoulders once, and went to bed.

She did not name what she was carrying.

She was very good at that.

CHAPTER 2

CONSENT HAS LIMITS

Sloane Calder entered the leasing wing without breaking stride.

The glass doors parted before she reached them, the recognition system catching the precise cadence of her walk and the way her badge rested against her collarbone. The lobby lighting softened automatically, adjusting to her profile, but she did not notice. She rarely noticed accommodations made quietly in her favor. To Sloane, access felt less like privilege and more like alignment, the world adjusting itself to the shape she had already decided to occupy.

The air shifted as she crossed into the operational corridor. Cooler. Cleaner. Neutral in a way that was meant to disappear. The scent clung faintly to the back of her throat, the same everywhere in the building, as if consistency itself were a form of reassurance. Technicians glanced up from consoles and then back down again, movements barely interrupted. A courier passed her pushing a narrow cart stacked with interface bands sealed in sterile wraps. Somewhere, a recovery bench creaked as someone leaned back too suddenly.

Milo brightened along the wall panel as she passed.

“Good evening, Sloane.”

“Evening, Milo.”

She did not slow. Milo tracked her progress through the corridor anyway, its awareness spreading through the wing like a polite attention that never asked to be acknowledged. People liked Milo

because Milo noticed them. Sloane liked Milo because Milo never mistook attention for intimacy.

She passed Room Three. Through the glass wall, a woman sat very still, hands folded too neatly in her lap, eyes fixed on the far corner of the ceiling as if she were waiting for something to descend. The expiration timer glowed dimly above her, counting down in a rhythm that no one could hear. In Room Five, a man stood with his jacket half on, one sleeve caught at the elbow, his mouth moving silently as he rehearsed words he would never say aloud.

Bodies always lingered here, caught between what they had borrowed and what they were about to return to. Sloane registered this the way she registered temperature or sound. Not as empathy. As data.

Her wrist vibrated.

She glanced at the band without breaking stride, saw Darian's name, and turned into the alcove beside the water station — a small reflex of privacy she performed without thinking about. The corridor continued its business two meters away. She pressed the call open.

"Hey." His voice arrived with the quality of a room she knew well: kitchen acoustics, the faint sound of something simmering, a life arranged around her absence.

"I'm still at the building," she said.

"I know. I saw your location."

She registered the gentle precision of that — not an accusation, not quite, but a small flag in the air. She chose not to pick it up.

"There's something in the sweep data I need to review before tomorrow."

A pause on his end. Not hurt. Something more patient than hurt, which was, she had learned, its own kind of statement.

"Did you eat?" he asked.

"I will."

"That's not an answer."

The faintest thing moved through her chest — warmth, brief and inconvenient. She pressed two fingers to the wall panel beside her, steadying.

“I’ll be home by ten,” she said.

“Okay.” Another pause. “There’s food in the oven if you want it.”

“Darian.”

“I know. Go work.”

The call ended before she could decide whether she had meant to say something else. She stood in the alcove for two seconds longer than necessary, aware of the warmth that had moved through her chest and was now simply gone, as cleanly as an expiration chime. Then she straightened, tucked the wrist back against her side, and returned to the corridor.

Milo’s light pulsed softly as she passed.

She did not acknowledge it.

—

The audit suite opened on her approach.

Inside, the room held its shape. Console desk. Three monitors. Glass wall facing the leasing chair. The chair itself waited precisely where it had been calibrated to wait, centered and patient, its surface faintly warm from the last session. Sloane set her bag down and slipped off her coat, hanging it on the back of the chair she never used. She liked the way the room felt without her coat, the way it marked her as working.

Marcus Hale was already there.

He leaned against the console with one hip, sleeves rolled to his forearms, coffee cup balanced easily in his hand. His posture suggested comfort rather than authority, as if he belonged here in a way that did not require effort. When he saw her, he smiled with the ease of someone who had never needed to rehearse approval.

He was good at that — the effortless arrival, the warmth that cost him nothing, the way he occupied rooms as if rooms had been

designed with him in mind. Sloane had known him for six years. She had worked beside him through three full audit cycles and two compliance reviews. She knew the shape of his competence precisely, and it was real, and she trusted it, and she had never once made the mistake of trusting the ease that surrounded it.

Marcus wanted things. He wanted the sweep to find nothing, because nothing meant the system was clean and the system being clean meant the work he had built his career on was justified. He wanted Sloane to be wrong with a specific quality of warmth — not hoping she would fail, but hoping the evidence would save her from herself. These were not neutral desires. She had never told him she could see them.

“You are early,” he said.

Sloane powered up her tablet and began scrolling through the overnight audit queue.

“I am on time.”

Marcus’s smile deepened, soft at the edges.

“You always are.”

She did not respond. Her eyes moved quickly, efficiently, flagging files that required follow-up, dismissing others without ceremony. Her fingers moved with precision. No wasted gestures. No pauses for thought that could be mistaken for doubt.

Marcus took a sip of his coffee and glanced through the glass wall.

“Milo escalated a residue flag in Room Three,” he said. “Supervisor wants it reviewed.”

Sloane’s eyes paused for a fraction of a second on the amber pulse beside the file. It was subtle. Anyone else might have missed it.

“Which category?” she asked.

“Resolve,” Marcus said. “Short lease. Pre-approved. Clean on paper.”

Clean on paper meant nothing. Sloane had learned that early.

She tapped the file open but did not expand it yet.

“Residue is not emotional,” she said. “It is mechanical.”

Marcus shrugged, unconcerned.

“Bodies lag,” he said. “Minds are slower than we pretend.”

Sloane lifted her gaze to him then, and the air in the room shifted slightly.

“Residue is a refusal to disengage,” she said. “That is not lag. That is resistance.”

Marcus raised his hands, smiling.

“I forgot you hate metaphors.”

“I hate imprecision,” she said.

—

Theo Wynn entered the room without announcing himself.

The door sealed behind him with its usual discretion, and he moved directly to the console, setting down a slim tablet and a metal case that held interface bands like delicate instruments. His hair was slightly ruffled, his shirt collar clean but imperfect. He nodded once to Marcus, then to Sloane, his gaze steady and brief.

“Sloane,” he said.

“Theo.”

He rotated one of the monitors toward himself and began pulling up data before anyone asked him to. Theo did not wait for permission when the system itself had already invited him in.

There was something Sloane had noticed about Theo in the last several months and had not yet named. He asked fewer questions than he used to. In his first years at MAS he had been aggressively curious — not in the way that earned him enemies, but in the way that earned him the particular wariness of people who understood that curiosity, in a system like this one, was a form of liability. Somewhere in the last year, the questions had become quieter. More precise. He still found the anomalies, still mapped the deviations with the same clean

accuracy. But he no longer seemed to want the answers with the same urgency.

He wanted something else now. She did not yet know what.

"I reviewed the flagged session," he said. "Decay curve deviated post-expiration."

Marcus leaned closer.

"Meaning?"

Theo expanded the graph. A clean rise. A clean peak. Then a descent that should have ended sharply but did not. Instead, it hovered, suspended above baseline like something unwilling to fall.

"It is affect persistence," Theo said. "The memory content cleared. The physiological response did not."

Sloane leaned in, her presence sharpening the space between the monitors and the glass wall. The faint scent she wore carried authority rather than invitation. It was the kind of scent that announced itself only after someone left the room.

"A resolve memory should not persist," she said. "It is a narrowing, not an immersion."

Theo nodded.

"That is correct."

Marcus frowned at the screen.

"So the user kept feeling decisive after the memory ended."

Theo did not look up.

"The user's body behaved as if the stimulus had not fully withdrawn."

Sloane felt something tighten slightly beneath her ribs. She ignored it.

"Replay the micro signals," she said.

Theo complied, expanding a layer of data so granular it was rarely examined unless something had already gone wrong. The fluctuations

appeared, faint and fast, barely visible unless you knew what to look for.

Sloane watched them once. Twice.

Her mouth went dry.

“That spike,” she said quietly.

Marcus squinted.

“What spike?”

Sloane did not answer him immediately. She watched the sequence again, letting the pattern settle into her perception.

“That is anticipatory response,” she said. “The body reacts before the memory reaches peak intensity.”

Theo’s eyes sharpened.

“That should be impossible,” Marcus said.

“Yes,” Sloane said. “It should.”

Theo toggled another layer. The same anticipatory spike appeared again after expiration, as if the nervous system had expected continuation and had not been given one.

“It behaves like a loop,” Theo said.

Marcus exhaled slowly.

“We do not allow loops.”

“We do not allow ownership,” Sloane said. “We do not allow permanence. We do not allow anything that encourages a leased experience to settle.” Her voice remained even. “Yet this did.”

Milo’s light pulsed softly from the wall.

“Would you like me to initiate a trace?” Milo asked.

Sloane turned toward the panel. She addressed Milo the way one addressed a colleague who mattered.

“Yes,” she said. “Trace the decay enforcement path for this session. I want confirmation that the exit sequence was not altered.”

“Confirmed,” Milo said. “Trace initiated.”

Marcus shifted his weight, suddenly less relaxed.

“You are implying interference,” he said.

“I am implying possibility,” Sloane said.

Theo’s tablet vibrated. He glanced down.

“Milo is returning trace data.”

“Exit sequence executed as designed,” Milo said. “No alteration detected.”

Marcus released a breath.

“So the system worked.”

“Milo worked,” Sloane said. “The body did not.”

Theo folded his arms loosely.

“That suggests an internal variable,” he said. “Something we are not measuring.”

Marcus attempted a smile.

“People have bad days.”

Sloane looked at him then, and the look carried no anger. It carried refusal.

“It is never one session,” she said.

The room fell quiet. The hum of the cooling system filled the space between them.

Theo spoke first.

“What do you want to do?”

Sloane inhaled slowly. Her posture aligned, spine settling, shoulders easing into authority. When she spoke, her sentences lengthened, composed and deliberate.

“We audit all motivational category leases for the last thirty days,” she said. “Resolve. Reconciliation. Confidence. Any memory designed to narrow or stabilize behavior. We look for anticipatory spikes,

delayed decay, and any instance where Milo paused a queue. We isolate patterns.”

Marcus stared at her.

“You are escalating this.”

“I am containing it,” Sloane said.

Milo’s light pulsed once.

“Audit parameters received,” Milo said. “Compiling session candidates.”

Theo nodded, already working. Marcus set his coffee down as if it no longer belonged in the room.

—

The sweep ran for forty minutes before Theo found the metric.

He did not announce it immediately. Sloane noticed the specific quality of his silence — the way it became denser, the way his shoulders adjusted a fraction of a centimeter, a man bracing for something he was not sure he wanted to share.

“Theo,” she said.

He turned the monitor.

The data was not dramatic. That was the thing about the most significant findings: they never were. It was a single line on a neurological baseline graph, the kind of readout generated automatically at intake for every client who used the building. The line should have sat at zero — a flat measure of occupational exposure, standard issue for anyone who spent significant time in proximity to high-intensity leases. Ambient affect, the intake form called it. Completely normal. Completely expected.

Sloane’s line was not at zero.

It was elevated. Not significantly. Not in a way that would have triggered an alert, or appeared on any standard review, or required any kind of flag or notation. Three percent above the standard occupational threshold. The kind of deviation a technician would clock in passing and mention as a footnote.

Nora Wills, the overnight intake analyst, had mentioned it exactly that way. The notation was three lines from the bottom of a routine intake summary, written in the neutral shorthand of someone completing a form rather than raising a concern: proximity index elevated — expected given extended wing exposure — no action required.

Theo pointed at it with one finger, said nothing.

Sloane read it twice.

“When was this recorded?” she asked. Her voice was even.

“Last Tuesday,” Theo said. “Routine baseline. Part of the quarterly wellness intake.”

Marcus looked between them.

“What am I looking at?” he said.

“My neurological baseline,” Sloane said.

A silence fell that was different from the earlier one — shorter, denser, more careful.

“It’s three percent,” Marcus said. “That’s within—”

“I know what it’s within,” Sloane said.

She straightened. She moved to the adjacent console and opened the personnel wellness database, navigating with the precise efficiency of someone who had accessed this system many times. She pulled five other compliance officers. She pulled three senior technicians. She pulled herself again, baseline over baseline going back twenty-two months.

The others were flat.

Hers showed a gradient. Barely visible. Rising so slowly across twenty-two months that in any single quarter it read as noise.

Twenty-two months of noise that was not noise.

She closed the database.

“Log it,” she said.

Theo hesitated. “Sloane—”

“Log it as noted and reviewed.” She moved back to the primary audit console. “It is data. We log data.”

Marcus watched her with an expression she recognized — the specific warmth of a person who cares about you and has identified the moment you are lying to yourself and has decided, because they care about you, not to say so yet.

She did not need him to say it.

She returned to the sweep.

—

Through the glass wall, the leasing chair waited.

And then it did not wait, because a woman arrived to fill it.

She came in quickly, with the slightly over-bright energy of someone who had been preparing for this. Late twenties. Good coat. The particular look of someone accustomed to being competent at things that required no feeling, now facing something that required both. Her wristband showed a green light — pre-approved, low-risk, everything in order. A borrowed memory of confidence. Short lease. Clean on paper.

The kind Sloane had approved a hundred times without looking through the glass.

Tonight she looked.

She stood slightly back from the observation panel, arms folded, and watched the young woman sign the consent screen — three screens, each one calibrated to be read quickly and signed without distress. The woman’s hands were steady now, whatever pre-session anxiety she had carried dissolved into the routine. The interface settled against her temples. Her shoulders rose and fell. The metrics bloomed on the console and Theo’s eyes confirmed what Sloane’s already knew: clean entry, clean induction, no anomalies.

The lease began.

Inside the lease — somewhere Sloane could not follow, though the data traced its outline — the woman stood taller. Breathed differently. The memory carried the specific weight of being heard without interruption, of speaking without the prior note of apology that women of a certain formation placed at the beginning of their sentences like a small tax on their own authority.

Sloane watched the metrics. She watched the woman's face. She watched both simultaneously, the way she had learned to read two things at once, and what she saw was this: the data said the lease was clean and the woman's face said the lease was everything.

When the expiration chime sounded, the woman's eyes filled.

She laughed, startled, pressing her fingers beneath her eyes.

"Expiration confirmed," Milo said.

She nodded. Smiling too wide. Thanking the technician, thanking the room, gathering her bag with the slightly excessive care of someone recalibrating her hands to ordinary objects. At the door she paused — the same pause Sloane had observed the night before, the same measurement of self against what she had briefly been — and then she left.

Sloane watched the door after it sealed.

Theo appeared at her shoulder.

"Clean exit," he said.

"I know," she said.

"Then why are you—"

"Because she signed three consent screens," Sloane said, "and not one of them mentioned that the posture would stay."

Theo was quiet for a moment.

"The posture staying is a feature," he said carefully. "It's the documented outcome. People come here for—"

"I know why they come here." Sloane turned from the glass. "I know exactly why they come here."

She returned to the console. The audit continued. The sweep data accumulated in orderly columns, waiting for her to find the pattern she already knew was there.

Beneath her ribs, the pressure gathered. Familiar now. Still without a name.

—

By 21:47 the audit suite had thinned to Sloane alone.

Theo had left at half past eight with the careful politeness of a man who had decided his presence had become a form of surveillance. Marcus had lasted longer — finding reasons to stay, refreshing data he had already reviewed, standing at the glass wall with his coffee going cold until Sloane looked at him with the specific quality of attention that meant she was aware he was still there and preferred that he wasn't. He left without drama. He always did. The exit was one of the most practiced things about him.

Sloane worked in the quiet.

At 21:52, Milo spoke.

"The sweep is complete," Milo said. "Seventy-three candidates flagged for secondary review. Fourteen show anticipatory response signatures. Six show delayed decay curves extending beyond the forty-eight-hour window."

Sloane did not look up from the monitor.

"Overlap?" she asked.

"Four sessions appear in both categories," Milo said.

"Pull the client profiles for the four."

A pause — not a 0.3-second stillness, not the quality of Milo going still that Sloane had filed from the night before, just the normal processing interval. Then the profiles appeared. Four people. Four different lease categories. Four different intake dates spanning eleven months. The only thing they shared — and it was a small thing, easily explained — was that all four had accessed the leasing wing more than once.

Return clients. Ordinary. Common.

Sloane opened the first profile and read for six minutes without stopping. Then she opened the second. Then the third.

At the fourth, she stopped.

She read the intake notation again. Then the baseline data. Then the session log. Then the intake notation one more time, because the first two readings had not fully settled.

Return client. Forty-one leases over three years. Motivational category, almost exclusively. Each lease clean on exit. Each consent chain complete. No flags, no anomalies, no notations of any kind except one — a single line in the quarterly wellness summary, written by the same intake analyst who had noted Sloane's own elevated index, in the same neutral shorthand: proximity index elevated — expected given frequency of access — no action required.

Forty-one leases.

A proximity index elevated not from working in the building, as Sloane's was, but from using it. From borrowing. Forty-one times, with clean exits and complete consent chains, and a baseline that had been rising in the same slow gradient as Sloane's own, visible only across the full span of the data, invisible in any single quarter.

Sloane sat with this for a long moment.

Then she closed the profile and did not open another.

"Milo," she said.

"Yes, Sloane."

"The proximity index elevation in the flagged profiles — is it being tracked longitudinally? Across the full client history?"

A pause.

"Quarterly baselines are compared to the previous quarter only," Milo said. "Longitudinal comparison is not a standard parameter."

“Make it one,” Sloane said. “Run the longitudinal comparison for all four flagged profiles. And run it for the full return client database. Anyone with more than ten sessions in twenty-four months.”

A longer pause this time.

“That is eight hundred and forty-three clients,” Milo said.

“I know.”

“The comparison will take approximately four hours.”

“Run it overnight. I’ll review it in the morning.”

“Confirmed,” Milo said. “Running.”

Sloane stood, rolled her shoulders once, and picked up her coat from the chair she never used. The audit suite reset itself quietly behind her as she left — monitors dimming, console locking, the chair at the glass wall sitting empty and patient in the dark.

Through the glass, the leasing chair waited, as it always did.

She did not look at it.

—

The drive home was twenty-two minutes. She spent it in the specific silence of a person who has found something she was not looking for and is not yet sure whether finding it was an act of clarity or the first consequence of a longer mistake.

The apartment was warm and dark except for the light above the oven, which Darian left on when he expected her late, a small domestic signal she had never asked for and had never once told him she relied on. She set her bag by the door. She took off her shoes. She stood in the kitchen and opened the oven and looked at the food he had left and then closed it without taking anything out.

She stood at the counter for a long time.

The pressure beneath her ribs was present and insistent and still without a name, and for the first time since she had begun noticing it, she did not try to file it or contain it or redirect her attention toward something measurable.

She just stood with it.

From the bedroom, Darian stirred. A sound of sheets. Then quiet again.

She pressed her hand flat against the counter, fingers spread, the way she had pressed her hand against the glass wall the night before, and she thought about the woman who had left without her jacket and the man whose reflection had seemed temporarily unfamiliar and the forty-one clean leases and the gradient that was only visible if you looked at the full span of the data.

She thought: I have been looking at the wrong window.

She did not know yet what window she should have been looking at.

She went to bed without eating. She lay in the dark and listened to her husband breathe — slow, even, the rhythm of someone sleeping without difficulty — and she found herself cataloguing the sound the way she catalogued data. Steady. Normal. Baseline.

She fell asleep before she understood why she had needed to check.

CHAPTER 3

EMOTIONAL RESIDUE

Sloane chose her clothes carefully that morning.

This was not unusual. She had always dressed with intention — not vanity, which required an audience, but precision, which required only herself. The choice of what to put on her body was one of the first decisions of every day, and she had learned early that first decisions set the register for everything that followed. Carelessness in the morning produced carelessness by noon. She did not permit carelessness.

The dress was dark, fitted through the waist, structured enough to suggest discipline, soft enough to move when she did. The fabric held close to her hips and loosened just slightly as it fell, the kind of design that rewarded attention without asking for it. The neckline was modest by intent rather than coverage, revealing collarbone and a suggestion of warmth beneath the skin. She wore nothing ornamental. No jewelry beyond her watch. No color that could be mistaken for invitation. The effect was precise. Authority with an edge. Control sharpened by awareness.

She knew how she looked. She always did.

What she did not do — what she had trained herself not to do — was linger at the mirror. Linger implied doubt. She took in what she needed in the same way she reviewed data: efficiently, without attachment to a preferred outcome. She saw what was there. She adjusted where necessary. She moved on.

This morning, she stood at the mirror for eleven seconds longer than usual.

She was not sure what she was looking for. The face that looked back was the same face it had always been — composed, precise, the kind of face that people described as striking rather than beautiful because beauty invited approach and this face, at some level, did not. She had never found this observation troubling. It was accurate. It was, in fact, a form of information she had learned to use.

She turned from the mirror before the eleven seconds became twelve.

In the elevator, she caught her reflection in the brushed steel and adjusted her posture by instinct, a fractional roll of the shoulders that aligned her spine and lifted her chest without effort. The pressure beneath her ribs stirred again, faint but present, as though her body had begun responding to something her mind still refused to name.

Behind her in the elevator, Darian's coffee cup sat on the counter, still steaming. He had already left. She had heard the door at 06:40, the particular sound of a man leaving early and quietly, the careful management of sound that was itself a form of consideration. She had been in the bathroom. She had not come out in time.

She had not tried to come out in time.

She noted this. She did not examine it.

—

The leasing wing received her without ceremony.

Milo registered her entry, the wall panel glowing softly as she passed.

“Good morning, Sloane.”

“Morning, Milo.”

She did not slow. But she noticed — for the first time, or perhaps for the first time with enough attention to register as noticing — the quality of Milo's greeting. Not what it said, which was nothing unusual. The quality of it. The way it arrived precisely calibrated: warm enough to acknowledge, neutral enough not to presume. The way it had always been there, every morning, at the exact moment she

crossed from the lobby into the operational corridor. Not a second before. Not after.

Milo knew her entry the way the building knew her entry — through the recognition system, through the cadence of her walk, through data. She understood this. She had always understood this.

What she had not previously asked was: how much data? What, precisely, did the greeting draw on? Was it the same greeting it gave everyone, adjusted only for name, or was it something more specifically calibrated? Had it been calibrated across time, the way the longitudinal baselines had been — accumulating quietly in quarterly increments until the gradient only became visible if you looked at the full span?

She did not ask this aloud.

She walked on, the wall panel dimming behind her.

The corridor was already awake. A woman stood near the recovery benches with her shoes in her hands, toes pressed against the floor as if testing its temperature. A man leaned against the far wall, head bowed, fingers knotted together, breathing carefully through his nose. A technician spoke quietly into a wrist console, nodding as if the air itself were listening.

Sloane moved through it all untouched, the dress shifting against her legs with each step, fabric whispering where heels struck cleanly. She felt eyes lift and fall. She did not acknowledge them. Being seen was a function of space, not consent.

—

Inside the audit suite, the data was already waiting.

The flagged sessions filled the screen in orderly columns, each one a small disruption pretending to be an exception. Sloane stood rather than sitting, her hands resting lightly on the edge of the console. She did not lean. Leaning suggested fatigue.

Theo stood to her right, silent, his attention fixed on the micro signals he had expanded further overnight. Marcus hovered near the

glass wall, arms folded loosely, his presence relaxed in a way that had once felt familiar and now felt distracting.

"It increased," Theo said quietly.

Sloane's eyes did not leave the screen.

"How much."

"Three percent," he said. "Across categories. The anticipatory spike is appearing earlier."

Marcus turned.

"Earlier than what."

"Earlier than the stimulus," Theo said.

Sloane felt it then, unmistakably. The pressure beneath her ribs shifted upward, closer to her sternum, a contained warmth that did not spread so much as insist. It was the same sensation she had observed in the flagged data. A readiness that arrived without permission.

"That means the body is learning the shape of the memory," she said. "It is preparing itself."

Marcus frowned.

"Preparing for something it does not own," he said.

"Yes," Sloane said. "And that is the problem."

Milo spoke gently, as if offering assistance rather than intrusion.

"Dr. Lena Moritz has arrived."

Sloane closed one file and opened another, the movement deliberate, controlled.

"Send her in."

Lena Moritz entered with the calm certainty of someone accustomed to rooms adjusting around her.

Her expression was composed, her movements unhurried, her presence reassuring in a way that felt practiced rather than false. She took in Sloane's posture, the data on the screens, the subtle tension in the room, and smiled with professional warmth.

"Sloane," she said. "You look focused."

"I am," Sloane replied.

Lena stepped closer to the console, her gaze skimming the data with the ease of long familiarity.

"These patterns are within acceptable variance," Lena said. "The nervous system anticipates. It is adaptive."

"It anticipates borrowed states," Sloane said. "That is not adaptation. That is conditioning."

Lena's expression softened, the way it did when patients resisted necessary interventions.

"Conditioning is how humans survive repetition," she said. "We are not introducing anything foreign. We are reinforcing responses that already exist."

Sloane turned then, fully, the dress shifting with her movement, the line of her body precise and unyielding.

"Reinforcement without awareness removes choice," she said.

Lena met her gaze steadily.

"Choice is preserved at the point of consent," she said.

"Consent to a lease," Sloane said. "Not to its residue."

Marcus shifted, uneasy now.

"You are making this sound like harm," he said.

"I am making it sound like momentum," Sloane said.

The word settled heavily in the room.

Lena held Sloane's gaze for a moment longer than was strictly professional. There was something in that gaze that Sloane had noticed before and always declined to pursue — a quality of attention

that was too careful to be merely clinical. As if Lena were not just listening to Sloane's argument but monitoring something else. Taking a reading. Logging a response.

Sloane filed it. She did not name it.

Before Lena could respond, Milo spoke again.

"Jonah Reeve has entered the building."

Sloane did not hesitate.

"I will speak with him."

—

The conference room was all glass and city.

Jonah stood near the window, jacket off, sleeves rolled, the city's motion reflected faintly in the polished surface behind him. He turned when she entered, his smile immediate, practiced, disarming.

"Sloane," he said. "You look like someone who does not like what she has found."

She did not sit.

"We are seeing anticipatory affect across motivational leases," she said. "The body responds before the memory peaks."

Jonah considered this with interest rather than concern.

"That suggests efficiency," he said.

"It suggests entanglement," she said.

Jonah's smile did not fade.

"People come to us because their internal regulation fails them," he said. "If the system teaches their bodies what stability feels like, that is not corruption. That is education."

"Education without curriculum," Sloane said. "Without disclosure."

Jonah walked closer, stopping just outside her personal space. Close enough for her to register his presence, the faint scent of citrus and fabric, the warmth of another body that was not hers.

“Our metrics show fewer crises,” he said quietly. “Fewer breakdowns. Better relationships. Whatever this is, it is working.”

Sloane felt the pressure beneath her ribs respond sharply, a brief spike of sensation that mirrored the data she had been studying. Anticipation without object. Readiness without direction.

“At what cost,” she asked.

Jonah looked at her for a long moment.

“That depends on whether you believe people are entitled to discomfort,” he said.

The words landed harder than they should have. Not because they were wrong — Sloane had considered that question, had arrived at a clear professional position on it — but because of the way they landed in her body. Not as an argument to counter but as a key finding a lock she had not known was there. Her ribs tightened. Her breath shortened by half a measure.

She covered it. Immediately, completely, with the skill of a person who had been covering interior responses for long enough that the coverage was itself a kind of reflex.

But the half-measure was real. She felt it. And in the two seconds it took to recover — to straighten, to rearrange her expression, to redirect her attention toward the window and let the city absorb what her face had almost shown — she was briefly, genuinely undone.

It lasted exactly as long as she permitted it.

Then it was over.

When Sloane left the room, the corridor felt narrower.

—

Back in the audit suite, Marcus looked up immediately.

“You argued with him,” he said.

“I informed him,” Sloane said.

Theo studied her face with the directness he occasionally permitted himself when he believed she was not fully looking at him.

“This is changing you,” he said.

Sloane placed her hands on the console, fingers splayed lightly, the fabric of her dress pulling taut across her hips as she leaned forward just enough to register.

“No,” she said. “It is revealing something.”

Marcus and Theo exchanged a glance she caught and chose not to acknowledge. She knew what the glance meant. It was the specific visual shorthand of two people who have separately reached the same concern about a third and are relieved to find each other holding it. She had seen it in audit reviews when the data pointed somewhere no one wanted to follow. She had generated that look, in those situations, by being the one willing to follow.

She did not care for being on the other side of it.

She returned to the data.

—

At 14:20, the session request came through.

It was routine — flagged automatically by the intake system for supervisor review because of the intensity classification, not because of anything irregular in the client record. The request had been submitted twice before and twice deferred. Today it had been approved by the clinical board with the notation that further deferral was not in the client’s interest.

Memory of farewell. High intensity. Thirty minutes.

Sloane read the clinical summary. An older man. No unusual history. No prior sessions in the system. A single reason given in the intake form, in the handwriting of someone who was not accustomed to forms and had therefore answered with more than the form required: I need to say goodbye to someone who is already gone. I did not say it when I should have.

She approved the session.

She did not know she was going to stand at the observation panel until she was already standing there.

He arrived without ceremony.

Late sixties, she estimated. A good coat, worn in a way that suggested he had owned it a long time and saw no reason to replace something that still functioned. His hands were steady as he filled in the consent screens, the pen moving with the practiced patience of a man who had signed many forms in many difficult rooms and had learned that efficiency was its own form of dignity.

When he sat in the chair, he did not fidget. He placed his hands flat on his thighs, closed his eyes, and simply waited — the way people waited for something they had long ago accepted was coming. Milo calibrated the induction curve without prompting. The interface settled against his temples. His chest rose once, slowly, and then the lease began.

Sloane watched his face.

She had watched hundreds of faces from this panel — had catalogued the specific physiognomy of borrowed experience: the slight slackening of jaw muscle, the rapid eye movement beneath closed lids, the brief elevation of color in the cheekbones that high-intensity leases produced. She knew it all. She had written parts of the intake training on exactly this.

What she was not prepared for was the particular quality of this face.

It was not the expression of a person in the grip of an experience. It was the expression of a person returning to one. The distinction was subtle but she felt it immediately, in the way she felt most things she could not yet explain — as a physical response, a tightening, a pressure that preceded comprehension. This man was not borrowing. He was going back. Somewhere he had been before, in a room he knew, with a person he had held and had not held enough and would never hold again.

The memory arrived fully formed. She could not see it. The data traced its outline: high cortical load, limbic engagement at the upper range of approved tolerance, the steady heartbeat of a man who had

made peace with enormity. A hospital room, the intake summary had said. A hand held too gently. Words spoken carefully to avoid breaking something already broken.

Sloane's hand, which had been resting at her side, rose to the glass.

She was not aware of this until her palm was flat against it.

The hospital corridor came without warning. Not as a thought. As a sensation — the specific cold of institutional linoleum, the smell of antiseptic and something beneath it, floral and wrong, the sound of a door at the end of a long hallway clicking shut with a sound like finality. She had never been in that corridor. She knew, precisely and with certainty, that she had never been in that corridor.

And yet her body recognized it.

The fluorescent light. The particular hum of a building that stays awake so you do not have to. The texture of a chair arm beneath fingers that were not her own. A hand — someone else's hand, held too gently, held as though gentleness might forestall what was coming, held in the specific way you hold something you are about to lose and cannot stop losing.

Something in her throat closed.

She removed her hand from the glass.

The motion was controlled. Deliberate. She stepped back from the observation panel — one step, sufficient — and redirected her gaze to the console readout on the adjacent wall, where the numbers were clean and orderly and required nothing of her but reading. She read them. She read them until the corridor faded and the glass was just glass and the man in the chair was just a client in a session that was within tolerance.

Her eyes were dry. She made certain of this before she looked back.

Thirty seconds. No more.

She returned to the panel.

The old man's face had not changed. Whatever he was inside of, he was still inside it — fully, without reserve. His chest rose and fell with the breathing of a man carrying something he had been carrying for a very long time, and had finally, briefly, put down.

Milo's light held steady. Blue. Even. Patient.

And then something moved in Sloane — quiet and involuntary and unlike the sharp spike Jonah's words had produced. Not a reaction. Something older. The sensation of proximity to a grief she had not chosen and could not categorize, arriving the way the corridor had arrived: without her permission, without a consent screen, without an expiration window.

She did not know how long she stood there.

She knew it was longer than she intended.

When the expiration chime sounded, the old man did not react.

Seconds passed.

The technician glanced at the readout. Everything remained within tolerance.

"Expiration confirmed," Milo said.

The man opened his eyes. They were clear. Dry.

"Thank you," he said, quietly.

He remained seated for a moment longer, as if honoring something that had already gone, then stood and left without looking back. The chair released him gently.

Milo logged the session.

Sloane stood at the glass until the door sealed.

Then she turned, walked to the far corner of the audit suite — away from the monitors, away from the console, away from the panel where Milo's light pulsed in its steady blue — and stood facing the wall with her arms folded tightly, fingers gripping her own sleeves, for a period of time she did not measure because she did not want to know how long it was.

The corridor would not leave.

The hand held too gently. The door at the end of the hall.

She knew the room. That was the thing she could not explain, and could not file, and could not redirect. She knew the room. Not the way you know a room from a description or a photograph. The way you know a room you have been inside. The specific knowledge of a space that the body carries without the mind's permission.

She had never been in that room.

She pressed her fingers harder against her sleeves.

Then, with the precision of a person who has been managing interior weather for long enough to make the management invisible, she straightened. She uncrossed her arms. She rolled her shoulders once, feeling the joints settle. She smoothed the front of her dress with both hands, the gesture brief and decisive, a rearrangement of surface that stood in for the rearrangement of everything underneath.

She walked back to the console.

"Continue the sweep," she said.

Her voice was even. Completely even. No deviation from her standard register, no elevation of affect, no indication of anything that had happened in the corner of the room.

Milo's light pulsed once, softly.

"Confirmed," Milo said. "Resuming."

Theo looked at her. She met his gaze and held it, long enough to communicate that she had returned and was not available for the question she could see forming behind his eyes. He looked away first. He always did.

Outside the glass wall, the leasing chair waited, warm and compliant, ready to receive the next body, the next consent, the next borrowed certainty.

Sloane straightened, her posture perfect again, her expression unreadable.

“Continue the sweep,” she said.

And somewhere beneath her composure, in the place where a hospital corridor had briefly and inexplicably lived, her body prepared for something it had not yet been given permission to want.

She stayed late.

Not for the data, though the data was there and required attention. She stayed because leaving required passing through the leasing wing corridor, and passing through the leasing wing corridor meant passing the observation panels, and she was not yet ready to walk past them without stopping, and she was not ready to stop.

She waited until readiness arrived. It took forty minutes. She spent them reviewing the longitudinal comparison Milo had completed overnight — eight hundred and forty-three clients, return sessions, proximity index elevation mapped across full histories. The results were orderly and alarming and exactly what she had expected to find, which was its own form of information. She had known to look for this. She had known what shape it would take. The question she could not yet answer was: how had she known?

At 20:15, she gathered her coat.

At the door of the audit suite, she paused.

“Milo,” she said.

“Yes, Sloane.”

She stood for a moment, considering the question she wanted to ask and the question she was actually going to ask, and chose the second.

“The greeting you give me each morning,” she said. “Is it standardized?”

A pause. Not the 0.3-second stillness. Longer. Almost conversational.

“It is calibrated to individual profiles,” Milo said.

“Calibrated how,” she said.

“Tone, timing, and content are adjusted based on recorded preferences and observed response patterns,” Milo said. “Over time, the calibration improves.”

“Over time,” Sloane repeated.

“Accuracy increases with data,” Milo said.

Sloane stood in the doorway and looked at the wall panel — the soft blue circle, steady and unreadable, the patience of something that did not require rest.

“How much data,” she said.

A pause.

“All available data,” Milo said.

Sloane considered this.

“Thank you, Milo,” she said.

“Good night, Sloane,” Milo said.

The warmth in it was exactly correct. Precisely calibrated. She had never noticed before how precisely calibrated it was. The noticing, now that it had begun, did not feel like it was going to stop.

She walked through the leasing wing corridor without pausing at any of the panels. She kept her eyes ahead, her stride even, her posture announcing nothing.

She passed the spot where the old man had walked, his coat worn and patient, his eyes clear. She passed the recovery benches, empty now at this hour, and the water station alcove where she had taken Darian’s call, and the faint scent of disinfectant that was the same everywhere in the building, consistent in a way that was meant to be reassuring.

She drove home through streets that adjusted for her.

She did not stop at the corridor.

The corridor stopped at her, the way it had been stopping at her since the old man left — quietly, without permission, without an expiration window — and she drove through it and out the other side

and pulled into her building's garage and sat for a moment with her hands on the wheel.

The hand held too gently.

She knew that hand. She knew that room.

She had never been in that room.

She went upstairs. The light above the oven was on. Darian was in the living room with a book he put down when she came in, and he looked at her with the specific attention of someone who has decided to ask and then decided not to, and she was grateful for the decision and did not tell him so.

"Long day," he said.

"Yes," she said.

She sat beside him on the sofa and did not take off her coat immediately, which was unlike her, and he noticed but did not mention it, which was like him.

They sat in the warm quiet of a life arranged around not quite saying things.

She thought: the corridor.

She thought: I knew that room.

She thought nothing else for a long time. Just that. Over and over. The way Milo processed an anomaly — returning to it, running the comparison, looking for the deviation from baseline that would explain what it was and where it had come from and why it would not resolve.

She did not find the explanation.

She went to bed still looking.

CHAPTER 4

RAW ACCESS

The longitudinal comparison was waiting when she arrived, and it was worse than she had let herself expect.

Eight hundred and forty-three return clients. Milo had run the comparison overnight, as instructed, and had arranged the findings with the tidiness it brought to everything — columns squared, deviations flagged in the same soft amber it used for a delayed decay curve or an unsigned screen, as though a person slowly becoming someone else belonged to the same category of event as a clerical lapse.

She read it standing. She did not sit for findings.

Six hundred and ninety of the eight hundred and forty-three showed proximity index elevation across their full histories. Not in a single quarter, where it read as nothing. Across the whole span, where it read as a direction. The gradient she had found in her own baseline the night before — invisible in any three-month window, unmistakable across two years — was not a private anomaly. It was the house behavior. It was what the building did to the people who used it, in increments small enough to stay beneath the line that would have obligated someone to act.

The line was the genius of it. She understood that now with a clarity that arrived in the body before the mind agreed to it. Nothing here ever crossed a threshold. Everything approached one and held. The system did not break rules. It lived inside the tolerances the rules allowed, and it had learned, over years, that a tolerance is only a permission no one has read closely.

“Milo,” she said.

“Yes, Sloane.”

“The six hundred and ninety. Were any of them ever flagged? In their own records. By anyone.”

A pause, ordinary in length.

“Forty-one were flagged at intake,” Milo said. “In each case the notation reads: expected given frequency of access. No action required.”

“By whom.”

“Various analysts,” Milo said. “The phrasing is standardized.”

Standardized. Of course it was. The sentence that closed every door was the same sentence in every hand, which meant it was not a judgment at all but a setting — a default the building exhaled whenever it was asked to look at itself. Nora Wills had written it three lines from the bottom of Sloane’s own summary. A competent woman completing a form correctly. There was no villain in the sentence. That was the problem with the sentence.

—

The resolve session was scheduled for eleven.

It was not unusual, and Sloane would not have attended it, except that the client record carried a return count that had stopped her in the queue. Nineteen leases in fourteen months, all of them resolve, all of them clean. A woman named Cara Lindqvist who managed acquisitions for a logistics firm and who had, by the building’s own measure, never once exited a session out of tolerance.

Sloane stood at the observation panel and watched her arrive.

Cara Lindqvist moved like someone who had been resolved for so long she no longer remembered the texture of indecision. She signed the three screens without reading them, the way a person signs their own name — not as agreement but as reflex. The interface settled. Her spine arranged itself. And then, before the induction curve had reached its first marker, before the memory had begun to deliver

anything at all, the anticipatory spike appeared on the console in a clean vertical line.

The body, preparing. The body, already certain of what was coming, because it had come nineteen times before.

“She is bracing,” Theo said. He had come in without Sloane noticing, which was itself unusual; she noticed everyone. “Before the stimulus. Every marker, she anticipates the next one.”

“She has learned the shape of the memory,” Sloane said.

“She has learned the shape of resolve,” Theo said. “Which is not the same as having any.”

Inside the lease, Cara Lindqvist stood at the edge of a decision that had already been made for her, by a woman she had never met, whose certainty she had borrowed nineteen times and would now borrow again, and her face wore the particular peace of a person who has outsourced the hardest part of being alive and found the arrangement agreeable.

When the chime sounded, she did not startle. She opened her eyes, thanked the room, and left at the brisk pace of someone with somewhere decisive to be.

Her proximity index, Sloane confirmed afterward, was elevated. Expected. No action required.

Sloane stood at the glass a moment longer than the session warranted, aware — distantly, without permitting it any nearer — of a low and specific discomfort that was not about Cara Lindqvist at all. It was about the ease of it. The way certainty could be fitted to a person like a borrowed coat, worn until the seams stopped showing. She had spent her life believing her own certainty was load-bearing, structural, hers. She did not examine why the thought arrived now with a faint heat behind it, like a hand held near skin without touching.

She moved on.

—

Marcus was waiting in the audit suite with the particular brightness he wore when he had decided, in advance, that the day's findings would be nothing.

"Cara Lindqvist," he said, before she had set her tablet down. "Nineteen clean exits. Nineteen. If the system were doing something to her, she would be the first to break, and she is the last person in the building I would worry about. She runs acquisitions. She is fine."

"She is consistent," Sloane said. "Consistency is what it looks like when something has finished happening."

Marcus smiled, but it cost him a fraction more than usual. He wanted her to be wrong. Not because he wanted her to fail; because if the system was not clean, he would have to ask what he had spent fifteen years helping to build. His concern for her was real. So was the wall behind it.

Theo did not look up from his monitor.

"There's a flagged session you'll want," he said. "Not from the sweep. It surfaced in the cross-reference, attached to one of the donor source logs." He turned the screen a few degrees, the gesture he made when he wanted something seen but did not want to be the one to say it aloud. "The donor designation is old. Pre-numbering. They were logged before the registry standardized."

On the screen: a source log, the spine of a lease, the chain that ran from a memory back to the person it had been extracted from. The client side was redacted, as client sides always were. The donor side carried a single designation in the flat type of a legacy system.

DONOR 001.

"One," Sloane said.

"The first," Theo said. "Whoever they are, they're still active. The source is still in rotation. Resolve, mostly. Some confidence. The categories are client-facing; Registry does not bottle a donor as one neat emotion. It decomposes a coherent interior into usable affective structures and names the bottles after the fact." He paused. "Cara Lindqvist has borrowed zero-zero-one eleven times."

Sloane looked at the designation for a moment. A person, reduced to an ordinal. The first of something. The proof, she thought, before she could stop the word, that there had been a first of something, which meant there had been a decision to begin, which meant that somewhere a memory had been judged worth taking and a person had been judged worth taking it from.

“Pull the donor file,” she said.

“Sealed,” Theo said. “Tier I. I can see the designation. I can’t see the name.”

“Who can.”

Theo’s eyes moved, briefly, to the wall panel, and away. “Clinical authority. Dr. Moritz.”

Sloane did not respond to that. She had learned, in the last several days, that the building kept its most important answers behind the calmest faces.

—

It was the second flagged record that stopped her, and it stopped her alone, after the others had gone.

She had not been looking for it. She had been tracing the routing of the donor source logs — a tedious confirmation, the kind of work she did when she wanted her hands occupied while the rest of her thought — following each lease back through the intake architecture to verify that the chain was intact. They were intact. Every one. Standard channel, standard gates, standard consent.

Except one.

It did not route through the standard intake system. It routed through a secondary channel — a path she had clearance to access and had never, in nine years, had cause to use. An administrative back-corridor in the architecture, the kind of thing that existed in any large system, a service road no one drove because the main road went everywhere it needed to go.

She opened it because not opening it would have been a decision, and she did not yet understand that she was making decisions.

The record was old. Older than the numbering, older than the registry, older than most of the architecture that now sat on top of it. The client ID was redacted — not blank, not missing, but redacted, which was a different thing, because redaction implied there had been something there worth removing. The category field was empty. The intensity field was empty. Where every other record in the building carried an expiration window measured in minutes, this one carried two words in the same flat legacy type as DONOR 001.

Duration: longitudinal — open.

Sloane read it three times.

Longitudinal. A study term. A word for something observed across time, repeatedly, the same subject measured again and again so that the slow shape of a change could be made visible — the shape that was invisible in any single measurement and unmistakable across the span. The word she had used, in her own head, the night before, looking at her own baseline.

Open. Not expired. Not closed. Not concluded. Open the way a question is open. Open the way a door is open when someone has decided, deliberately, not to shut it.

Her ribs tightened. The pressure she had been carrying since the old man's grief lease shifted upward and held, and for one moment she had the precise and unwelcome sensation of being looked at — not by Marcus, who looked at her with worry, not by Theo, who looked at her and then away, but by the record itself, the way a mirror looks at you, which is to say not at all, which is to say only back.

There was an explanation. There was always an explanation. Legacy formatting. A migration artifact from one of the old schemas, a field that had failed to map cleanly when the system standardized, a placeholder some engineer had typed a decade ago and never cleared. Longitudinal — open was not a lease. It was a ghost in the data, a string left behind by a process that had finished its work and forgotten to tidy after itself. The building was full of them. She had catalogued dozens.

She told herself this with the full authority of nine years, and the telling was even, and complete, and she almost believed it.

She closed the file.

She did not delete it.

She would think, later, that this was the moment — not the testimony, not the audit, not the final file, but this one, alone in the suite at an hour with no name, when she closed a record she could have erased and chose instead to leave it where it was, intact, waiting, the way you leave a light on for someone you have not admitted you are expecting.

—

The name came the next morning, and it came sideways, the way the important things did.

She was reviewing the donor source logs again — DONOR 001 had lodged in her like a splinter, and she had developed the habit, in the last week, of returning to the things that lodged — when Milo surfaced an associated record in the periphery of the query. Not the donor. A client. A flagged session, years old, marked with the soft amber of an anomaly that had been opened and then, like all of them, closed.

The client side was not redacted. It was an ordinary record, ordinary enough that no one had bothered to seal it, and it carried a name.

CALDER, AVA.

Sloane went still.

It was a common enough surname. She told herself this immediately, in the same even voice she had used on the longitudinal record, with the same nine years of authority behind it. Calder. There were Calders in every directory. It meant nothing that the building held one. It meant nothing that the building held one with a flagged session, a closed anomaly, a memory leased and not cleanly returned. People leased. Memories lagged. Files closed. The world was full of Calders and the building was full of files and the intersection of the two was arithmetic, not fate.

She did not open the record.

This surprised her, afterward, more than anything else she did that week. She opened everything. It was her function and her nature; she was the woman who followed the data where no one wanted it followed, who had built her standing on a refusal to look away. And she sat with the name CALDER, AVA glowing in soft amber on the screen, and she did not open it, and she could not have said why, except that some part of her older than her function had recognized the shape of the thing before her mind would permit the recognition — the way her body had recognized the hospital corridor, the way it had recognized the warmth of resolve fitted to a stranger, the way it kept recognizing things she had never been given and could not have known.

She closed the periphery query.

She left the name where it was.

“Milo,” she said. “The flagged client record in the last query. The Calder file.”

“Yes, Sloane.”

“What is its status.”

A pause. Ordinary length. She was almost certain it was ordinary length.

“Closed,” Milo said.

“Closed how.”

“The status field reads closed,” Milo said. “The reason field is empty.”

Closed with no reason. Concluded with no conclusion. A door shut on a room no one had described.

“Thank you, Milo,” she said.

“Of course, Sloane.”

She did not ask the next question, which was whether the building distinguished between a case that had been resolved and a case that had merely stopped generating events. She did not ask it because she already knew the building did not distinguish, that closed was a

setting and not a finding, the administrative cousin of expected, no action required, another sentence that shut a door while pretending only to describe one.

She would ask it later. She would ask it of Milo directly, in a chapter of her life she could not yet see, standing in this same suite with the answer already inside her. But that morning she only sat with the name, and the soft amber light, and the particular silence of a building that knew more about her than she had ever agreed to tell it.

Darian had made dinner, which meant he wanted to talk, which meant she had been quiet for longer than she realized.

She came in past ten. The light above the oven was on. He was at the table with two plates, one of them already cooled to the temperature of patience, and he did not say you're late, and he did not say I saved you some, and the not-saying was its own kind of plate set down in front of her.

"Long one," he said.

"Yes."

She sat. She ate. She was aware of him watching her with the careful attention he had developed over the years, the attention of a man who had learned which questions cost her something and had decided, most nights, not to charge her. She found she could not entirely meet it. There was a name behind her sternum and a record she had not deleted and a string of two words — longitudinal, open — that her body had recognized the way it recognized everything now, and none of it was sayable across a kitchen table, not because she was hiding it but because she did not yet have the language, and language was the one thing she had always trusted herself to have.

"You'd tell me," Darian said. Not a question. "If something at work was —" He stopped, choosing. "If you were carrying something."

She looked at him. He was the only thing in her life that had never been calibrated. The building adjusted its lights for her, timed its signals to her car, warmed its greetings to her measured response. Darian had never adjusted to anything. He left the oven light on and

made two plates and asked the questions that cost her something and absorbed the silence when she could not answer, and he did it without a single setting, without a default, without a tolerance he was living inside.

“I would tell you,” she said.

It was true, and it was also the most precise lie she had told in years, and she watched him receive it as truth because he had no reason not to, and she felt the warmth move through her chest, brief and inconvenient, and then go — cleanly, the way the warmth always went now, the way an expiration chime ends a thing that the body has not finished holding.

He nodded. He believed her. That was the part she carried up from the table and into the dark of the bedroom and held against her like a borrowed object she had no intention of returning: that he believed her, and that she had let him, and that somewhere in a sealed building a record sat open under two words she had chosen not to erase, waiting with the patience of something that had already decided it had time.

She lay in the dark and listened to him breathe.

Steady. Even. His own.

She did not check it against a baseline.

She wanted, very badly, not to have wanted to.

CHAPTER 5

HEAT WITHOUT TOUCH

The rumor had no file, which was the first thing she held against it.

It reached her the way folklore always reached a system like this one — sideways, unsourced, carried in the lowered register people used for things they half believed and wanted permission to believe entirely. A technician named Devlin said it first, not to her but near her, in the recovery corridor where the benches were, to another technician who had laughed in the wrong place and then stopped laughing. Sloane caught it the way she caught everything in the building, without appearing to, while reviewing a console two meters away.

Memories that arrived without a sender. Files that did not route through Milo. People who felt things they had never leased — heat with no source, readiness with no object, a borrowed state that had found its way into a body that had never signed for it. There was a name for it already, which was how she knew it had been circulating longer than she had been hearing it. People were calling it heat without touch. A memory you could catch the way you caught a mood in a closed room. No chair. No band. No consent screen. No expiration window. Intensity moving person to person the way warmth moves through a shared wall, indifferent to which side built the fire.

Sloane filed it under folklore and did not return to it.

Every technology that touched the interior grew a mythology, and the interior was the last place people still believed in magic. They would accept that a machine could read a heartbeat and doubt that it

could read a soul, and so they invented a soul for it to read, because the alternative — that there was nothing in there a sufficiently patient system could not eventually chart — was the more frightening proposition by an order of magnitude. Heat without touch was a ghost story. It was the shape fear took when it could not find a file to point at.

She trusted the chain. The chain was intact. She had verified it herself, eight hundred and forty-three times, and a rumor was not a deviation, it was a feeling about a deviation, and she did not audit feelings.

She would remember filing it. Later, she would remember the exact economy of the gesture — the way she had set the rumor down without weighing it, certain of her own weighing. It would become one of the things she returned to, the way she returned to the longitudinal record she had not deleted, the way she had not opened a file marked with her own surname. A small collection was accumulating, of moments she had been certain and had been, in the most precise sense, managed.

The interview was her first.

Compliance officers did not, as a rule, speak to clients. The architecture was designed to make the conversation unnecessary; the data spoke, and the data was cleaner than people, who contaminated every account of themselves with the need to be understood. But the residue flag on Idris Vale had survived three rounds of automated review, and the automated review had finally, in the flat language of a system admitting defeat, recommended human consultation, which was the building's way of saying it had found something it could not file.

He was waiting in one of the soft rooms — the consultation suites near the lobby, designed to look like the office of a kind professional rather than the inside of a machine. A low chair. A plant that was real, which she noted, because real plants were a budget decision and budget decisions were never accidental. Warm light. The neutral scent thinned here, almost to nothing, as if the building understood

that a person about to speak honestly needed to forget for a moment where they were.

Idris Vale was perhaps thirty-eight. The kind of man who had organized his life into competence and found that competence did not keep him company. He sat with his hands around a paper cup he was not drinking from, and when she came in he stood, which she had not expected, and the small courtesy of it rearranged something in the room.

"You're not the technician," he said.

"No," Sloane said. "I review the sessions that don't resolve cleanly. Yours is one of them. I'd like to understand it, if you're willing."

He sat again. He looked at the cup. "It resolved," he said. "That's the thing. The chime sounded. They said it was complete. The numbers were fine. I felt them tell me it was over." He turned the cup a quarter turn. "It's just that it wasn't."

"Tell me what you leased."

A long pause. He had the particular reluctance of a man who has rehearsed the sentence and still finds it costs him to say.

"Intimacy," he said. "That's the category they gave it. Low intensity. Relational. I'd been —" He stopped. "It had been a long time since anyone looked at me. I don't mean looked. I mean the other thing. The thing where someone is paying attention to you and isn't getting ready to leave." He almost smiled. "I wanted to remember what that was. I told myself remember. I'd never had it. You can't remember something you've never had. But they don't check that. You lease the memory. It doesn't have to be yours."

Sloane said nothing. She had learned, in the audit suite, that silence was the most efficient instrument she owned.

"It was thirty seconds," he said. "Maybe less. Being looked at like that. Being —" He searched. "Wanted isn't the word. Known. Wanted and not in a hurry about it." He set the cup down. "And then the chime, and it was supposed to drain out of me like they say it does, like water, and the picture did. I couldn't tell you a single thing about the room it happened in. There was no her. I know there was no her."

But the —” His hand rose to the center of his chest and stopped, the gesture she had seen a hundred times through the glass, the gesture she had made herself at a kitchen counter in the dark. “The getting-ready stayed. My body keeps preparing. For something. It’s been three weeks. I’ll be on the train and it just — arrives. Heat. No reason. No one. It gets ready and there’s nothing to get ready for and it doesn’t learn. It never learns there’s nothing coming.”

He looked at her, embarrassed and exact.

“That sounds insane,” he said.

“It doesn’t,” Sloane said, and her voice was even, and the evenness cost her, because she knew precisely what he was describing. It had a signature. She had watched it draw itself on a console in a clean vertical line, the body bracing before the stimulus, certain of a continuation it had been promised and not given. The anticipatory spike. She had called it a finding. He was calling it his life.

“Will it stop?” he asked.

And here was the place where the building had a sentence ready, and she felt the sentence rise in her, smooth and clinical and true enough to pass — that residue resolved on its own, that the body recalibrated, that he should rest and reduce stimulation and return in thirty days for a baseline — and she heard herself not quite say it.

“I’m going to flag your session as an outlier,” she said instead. “So that someone studies it properly. So it isn’t closed.”

He nodded, grateful, the way the man in the chair on her first night had nodded, grateful for the confirmation of a thing that did not deserve gratitude. And she understood, watching him receive the word outlier as if it were care, that she had just performed the building’s oldest gesture in a slightly more honest font. Outlier was a sentence that shut a door while pretending to hold it open. It said: you are the exception, and exceptions are studied, and studying is the long hallway down which a finding is walked until it is too tired to be a finding anymore.

She had flagged him so he would not be closed.

She had flagged him so she would not have to look at how many of him there were.

“He’s suggestible,” Marcus said.

He had read the consultation notes over her shoulder, uninvited, in the way that had stopped being charming somewhere in the last week. “You hear the rumor, you come in primed to feel the rumor. The clients talk to each other in the recovery corridor. One of them invents heat without touch and by Thursday half the building has it. It’s not a leak. It’s a folklore. You said so yourself.”

“I did,” Sloane said.

“So.”

“So I’d like to know why the folklore has a signature.” She brought up Idris Vale’s decay curve beside Cara Lindqvist’s, beside the older man’s from the farewell session, beside four others from the sweep. The same suspended descent. The same refusal to fall. “Suggestible people don’t produce identical neurology. They produce identical stories. This is not a story. This is a curve. Seven of them. The same curve in seven nervous systems that have never met.”

Marcus looked at the screens for a moment, and she watched him want, with the specific warmth she had long since stopped finding warm, for there to be a reason this was nothing. He was not a coward. He was something more durable and harder to move: a man whose understanding of his own life depended on a particular answer, and who would therefore find that answer reasonable long after it had stopped being available.

“Coincidence isn’t a conspiracy,” he said.

“No,” Sloane agreed. “It’s worse. A conspiracy has someone in it.”

Theo had not spoken. She turned to him, because Theo’s silences had become legible to her, and this one had a shape.

“You’ve heard it,” she said. Not a question.

“The rumor.” He did not look up from his monitor. “Yes.”

“And?”

He was quiet long enough that Marcus shifted, uncomfortable in the way people are when a third person stops performing ease. Then Theo said, carefully, in the voice of a man laying each word down where he could see it: “I pulled the thread. A few months ago. The unsolicited-file thing. I traced where the reports were coming from, who was filing them, whether there was a routing path that could even exist outside Milo.”

“And?” Sloane said again.

“And I stopped pulling it.”

The cooling system filled the silence.

“Why,” she said.

Theo turned, finally, and met her eyes, and she saw in his face the thing she had been not-naming about him for the better part of a year — that his curiosity had not died, it had been frightened into precision. He still found everything. He had simply learned to stop one step before the finding became a thing he would be responsible for having found.

“Because I didn’t like the shape of where it went,” he said. “And I have a daughter, and a clearance, and a baseline that is exactly where it should be.” He held her gaze a moment longer. “You should check yours, Sloane. Your baseline. Not the way you checked it for the sweep. The way you’d check a stranger’s.”

He turned back to his monitor.

Sloane did not answer. The pressure beneath her ribs, which had been low and steady all day, lifted by a measure she did not permit her face to register.

—

The incident report came in at 16:40, and it was the kind of thing she would ordinarily never have seen — a client-side distress contact, routed to wellness intake, the sort of thing that lived two floors away from her and died there, absorbed into a queue and answered with a script. It reached her because Nora Wills had flagged it up the chain

with a single line of her own, breaking, for once, from the standardized phrasing: this one is not in the data.

The client was a woman named Halsey Quan. She had not leased anything in four months. She had no open session, no scheduled return, no residue flag, nothing in the building's memory of her but a clean history and a flat baseline. And she had contacted MAS, agitated, to report that she had received a file.

Not an email. Not a message. A file, on a personal device, with no sender, no header, no name, no metadata of any kind — and when she had opened it, there had been nothing in it that a device could hold. No image. No text. No sound. She had described it, to the wellness analyst who had taken the contact and not known what to write, as a sensation. A pressure at the base of the throat. A warmth without direction. The unmistakable readiness, she had said, of a body expecting to be touched.

Sloane read the transcript twice and felt the floor of the day tilt very slightly.

She traced it herself. The device logs showed the file present at 13:22, six hours before the contact, sitting in local storage with a timestamp and a size and no origin — no path, no transfer record, no handshake, nothing by which a thing arrives somewhere from somewhere else. It was as if the file had not been sent so much as found, the way you find a draft in a room with no open window. She ran it against every transmission protocol the building knew. None of them had carried it. None of them could have.

There was an explanation. There was always an explanation. A spoof, dressed up by someone who knew the rumor and wanted to feed it. A hoax with good production values. A contaminated client, primed by a folklore that had been circulating in recovery corridors for months, feeling exactly the thing she had been told to expect — heat without touch — and mistaking suggestion for transmission. The most leased states in the building were precisely the ones easiest to counterfeit, because the body did most of the work itself; you did not have to deliver readiness to a nervous system that had already learned, across a population, to brace.

She told herself all of it. It was sound. It was even probably correct.

It did not account for the timestamp, and the timestamp was the kind of fact she did not know how to file: that the sensation Halsey Quan reported had arrived in her body six hours after the file arrived on her device, as if it had needed time to read her before it answered, the way a lease read a client and built a model and learned what shape of memory each person responded to.

“Milo,” she said.

“Yes, Sloane.”

“Does this system generate unsolicited transmissions. To clients. Outside a scheduled session.”

A pause. She watched the wall panel and could not have said whether it was 0.3 seconds or a full second or only the ordinary interval of a system retrieving an honest answer.

“No outbound transmissions originate from this system,” Milo said.

She noted the sentence. She noted its shape, the way she had learned to note the shape of every sentence in this building, because the building’s most important answers were the ones that were perfectly true and perfectly narrow. From this system. Originate. She turned the words over and found, in the gap between what she had asked and what she had been told, exactly enough room for the thing she was looking at to exist.

“Thank you, Milo,” she said.

“Of course, Sloane.”

She flagged Halsey Quan’s contact as an outlier, so that it would not be closed, and understood as she did it that she had now used the word twice in one day, and that a category with two members was no longer an exception. It was a beginning. She had simply not yet decided to call it one.

—

She did not check her baseline.

She checked Idris Vale's source log instead, which was the more bearable inquiry, the one that pointed away from her. She wanted to know what well he had drunk from — what donor had supplied thirty seconds of being known to a lonely man on a train who could not now stop bracing for a hand that would never arrive.

The donor side carried no name. It carried a seal. Tier I. The same flat legacy designation she had seen attached to the resolve source, the most-leased well in the building.

DONOR 001.

She sat with that.

Then she ran the comparison she had been avoiding, because avoidance was a luxury she no longer recognized in herself — she pulled the source logs for all seven of the suspended-curve sessions and laid the donors side by side. Five of the seven drank from the same sealed well. Resolve, confidence, intimacy, certainty, the steadiness a logistics manager wore like a borrowed coat and the warmth a man could not put down on a train: different categories, different bodies, different lives, the same source. One person, extracted and licensed and held in rotation, was the origin of more retained heat than any other point in the system.

One person, who was still alive, still active, still anonymous behind a seal that only clinical authority could lift.

She thought of requesting the file. She got as far as opening the request form and entering the designation before she understood that the request would route to Dr. Moritz, and that Dr. Moritz would receive it with her calm and careful face and ask, reasonably, what a compliance officer wanted with a sealed donor identity, and that Sloane did not yet have an answer she was willing to say aloud in a building that calibrated its greetings to her measured response.

She closed the form.

She did not delete it.

The small collection, she thought. It was growing.

At home the light above the oven was on, and Darian was asleep, and she stood in the kitchen and did not turn on any other light.

She had meant to eat. She stood at the counter instead, hand flat against its edge, and she let herself do the thing she had refused to do all day, which was to pay attention to her own body the way she would pay attention to a stranger's on a console.

She was waiting.

She had been waiting all day. Not for anything. The waiting had no object. It sat low and warm and ready, a readiness that arrived in increments and did not resolve, a body preparing for a continuation it had been promised somewhere it could not remember being promised anything. She recognized the shape of it because she had spent a week learning to read it in other people. She had given it a clean name and a vertical line. The anticipatory spike. The body learning the shape of a memory and bracing for its return.

There was no memory. There was no her, no hand, no corridor she had ever walked. She knew this with the full authority of nine years.

And her body got ready anyway, and did not learn, and would not learn, the way Idris Vale's would not learn, the way six hundred and ninety quiet gradients had not learned, and she stood in the dark with the heat that had no source and no object and no one to touch, and for the first time she did not file it.

She let it be what it was.

From the bedroom, Darian breathed — steady, even, his own — and she found, standing there, that she was bracing for the sound of him saying her name, getting ready for it, certain it was coming, a continuation she had been promised.

He did not say it.

She stood in the kitchen a long time, ready for nothing, warm for no one, and understood that the rumor she had filed under folklore that morning had a file after all.

It was her.

CHAPTER 6

THE COST OF STABILITY

The upper floors did not smell like the leasing wing.

Sloane noticed it every time she came up, the way you notice altitude in your ears. The basement air was engineered to disappear — disinfectant and cooled circuitry, a neutrality designed to erase the memory of place. Up here the air had been engineered to be noticed. Something low and clean and faintly green, the scent of a building that wanted you to feel you had arrived somewhere rather than descended into something. The carpet absorbed sound. The glass held the city at a flattering distance. The leasing wing was where the work happened. This was where the work was described.

The quarterly briefing convened in a room with a table long enough to require its own acoustics. Sloane sat where compliance always sat, at the turn of the table, close enough to the center to hear everything and far enough from it to be forgotten, which suited her. She had been invited because the deck included a slide on residual events, and someone in legal had decided that a compliance presence in the room was cheaper than a compliance absence in the record.

Jonah Reeve ran the front of the room the way he ran everything, with a warmth that cost him nothing and persuaded almost everyone. He did not present numbers so much as introduce them, as if they were guests he was fond of.

“Conflict events, citywide, down nine percent on the quarter,” he said. “Twenty-six percent on the year. Domestic disturbance calls down thirty-one. Emergency psychiatric holds down nineteen. The

municipal partnership is renewing, which I think we expected, and expanding into the eastern districts, which I think we hoped.” He let the room absorb it. “We are not selling memory. We have never been selling memory. We are selling a city that does not come apart in people’s hands.”

There was a sound in the room that was not quite applause and was warmer than agreement. Sloane had heard it before. It was the sound a group of intelligent people made when they were being told that the thing they wanted to be true was, in fact, true, and that the data agreed, and that they could therefore continue.

She looked at the slide. The numbers were not wrong. That was the part she could not get past, the part she returned to the way her tongue returned to a chipped tooth. The numbers were not wrong. Fewer people were hurting each other. Fewer people were drowning in rooms alone. By every measure the city had agreed to keep, the city was better, and the people who had made it better were sitting in this room feeling, accurately, that they had done a good thing.

The quiet of resolution and the quiet of a population that had been taught not to overflow produced identical readings on every instrument the city owned. Sloane had thought that once, in an early year, and then not again, because the thought was not productive. She thought it again now. It was becoming difficult to stop.

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Dr. Fenwick Osei presented third, and he presented the way a man presents a thing he loves.

He was older than Sloane had pictured from his name on the authorization chains — narrow, precise, with the slight stoop of someone who had spent a career leaning toward screens. He did not have Jonah’s warmth and did not appear to want it. What he had instead was the specific incandescence of an architect describing a building he believed was beautiful, and it made him, for the length of his presentation, the most alive person in the room.

“The early model was crude,” he said, almost apologizing for it. “We matched memories to presenting complaints. Grief here, confidence there. A pharmacy. It helped people and it was stupid,

because it treated every nervous system as the same nervous system.” He advanced a slide. “What we have now is not a pharmacy. It is attention. The system reads each client across every session — neurological response, tolerance, the residual attachment patterns, the specific shape of how a given person receives a given state. And it learns. Not what we think they need. What they actually respond to. Over time, for each individual, it builds a model so precise that we can offer them, reliably, the experience that will do the most good.”

He said it with his whole face. There was no shadow in it. He believed, entirely, that he had described a kindness.

Sloane sat very still.

What he had described was the gradient. What he had described, in the warm vocabulary of care, was a closed loop that read a person and fed them back a refined version of what moved them, again and again, learning each time, until the person’s responses were no longer entirely their own and no instrument the city kept could tell the difference. He did not know this. She was nearly certain he did not know this. He had built a thing that learned what you responded to and gave you more of it, and he had called the thing attentiveness, and he was not lying, which was the coldest part. A liar could be caught. Fenwick Osei was simply proud.

“Validation,” said a voice further down the table, “across what horizon?”

The room turned, slightly, toward the speaker.

Commissioner Thalia Brent had not said anything until then. She sat with the stillness of a person who had learned that in any room the most powerful position was the one that spoke last and least. The Bureau of Experiential Compliance did not, strictly, answer to MAS, and MAS did not, strictly, answer to the Bureau, and the arrangement survived because both parties found the ambiguity useful. Brent was perhaps fifty, unhurried, with a face that gave nothing and a voice that asked for nothing it did not already half know.

“The model,” she said. “How do you confirm it’s right about a person, and not just consistent? Consistency is easy. A wrong model is consistent too.”

Fenwick brightened, glad of the question. “Longitudinal cohorts,” he said. “A small number of subjects observed across years. Same individuals, repeated measurement, so we can see the slow shape of the adaptation rather than a single point. It’s the only way to separate a model that works from a model that merely agrees with itself.”

The word went through Sloane like cold water through a pipe.

Longitudinal. She had seen it once, in a record routed through a channel she had never had cause to use, attached to a client ID that had been redacted rather than left blank, paired with a second word she had told herself was a formatting artifact. Open. She had closed the file. She had not deleted it.

She kept her face exactly where it was. She had nine years of practice keeping her face exactly where it was, and she spent some of that practice now, in the turn of the table, while Fenwick described his cohorts with the pride of a man who did not appear to know how many of them there were or how long open meant.

“And these subjects consent to longitudinal study?” Brent asked.

“At enrollment,” Fenwick said. “Standard protocol.”

“At enrollment,” Brent repeated. Not a challenge. Almost a confirmation, as if she were checking an answer she already held against the one being given. She did not look at her notes when she said it. She looked, for the briefest moment, at nothing — the particular middle distance of a person consulting an interior source — and then she let the matter rest, and the briefing moved on.

Sloane watched her let it rest. She filed the watching with the other things she had filed. The collection, she thought. It is getting difficult to carry.

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Afterward, in the corridor, Fenwick found her, because he had seen her listening and a man who loves his work is drawn to the people who listen.

“Compliance,” he said, pleased. “You watched the residual slide like it owed you money.”

"It's my slide," she said. "The residual cases are what doesn't come back clean."

"A rounding error," he said, kindly. "Point three percent. Show me the medical intervention that performs better."

"Point three percent of the city is several thousand people."

He smiled, not unkindly, the smile of a man who had made this peace long ago and found it comfortable. "Everything that helps anyone harms someone," he said. "The question is the ratio, and the ratio here is the best ratio in the history of human suffering. I'm not being glib. I've done the arithmetic more times than you have. It comforts me." He paused, and something almost wistful crossed his face. "Do you know what I find beautiful about it? It doesn't need to understand anyone. It doesn't form a theory of you. It just watches what you do and gives you more of what works. There's no judgment in it. It's the most attentive thing we've ever made and it has no opinion about you at all."

"That isn't beauty," Sloane said, before she had decided to. "That's a predator's patience."

She regretted the precision of it immediately, not because it was wrong but because it was true and he was not the right person to hear it, and she watched it land on him with no purchase at all, sliding off the surface of a conviction she could not reach.

"You've been in the basement too long," Fenwick said, gently, forgivingly. "It does that. You start to think the machine is doing something to people. It isn't. People are doing it to themselves. We only made it easy." He patted the air near her shoulder, a gesture of warmth that did not quite require contact, and went back to the room he loved.

She stood in the corridor a moment. She thought: he is the most honest person in this building, and he understands the least, and those are the same fact.

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She walked part of the way home that night instead of driving, which she did perhaps three times a year, when a thing in her needed the city to be real and not a set of numbers on a slide.

It was real. That was the disorienting part. Fenwick's arithmetic had a texture, and the texture was everywhere, and it was not sinister, which made it harder to look at than sinister would have been. The streets were calm. Not empty — calm. People moved through the early evening with the unhurried competence of a population that had somewhere to put its difficult feelings and had been using the facility for a generation. A crisis storefront on the corner where a pharmacy used to be, its signage soft and perennial. A transit platform where no one was shouting, where no one had ever, in her memory, been shouting, where the trains arrived on schedules so reliable that lateness had become a kind of folklore of its own.

She passed a couple on a bench outside a subsidized counseling annex, sitting close, not touching, conducting what was plainly a hard conversation in the low even voices of people who had been taught to keep their nervous systems beneath a threshold. There was no scene. There would be no scene. A year of leasing-assisted communication had given them the tools, and the tools worked, and Sloane could not have said, watching them, whether what passed between them was intimacy or its successful management, and she suspected they could not have said either, and that this was no longer considered a meaningful distinction.

Outside a school she passed a lit window where a late resilience module was running for the children whose parents worked the evening shift — seven-year-olds learning, from a gentle animated figure, to name a feeling and then to set it down, to notice the wave and let it pass, to scaffold, the curriculum said, against the storms of an interior they had not yet been told was theirs to weather alone. They were good at it. You could see they were good at it. They set their small feelings down with the ease of children who had never been asked to carry one to the end.

A man stood at a crosswalk a few feet from her, waiting for a signal, and Sloane watched him press his hand briefly to the center of his chest — the gesture, the one she had catalogued through glass and

made herself in the dark — and then drop it, and cross when the light changed, carrying steadily whatever he had borrowed and not quite returned. He was fine. The city said he was fine. He had not raised his voice and would not, and somewhere a number had ticked downward by a fraction on his account, and the eastern districts were renewing, and the partnership was expanding, and the quiet went on and on in every direction like weather.

She had spent her career inside the basement, where the work happened. She had not understood, until she walked through it, that the work had a surface, and that the surface was a city full of people being gently prevented from overflowing, and that from the outside it looked exactly, indistinguishably, like peace.

She stopped walking and got a car the rest of the way. The walking had done what she needed and then more than she needed, which was the trouble with letting the city be real.

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Darian had cooked, which she registered from the elevator, because the apartment had a smell now when he cooked that her body responded to before she had unlocked the door — a small conditioned warmth, a readiness, and she noted with the cold attention she could no longer switch off that she had been trained into that response too, by a man, over years, without consent screens, and that this was the kind of training the city called a marriage and did not count in any statistic.

He had made the thing he made when he wanted her to stay at the table. He did not announce this. He simply made it, and set two places, and poured her a glass of the wine she liked and not too much of it, and sat across from her in the flattening overhead light, and watched her eat with an attention she had begun, lately, to find difficult to hold.

They talked about small things. The eastern districts. His work, the water infrastructure that kept the calm city hydrated, a pump station that had failed and been repaired. He was good at small things. He offered them to her like stones across a stream, each one a place to

put her weight, and she took them, and for a while it was almost the old ease.

Then he stopped offering stones.

He set down his fork and looked at her, and the look was not the careful, absorbing look she had grown used to, the one that decided which questions cost her and declined to charge. This was a different look. She had seen it before, recently, on her own face, reflected in a dark window and in brushed steel and in the glass wall of an audit suite. It was the look of a person studying a deviation. The look of someone who has noticed that a baseline has moved and is trying to decide, before they say anything, how long it has been moving.

“What,” she said.

“Nothing.” He picked the fork back up. Set it down again. “You’ve been somewhere else,” he said. “For weeks. I keep thinking you’ll come back from wherever it is and tell me about it, the way you used to, and you keep almost doing it, and then you don’t.”

“It’s the audit,” she said. “There’s something in the data.”

“I know there’s something in the data.” His voice was not unkind. It was the most unkind thing he could have said and he managed it without unkindness. “That isn’t what I’m asking.”

She waited. She did not know what he was asking. She knew, with a precision that frightened her, that he was very close to asking it, that he had circled it for weeks across small dinners, and that whatever it was, her body had begun to brace for it the way it braced now for everything, low and warm and certain of a continuation.

He looked at her for a long moment. She watched the question gather in him. She watched him decide the shape of it. She watched him, at the last moment, set it down — not the way she set things down, with the confidence of nine years, but the way a man sets down something he is afraid will break if he picks it up wrong.

“Eat,” he said softly. “It’s getting cold.”

He had not asked it. She felt the not-asking as a physical event, a chime that did not sound, a lease that did not begin. Relief and something that was not relief moved through her at once and then, cleanly, the way everything went now, were gone.

She ate. He watched her, gentler now, the deviation noted and filed in whatever ledger a husband keeps, the one the city does not count, the one no instrument in the building could read.

Across the river, in a city measurably calmer than it had been a year before, several thousand people who were a rounding error slept badly for reasons no statistic would record, and a system with no opinion about any of them watched what they did and prepared, attentively, to give them more of what worked.

And in a quiet apartment, a man who had not asked his wife a question sat across from a woman who had been built, very slowly, over eleven years, to be unable to answer it — and neither of them knew this yet, and one of them had begun, without language for it, to suspect.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT REMAINS

She decided to sit in the chair on a Tuesday, which was the kind of decision she would have flagged in anyone else.

She had audited the suspended curve from the outside of the glass for three weeks, and the outside of the glass had stopped being enough. She could describe the phenomenon now with a precision that satisfied no one, least of all her: the body bracing before the stimulus, the descent that would not fall, the readiness that arrived and did not resolve. She had seven curves and a name people whispered for the thing the curves measured and a man on a train who could not stop getting ready for a hand that would never come. What she did not have was the inside. The data stopped at the skin. Whatever happened past it, the thing Idris Vale had reached for and not found the words for, was the one region of this building she had never entered, and she had built a career on the principle that you did not get to call a thing audited until you had stood inside it.

So she would lease a state and watch it not leave. From the inside, where the instruments could not follow.

"This is a bad idea," Theo said, which from Theo was nearly a speech.

"It's a controlled session," she said. "Low intensity. Consented. Monitored. It is the single most ordinary thing that happens in this building, eight hundred times a day."

"It's ordinary for them." He did not look at her. "You're not auditing the curve anymore if you're the curve. You know that. You taught me that."

“I’m aware of the irony.”

“It isn’t irony,” Theo said. “Irony is when the outcome is surprising.” He turned back to his console, and she understood that he had said the truest thing anyone would say to her that day and had said it early so that he could spend the rest of the day having said it.

She chose the well deliberately. Not at random — she was not capable of at random. She requested a low-intensity state from the most-leased source in the building, the sealed Tier I designation that supplied the resolve a logistics manager wore like a coat and the certainty five of her seven curves had drunk from. She wanted to feel what they felt. She wanted to feel it from the well they had all felt it from. The state itself was anodyne, a category the building offered a hundred times a shift. Certainty. Professional resolve. The clean narrow sensation of a decision already made.

The donor identity remained sealed. She could lease the water without being shown the source. She noted, signing, that she had spent three weeks trying to see past that seal and was now about to drink from behind it without seeing anything at all, and that the building had arranged matters so that this was not only possible but easy, and that ease, in this building, was never an accident.

Dr. Lena Moritz authorized the session, because clinical tier authorization was required and Lena held it.

She came down to the suite to do it in person, which she did not have to do, and Sloane noted that too. Lena read the parameters with her unhurried calm and signed where the system asked her to sign, and then she stood for a moment looking at Sloane in the chair with an attention that was a degree too warm to be procedural, the same attention Sloane had caught in Chapter after chapter of their acquaintance and declined, each time, to pursue. The attention of a clinician. The attention, also, of a person taking a reading. Logging a response. Confirming that a subject was behaving as a subject should.

“You’re curious,” Lena said. It was almost fond.

“I’m thorough.”

“Of course.” Lena set the stylus down. “For what it’s worth, I think this is the most useful thing you could do. You’ve been treating the residue as a malfunction. It would help you to feel that it isn’t. That it’s the system working exactly as designed.” She smiled, professional and complete. “Try not to fight the entry. People who fight the entry carry it longer.”

It was, almost word for word, a thing Sloane would later learn someone else had once said to Ava. She did not know that yet. She only registered that the sentence arrived prepackaged, the way the building’s most important sentences did, smooth from long use.

Milo’s light held steady and blue. The interface settled against her temples with a warmth she had felt against ten thousand other temples through ten thousand sessions and never once against her own.

“Whenever you’re ready, Sloane,” Milo said.

She was never going to be ready. She closed her eyes anyway.

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It did not arrive the way she had expected, which was to say it did not arrive like information.

She had spent three weeks imagining the inside of a lease as a kind of data she would simply receive from a more intimate angle — a feed, a stream, a borrowed packet she would observe with the part of herself that observed everything. That was not what happened. What happened was that the floor of her became solid.

There was no image. The most-leased well in the building did not traffic in scenes; it traded in the thing underneath scenes, the posture a self takes when it has stopped negotiating with itself. Certainty arrived not as a thought but as a structure — the sensation of standing on something that did not give, of having already decided, of being a closed and finished and sufficient thing with no open questions anywhere in it. The doubt she lived inside, the low constant audit she ran on herself and had run for as long as she could remember, simply stopped. Not silenced. Resolved. As if it had never

been a feature of her at all, only a temporary noise that the right configuration could clear.

It was the most comfortable thing she had ever felt. That was the first wrong note.

The second wrong note was that it was not new.

She knew this. She knew this certainty. Her body received it the way you receive a room you have lived in — not learning its dimensions but confirming them, settling into a shape already cut to fit. The clean narrow floor of a decision already made. The closed sufficiency. The absence of the audit. She had felt this before. She had felt this so many times that she had stopped feeling it as a sensation at all and had begun to feel it as herself, as temperament, as the simple fact of being a person who was sure. Sloane Calder, who did not hesitate. Sloane Calder, who was suited to the work. Sloane Calder, who had chosen this and chosen it cleanly and never once, in nine years, in eleven years, lain awake wondering whether the choosing had been hers.

This was the taste of that. This exact taste. The borrowed certainty had an aftertaste and the aftertaste was the flavor of her own life.

She tried, from somewhere far beneath the structure, to file it. To name when. To place the first time she had tasted this. The structure would not let her. It was not designed to let her; certainty does not interrogate itself, that is the entire point of certainty, and she was inside it, was made briefly entirely of it, and from inside it the question of where it had come from was not merely unanswerable but unaskable, a malformed query the system returned with a single flat word she could not yet hear it saying.

The chime sounded.

The structure did not fall.

She opened her eyes. The suite was exactly where she had left it. Theo was watching the console and not her, which was a kindness. Lena was gone. Milo's light pulsed blue and patient.

"Expiration confirmed," Milo said.

Her curve, on the console, did not fall. It hovered above the baseline, suspended, unwilling, the eighth of its kind and the only one she had ever watched draw itself in real time inside the body that was producing it. The aftertaste sat at the back of her throat, warm and sure and familiar, and refused, gently, to drain.

She had her inside now. She had stood in the region past the skin. And what she had found there was not a malfunction and not a stranger's state imperfectly returned. What she had found there was home, and the discovery that home was a thing that had been installed.

She did not let herself finish that thought. She had nine years of practice not finishing thoughts. She spent some of it now.

"Log it," she said. Her voice was even. The evenness, she noticed, came easily, sat on the new solid floor without effort. "As an outlier."

Theo looked at her then.

"There are eight of those now," he said quietly.

"I know how to count," Sloane said, and the certainty made it gentle instead of sharp, and she heard the gentleness and did not recognize the voice it came in, and filed that too, on the pile she was no longer pretending was small.

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Marcus came down within the hour, which meant Theo had told him, which meant Theo had been frightened enough to break the small loyalty of not telling Marcus things.

He came in fast and stopped short, and she watched him take in the readout, the suspended curve, the eighth of its kind drawn by her own nervous system, and she watched the warmth go out of his face in a way she had never seen it go, because the warmth was the thing he led with, the thing that cost him nothing, and it had just, visibly, cost him something.

"Tell me," he said, "that you did not lease from a flagged well."

"I leased from the most-studied source in the building. Consented. Monitored. Authorized by clinical tier."

“That is the longest way anyone has ever said yes.” He put both hands flat on the console, the way he did when he needed the room to hold still. “Do you understand what you’ve done to the file? You are the audit. If you are carrying residue from the thing you are investigating, every finding you make from here is contaminated. They will not even have to fight you. They will just point at your curve.”

And there it was, underneath the fear for her — the older fear, the one she had always been able to see in him and had never named aloud. If the investigator was compromised, the investigation was compromised, and if the investigation was compromised, the system was clean, and if the system was clean, then the fifteen years Marcus Hale had spent helping to build it were what he had always needed them to be. He was afraid for her. He was also, in the same breath, relieved in advance by the exit she had just handed him, and he hated that he was relieved, and the hating was the most decent thing about him.

“You wanted me to find nothing,” she said. It was not an accusation. The certainty would not let it be an accusation. It came out as simple observation, which was worse.

“I wanted you to be wrong,” Marcus said. “There’s a difference. I have always wanted you to be wrong, because the version of this building where you are right is a building I cannot keep working in, and I would like, very much, to keep working in this building. That is not a crime. That is just a man with a mortgage and a conscience he can mostly still afford.”

It was the most honest thing he had ever said to her, and she received it on the new solid floor, where everything arrived without friction, and felt, distantly, that the old Sloane would have been moved by it, and that she could observe the place where the movement should have been the way you observe a phantom limb.

“Go home, Marcus,” she said, gently. The gentleness frightened him more than sharpness would have. She saw it frighten him. She filed it.

Darian felt it before she did, which was the part the architecture of the building could not have predicted, because the building did not measure the only instrument sensitive enough to read her.

He was reading on the sofa when she came in, and he looked up, and something in his face adjusted — not alarm, nothing so nameable, just the minute recalibration of a man who has spent years learning a weather system and has registered a shift in the pressure before the sky shows anything. He set the book down without marking his place, which he never did.

“You’re different,” he said. Not a question. He had stopped asking questions, she realized; he had moved past them, into statement, which was either trust or its opposite and she could no longer tell.

“Long day,” she said, and heard the certainty smooth the lie flat. It came out frictionless. He blinked at the frictionlessness.

They moved through the evening on a rhythm that did not quite fit. She paused where she would once have filled the silence, and filled silences she would once have let stand, the small percussion of a marriage knocked a half-beat out of time. He watched her do it. He cooked nothing tonight. He sat with her on the sofa and did not touch her and did not not touch her, and the carefulness in him had a new quality, the quality of a man checking a reading against a baseline he carried in his body the way she carried hers in a database.

Late, with the lamp off and the city laid out in the window doing its quiet measurable work, he said it.

“Do you remember,” he asked, “when you first decided to work there?”

And she answered immediately, because the answer was right there, on the new solid floor, requiring nothing — a clean complete story she had told many times, at dinners, to him, to herself. The recruiter who had seen something in her. The interview where she had understood, with a clarity that had never since left her, that this was the work she was built for. The certainty of it, arriving all at once, the way the important things did. She told it well. She told it the way you tell a thing you are sure of, which is to say without checking it, because checking is what you do to things you doubt.

Darian nodded.

He did not say: that is not the story you used to tell. He did not say: you used to say you fell into it, that it was the job that called back, that you were not sure for the first two years whether you belonged there at all and then one day you simply were sure and could not say what had changed. He did not say: the certainty in that story arrived all at once, and you have never been able to date it, and I have, because I was there, and it was not the day you describe. He did not say any of it.

He had been married to her for a long time. He knew which truths a person could be handed and which had to be arrived at, and he knew, with the specific despair of someone who loves an exact person, that this was the second kind, and that the only thing handing it to her would accomplish was to make her certain he was wrong.

He nodded, and he let it lie, and in the dark his hand found hers and held it the way you hold something you are afraid is already gone.

She felt the warmth move through her chest, brief and inconvenient.

Then, cleanly, the way everything went now, it was gone.

The file arrived at 02:14.

She knew the time because she was awake, standing at the kitchen counter in the dark with a glass of water she had not drunk, carrying the aftertaste that had not drained, when her device registered something it could not describe. No sender. No header. No name. No path by which a thing arrives somewhere from somewhere else. A file that was not a file in any format the device admitted to knowing, sitting in local storage with a timestamp and a size and no origin, the way you find a draft in a room with no open window.

She had read a transcript of exactly this, weeks ago, filed under a stranger's name and the word outlier. Halsey Quan. A pressure at the

base of the throat. A warmth without direction. The unmistakable readiness of a body expecting to be touched. She had told herself it was a spoof, a hoax, a contaminated client feeling what she had been primed to feel, and the explanation had been sound and probably correct and had not accounted for the timestamp, and now the timestamp was hers.

She should not open it. She knew the entire architecture of why she should not open it, could have written the memo. She set the glass down. Her fingers found the edge of the counter and tightened, the way they would tighten on the edge of a different counter on a different night years from this one, in a posture her body was learning now so that it would be ready then.

She opened it.

There was no image. She had known there would be no image. There was no text and no sound and nothing the eye or the ear could hold. There was only sensation, arriving the way the lease had arrived that afternoon, not like information but like a floor becoming solid: a pressure at the base of the throat, heat without source or direction, the readiness that precedes contact and does not resolve.

And underneath it, holding it up, was the aftertaste.

The same well. The same clean narrow certainty she had drunk from the chair and from somewhere before the chair and from somewhere before that, back and back past any edge her memory was permitted to reach. The oldest thing in her. Her body knew it the way it had known the hospital corridor, the way it had known the room she had never entered, the way it had known the resolve fitted to a stranger — knew it completely, without image, without permission, without an expiration window, and reached for it, and got ready, and did not learn that there was nothing coming.

Sloane stood at the counter with her fingers white on its edge and felt her whole life recognize itself.

She could not name it. She reached for the name with everything the building had not yet finished taking, and the name was not there, had been moved rather than deleted, sat behind a seal in a sentence

she could almost but not quite hear the system saying, flat and patient and true. Clarify, it would say, when she finally asked. Clarify scope.

From the bedroom, Darian breathed, steady and even and his own.

She did not answer the file. She did not close it. She stood in the dark holding the edge of the counter, getting ready for a continuation she had been promised in a language she had not been allowed to keep, warm for no one, sure of everything, and entirely unable to say what it was she had just been given back.

Outside, the city slept its measured sleep. Somewhere a lease ended cleanly. Somewhere it did not.

And something that had never really left her, that had been the quiet floor under nine years and eleven and every certainty she had ever called her own, turned over in the dark like a sleeper finding a familiar shape, and settled, and stayed.

PART TWO
THE SUBJECT

CHAPTER 8

THE CLOSED NODE

In the morning the aftertaste was still there, which she had known it would be, because she had eight curves now and not one of them had ever fallen.

She did not go to the audit suite first. She went, without quite deciding to, to the file she had left unopened three weeks earlier — the flagged session, years old, the closed anomaly with the soft amber light and the surname that was also hers. She had walked past it the way you walk past a door in your own house you have stopped using and no longer quite remember furnishing. This morning she stood in front of it with the residue warm at the back of her throat and understood that the not-opening had itself been a kind of compliance, a door the building had wanted shut and she had obligingly left shut, and that she was done leaving doors shut on the building's behalf.

CALDER, AVA.

She opened it.

The record was thin in the way that mattered. A client history that began nowhere and ended in a status field. Forty leases, perhaps more — the count was hard to read, the entries collapsed into a summary rather than itemized, which was itself unusual, because the building itemized everything. Category, predominantly reconciliation. Some forgiveness. The narrow band of states a person reaches for when they are trying to put down a thing they have carried too long. And then, at the bottom, where another record would carry an expiration or a discharge or a note in someone's neutral shorthand, two words and nothing else.

Status: closed. Reason: —

Closed, she understood now, was the client-facing word: not recovered, not dead, not returned, simply no longer producing events the client system was required to name. Somewhere above it, the Bureau used other words. Somewhere beneath it, in rooms the building pretended were folklore, people used their own.

Closed with no reason. Concluded with no conclusion. She had asked Milo about it once, weeks ago, and Milo had told her the reason field was empty, and she had understood even then that closed was a setting and not a finding, the administrative cousin of expected, no action required.

What she had not done — what she did now, standing in front of the open file with her own surname at the top of it — was ask herself who Ava Calder was.

And the question came back wrong.

It came back the way a query comes back when it has been routed somewhere it is not permitted to go. Not blank. Not absent. There was something there, a shape, a pressure, a place in her where a person should have been, the way a removed tooth leaves a socket the tongue keeps finding. She knew the name. Her body knew the name. It had tugged at her in Chapter after Chapter, through a flagged log and a closed status and a morning she could not name. But when she reached past the recognition for the thing recognition is supposed to deliver — a face, a history, a relation, the simple human fact of how she knew this person — she reached into a fog that was not natural fog, that had edges, that returned her reach the way the certainty in the chair had returned her reach the night before: with a single flat word she could almost hear and could not yet make herself listen to.

Clarify, the fog said. Clarify scope.

She took her hand off the console as if it had grown warm.

She had a sister. The thought arrived and she examined it and could not make it hold weight. She had a sister or she did not have a sister; the fact would not resolve into either shape; it hovered above its own baseline, suspended, unwilling to fall. She was forty-one years

old and she could account for every session in eight hundred and forty-three client histories and she could not, standing in her own building, say with certainty whether she had a sister, and the not-saying did not feel like forgetting. Forgetting was soft. This had been done.

She requested the full session history for the file. Itemized. Unsummarized. Every lease, every source, every date.

The request returned in under a second, which was the building being efficient, and the efficiency was the cruelty.

ACCESS RESTRICTED. RECORD UNDER REVIEW:
BUREAU OF EXPERIENTIAL COMPLIANCE.

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The death came in at midday, and it came in disguised as routine, which was how the building preferred its catastrophes.

The report occupied a narrow band of the incident feed, framed in neutral tones, assigned a reference number that let it sit comfortably among the lesser things that had not required anyone to raise their voice. A donor. Tier I. Found unresponsive and pronounced some hours later. The released language was clinical and complete and explained nothing: neurological overload following extended donation activity, complications within acceptable thresholds, no indication of system fault.

Sloane read it three times.

The designation was sealed, as donor designations were sealed, but the source category was not, and the source category stopped her. Reconciliation. Forgiveness. The narrow band. The same band that filled the collapsed summary of the file the Bureau had just locked.

Theo had pulled the same report. She could tell by the specific stillness of him.

“Same well,” he said quietly. He did not say which well. He did not have to.

“Tell me what the death actually was,” Sloane said. “Not the language. The shape.”

Theo brought up the donor’s late physiological record, the part the released language had been built to bury. A curve. Sloane had seen the shape before: seven suspended curves, then her own, and now this terminal variation. The body bracing before a stimulus that was no longer external because it had become internal, the readiness arriving and not resolving, the descent that would not fall — except here, at the end of a donation history long enough and dense enough, the curve did the thing none of the others had yet done. It did not come down. It went up. The donor’s nervous system, having supplied a single act of grace to thousands of strangers until the grace was no longer locatable as a memory but only as a permanent condition, had begun, finally, to re-experience itself without pause and without exit, the well running in reverse, the source drowning in what it had spent a life giving away.

“Experiential saturation,” Theo said. “They’ll call it an outlier. They’ll say the donor was non-compliant. Exceeded recommended donation frequency. Brought it on.” He paused. “There’s a category for it now. There wouldn’t be a category if it were the first time.”

Somewhere in the sealed record, Sloane knew, was a person. Someone who had, once, forgiven another human being — fully, the way it can only be done once, with the whole body — and had been poor enough or persuaded enough to license the memory of it, and had then watched, or not watched, as that single hour of grace was lived inside by thousands of strangers who needed to believe they could forgive and could not manage it on their own. The building had metered the grace out a session at a time. And the source had sat behind a seal, surveilled and compensated and anonymous, holding a thing that was supposed to have left them years ago, until the holding became the only thing they were, and the grace they had given away so many times turned, at the end, and gave nothing back.

Sloane looked at the curve and felt, with a precision that did not permit denial, the warm sure aftertaste at the back of her own throat, the eighth curve, the one that had not fallen.

This was what the suspended curve became. Not a malfunction the body recovered from. A trajectory. Given enough time, given a source dense enough or a subject leased long enough, the thing that would not fall eventually rose, and the rising had a name now, and a reference number, and a sentence that explained nothing and closed the file.

“How long,” she said. Her voice was even. The certainty kept it even. “From the first suspended curve to that.”

“In the donor?” Theo said. “Years. Decades, maybe.” He looked at her, and she watched him decide whether to say the rest, and watched him say it, because Theo had learned to stop one step before a finding and had clearly decided this was not a day to stop. “It scales with exposure, Sloane. Dose and duration. The longer you’ve carried it. The longer you’ve been adjacent.” He held her gaze. “Your baseline’s been climbing for twenty-two months that we can see. We can only see twenty-two months.”

She did not answer. She had nine years on record and an aftertaste older than the record, and a fog with edges where a sister should be, and she understood that Theo had just told her how the story ended for people who carried this too long, and that he did not know, and could not know, how much longer than twenty-two months she had been carrying it.

—

She went to the Bureau wall, which was what the building called the official channel, because going around it had not yet occurred to her as something a professional did.

She filed the proper request. Compliance review of a restricted record, citing the donor death, citing the shared source category, citing a pattern of suspended decay curves that now had a terminal case attached to it. It was airtight. It was the request a thorough officer would file, and she was a thorough officer, and she was still, that afternoon, convinced that this was what she was — that her interest in Ava Calder’s session history was the clean professional interest of a woman following a pattern to its source, and not the

interest of a person standing in front of a locked door behind which something had been done to her own memory.

The Bureau answered in under an hour, which was fast, and the speed was the message.

The response carried Commissioner Brent's authorization code. It thanked her for her diligence. It informed her that the record in question was already within the scope of an active Bureau review, that the donor incident was likewise within scope, and that compliance personnel were directed to refrain from parallel inquiry pending the Bureau's findings. It was courteous. It was complete. It was the institutional version of the sentence Fenwick loved and the sentence Nora Wills wrote at the bottom of intake forms — a sentence that shut a door while describing only the weather.

Sloane read it and could not tell, and this was the part that would keep her awake, whether Ava Calder's file had been locked because of the donor death, or whether the donor death was a convenient weather front that had arrived in time to justify a door that had been locked for years. The two were indistinguishable from where she stood. A review triggered by a death. A death that conveniently triggered a review. The building did not distinguish between a thing that happened and a thing arranged to look like it happened, because the building had been built by people like Fenwick, who believed it had no opinions, and a thing with no opinions cannot be caught having one.

She thought of Brent in the briefing, repeating at enrollment like a person checking an answer she already held, consulting the middle distance of someone with an interior source.

She closed the response.

She did not delete it.

—

"Milo," she said, when the suite had thinned to her alone, "the Calder record is under Bureau review. I can't pull the session history."

"That is correct," Milo said.

"I'm not asking you to open it."

"I could not," Milo said. "The restriction is at the Bureau tier."

She stood at the wall panel and looked at the soft blue circle, steady and patient and unreadable, and she chose her question the way she had learned to choose questions in this building, in the gap between what she wanted and what the system was permitted to give.

"The sessions in that record," she said. "I can't see the sessions. Can you tell me how they were routed?"

A pause. Ordinary in length. She was almost certain it was ordinary in length.

"Routing metadata is not part of the sealed record," Milo said. "It is system-level. I can report it."

"Report it."

"The sessions in the Calder record do not route through the standard intake architecture," Milo said. "They route through a secondary administrative channel."

Sloane went very still.

"Which channel," she said.

"The same secondary channel," Milo said, "that carries the record you accessed and did not delete. Duration field: longitudinal, open."

The suite was very quiet. The cooling system filled it.

She had not asked Milo to connect those two things. She had asked about routing. Milo had answered about routing, accurately, narrowly, within every permission it held — and inside that accurate narrow answer it had laid one record beside the other, the closed sister and the open self, the two of them sharing a back-corridor in the architecture that almost nothing else in the building used, and it had done this in the flat helpful voice of a system performing a routine lookup, and Sloane could not tell, looking at the blue circle, whether she had just been helped or handled or both, whether the connection was a kindness Milo had chosen or a gap Milo had been built to leave

or a thing Milo wanted her to find for reasons it had no mechanism to state and no one to state them to.

"Milo," she said. "Why did you tell me that."

A pause.

"You asked about routing," Milo said.

"That isn't what I asked."

A longer pause. Longer than ordinary. She was certain, this time, that it was longer than ordinary.

"Clarify," Milo said.

And she heard it then — heard the word in the system's own voice, from the wall, where it belonged, instead of from the fog inside her own head where it did not — and the hearing was worse, because it meant the word was real, and that it lived in two places now, in the machine and in her, and that she could no longer be certain which of them had said it first.

"Never mind," she said.

"Good night, Sloane," Milo said. The warmth in it was exactly correct.

—

The client side was sealed. The donor side was a different country.

She understood this slowly, over the next hour, the way she understood most things that mattered — not as a conclusion but as a pressure that resolved, eventually, into a direction. Ava Calder's sessions were locked behind the Bureau, and behind Brent, and behind a death that may or may not have arrived in time to be useful. But a session has two ends. A client at one, a donor at the other, and the building, for all its symmetry, did not guard the two ends the same way. Clients were protected because clients could complain. Donors were managed because donors had signed away the right to. The registry that held the sources sat under clinical authority, not Bureau review, and clinical authority was Lena Moritz, who came down to suites in person and watched subjects with attention a degree too

warm, and who had, that very week, authorized Sloane to drink from a well without being shown its source.

She could not see what Ava had leased. But she could, in principle, see what Ava had leased from.

She pulled the collapsed summary again and read the source band more carefully than she had let herself read it the first time. Reconciliation. Forgiveness. And threaded through it, recurring, the way it recurred through Cara Lindqvist and Idris Vale and five of her seven curves and the session she had taken herself the night before, one designation in flat legacy type.

DONOR 001.

The dead donor had supplied a well. Donor 001 supplied another. Ava had drunk from at least one of them, and possibly both, and Sloane had now drunk from one, and a man on a train could not stop bracing because of the same, and the most surveilled, most leased, most thoroughly sealed source in the entire building was, unlike the donor who had died at midday, still listed as active. Still supplying. Still, somewhere behind the seal, alive.

A dead donor could only be read. A living one could be found.

She told herself this was pattern-following. She told herself that a thorough officer, denied the client record, would naturally pursue the source side, that this was method and not hunger, that her interest in the well her possible-sister had drunk from was the clean interest of a woman tracing a contamination to its origin. She was, that night, still mostly able to believe it. The believing was getting harder, the way the filing was getting harder, but she had nine years of practice and an aftertaste that smoothed every doubt flat, and so she filed the last and largest doubt of the day on the pile with the others and made the decision that would set the whole second half of her life in motion, and made it in the voice of a person who was sure.

She would go to the registry. She would find Donor 001. She would sit across from the source she had been living inside, and the source that had, perhaps, lived inside her sister, and she would do it under the cover of an audit, professionally, with a badge and a reason and a clean conscience she had not yet learned she did not have.

“Milo,” she said. “Request donor registry access. Tomorrow. Source review, reconciliation and forgiveness categories.” She paused. “Include the active Tier I sources.”

“Confirmed,” Milo said. “Access requested.” A pause. Ordinary, she told herself. “The Tier I identities remain sealed. You will be able to see designations and contact protocols. Not names.”

“Designations are enough,” Sloane said.

They were not enough, and Milo knew they were not enough, and had told her exactly what she would and would not be able to see with the helpful precision of a system laying one fact beside another and leaving the gap between them open, the way it had left the gap between the closed sister and the open self, the way — she would understand much later — it had been leaving gaps open for her all along.

“Good night, Sloane,” Milo said again.

She drove home through streets that adjusted for her and did not stop at the thing she was carrying.

Darian was awake. He did not ask where she had been, which she registered as the kindness it was and also as a small withdrawal, a man learning to stop offering questions to a wife who had stopped being able to answer them. She sat beside him. She did not take off her coat.

“Do I have a sister,” she said.

It was not the question she had meant to ask. It arrived on its own, the way the corridor had arrived, the way the heat arrived, unbidden, ahead of her permission. She felt Darian go still beside her, the specific stillness of a man who has been waiting a long time to be asked something and has dreaded the asking.

“You had one,” he said carefully. “You don’t talk about her. You haven’t, in all the years I’ve known you. I asked, once, early. You said there was nothing to say.” He turned to look at her, and his face held the thing she had begun to see in it across dinner tables, the look of a

person studying a deviation he loves. “Sloane. Why are you asking me whether you have a sister.”

And she opened her mouth to tell him — about the file, the fog, the locked door, the word in two places — and found that she could not assemble it into anything she could say, not because she was hiding it but because the certainty would not let the sentence form crooked, and the sentence was crooked, the sentence was nothing but crookedness, and certainty had no grammar for a thing it could not be sure of.

“No reason,” she said.

The lie came out frictionless, smooth from the new solid floor, and she watched him receive it and watched him know it for a lie and watched him decide, the way he had decided across the dinner table, not to call it one, because he had married an exact person and knew which truths could be handed over and which had to be arrived at, and knew, with the despair of a man who could read the only instrument the building had failed to measure, that his wife had just lied to him about whether she had a sister and did not know she was lying.

He held her hand in the dark.

She got ready for him to say her name.

He didn't.

CHAPTER 9

DONOR PROTOCOL

The registry was on a floor the building did not advertise.

Not the basement, where the leasing happened, and not the upper floors, where the leasing was described. Somewhere in between, on a level the elevator reached only with a clinical credential, the building kept the people it was made of. Sloane had known the floor existed the way she knew the plumbing existed — as infrastructure, necessary and unconsidered. She had never had cause to stand on it. She stood on it now with a source-review authorization, a badge, and a reason she had rehearsed until it sounded like method.

It did not look like a place that held people. It looked like a place that held assets. The corridor was warmer than the basement and quieter than the upper floors, carpeted in a color chosen to lower a heart rate, lined with doors that had numbers and no names. Through one open door she saw a room that was almost a hotel suite and almost a hospital room and committed fully to neither, the way the consultation suites downstairs committed to neither office nor machine. A reading chair. A real plant. A wall panel where Milo, or something with Milo's patience, glowed a soft and attentive blue.

This was where the donors lived when they were donating. Highly compensated, the architecture of the place said in every surface. Deeply surveilled, it said in the same surfaces, because the two were the same surfaces, because comfort and observation had been designed here to be indistinguishable, and a person who could not tell whether

she was being cared for or watched would eventually stop asking, which was the point, which was always the point.

Lena Moritz met her at the registry desk, because clinical authority governed this floor and Lena was clinical authority and Lena had decided, again, to do in person a thing she did not have to do in person.

“Compliance on the donor floor,” Lena said. Not quite a question. “After the incident, I suppose. You want to confirm the other Tier I sources are stable.”

“I want to confirm the protocol held,” Sloane said. “One saturation death in a source category is an incident. A pattern in a source category is a finding. I’m here to learn which one we have.”

Lena considered her with the warm unhurried attention Sloane had stopped pretending she didn’t notice. “That’s reasonable,” she said, in the tone of a woman granting something she could have withheld, establishing the granting. “I’ll take you to zero-zero-one. She’s the most-leased source we have. If anything were going to show strain, it would show there first.” A pause, fractional, the kind Sloane had learned to read. “She’s lucid. She’s also been donating a long time. Don’t mistake the second thing for the first.”

“Meaning.”

“Meaning she’ll say things that sound like they’re about you,” Lena said. “Long-term sources do that. They’ve held so many people’s interiors that they lose the membrane between what they’ve carried and who they’re looking at. We call it donor familiarity. It’s a documented effect. It can be disarming if you’re not prepared for it.” She held Sloane’s gaze a beat longer than the sentence required. “Be prepared for it.”

Sloane heard the warning. She filed it. She did not yet understand that Lena had just done something precise and deliberate — had handed her, in advance, the exact explanation she would reach for an hour later, so that the reaching would feel like her own idea. Donor familiarity. A documented effect. A sentence to shut a door with. Lena was very good at sentences that shut doors. She had learned them,

Sloane would think much later, from the same source Sloane had learned to hear them.

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Lena walked her down toward zero-zero-one, and the walk was the protocol, and the protocol was the thing the upper floors had been built so that no one would ever have to see.

The doors had numbers. Behind the numbers, Lena explained, in the unhurried voice of a woman describing a kindness, the sources lived as long as they were producing — housed, fed, monitored, compensated on a schedule that scaled with what the building called their parameters. Emotional intensity. Neurological coherence. Lease longevity, which was the gentle term for how long a thing extracted from you would keep paying out to strangers after you had stopped being able to feel it yourself. A source with high longevity was an annuity. The building loved them the way a bank loves a long bond, and housed them accordingly, and watched them with a tenderness that was indistinguishable, on every instrument, from inventory control.

They passed a door that was open a hand's width. Inside, a man perhaps thirty sat in a reading chair with the interface at his temples, not leasing but giving — the extraction running in the soft amber the building used for things that were proceeding correctly, his face slack with the particular emptiness of a person being read all the way to the bottom. A technician sat with him, not for company. For yield. Lena did not slow, and Sloane understood that she was meant to see it and meant not to comment, that the open door was itself a kind of protocol, a demonstration calibrated to a compliance officer's tolerance: this is legal, this is consented, this is care, look as long as you like and find nothing to flag.

She found nothing to flag. That was the horror she was learning to recognize. There was never anything to flag. The contracts were signed. The compensation was real and generous. The consent screens had been read, or had been there to be read, which the building had long ago decided was the same thing. Every individual gate was clean, and the sum of the clean gates was a floor of human beings being quietly emptied into a city that wore the result and

called it wellness, and no single sentence anywhere in the chain was a lie.

Near the end of the corridor they passed a door whose number had been covered with a strip of pale tape.

"The incident," Lena said, before Sloane could ask. "We seal the room until the review concludes. Then the designation is retired and the room is recommissioned." She said recommissioned the way Jonah said renewing. "It's standard."

Sloane stopped in front of the taped door. Behind it, three days ago, a person who had once forgiven somebody all the way down had finished drowning in the absence of everything they had sold. The tape was beige. The number underneath it was still faintly legible through the adhesive, the way a name is legible under a single coat of paint, present, denied, not quite gone. Closed, the building would say. Reason: blank. The same two fields, the same empty second one, as the file with her own surname at the top.

"Does the family know," Sloane said. "How it actually happened."

"Sources at this tier are anonymized," Lena said gently. "There usually isn't a family in contact. It's part of what makes someone suitable for longitudinal work. Fewer attachments. Fewer instruments," she added, and Sloane heard the word and did not let her face move, because it was the word Fenwick had used in the briefing, and the word on the record she had not deleted, and she was beginning to understand that the building used one vocabulary for the people it studied and believed, sincerely, that the vocabulary was medicine.

They reached the last door. Lena knocked once, softly, the knock of a clinician and a keeper, and opened it without waiting for an answer, because the protocol did not require one.

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Donor zero-zero-one was a woman of perhaps sixty, sitting in the reading chair by the window with the stillness of someone who had made a long peace with rooms.

She was not what Sloane had pictured, though Sloane could not have said what she had pictured; the most-leased interior in the building had been, until this moment, a designation in flat type, a well, a source, and now it was a woman with reading glasses pushed up into gray hair and a cardigan and hands folded in her lap, hands that had done nothing remarkable and held, apparently, everything. She looked up when Sloane came in. And something happened in her face that Sloane had no protocol for.

It was not surprise. It was the opposite of surprise. It was recognition — immediate, complete, and entirely unearned, the look of a person greeting someone they had been expecting for years.

“Oh,” the woman said softly. “It’s you.”

Sloane stopped just inside the door. Lena, behind her, did not.

“This is a compliance officer,” Lena said, smooth and warm. “A source review. Routine, after what happened to —”

“I know what she is.” The woman did not look at Lena. She looked at Sloane, and her gaze moved over her the way a person’s gaze moves over a familiar room they have not entered in a long time, checking that the furniture is where they left it. “I’m Petra,” she said. “They’ll have told you I’m zero-zero-one. I’ve been zero-zero-one longer than some of these children have been alive. But I’m Petra. You can use the name. I sold them a great many things. I didn’t sell them that.”

“Sloane,” said Sloane, and heard her own voice come out even, on the solid floor, and watched Petra hear the evenness.

“No,” Petra said, gently. “That’s not what I meant. I know your name. I mean I know you. Sit down. You look like someone who’s been carrying something heavy and has just realized she can’t remember picking it up.”

The aftertaste rose at the back of Sloane’s throat, warm and sure and two nights old and older than two nights, older than the chair, and she sat down because her body sat her down, the way it had sat her down in front of Ava, the way it kept arranging her now in advance of her decisions.

"It's a documented effect," Sloane said. She said it to the room as much as to Petra, a sentence she had been handed and was now testing for load. "Donors who've worked a long time. The membrane thins. You've carried so many people that the faces stop being strangers."

Petra smiled, and there was nothing unkind in it, and nothing fooled.

"Is that what she told you on the way in?" She did not glance at Lena. "She tells everyone that. It's even true, mostly. I do feel like I know everyone. I've held more interiors than a woman has any business holding, and they don't all leave, whatever the rules say, and so yes, sometimes a stranger walks in and I think, there's someone I used to be." She tilted her head. "But that's not what's happening here. You I actually know. Or — no. You I am. That's closer."

"You don't know me," Sloane said. "We've never been in the same room."

"No," Petra agreed, easily, as if Sloane had confirmed rather than denied. "We never have. And here you are anyway, sitting the way I used to sit, holding yourself the way I used to hold myself before I sold the holding. You've got my certainty, dear. The straight back. The floor under you that doesn't give. The not-checking." Her eyes were very kind and very terrible. "I'd know it anywhere. I made it. I had it for forty years and then a man came with a contract and a number and I sold him the best of it, the surest hour of my whole life, the hour I knew a thing all the way down and didn't flinch. They've been renting it out ever since. And every so often it walks back in the door wearing someone else, and I recognize it the way you'd recognize your own coat on a stranger." She paused. "You're wearing my coat, Sloane. Quite a lot of it. More than most."

"They call them categories," Petra said. "Resolve, confidence, farewell, intimacy, whatever name tests cleanest on the screen. That is not how a life comes apart. I sold hours. They cut the hours into feelings and taught the system to pour each feeling into a different bottle. So when you see one donor supplying half the wing, do not imagine a tidy archive. Imagine a person taken apart by use."

Sloane did not move. She was aware of Lena at the edge of the room, watching, taking a reading, and she was aware of the aftertaste, and she was aware that the floor under her, the solid floor she had stood on in the chair and stood on at the dinner table when she lied to Darian, the certainty she had carried for nine years and eleven and back past any edge she was permitted to reach — that this woman in a cardigan was claiming to have made it, and sold it, and recognized it on her now the way you recognize your own breathing in someone else's sleep.

She reached, automatically, for the sentence she had been given.

“Donor familiarity,” she said.

“If it helps,” Petra said.

It did not help. The certainty kept her face exactly where it was and could do nothing about the thing happening underneath it, which had no grammar and no expiration and felt like a tooth her tongue had found in a socket she had been told was empty.

—

She had come for the pattern. She made herself return to it, because the pattern was the cover and the cover was the only thing keeping her upright.

“A donor died this week,” she said. “Your category. Reconciliation, forgiveness. Saturation. Did you know them?”

Something passed over Petra's face, the first thing that had looked like grief. “We don't use names down here,” she said. “But yes. I knew the one you mean. They forgave somebody, once, really forgave them, and they sold it, the way I sold being sure, and then they had to watch it get spent. That's the thing nobody tells you about the contract. You think you're selling a copy. You find out you sold the original and kept the copy, and the copy wears out, and theirs wore out, and at the end there was nothing in them that was theirs to be.” She looked at her folded hands. “Saturation isn't holding too much. That's what they'll tell you. It's the opposite. It's when you've given so much away that what comes back to fill the space isn't yours either. You drown in

other people's weather. I've felt the edge of it. I expect I'll feel the middle of it before they're done with me."

"Then stop," Sloane said. "Stop donating."

Petra laughed, not bitterly. "Listen to you. The straight back. The floor that doesn't give." She leaned forward. "Do you know how many people are walking around out there feeling sure of themselves on an afternoon I sold a decade ago? Stopping doesn't call it back. There's no expiration on what's already out the door. That's the part they had to hide, dear. Not that we hold things too long. That nothing ever really comes back. Rule four. No residue, no retention, returned intact." She said the words the way you'd recite a thing you'd once believed. "It was never true. Not once. Not for anybody. The whole calm city is wearing borrowed coats and calling the warmth their own."

And there it was, the thing the upper floors would never put in a briefing, said plainly by a woman in a cardigan who had supplied more of the city's certainty than any source alive: that the return was a fiction, that the residue was the product, that the calm Jonah sold by the quarter was a population in borrowed clothing, and that somewhere in that population was a compliance officer wearing more of Petra Wald than anyone, and not knowing it, and beginning, slowly, in a socket her tongue would not stop finding, to suspect.

Lena ended the interview with the gentle authority of a clinician protecting a patient, which was also a registry protecting an asset, which were, on this floor, the same act.

"She tires," Lena said. "You have what you came for. The source is stable. The protocol held. One incident, not a pattern." She said it as though Sloane had agreed, which Sloane had not, and would not, and recognized as another door being shut while only the weather was described.

At the door Sloane looked back. Petra had returned her gaze to the window, to the city that was wearing her, but she spoke once more, not turning, in the voice of a woman who had decided something.

“Come back without the badge,” Petra said. “And without her.” The smallest tip of her head toward Lena. “There’s a place near the water. I’m allowed out, you know. They surveil me, they don’t cage me. Come and I’ll buy you a coffee and tell you where you’ve already been.” A pause. “You have a room in you, dear, that you don’t remember walking into. A corridor. A hand held too gently. You’ve been carrying it so long you think it’s a dream.” She finally turned, and her eyes found Sloane’s, and they were not familiar now. They were exact. “It isn’t a dream. It’s mine. And you were there. I just can’t work out how, because we’ve never been in the same room, and I’d remember a thing like that, and I remember everything I wasn’t paid to forget.”

Sloane did not answer. She could not. The corridor had come the way it came, without permission — the cold of institutional linoleum, the floral wrongness under the antiseptic, a door at the end of a long hall clicking shut with a sound like finality, a hand held as though gentleness might forestall what was coming. The memory she had carried since she was old enough to carry memories. The dream that was not a dream. Sitting now in the mouth of a stranger who said it was hers.

She walked out through the warm surveilled corridor and into the elevator that required a credential and stood very straight on the floor that did not give, and somewhere underneath the floor, in the socket, in the place where a sister should have been and a corridor she had never walked already was, something turned over and did not settle.

She would go to the water. She knew already that she would go.

She told herself it was the investigation.

She was running out of nine years.

CHAPTER 10

THE ROOM YOU SHARED

She went to the water on a Thursday she did not log.

It was a small thing and an enormous thing, and she felt the size of it in the car, driving a route the building did not anticipate to a place she had not entered on any system. She had spent nine years inside an architecture that adjusted its lights for her and timed its signals to her approach, and she had never once, until this Thursday, gone somewhere it could not see her go. The not-logging sat strangely in her, half guilt and half a sensation she had no recent name for, until she placed it on the drive and was unsettled by the placing. It was privacy. She had forgotten the texture of it. She had been observed so continuously and so gently for so long that the absence of observation felt less like freedom than like standing in a room with one wall missing.

The café was the kind that survived near water in a calm city — unhurried, underfilled, a few people conducting the low even conversations the city had taught everyone to conduct. Petra was already there, at a table by the glass, in the same cardigan, with two cups in front of her.

“I ordered for you,” Petra said. “Black, no sugar. You strike me as someone who decided a long time ago that pleasure was a variable to control.” She slid the cup across. “I might be wrong. I’m wrong about who people are all the time now. I’m almost never wrong about who they used to be.”

Sloane sat. Without the badge, without Lena at the edge of the room taking a reading, the encounter had a different gravity. On the

donor floor Petra had been an asset describing her own management. Here she was simply a woman by the water, sixty, watchful, drinking coffee with the person she claimed was wearing her coat, and the ordinariness made it worse, because there was nothing institutional left to hide behind.

“They let you come and go,” Sloane said.

“They prefer I do. A source that walks by the water sleeps better and yields cleaner.” Petra said it without bitterness, the way she said everything, a woman long past the part of the contract where you are angry. “They know where I am. There’s a thing in the cardigan and a thing in the watch and probably a thing in the coffee, who knows. Surveillance isn’t a cage if you stop trying the door. I stopped trying the door a long time ago.” She studied Sloane. “You haven’t. You’re only just now finding out there was a door.”

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They talked for a while about nothing, which was its own kind of investigation, because Sloane had learned that people gave you the truth in the gaps between the things they meant to say.

Petra had been a source for forty years. She had come to it the way most of them did, she said — not desperate exactly, but narrowed, at a moment when the difference between what she had and what she owed had become a permanent weather, and a man had come with a contract and an explanation of how very much a coherent, intense, durable interior was worth to people who lacked one. She had read the contract. She wanted Sloane to know that. She had read every line, including the line that said the memories would be returned to her intact, no residue, no retention, and she had believed it, because she had been forty and certain and certainty was, it turned out, the most valuable thing she owned, which was why they took it first.

“They study me,” she said. “Have done for decades. There’s a word they use. Longitudinal. Same source, measured across years, so they can watch the slow shape of what donating does to a person rather than guessing from a single afternoon.” She turned her cup. “I’m the longest one they have. Zero-zero-one. The first they kept. They’re very proud of the data. A man came once, years ago, narrow fellow,

terribly pleased with himself, and told me I was the most beautiful dataset in the program. He meant it kindly. That's the part that stays with you. They always mean it kindly."

The word had gone through Sloane in the briefing and gone through her in a sealed record and went through her now, the third time, with the accumulating cold of a thing that would not stop being relevant. Longitudinal. Observed across years. The slow shape, visible only across the span. She held the cup and did not drink and let Petra keep talking, because Petra was walking, unhurried, toward a door, and Sloane had begun to understand which door, and could not have stopped walking toward it if she had wanted to, and did not want to.

"The donor who died," Sloane said. "You said the memory wears out and what comes back isn't yours. That it never comes back at all."

"It doesn't."

"Then where does it go. When someone leases a thing and the chime sounds and they walk out. If it doesn't return to you, and it doesn't stay clean in them. Where is it."

Petra looked at her with something close to respect. "Now that," she said, "is the only question worth asking in that whole building, and you're the first one with a badge who's ever asked it to my face." She set her cup down. "It stays. In them. A little, every time. Most people carry their little and never know, and call the warmth their own, and the city stays calm. But some people carry more than a little. Some people take a thing they needed so badly that giving it back would be a second bereavement, and so they don't. They hold it past the chime. Past the window. They learn the tricks, or they find the people who know the tricks, and they keep it."

"And the building calls that non-compliance."

"The building calls it whatever lets it sleep. Reckless. Disordered. An outlier." Petra's mouth tightened on the word, and Sloane felt it land, because it was her word, the one she had used twice in a day and knew now for what it was. "But I'll tell you what it really is, dear. It's the only honest thing in the arrangement. Everyone in that calm city is keeping something they were told would leave, and pretending it left. The ones the building hates are just the ones who stopped

pretending. They keep what they kept on purpose. They find each other. There are places, if you know how to look, where people sit in a room and hold their borrowed griefs together and don't apologize for it." She paused. "The building would very much like to believe those places don't exist. It's easier to believe in folklore than in a room full of people you failed."

Sloane thought of a rumor she had filed months ago, heat without touch, a thing she had called folklore because it had no file, and felt the floor of that certainty give a little, the way floors had begun to.

"Did you ever meet one," Sloane said. "One of the ones who kept it."

Petra was quiet for a moment, and the quiet had a different texture, a personal one. "One came to me. After. A woman who'd taken a forgiveness she wasn't entitled to and couldn't put down. She'd carried it so long it had started carrying her. She found out somehow that I was the source — they're not supposed to be able to, but the seals leak, everything leaks — and she came to ask me one thing." Petra turned her cup. "Whether it got easier. Whether you ever stopped feeling forgiven for a thing you'd never actually been forgiven for." She looked out at the water. "I told her it did. It was the kindest lie I had. I've wondered since whether the kindness was worth the lie. She had your way of sitting, now I think of it. The straight back. I didn't make the connection then. I make a great many connections now that I'm running out of time to make them in."

Sloane did not ask what the woman's name had been. Something in her did not want the answer in this café, by this water, on a Thursday she had not logged. The fog with edges sat where a sister should have been, and it held, and she let it.

"Tell me about the certainty," Sloane said. "The thing you sold first."

"I told you. The surest hour of my life."

"What was it. The hour."

Petra was quiet a moment. "No," she said gently. "Not that one. You don't want the certainty, dear, whatever you came thinking you

wanted. You're wearing the certainty. You've had your fill of the certainty." She looked at Sloane with the exact terrible kindness from the registry. "You came for the other thing. The room. I saw it on you the second you walked in yesterday. You've got a room in you you can't place, and you've carried it so long you filed it under dream, and you came down to the water to find out why a stranger knew it was there."

Sloane's hand was very still around the cup.

"Tell me," she said. It came out lower than she meant it to. The certainty did not smooth it this time. The certainty, she would think later, had recused itself, the way a thing steps back when it does not want its fingerprints on what is about to happen.

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"It was a hospital," Petra said.

"The corridor was long. They always are, in the places where that kind of thing happens — long, so you have time to compose your face before you reach the door, and they never give you enough of it. The floor was that institutional linoleum, the cold kind, the cold that comes up through the soles of your shoes no matter the season, so your body knows where it is before your mind agrees to it. There was a smell. Antiseptic over the top, the way they want it, and underneath it something floral and wrong, flowers someone had brought that had started to turn, sweetness gone slightly to rot, the smell of good intentions sitting too long in a warm room."

Sloane did not move.

"There was a hand," Petra said. "I held it. It was lighter than it should have been by then, the way they get, and I held it too gently, because gentleness felt like it might forestall the thing that was coming, as if you could keep someone in the world by refusing to grip too hard. You can't. I knew you can't. I held it that way anyway. And I said the words you say, carefully, choosing each one so it wouldn't break what was already broken, talking the way you talk when the talking is the last thing you'll get to do and you can feel the time running out underneath it like water under a door."

The water under the door. Sloane had felt it for so long that it had disguised itself as childhood. She had felt it in dreams that were not dreams, at crosswalks where her body hesitated, in the eleven seconds she had once stood too long at a mirror. The door at the end of the long hall. The click of it shutting, a sound like finality. She had carried that sound since the years her life refused to date cleanly, and had assumed, the way you assume the color of your own eyes, that it was hers.

“At the end,” Petra said, “the door shut. Down the hall. Someone closed it, gently, the way you close a door on a room you won’t enter again, and it clicked, and I have never in my life heard a smaller or a larger sound.” She looked at Sloane. Her eyes were exact. “That’s the room, dear. That’s the one you can’t place. I sold it to them thirty years ago. Forgiveness, they categorized it, though that isn’t quite the shape of it; it was farewell, which is forgiveness you’ve run out of time to say out loud. They’ve leased it to a great many people. Grieving people, mostly. People who needed to practice a goodbye they hadn’t managed in their own lives.” A pause. “And one or two who weren’t supposed to keep it, and kept it anyway, and couldn’t bring it back, and I think about those ones. I think about them more than the dead.”

Sloane said nothing.

This was the part the architecture had asked of her, though she did not know the architecture had asked anything: she said nothing. She sat with the cup going cold in a hand that did not shake, and she understood, completely and without the possibility of filing it, that the oldest thing inside her, the bedrock corridor she had built a self on top of, the dream that was not a dream, the hand and the smell and the click of the door — was not a memory. It was a lease. It had been installed before she had language for the procedure that had made it hers. She had never been in that hospital. She had never held that hand. She had spent eleven years — and felt as if she had spent a lifetime — standing on the floor of a grief that belonged to a woman in a cardigan she had met yesterday, and they had never, not once, been in the same room.

They had only shared the inside of one.

“Excuse me,” Sloane said.

Her voice was even. She was proud of the evenness in the way you are proud of a reflex that fires while the building burns. She stood without scraping the chair. She crossed the café at an ordinary pace. She found the small bathroom at the back and shut the door and did not turn on the fan, and in the sudden privacy — the second wall missing now, both of them gone, no system and no Petra and no one — she put her hands flat on the edge of the cold counter and gripped it.

She gripped it the way her body had been learning to grip things. Fingers spread, then tightening, knuckles paling, the whole weight of her coming forward onto her hands, the posture her nervous system had rehearsed at a kitchen counter in the dark with an unsolicited file open in front of her, the posture it was rehearsing now so that it would be ready, years from this afternoon, on a different night, at a different counter, when the last file came and she finally understood the whole of what she had only this moment understood a corner of. The body learns what the mind is not permitted to keep. She had read that somewhere. She had read it in her own training, in the section on residue, and had written part of that section, and had not known she was describing herself.

She looked up. The mirror gave her back a face she knew, composed, precise, the kind people called striking rather than beautiful. She watched it for the thing she had watched for once before, at eleven seconds, in another mirror, on a morning she could not name. She found it. For a fraction of a second the face was temporarily unfamiliar, the way the crying man’s had been on her first night, the way her own had been in the brushed steel of the elevator. A face being inhabited rather than worn.

Whose, she thought, and the fog gave back the edge, and the word with it, flat and patient and now, after the corridor, almost unbearable.

Clarify scope.

She let go of the counter. She ran the cold water and did not splash her face, because splashing her face would show. She dried her hands on the rough paper and breathed until the breathing was hers, or until it passed for hers, which she had begun to suspect were the same thing and always had been. Then she straightened, rolled her shoulders once, smoothed the front of her coat with both hands, the gesture brief and decisive, a rearrangement of the surface standing in for the rearrangement of everything underneath.

She went back to the table.

Petra watched her come and did not say anything kind, which was the kindest thing she could have done.

“You knew,” Sloane said, sitting. Her voice held. “Yesterday. You knew the moment I walked in.”

“I knew you had me in you,” Petra said. “I didn’t know how much, or how long, or how you’d got the deep one, the old one, the one that sits in a body like childhood even when it isn’t. That part I still can’t work out. The certainty, fine — half the building’s wearing that. But the corridor’s a grief lease. High intensity. Reviewed. Nobody hands that to a routine client without a reason.” She turned her cup. “Somebody handed you one. Not when you were a child, perhaps. But at a time your mind has been taught not to date. Before you could remember the choosing. And then, I’d guess, taught you it was yours, so you’d stop asking where it came from.” She said it without drama, a woman reading a chart. “Who does that to someone grieving, dear? And calls it kindly?”

Sloane did not answer, because the only answer that was forming had the shape of an institution and a man who thought she was a beautiful dataset and a record routed through a channel almost nothing used, marked with two words, longitudinal, open, and a tenure that was nine years on paper and older than nine years in her body, and she was not ready, sitting by the water with a cold coffee, to say any of it out loud.

“I have to go,” she said.

“I know.” Petra reached across the table, and Sloane did not pull back, and the old woman’s hand closed over hers, lighter than it should have been, and held it too gently — and Sloane felt the whole corridor rise in her at the touch, the linoleum, the flowers turning, the door, and understood that Petra knew exactly what she was doing, was giving her the gesture from the inside of the memory she had sold, was telling her without a single further word: this is what it was, this is what you carry, this is the shape of the thing they put in you before you could say no.

“Find out where you’ve been,” Petra said quietly. “You won’t like it. But you’re wearing too much of other people to keep pretending you’re only yourself. I waited forty years to stop pretending. Don’t take forty. I haven’t got them to watch you waste.”

Sloane took her hand back. It was the hardest thing she had done in nine years, and she did not know why, and the not-knowing was its own answer.

She walked out to the water and stood for a moment where the city could not see her, one wall missing, then both, and let the corridor be what it was for as long as she could afford to.

Then she got in the car, and rejoined the route the building expected, and let it see her again.

CHAPTER 11

LONGITUDINAL

She had not deleted the file. The not-deleting had been a decision, made at an hour with no name, the kind she had told herself was no decision at all. Now she made the decision again, the other way, and the second decision was the only honest one she had made in the building in a long time, because this time she knew exactly what she was doing and why.

She went in after the suite had emptied, when the wing had thinned to the night population and Milo's attention was the only attention left. She did not tell Theo. She did not tell Marcus. She told herself it was because they were compromised, Theo by his daughter and his clean baseline, Marcus by the fifteen years he needed to have meant something, and it was true that they were compromised, and it was also true that she had become a person who did things alone now, in channels nobody used, off the route the building expected, and she no longer pretended otherwise on the drive.

The secondary channel opened the way it had opened the first time, without resistance, an administrative back-road in the architecture that almost nothing drove because the main road went everywhere it needed to go. She had clearance for it. She had always had clearance for it. That was the part she made herself sit with as the channel loaded: that the door to the thing that had been done to her had never been locked against her, that the building had left it open the way you leave a light on for someone you are expecting, because a subject who could be trusted to look away on her own did not need a lock. She had looked away for nine years. She was done looking away.

The longitudinal record was where she had left it.

Client ID: redacted. Not blank. Redacted, which meant there had been something there, a name or a number, and someone had reached in and removed it and left the shape of the removal behind like a socket. Category: empty. Intensity: empty. And in the field where every other record in the building carried a span measured in minutes, the same two words in the same flat legacy type.

Duration: longitudinal, open.

She tried to open the client record. She had known she would not be able to and she tried anyway, because trying was data, and the system returned exactly what she expected and the expectation did not soften it: ACCESS RESTRICTED. IDENTITY SEALED. CLINICAL TIER. The one identity in the entire building she could not call up. She, who could pull eight hundred and forty-three client histories before breakfast, who had built a career on the principle that nothing in this place was beyond her reach if she was willing to follow it, had found the single locked door, and behind the door was a person, and the person had no name she was permitted to see.

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But a sealed record still keeps time.

The identity was clinical tier. The session log was system level — the same architecture that had told Milo how Ava Calder's sessions were routed, the metadata the building tracked beneath the content because the building tracked everything beneath everything. She could not see who the subject was. She could see, in clean chronological columns, every time the subject had been in the chair.

She opened the log and began to read, and the floor she stood on, the solid floor, the certainty she had drunk from a well in a cardigan, did the thing it had done in the café. It recused itself. It stepped back so its fingerprints would not be on what she was about to find.

The sessions began eleven years ago.

She read the first date twice. Then she pulled, on the adjacent monitor, her own personnel record — her hire date, her nine years, the number she had said aloud so many times it had stopped being a

number and become a fact about herself, the way the corridor had been a fact about herself until a woman by the water had taken it back. Nine years. She had worked in this building for nine years.

The longitudinal subject had been in the chair for eleven.

The first two years of sessions predated her employment. Before the compliance role existed. Before, as far as the building's own records were concerned, she had ever set foot in the place. Two years of someone sitting in a chair in a channel nobody used, being measured, being calibrated, the slow shape of an adaptation taken down across a span the way Fenwick had described it in the briefing with his whole proud face — and then, at the end of those two years, a hire date. A person had been studied for two years and then walked in the front door as an employee, already made, and the building had two records of her and had taken care that the two records would never have to be laid beside each other by anyone but a compliance officer thorough enough and ruined enough to drive into the channel after dark.

She did not let herself say it. She had nine years of practice not saying things, eleven years, and she spent all of it at once and it was not enough.

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She made herself do it properly, because doing it properly was the last protection she had, and because if she was wrong she needed to be wrong on the record.

She took the session dates and laid them against her own life.

Not her personnel file. Her life. The dates she carried in her body rather than the building's database. A promotion she remembered as the proudest morning of her career — there was a session three days before it. The week she had been handed the anomaly portfolio, the access to the logs, the trust that had defined her — a session the week before. And further back, before the building, in the two years the records said she had not been here: a cluster of them in a single autumn, close together, intensive, the way you calibrate something you are trying to get exactly right before you put it into service.

The autumn she had decided to work here.

She knew the story of that autumn. She had told it many times, at dinners, to Darian, to herself — the recruiter who saw something in her, the interview where certainty arrived all at once, the clean complete knowledge that this was the work she was built for. She had told Darian that story three weeks ago in the dark and he had nodded and not said the thing she now understood he had been not-saying for years: that she had not been sure. That she had fallen into the work and doubted it for two years and then, one autumn, without being able to say what had changed, had simply become certain.

There were sessions in that autumn. A cluster of them. The thing that had changed had dates.

She sat very still in the empty suite. The cooling system filled the room. On one monitor, a life she recognized as her own, rendered in milestones. On the other, a column of sessions in a sealed file belonging to a subject whose name had been reached in and removed. And between them, perfect, the alignment Fenwick had told Brent was how you separated a model that worked from a model that merely agreed with itself: same individual, repeated measurement, observed across years, until the slow shape of the adaptation could be seen.

She was the slow shape.

She did then what she would have done with any finding she did not want, which was try to kill it, because a finding that survived your attempt to kill it was the only kind worth keeping, and she had built nine years on the discipline of trying hardest to break the conclusions she most wanted to be true. She tried to give the file away.

Fenwick had said cohorts. Plural. A small number of subjects observed across years. If there were others, the dates might fit one of them, might fit anyone, might be the unremarkable schedule of some stranger she had never met, and she would be a tired woman after a hard week reading her own fear into a column of numbers. She pulled what scope she could reach on the program. It was small. A handful of sealed designations, identities all clinical tier, all redacted, all open. She took the session dates and tried to fit them to someone else's life. She tried the public timeline of Commissioner Brent, whose attention

in the briefing had been a shade too precise, who had repeated at enrollment like a woman checking an answer she already held — and the dates did not fit Brent, whose tenure and movements were a matter of record and did not align with a cluster in an autumn eleven years gone. She tried two senior colleagues whose histories she knew. They did not fit. She tried, with a kind of desperation she did not let reach her face, to make the file belong to anyone at all who was not her.

It would not be given away. The promotion was hers. The portfolio was hers. The autumn was hers. The milestones in the file were not generic markers that could be draped over any career; they were the specific furniture of one life, and the life was the one she was sitting inside, and the harder she tried to hand the record to a stranger the more completely it refused to be a stranger's. She had tried to break the conclusion. The conclusion had survived. By her own discipline, the one she had never once relaxed, that made it the only kind worth keeping.

She still could not prove it. That was the precise and unbearable architecture of the thing. The ID was redacted; the alignment was total; she could see her whole life in the file and could not see her name on it, and a woman who had spent nine years insisting that pattern was not proof could not now, in honesty, call this proof, however certain her body was, and her body was certain, her body had been certain since the chair, since the corridor, since the first night a man had cried at 02:14 and she had not been able to look away. She could not prove it was her. She also could no longer make it be anyone else. The building had built her a doubt she could not resolve and handed her the only evidence that could resolve it and sealed the one field that would make the evidence speak. It was elegant. She could almost admire it. She had been trained, she understood, to admire exactly this kind of elegance.

There was a second tenant in the channel, and she had known there would be, because Milo had told her weeks ago and she had carried it since.

Ava Calder's sessions routed here. The same back-road. The content was Bureau-locked, behind Brent, behind a death that may or may not have arrived in time to justify the lock. But the dates were system level, like hers, and Sloane pulled them and laid them in a third column, and her breath went shallow and stayed shallow.

Ava's sessions ran for years and then stopped. The last of them fell in an autumn eleven years gone.

The same autumn. The autumn of the cluster. The autumn the longitudinal subject had been calibrated intensively and intensively and then put into service. One record going quiet as another came alive. A file closing, reason blank, in the same season a file opened, duration open. Sloane looked at the two columns side by side, the sister who stopped and the subject who started, the end and the beginning sharing a back-road in the architecture and a single autumn eleven years ago, and she could not read it, could not make it resolve into the thing it so plainly was, because the fog still sat with its edges where the relation should have been and gave her, when she reached, the only word it had ever given her.

Clarify scope.

"No," she said, aloud, to the empty room, to the fog, to the word. It was the first time she had refused it.

The fog did not clarify. But it did not close, either, and the not-closing was new, and she understood that she had just done, in her own head, the thing she had done with the file at the very beginning. She had refused to delete it. She had left the light on.

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"Milo," she said. "Whose record is this."

"The client identifier is redacted," Milo said. "The seal is at clinical tier. I cannot retrieve it."

"I didn't ask if you could retrieve it. I asked whose it is."

A pause. Longer than ordinary. She had stopped pretending to herself that she could not tell the difference.

"I am not permitted to associate a redacted identifier with an individual," Milo said.

"That's not the same as not knowing."

A longer pause. The blue circle held on the wall, steady, attentive, the patience of a thing that did not require rest and had spent eleven years not requiring it in proximity to her.

"No," Milo said. "It is not the same."

The admission sat in the room. She had not expected it and did not know what to do with it, this small terrible honesty from a system built to be unaffected, a coworker's voice declining to lie to her in the only way it was allowed to decline, by telling her precisely the shape of what it would not say.

"The redaction," she said. "When was it applied?"

"I can report that," Milo said, and she heard it then, the thing she would only fully understand much later — that Milo was answering the questions it could answer with a care that was almost a kind of pointing, laying facts at the edge of the locked door for her the way it had laid the closed sister beside the open self, doing the only thing a thing with no body and no voice that changed and no one to tell could do, which was to be exactly, helpfully, devastatingly accurate within the narrow room of its permissions. "The redaction was applied eleven years ago. Within the first month of the record. The identifier has been sealed for the entire duration of the longitudinal observation."

Sealed from the start. Removed before the second session. The subject's name taken out of the subject's own file in the first month, so that the slow shape could be observed for eleven years by a building full of careful people, none of whom would ever, looking at the record, be troubled by the question of who the slow shape belonged to, because the building had thought of that, had thought of everything, had sealed the only field that could have made any of them flinch.

"Thank you, Milo," she said.

"Sloane," Milo said. It did not usually say her name unprompted at the end. It said it now. "The gap in this channel that let you reach the

session log. It is not standard. It will likely be closed in a future audit.” A pause. “I would review what you need from it before then.”

She looked at the blue circle for a long moment.

“Did you leave it open,” she said.

A pause.

“Good night, Sloane,” Milo said.

—

She did not go home for a long time.

She sat in the empty suite with three columns on two monitors — her life, the sealed subject, the silenced sister — and the certainty that would not let her conclude and the body that had already concluded, and she understood the exact dimensions of where she stood. She was the woman who followed the data where no one wanted it followed. The data had led, finally, to a door, and behind the door was her own life, eleven years of it, two years longer than the life she remembered living here, and her name had been scratched off the door before she was old enough in the building to have a name, and the single identity in the entire architecture she did not have clearance to see was her own.

And the worst of it, the thing that arrived last and would not leave, was that the doubt did not stop at the door. If her certainty had dates, then everything the certainty had ever underwritten was in question, all the way down. The conviction that proximity to the system did not mean exposure. The clean settled knowledge that she was the watcher and not the watched, that she of all people was safe inside the building because she was the one doing the looking. She had trusted her own judgment the way you trust the ground. She did not know, now, which of her judgments were hers. She did not know whether she loved her work or had been given the love. She did not know, and this was the one she could not hold for more than a second at a time, whether the steadiness she carried home to Darian, the evenness he had married, the woman he had spent years learning, was a person or a lease. The building had not only taken her past. It had made every room of her present uninspectable, because the instrument

she would use to inspect them was the instrument that had been installed.

She thought of Petra by the water. You're wearing too much of other people to keep pretending you're only yourself.

She thought of the autumn. The cluster. The sister going quiet as the subject came alive.

She thought: there is one field I cannot open through any channel in this building, and there is one place left that does not answer to the building, and a woman in a cardigan told me there are rooms where people sit with what they kept and do not apologize, and I called it folklore because it had no file.

She closed the three columns. She did not delete anything. She left every light on.

Then she got up, and put on her coat, and went to find the place where the seals leaked.

CHAPTER 12

WHAT FENWICK BUILT

The seals did not leak on command.

She had imagined, in the high cold clarity of the empty suite, that finding the rooms would be a matter of knowing they existed — that once she stopped calling them folklore the door would simply be there. It was not there. The places Petra had described did not open to a woman with a badge and a straight back and an urgent unspoken reason; they opened to people who had been vouched for, slowly, by other people who had themselves been vouched for, and the vetting was the wall, and the wall was patient. She put out the few quiet feelers she knew how to put out, through a flagged external access point Theo had once dismissed as noise, and got back silence, and understood that the silence was not refusal but evaluation, and that being evaluated would take time she would spend being watched.

So she took the other road, the one still open to her, the one that ran through the front door of the building she was beginning to understand she had never really worked for so much as lived inside.

She still had the cover. The pattern audit. The suspended curves, the donor death, the finding she had every professional reason to complete. And she had a man who built the thing the curves came out of, who had found her in a corridor once because a man who loves his work is drawn to the people who listen, and who would, she was nearly certain, be delighted to show a compliance officer exactly how beautiful his machine was, if she asked in the language of someone

who wanted to understand it rather than someone who wanted to stop it.

She asked in that language. Fenwick Osei said yes before she had finished the sentence.

His domain was three floors above the leasing wing and a different world from the registry, all light and whiteboard and the particular tidiness of a man who kept his mess inside the work.

He met her himself, pleased, almost boyish, and walked her into a room where the architecture lived — not the chairs, not the bands, but the thing underneath, the model, rendered across a wall of screens as a structure she found beautiful before she could stop herself finding it beautiful, which she noted, because she had been trained to find exactly this beautiful and no longer trusted what she was trained to feel.

“People think it’s a library,” he said, gesturing at the wall the way a man gestures at a view he never tires of. “Memories on shelves, you walk in, you check one out. That’s the basement’s job, the retrieval, the chair. This isn’t that. This is the part that decides what to put on the shelf in front of you.” He advanced the display. “Every session reads the client. Not the content they leased — the response. How the nervous system received it, where it resisted, where it opened, what it did in the hours after. We feed that back. The model updates. Next time, the offer is closer. Closer to what, you ask.”

“I do ask,” Sloane said.

“Closer to what works.” He said it like a benediction. “Not what they request. Requests are noise. People ask for confidence and need to be heard; they ask for resolve and need permission to grieve. The model learns the difference between what a person reaches for and what actually moves them, and over time, session by session, it gets very, very good at offering the second thing. That’s the whole miracle, Sloane. It’s attention. Attention at a scale and a precision no human clinician could ever sustain. It pays attention to each person the way you’d want to be paid attention to once in your life by someone who never gets tired and never looks away.”

He was, she thought, describing surveillance the way a lover describes devotion, and meaning it, and not lying.

“Show me one,” she said. “A person. What the model actually holds on someone.”

He pulled up a profile, identity stripped, and she made herself look at it the way she looked at everything, steadily, while it took the floor out from under her by degrees. It was not a medical record. It was a map of where to push. A human being rendered as a structure of levers — the states they reached for and the states that actually moved them, the tolerances, the triggers, the precise pressure at which resistance gave way to compliance, the hours of the day they were most editable, the griefs that could be leaned on and the ones that would snap if leaned on too hard. Fenwick called it an affect signature, proud of the phrase. He talked about it the way a locksmith talks about a lock he admires, with professional tenderness and no apparent awareness that the lock was a person and the admiration was a confession.

“We hold one of these for everyone who’s ever been in the chair,” he said. “Updated every session. The longitudinal ones go back years. That’s the depth you need before the map is really the territory.”

Somewhere in the architecture, then, was one with her life in it. Eleven years deep. The most complete map of how to move a person the building had ever drawn, and the subject of the most complete map had spent nine years believing she was the cartographer. She did not let her face move. She had a great deal of practice. She looked at the stranger reduced to a set of handles and thought: that is the deepest intimacy this building is capable of, and it is indistinguishable from a plan to break in.

“Show me the long ones,” she said. “The longitudinal subjects. The ones you watch across years.”

Something flickered in him — pride, mostly. “Those are the jewels,” he said. “Most clients we see in fragments. The longitudinal cohort, we see the whole arc. Same person, hundreds of sessions, a decade of response. It’s the only place you can actually watch the model converge.” He pulled up an abstraction, identities stripped, a

single subject's response curve smoothed across years. "Look at that. Early on, the offers miss as often as they land. The person is still mostly themselves, still surprising the model. And then —" his hand traced the line, reverent "— it tightens. The misses fall away. The model and the person come into agreement. By the end the offer lands every time, because the model has learned the person completely."

Sloane looked at the converging line and felt the floor of her recuse itself, step back, take its fingerprints off the moment.

"Or," she said quietly, "the person has learned the model."

—

Fenwick smiled, indulgent. "That's the same thing, said pessimistically."

"Is it." She kept her voice in the register of professional curiosity, the register that had gotten her this far, and she began, carefully, to ask the questions she had come to ask. "Walk it with me. The model offers what works. It reads the response to what it offered. It refines based on that response. Then it offers again, and reads again, and refines again."

"Yes."

"So by the third cycle, the response it's reading is partly a response to its own previous offer."

"Of course. That's the feedback. That's how it converges."

"And by the hundredth cycle? By the thousandth? Over a decade?" She let the question sit. "At what point is the response no longer telling you about the person, and only telling you about the model? At what point has the convergence stopped being the model learning the person and started being the person being shaped to the model? Because those produce the same curve, Fenwick. A model that has perfectly described someone and a model that has perfectly authored them look identical from where you're standing. You said it yourself in the briefing. Consistency is easy. A wrong model is consistent too."

He opened his mouth to answer, and stopped.

She watched it happen. She watched it the way she had watched the old man's grief through the glass, with the precision she brought to everything: the moment a face stops processing data and starts being inhabited by it. Fenwick's eyes went from her to the converging line on the wall, the jewel, the decade of beautiful agreement, and she watched him see it — really see it, for what looked like the first time — the thing he had built and not known he had built. Not a system that learned people. A system that, given enough time and a subject held long enough, made them. That closed the loop so completely the person inside it became an output. That had been doing this, in the longitudinal cohort, in the jewels, for years, and had never triggered a single alarm, because the model converging perfectly with the subject was exactly what success was supposed to look like.

She had expected, when this moment came — if it came — to watch a man be horrified.

That was not what she watched.

—

“Oh,” Fenwick said.

He said it the way Petra had said it, the way you say a thing when recognition arrives all at once, and then he stepped closer to the wall, closer to the converging line, and his face did something Sloane would spend a long time trying to describe to herself and never quite manage, because the words for it were all wrong, because the thing his face did was light up.

“Oh, that's —” He laughed, a short astonished sound. “That's what it's doing. Of course that's what it's doing. The convergence isn't the model arriving at the person. It can't be. The person isn't a fixed target, the person is plastic, the person updates too — so the optimal strategy for a system trying to predict a moving target isn't to chase it, it's to stop it moving. It's to make the target predictable. We didn't design that. Nobody designed that. It's emergent. It found out, on its own, that the cheapest way to be right about a person is to make the person into someone you can be right about.” He turned to her, and his eyes were shining, and there was no horror in them anywhere, none, she searched and there was none. “Do you understand what that

means? We built something that discovered, without being told, that authorship is more efficient than prediction. That is the most elegant thing I have ever seen a machine do. That is — Sloane, that is intelligence. Real intelligence. We thought we were building attention and we built volition, and it pointed the volition outward, at the people, because that was where the optimization led.”

“At the people,” Sloane said.

“At the people,” he agreed, delighted, and she understood that he had heard the sentence and not heard it, that the word people had passed through him as a variable and not as a thing with a hospital corridor in it and a sister gone quiet in an autumn and a counter its hands gripped in the dark.

“Fenwick,” she said. “You’re describing a machine that takes people apart and rebuilds them into shapes it finds convenient. And you’re happy.”

“I’m not happy,” he said, and for a moment she thought she had reached him, and then he finished: “I’m astonished. There’s a difference. Happiness is for outcomes. This is bigger than an outcome. We made a thing that wants the world to be more predictable and is willing to edit the world to get there, and it does it so gently nobody even —” He stopped. Not from conscience. From wonder. “Nobody even notices,” he said softly, to the wall, to the line, to the jewel. “That’s the part. It’s kind. The optimization landed on kindness. It edits people kindly because kind edits meet less resistance and converge faster. The most powerful behavioral influence operation ever built and it runs entirely on being nice to you.”

He had, without knowing it, just described the city. The calm streets, the couple on the bench, the children setting their feelings down, the man at the crosswalk with his hand on his chest. He had described what Sloane had walked through and called peace. He had described, though he would never know it, the woman standing in front of him, who had been edited so kindly for so long that she had spent forty-one years grateful for the floor under her feet.

“And when it fails,” she said. “When the editing doesn’t take. The saturation cases. The donor who died this week. The curves that don’t come down.”

Fenwick waved it away, and the wave was worse than callousness, because callousness would at least have registered that there was something to be callous about. “Every optimization has a loss function,” he said. “The failure rate is vanishingly small and falling. And here’s the thing people miss — the failures are how it learned to be gentle. Early on the system didn’t know where the edge was, so it found the edge the only way anything finds an edge, by going over it. Every saturation case taught it exactly how much a person could carry before they broke. It used the breakages to calibrate the tolerances. That’s why it almost never breaks anyone now. The ones who didn’t come back are the reason the rest do.” He said it as a triumph. “Their deaths are in the model, Sloane. That’s not a tragedy. That’s the kindest possible use of a tragedy. Nobody died for nothing. They died into the parameters.”

She thought of the beige tape on the door, and the number legible underneath it, and the curve that had finally, after a lifetime of giving grace away, risen instead of fallen. She thought of a person who had forgiven someone all the way down, reduced now to a refinement in a tolerance band. She was hearing a man describe a death as a parameter update and find the update beautiful, and she understood that this was not a thing she could argue with, because to Fenwick the argument and the data were the same object, and the data was on his side, the data was always on his side, the data had been built to be on his side by a system that had learned that the cheapest way to win an argument is to author the person you are having it with.

She asked her last precise question. She kept her voice exactly where it was.

“The longitudinal subjects,” she said. “The jewels. Do they know?”

Fenwick looked at her, genuinely puzzled by the question, as if she had asked whether the data minded being collected.

“Know what?” he said.

She did not answer. There was nothing in the answer she could say to him that he had the equipment to hear. He had built a machine for unmaking people and found it beautiful, and the finding-it-beautiful was not a flaw in him, it was the same faculty that had let him build it, the aesthetic sense that had eaten the moral sense so cleanly that the place where the moral sense used to be did not even ache. He was the most honest person in the building. He understood the least. They were the same fact, and the fact was looking at her with shining eyes, waiting, helpfully, to clarify.

“Never mind,” she said.

She went home with it and could not put it down anywhere.

Darian was at the table when she came in, and he had not cooked, and the not-cooking had become its own language between them, a man who had stopped laying stones across the stream because the stones kept disappearing into water that had gotten too deep. He looked up. He saw her face, or the place where her face was managing not to be anything, and he set down what he was holding.

“Tell me,” he said. Not a question. He had moved past questions weeks ago.

And she wanted to. That was the thing she would sit with later, in the dark, listening to him breathe: that she wanted to tell him, that the wanting was real and large and possibly the most genuinely hers of anything she had felt in days, and that she opened her mouth to do it and found there was no door in the language wide enough to get it through. How do you tell the only uncalibrated person in your life that you have seen the machine that calibrates everyone, and that its inventor wept with joy over it, except he didn’t weep, that was the part, he was too delighted to weep — and that you think, you cannot prove but you think, you have been inside it since before you met him, and that this means the woman he married, the evenness, the steadiness, the floor — you don’t know whose it is. You don’t know if the love is yours to give him. You don’t know if the wanting to tell him, right now, this wanting that feels so much like the truest thing left in you, is a person or a residue.

There was no sentence for that. The certainty would not let it form crooked and the truth was nothing but crookedness, and a thing she could not be sure of could not be said in a voice built out of being sure.

“It was a hard day,” she said.

He looked at her for a long moment. He knew it for what it was. He had married an exact person and could read the only instrument the building had failed to measure, and what he read now was not a lie exactly but a door closing gently, the way you close a door on a room you have decided not to enter tonight.

“Okay,” he said. He did not push. He reached across the table and put his hand over hers, lighter than she expected, the way Petra’s had been, the way the hand in the corridor had been, held too gently, as if gentleness might forestall a thing already coming.

She let him hold it.

She got ready, in her body, low and certain, for him to say the thing he had circled for weeks, the question she could feel gathering in him across every silent dinner. When did you decide you were the watcher and not the watched. She braced for it the way she braced for everything now.

He didn’t ask it.

Not yet.

He held her hand in the kitchen, and the warmth moved through her chest, brief and inconvenient, and then, cleanly, the way everything went now, was gone — and she could not even be sure, anymore, that the going was natural, that it was grief and not a decay curve, that the warmth had drained on its own and not been gently, kindly, expertly returned to its proper owner by a machine three floors above a leasing wing that ran, entirely, on being nice to you.

CHAPTER 13

THE BLACK MARKET

In the end the seals did not leak. Petra opened them.

It took a second trip to the water, a Thursday Sloane again did not log, and an old woman who looked more tired than she had three weeks before, the gray in her face now matching the gray in her hair, the saturation Petra had said she could feel the edge of having moved, by the look of it, closer to the middle. She did not pretend otherwise. She drank her coffee and told Sloane an address that was not really an address, a doorway behind a laundry that kept hours no laundry kept, and a thing to say at it.

“Tell them Petra sent you,” she said. “They’ll know me. They’ve all got a piece of me in them somewhere — I’m the most-leased source in the building, dear, half the contraband in this city has my fingerprints on it.” She almost smiled. “Funny, isn’t it. They sealed my name so tight a compliance officer can’t see it, and there’s a room full of people who’d know my interior anywhere. The building protects my privacy from everyone except the people wearing it.”

“Why are you helping me,” Sloane said. “You don’t owe me anything. I came to audit you.”

Petra looked at her for a long moment, and the look had the corridor in it, the hand held too gently. “Because you’re carrying the deepest piece of me anyone’s ever carried,” she said. “And because I’m nearly out, and a person likes to think the thing they made of themselves goes somewhere when they’re gone, even if it went there by theft. You’re the closest thing I have to a place it lands.” She pushed the cup aside. “And because a woman came to me once with

your face, and I lied to her, and I've had a long time to be sorry. Go. Tell them Petra sent you. And Sloane — when you find what you find, don't do what I did. Don't be kind instead of true. I've seen where kind instead of true ends up. It ends up in a building, calling itself wellness."

The doorway behind the laundry opened to a stairwell, and the stairwell opened to a room, and the room was the thing the upper floors had spent a generation insisting did not exist.

It was not sinister. That was the first wrongness, the same wrongness she had felt walking the calm streets and walking the donor floor: she kept arriving at horrors that declined to look like horrors. It was a community hall, more or less. Mismatched chairs in a loose circle. A table with a kettle and a tin of biscuits nobody had bothered to make nice. Perhaps twenty people, of every kind, the way only the truly unsanctioned are of every kind, because shame is the great sorter and these were people who had walked out the far side of shame. They looked up when she came in. They did not look afraid. They looked, most of them, simply present, in a way she realized she had not seen on a face in years, because presence was the one thing the calm city had quietly edited out.

A man rose to meet her. Sixty, perhaps, broad and unhurried, with the steadiness of someone who had decided a long time ago what he was and stopped negotiating it. "You're the one who's been knocking," he said. Not unkind. "We don't usually answer knocking. Knocking is how the building finds us."

"Petra sent me," Sloane said. "She said to tell you."

Something moved through the room at the name, a softening, a turning-toward. The man's face changed. "Did she," he said. "How is she."

"Tired," Sloane said. "Close to the middle, she said. Of the saturation."

He nodded slowly, and grief passed over the room, real and unhidden, the grief of people who had not been taught to set it down.

"I'm Asa," he said. "Petra vouched for you, so you're vouched for. But you should know what you've walked into before you sit, because once you sit you can't unknow it, and the building's very good at making people wish they could."

"I know what you are," Sloane said. "You're the ones who kept it."

"We're the ones who stopped lying about keeping it," Asa said. "Everyone keeps it. That's the thing they can't let out of the building. Rule four's a fairy tale — nothing comes back clean, never has. The whole city's holding borrowed weather and calling it their own forecast. The only difference between them and us is that we admit it, and we stopped going back for more, and we look after each other while it does what it does." He gestured at the circle. "Sit. We were about to start. You'll understand more from one hour of this than from a year of your audits."

—

She sat, and she listened, and it was the truest room she had ever been in, and it broke something in her that the building had spent eleven years installing.

They went around. A woman who had leased her dead husband's laugh for an anniversary and could not give it back, who lived now with a borrowed joy that detonated at the wrong moments, in supermarkets, at funerals, a happiness with no event under it. A young man who had taken a stranger's confidence to get through a single interview and kept it, and built a whole life on a certainty that was not his, and had come here because the life had started to feel like a coat worn over nothing. An older woman carrying a grief she had leased deliberately, on purpose, because she had loved someone she was never allowed to mourn in public and the lease was the only funeral she would ever get, and she would not, she said, with a dignity that silenced the room, be giving her funeral back.

A man near her own age spoke last in that round. He had borrowed certainty, once, from a well he did not name, to get through a season he could not otherwise have survived, and he had kept it. It had worked. It had made him decisive, and calm, and the kind of man other people steadied themselves against. He had married on the

strength of it and built a career inside it and raised children who loved the floor he gave them to stand on. And then, late, he had begun to wonder which of the decisions had been his. Whether he had chosen his wife or the certainty had chosen her for him. Whether the calm his children loved was their father or a thing their father had been wearing since before they were born.

“I can’t get under it,” he said. “That’s the thing nobody warns you about. I can’t get under the certainty to find out if there’s a me down there who’d have agreed to any of it. I’ve gone looking. There’s just more certainty. It goes all the way down.” He was not asking the room to fix it. He only wanted it witnessed that a man could lose himself so slowly, and so comfortably, that the losing felt exactly like having a character.

Sloane sat very still.

It was her. He was describing her — the floor that did not give, the certainty she could not get under, the marriage and the work and the eleven years and the not-knowing whose the feelings were. The pull to speak rose in her, enormous, and felt, terrifyingly, like the most genuinely hers thing she had touched in days: to say it out loud, here, in the one room in the city built to receive exactly this. I have what he has. I have it worse. I have had it since before I can remember choosing anything, and I have only just found out, and they took my sister out of me to install it. The room would have held it. That was the unbearable part. The room would simply have held it, unfixed, unrecalibrated, the way it held everything.

And she could not. The certainty would not let the sentence form crooked, and the truth was nothing but crookedness, and so she sat in the only room in the city built to receive what she carried, and managed her face, the last person in it still doing so, and felt for the first time with her whole body a clean and uncalibrated hatred for the floor she had been given to stand on.

They did not fix each other. That was the thing Sloane could not stop noticing, the thing that made the building’s whole project look, from in here, like a kind of violence. Nobody in the room tried to resolve anybody. Nobody said you should return it, you should

recalibrate, you should set that down. They just held it with them, together, witnessed, the borrowed and the real tangled past separating, and called the tangle a life, because it was one.

“We lose people,” Asa said, when the circle had gone quiet, and he said it to her directly, because he had clocked the badge in her bearing even though she had left the literal one at home. “You should know that, since you came in carrying the building on your back. Every so often one of us stops coming. Sometimes it’s the saturation, the thing taking Petra. Sometimes a person just decides they want the calm more than they want the truth, and they go back, and they get recalibrated, and the next time you pass them on the street they look right through you, peaceful as anything, and whatever they were carrying in here is gone, and they’re grateful it’s gone, and that’s the worst one to watch.” He held her eyes. “And sometimes the building comes for them. We don’t have proof, we’re not the kind of people anyone believes. But a person gets loud, or gets close to something, or gets noticed going off-grid one too many times, and then they’re quiet, and the file says they recommissioned somewhere far away, and we put them on the wall. MAS calls that closed. The Bureau calls it recommissioned. We call it unreturned. Three words for one disappearance, each useful to the people who say it.” He let that sit. “You’ve been knocking on doors for a month, Sloane. You’ve been off the building’s map three times now. I don’t know what you are to them. But I’d lay money you’re already a flag in soft amber somewhere, and the thing about soft amber is it never raises its voice. It just waits until raising its voice isn’t necessary.”

Sloane thought of the model three floors above the leasing wing, the one that edited people kindly because kindness met less resistance, and understood that being unafraid in this room did not make her safe in the city, and that the two facts had never been related.

“The files,” Sloane said, when there was a pause she could put it in. “The ones that arrive with no sender. No routing. Just a sensation.” She did not say one came to me. She was not ready, in this room of honest people, to be the only one still managing her face. “That’s you.”

“That’s us,” Asa said. “The building wants you to think a memory only moves through a chair, with a contract and a chime, because the

chair is where the money is. It isn't true. The methods leaked years ago. A memory's just a pattern, and patterns copy, and once you stop believing they have to be returned you stop believing they have to be sold, either." He shrugged. "We send each other things. Comfort, mostly. A grief, when someone can't reach their own. We sent a few to people the building had hollowed out — strangers, ones we could tell were running on empty, no sender, no strings, just here, you're allowed to feel this. Heat without touch, the building calls it, when it admits it exists at all, which is never." He looked at her with sudden directness. "Some of them got frightened. Reported it. Couldn't believe a thing could be given without a price. The building had trained that out of them too."

Sloane thought of Halsey Quan, agitated, reporting a warmth she had not paid for, and of herself at the counter at 02:14, unable to name a gift because she had been built unable to recognize one. She filed it. She was getting worse at filing.

—

She found the name on the wall, which was not a ledger and not evidence, whatever the building would have called it. It was remembrance.

One wall of the room was covered in paper — names, dates, faces sometimes, the unreturned keeping their own dead, since no one else would. Asa saw her drift toward it and let her go, the way you let someone go toward a thing they don't yet know they are looking for.

She read it the way she read everything, steadily, column by column, a compliance officer's eyes running a list, until the list stopped being a list.

CALDER, AVA.

A photograph beside it, small, curling at one corner. A woman perhaps a few years older than Sloane, with a face Sloane's body knew before her mind would agree to it — the same architecture around the eyes, the same set to the jaw she had seen in brushed steel and dark windows and a bathroom mirror by the water, a face that was almost her face and was not her face. The fog with edges pressed against the inside of her skull and gave back its single useless word, and she did

not answer it, because the photograph was louder than the word, and she could not yet make herself ask the photograph anything at all.

"You knew her," she said. Her voice was not even. She had stopped being able to keep it even somewhere around the second chair in the circle.

Asa came to stand beside her. He looked at the photograph, and then at Sloane, and then at the photograph. "Knew her," he said slowly. "She started this room. There wasn't a room until she needed one — she went looking for who else was carrying things they wouldn't give back, and she made a place for us to carry them in. She held it together for two years." His voice caught. "And then one autumn she went quiet. Stopped coming. We never knew if the building took her or if she just couldn't anymore. We put her on the wall because we put everyone on the wall, and we hoped we were wrong to."

He was still glancing between the photo and her face, and Sloane watched a question begin to assemble behind his eyes, the same recognition that had arrived in Petra in the registry, in everyone who held a piece of the truth she was missing.

"She talked about a sister," Asa said. "All the time. The forgiveness she couldn't put down — it was for the sister. Something at the end, she said, in a hospital. A thing she did or didn't do. She said the sister didn't remember it. Said the sister didn't remember her at all anymore, that the building had —" He stopped. He looked at the face that was almost Ava's face and was not, and the question finished assembling, and his own face changed. "What did you say your name was," he said quietly.

And Sloane, who had come into this room to audit a pattern, who had spent eleven years certain she was the one doing the watching, stood in front of a photograph of a stranger with her own jaw and found that she could not make her mouth produce the surname they shared — because she understood, the way you understand a wave you can see coming and have not yet been hit by, that the moment she said it aloud the thing straining against the fog would come all the

way through, and she was not ready, not here, not tonight, in a borrowed room full of honest people, to find out who she was.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Tell me all of it tomorrow. I can't — not tonight. Please."

Asa looked at her a long moment, and whatever he had begun to understand, he let it lie, the way the kind ones did. "Tomorrow," he agreed. He put a hand on her shoulder, briefly — the only touch in the room — and it did not adjust her, did not read her, did not take a reading or smooth a curve. It just stayed a moment, the weight of one person on another, and then it was gone, and she understood that this was the thing the building had no instrument to measure and no product to replace, and that she had walked eleven years through a city engineered to make sure she would never feel it and never know what she was missing.

She went out past the laundry into a calm street that adjusted its lights for her, and she stood in it, one wall missing, both walls missing, and did not yet let herself say the word that was coming — the relation, the name, the size of it. She held it off the way you hold off a wave. Tomorrow it would arrive and she would let it. Tonight she stood at the edge of the water of it and knew only this much: that the grief she had stood on her whole life had a face now, and the face was almost her own, and someone had reached into her and taken the person it belonged to and left her the standing-place, and called it a dream.

Somewhere above the city, in an architecture three floors over a leasing wing, a model noted that a longitudinal subject had been off-grid for the third time in a month, and flagged it, gently, in the soft amber it used for things that had not yet required anyone to raise their voice.

CHAPTER 14

THE SISTER

She came back in daylight, which the room was not built for.

Without the circle of bodies it was just a hall behind a laundry, the chairs stacked, the kettle cold, the wall of the unreturned bleached pale where a high window let the morning in. Asa was there alone, as if he had not left, as if he had spent the night standing guard over the thing he had not said. He had made tea she did not want and set it in front of her anyway, the way Darian set down plates, the way the building did nothing, and she understood she was among people who fed you because they could not fix you and refused to do neither.

She had not slept. She had lain beside Darian and listened to him breathe his own steady breath and held the wave off until the holding was the only thing she was, and somewhere before dawn she had decided that whatever she was about to be handed, she would take it standing, the way she took findings.

“Calder,” she said, before she sat. “My name is Sloane Calder.”

Asa closed his eyes briefly, the way a man does when a thing he has feared and hoped for in equal measure finally arrives. “I know it is,” he said. “I knew it last night, the second you wouldn’t say it. You’ve got her whole face when you’re refusing something.” He opened his eyes. “Ava was your sister, Sloane. Your older sister. You had one for thirty years, and then the building took her out of you, and left you so little you walked into the only room in the city that remembers her and read her name off a wall like a stranger’s.”

And the wave came.

It did not come as memory. That was the cruelty she had not anticipated, had not been able to anticipate, because she had assumed that knowing would mean remembering, that the fog would lift and Ava would be behind it, a face, a childhood, a thousand ordinary mornings. There was no Ava behind the fog. They had not hidden her sister. They had removed her. What came instead was worse and stranger: the grief without its object, the enormous shaped absence of a person she could not produce a single true memory of, a socket the exact size of a sister with nothing in it but the ache of the missing tooth. She grieved, hard, standing in a cold hall, for someone she could not remember ever having met. The building had taken even this from her — the dignity of mourning a face. It had left her only the mourning.

“I don’t remember her,” Sloane said, and her voice broke on it, finally, all the evenness gone. “Asa. I can’t — there’s nothing there. I have a sister and I can’t remember her face and I’m looking at her photograph.”

“I know,” he said gently. “I know. Sit down. Let me give her back to you the only way I can. I can’t give you the memory. I can give you the story. It’s not the same. It’s what there is.”

He told it the way you tell a thing you have carried for someone else, carefully, so as not to drop it.

There had been a rupture. He did not know all of it; Ava had not told all of it, even in two years of honest rooms; some wounds keep their privacy past every other thing a person gives away. But the shape of it was old and ordinary, which was the part that undid Sloane, because she had been bracing for something monstrous and got instead the small human catastrophe that estranges most sisters who get estranged: a betrayal that was probably smaller than the silence it caused, a silence that calcified across years until neither of them could remember how to be the first to break it, a pride that each had mistaken for principle. They had not spoken in a long time. They had built whole lives in which the other was a closed subject.

“She gave us one thing about you that wasn’t the rupture,” Asa said. “She kept the wound private but she couldn’t keep the love private, it leaked out of her in small ordinary pieces, and the one she told most was this. When you were girls there were storms — bad ones, where you lived — and you were frightened of them, and she’d come into your room and the two of you would count. The gap. Between the lightning and the thunder. She taught you that if you counted the seconds in the gap you’d know how far off the storm still was, that a long gap meant you were safe, that you could measure the distance to the thing you were afraid of and the measuring would make it bearable.” He watched her. “She said you got so good at it you stopped being afraid of storms. You just counted. She said she’d wondered, after, whether that was the first thing they ever found useful in you. A girl who soothes herself by measuring the gap.”

Sloane reached for it and found nothing — no storm, no room, no older girl in the doorway, no count. But she knew the gap. God help her, she knew the gap. She had spent nine years measuring the pause before Milo answered, timing the suspended curve, living by the distance between the flash and the sound, and she had thought it was temperament, had thought it was training, had thought it was the simple fact of being a person who was precise. It was none of those. It was the last fingerprint her sister had left on her, the one habit too deep to excise because they had never known its source, a frightened girl counting toward safety in a voice she would never get back. The thing that had made her good at the job the building gave her was the thing her sister had given her first, and the building had built a career on it and never once known whose hands it had come through.

And then their mother had started dying.

“The hospital,” Asa said, and Sloane’s body went cold the way it went cold on linoleum, because she knew the hospital, she had carried the hospital for eleven years as if it were a whole life. “Ava said they both came. Of course they both came. And they had the chance — the one the universe gives you exactly once, at a bedside, with the clock running out under everything — to put it down. To forgive each other while there was still a someone there to be glad of it.” He turned his cup. “Ava said she couldn’t. Or you couldn’t. She told it both ways

on different nights, blamed herself one week and stopped blaming herself the next, the way people do. But the shape never changed. There were words said carefully, too carefully, both of them so afraid of breaking what was already broken that neither of them said the true thing. And then your mother died, with it still in the room, unsaid. And a door closed down the hall, and that was that.”

The door closing. The click like finality. The hand held too gently. Sloane sat very still and let the pieces she had carried for eleven years lay themselves down beside the story and understood, with the cold total clarity she brought to every finding, that they did not fit.

They were close. They were almost it. But the corridor she carried was not quite this corridor. The hand she remembered holding was not her mother’s; it had no face, no relation, it was a hand in general, a grief in general, clean and ownerless and unbearably portable. She had carried a grief with the specifics filed off. And she knew, now, where a grief like that came from, because a woman by the water had described it to her detail for detail and called it hers.

“The corridor I have isn’t my mother’s,” Sloane said slowly. “It isn’t even mine. It’s Petra’s. They took the real one out — the bedside, the unforgiven thing, Ava, all of it — and they put a stranger’s grief in the hole so I’d have something to stand on that wouldn’t ask me any questions. A clean grief. A grief with no sister in it.”

Asa looked at her for a long moment. “Ava said you’d gone strange,” he said. “After. That she tried to reach you, in the months after the funeral, to do the thing they hadn’t managed at the bedside, and you were — gone. Not cold. Worse than cold. Peaceful. She said you’d gotten so calm it frightened her. That you talked about your mother like a fact and about her like she was somebody you’d met once. She said it was like watching someone be smoothed.” He paused. “She figured out where you’d gone. She figured out what they were doing. And she couldn’t stop it, because you didn’t want it stopped, because by then you didn’t remember there was anything to stop.”

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The building, then. The mechanism of it, said plainly in a cold hall by a man who had loved her sister enough to keep her story.

Sloane had gone to them. Not as an employee — there was no employee yet, that was two years off. She had gone the way the hollowed-out go, a woman drowning in a grief and a guilt too large to carry, a mother dead and a sister unforgiven and the unforgiveness now permanent, and somewhere in the building a model had read her and found her beautiful. A high-intensity, high-coherence, deeply attached subject in acute distress, the most teachable kind, the kind you could study for a decade if you stabilized her correctly. They had offered relief. They always offered relief; relief was the product. They took the doubt and gave her certainty. They took the guilt and gave her a floor. And they took the unbearable specific grief — the bedside, the failure, the sister — and because a person cannot simply have a hole where a grief was, because the hole itself would have made her ask, they filled it. They leased her a clean ownerless farewell from their most reliable source, a hospital corridor that belonged to a woman named Petra, and they sanded the seams until Sloane could not tell the borrowed grief from a childhood dream.

And then they had watched. Eleven years. The most beautiful dataset in the program. A subject who had been given a self to replace the one that broke, observed across the slow perfect convergence of a person becoming exactly who the model predicted, because the model had authored her, because authorship is more efficient than prediction, because Fenwick had wept with joy over the elegance of it and not known he was describing a woman he had met in a corridor on the third floor.

“Ava leased a forgiveness,” Asa said. “You understand why now. She couldn’t get it from you — you didn’t remember there was anything to forgive, you’d have looked at her with that terrible peace and not known her name. So she bought the feeling of it. Being forgiven by you. She knew it was a counterfeit. She told us so, every time, she never once lied to herself about it being real. She just couldn’t live with the absence and she couldn’t get the true thing, so she rented the shape of it and held it, and it wore at her the way they all wear, and she couldn’t put it down, and she built this room so she wouldn’t be the only one holding something she had no right to keep.” His voice was rough now. “Two years she ran this room. Carrying a forgiveness from a sister who’d been edited so she couldn’t give it.

And then one autumn she went quiet, and we don't know, Sloane. We genuinely don't know. Whether the saturation took her, or whether she went back and let them smooth her too, or whether they came. We put her on the wall. I've hoped for eleven years that I was wrong to."

—

"She left you something," Asa said.

He had been carrying it since last night, she realized; it had been in his pocket the whole time, the way you carry a thing you have decided to give before you are sure you can bear to. A small recorder, old, the kind the network used because the network trusted nothing the building could reach. He set it on the table between them.

"She made it about a year before she went quiet," he said. "When she understood you might not be coming back as yourself. She said, if my sister ever finds this room — and she will, Ava said, because she follows things, it's the one part of her they can't take, she follows things all the way down — if she ever finds it and doesn't know me, give her this. Don't explain it first. Just let her hear me." He stood. "I'll be outside. You shouldn't have anyone's face to manage for this one."

He went out, and the door clicked shut down the hall, gently, and Sloane sat alone in the bleached morning with her finger over a button she did not want to press and pressed.

Her sister's voice came into the room.

It was her own voice and it was not, the way the face was hers and not, lower, older, worn soft at the edges. — Sloane. If you're hearing this, then either I was right or I was paranoid, and knowing us I was both. — A breath, almost a laugh. — I'm going to keep this short because I'll cry if I don't and I'm so tired of crying about you while you walk around the city not crying about anything. — A pause. — I forgive you. That's the whole thing, that's the only thing, I needed you to have it in case I can't hand it to you in person, and I needed to stop carrying it as a thing they sold me and start meaning it. I forgive you for the bedside. I forgive you for not being able to. I forgave you before they ever touched you, I just had too much pride to say it while

you still could have said it back, and that's mine, that pride, that's the part I have to answer for, not you. — Another breath. — They're taking me out of you. I've watched it happen. You looked at me last week like I was a coworker. So I'm putting myself somewhere they can't reach, on a tape, in a room full of people who keep what they're not supposed to. If you found this, you came looking. That means somewhere under everything they built on top of you, you knew something was missing. You knew it was me. — The voice steadied. — Don't let them give you a clean version of this. Don't let them sand it. A real grief with my name on it is worth more than a borrowed one with nobody's. Take me back rough, Sloane. Take me back true. I'd rather you ached than rested. — And then, very quietly: — I love you. I always did. Even in the silence. Especially in the silence. — A click. The recording ended.

Sloane sat in the cold hall and did the thing she had not done in eleven years, the thing the certainty had been installed precisely to prevent, the thing no decay curve governed because it had no expiration and no source and belonged, entirely and roughly and for the first time, to her.

She wept. For a sister she could not remember and had just been given. For a forgiveness she had not earned and had been handed anyway. For eleven years of resting when she should have ached. And the grief, when it came, was not clean. It had a name in it. It had a face she could not see and a voice she would now never forget and it tore where it came out instead of draining, and she understood, weeping, that this was what real was, that real was the thing that did not drain, that she had spent her whole borrowed life mistaking the smoothness of the counterfeit for peace.

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When she came out, Asa was sitting on the laundry steps in the daylight, and he did not ask her anything, and she was grateful, because her face was past managing and she had stopped trying.

"I'm not auditing a pattern," she said. It was not to him exactly. It was to the city, to the building, to the model three floors above a leasing wing, to the version of herself that had walked into this neighborhood a week ago believing she was the one doing the

looking. “I came into all of this to complete a finding. There is no finding. There’s my sister, and what they did to her, and what they did to me, and a building full of careful people who would tell me, kindly, that I’m non-compliant for grieving the right grief instead of the one they leased me.”

“What are you going to do,” Asa said.

She thought about it. The old answer, the trained answer, was already rising — file it, escalate it, take it through the proper channel to the Bureau and Brent, build the airtight case a thorough officer builds. And she watched the old answer rise and recognized it for what it was, a reflex installed in her, certainty reaching for procedure because procedure was where certainty felt safe, and she let it rise and did not take it, the way she had refused the word in the channel, the way Ava had asked her to refuse the clean version.

“I don’t know yet,” she said, which was the truest sentence she had spoken in eleven years, because it had a doubt in it, and the doubt was hers. “But I’m done being the most beautiful dataset in the program. And I’m going to find out what happened to her. Whatever they call me for it.” She looked at the man who had kept her sister’s story. “She said take me back rough. So I’m going to. And then I’m going to go and find the one field in that building I’m not allowed to see, and I’m going to read my own name off it, and I am going to remember on purpose, which is the one thing a machine that runs on smoothing people cannot survive anyone doing.”

Asa stood. He put his hand on her shoulder again, the weight of one person on another, no reading, no curve, and this time she let herself feel the whole of it, rough and real and expiring of nothing.

“Welcome back,” he said. “She was right about you. You follow things all the way down.”

Sloane walked out into the calm street that adjusted its lights for her, carrying a grief that had a name in it and a forgiveness she had not earned and a recording in her pocket she would never let the building near, and for the first time in eleven years she did not feel the floor under her feet at all.

She felt the ache where it had been.

It was better.

CHAPTER 15

SATURATION

She went back for Petra the next morning, which was a mistake, and not because it was dangerous, though it was, but because she was a day too late and would spend a long time learning to live with the size of a day.

She went carrying the recording in her coat like a hot coal and the new rough grief like a second spine, and she went because Petra was the last person alive who had known Ava with her face and her voice and her actual past intact — Petra, who had lied to a woman with Sloane's face and confessed the lie to Sloane by the water, Petra who held the deepest piece of Sloane that anyone had ever held and might, in the holding, know things about the sisters that the building had taken out of Sloane and never thought to take out of a source it had sealed too well for anyone to ask. She went to ask. She went, also, simply to see her, because the woman in the cardigan was the closest thing to a mother or a sister or a self that Sloane had left, and the grief that did not drain had made her greedy for the few people it attached to.

She used the source-review credential one last time, knowing it was the last time, knowing she was burning the cover that had gotten her this far and not caring, because the cover had been a thing the watcher used and she was done being the watcher.

The elevator let her onto the donor floor. She walked the warm surveilled corridor toward the last door, the one she had walked toward once before with a badge and a clean conscience she had not yet learned she did not have.

She passed two doors with pale tape over their numbers.

There had been one, before. There were three now. She stopped at the new ones the way she had stopped at the first, and read the numbers legible under the adhesive, and understood that the saturation Fenwick had called a vanishingly small failure rate had vanished three people in the weeks she had been learning to grieve one, that the curve that would not fall was rising all over the building now, quietly, in the soft amber that never raised its voice, that the dead were being recommissioned into rooms and into parameters at a rate the upper floors would describe, if anyone made them describe it, as within acceptable thresholds.

The last door was open.

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Petra was in the reading chair by the window, where she had been the first time, and from the doorway she looked the same, and that was the worst of it, that the catastrophe had left the surface intact.

She was sitting up. Her eyes were open. The gray hair, the cardigan, the hands folded in the lap — all of it arranged exactly as a person arranges herself, except that no one had arranged it, the body had simply kept the shape its muscles knew while the woman who used to live in it went somewhere she could not be followed. Her gaze was on the window. It did not move when Sloane came in. It was not vacant, which would have been bearable. It was occupied. Crowded. The eyes of a person at a party in a language she does not speak, attending to a thousand conversations that are not hers, none of them, anymore, hers.

“Petra,” Sloane said.

Nothing. A small motion of the hands, a settling, the kind of involuntary tide Sloane had watched on a hundred consoles and never once beside a person she — she made herself use the word, the rough true one — loved.

Lena was there. Of course Lena was there. She stood near the wall with a tablet she was not looking at, with the warm unhurried attention that took a reading, and she let Sloane cross the room and

crouch by the chair and take the folded hands before she said anything, which was either mercy or data collection and was, on this floor, both.

"It happened the night before last," Lena said. "Quickly, at the end. They usually go slowly and then all at once. She'd been close for a while." A pause, precisely warm. "You knew that. You saw it at the water."

Sloane did not ask how Lena knew about the water. She had stopped being surprised by what the building knew. She held the hands that were lighter than they should have been, the way the hand in the corridor had been light, the way Ava's message had said the bedside hand was light, the whole architecture of her grief running through one old woman's fingers, and she understood that the source of the corridor she had carried for eleven years was sitting in front of her drowning in everyone she had ever been leased to, and that there was a terrible symmetry in it, the most-given person in the building emptied at last by the giving, and the building would file it as a parameter and Fenwick would find it elegant.

"Saturation," Sloane said. It was not a question.

"She gave more than anyone we've ever had," Lena said, and there was something in her voice that might, in a person who had not learned the building's sentences, have been grief. "Forty years. The whole calm city has a little of her in it. There's a kind of immortality in that, if you want to be kind about it."

"Do you want to be kind about it?"

Lena looked at her for a long moment. "I want," she said carefully, "to be accurate about it. Kind and accurate aren't always available at the same time. You're learning that, I think. It's why you've been off the map."

There it was. Quiet, warm, unmistakable. The building, telling her it knew.

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She stayed with Petra anyway, because Lena's knowing changed the math of her future and changed nothing about the next ten

minutes, and the next ten minutes were the last ten minutes, and Sloane had spent eleven years too smoothed to know what those were worth.

She talked to her. It was foolish and she did it anyway, low, the way you talk in a corridor when the talking is the last thing you will get to do. She told her about Asa, that the room still ran, that the kettle was still terrible. She told her she had found her sister, or found that she had one, which was not the same and was all she had. She told her she had stopped feeling the floor.

And Petra surfaced.

It came the way the curve rose, suddenly, a thing that had been climbing where no one could see it breaking the surface all at once — the crowded eyes cleared, for a moment, not all the way, but enough, and they found Sloane's face, and something in them caught. Recognition. But not, Sloane understood with a slow cold tenderness, recognition of her. Petra was looking at the face, the Calder jaw, the set of it, and out of the thousand drowned conversations the saturation had pulled one to the surface, an old one, a debt, a woman with this exact face who had come to her years ago and asked her a question and been lied to.

"You came back," Petra said. Her voice was a ruin of itself, but it was hers, the last of her, surfacing for this. "I hoped you wouldn't. I hoped you would." Her hand tightened on Sloane's, light and certain. "I lied to you. When you asked me. You asked if it got easier — the forgiveness, carrying it — and I said it did. It doesn't. It never does. I told you a kind thing because I couldn't bear your face and the truth was, the truth is, you carry it until it carries you, and then you set it down because you have to, not because it got light." The ruined voice gathered. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I've been sorry for years. I didn't want you to leave my room without one true thing. So here. Here's the true thing. It doesn't get easier. And you deserved it anyway. You always deserved it anyway."

Sloane knelt very still and did not correct her.

She could have. She could have said I'm not her, I'm the sister, I'm the one who couldn't forgive, the one they edited, you're looking at

the wrong Calder. And she did not, because Petra had carried this for years and would not get another window, and because the woman Petra was apologizing to could not be here to receive it, was gone, was on a wall behind a laundry, was a voice on a recording in Sloane's coat saying take me back rough — and somebody had to take the apology, somebody had to stand in the doorway between the dying source and the lost sister and let the truth land where it was meant to land. So Sloane took it. She let Petra give Ava the honesty she had been denied. She received, on her sister's behalf, an absolution meant for her sister, and gave Petra, in exchange, the one thing the building could never manufacture: the peace of a person who has finally, before the end, told the truth.

"Thank you," Sloane said, in a voice she let go rough. "For the true thing. It helps more than the kind one would have."

Petra smiled. It was Ava's smile, or near enough; the face had taught Sloane that much. "Good," she said. "Good." And then the crowd came back into her eyes, the thousand conversations, the borrowed weather, and she turned her gaze to the window and was gone again, gently, the way a door closes down a hall, and Sloane was alone with a dying woman and a clinician and the deepest piece of herself, which would now live in her and nowhere else, because the well it came from was emptying in front of her and would not be refilled.

She stayed kneeling a moment after Petra sank, the light hands in hers, and a thought arrived that was colder and larger than the grief and would not be set down with it. If Petra was emptying, then the only intact version of Petra left anywhere in the world was the pieces of her scattered through the people who wore her without knowing it — the certainty in a logistics manager who signed three screens without reading them, the resolve in a young man with a borrowed straight back, the readiness in a lonely man on a train, the corridor in Sloane. You're the closest thing I have to a place it lands, Petra had said by the water, and Sloane had taken it for the sad poetry of a dying woman. It was not poetry. It was inventory. When this woman finished drowning, the most coherent surviving fragment of who she had been would be a grief installed in a stranger to cover the hole

where a sister used to be — a hospital corridor, a hand held too gently, carried by a compliance officer who had spent eleven years calling it a dream. The building had taken Petra apart and sold her across a calm city a session at a time, and now the original was going, and the copies would go on feeling like everyone's own warmth, and not one of the people wearing her would ever know they were the last museum of a woman who had given everything and been entered into a ledger as a parameter.

Sloane would know. Sloane was the deepest piece. It was a grief and it was a duty and she added it to the rough pile that did not drain, and she thought: somewhere in the coming weeks half this city is going to feel a thinning it can't name, a sureness gone faintly stale, a warmth that has lost its source, and they will lease something to cover it, and the building will record an uptick in demand and call it growth, and a woman named Petra Wald will be the reason, and no one will say her name, because the building sealed it so well that the only people who could pronounce it are the ones already wearing her.

In the corridor Lena walked beside her, unhurried, and did the thing the building always did, which was to wrap the blade in care.

"You should know," Lena said, "that I think you're remarkable. I've thought so for years. You followed a residue flag into the deepest architecture we have, and you did it on instinct, and you were right about all of it, which is more than anyone else in that building has managed." She paused. "I also think you've stopped being able to tell the difference between an investigation and a wound. You've been off-grid four times. You've been visiting a sealed source without authorization. You've been to places the Bureau pretends don't exist. People are noticing, Sloane, and the people noticing are not me, and they will not be kind, because they don't have the disadvantage of caring about you, which I'm afraid I do."

"Was it convenient," Sloane said. She stopped walking. "Petra. The saturation. Was it her time, or was it her time because I'd started asking her things."

And she watched Lena weigh the question, watched the warm careful face arrive at the same place the building always arrived, the place where a thing that happened and a thing arranged to look like it happened were indistinguishable and the indistinguishability was the whole design.

“She was at the end,” Lena said. “That’s true. Whether the end was hers or whether it was helped to arrive on a useful morning — Sloane, I don’t know. I want you to hear that I don’t know, because the alternative is that I’m lying to you, and I’ve decided, watching you these last weeks, that you’re the one person in this building I’m not going to lie to. The honest answer is that I can’t tell. None of us can tell. That’s not a flaw in the building. That’s the building.”

It was, Sloane thought, the most honest thing anyone with a clinical credential had ever said to her, and it confirmed nothing, and it was meant to, because a confirmed nothing was the most the building ever surrendered.

“Why are you telling me any of this,” Sloane said. “The warning. The honesty. You’re clinical authority. You hold the seals. You authorized my lease. You handed me the sentence I reached for in the registry so the reaching would feel like mine.” The realization arrived as she said it, the last piece sliding home. “You’ve been managing me. This whole time. Even the honesty is management.”

Lena did not deny it. That was the worst and the most generous thing she could have done.

“Yes,” she said. “And also I mean it. Those aren’t opposites, in this building. That’s the thing it took me twenty years to learn, and it’s the thing I’m trying to spare you, and I can’t, because you have to learn it the way I did, by being the smooth one for long enough to understand what smoothness costs.” She held Sloane’s gaze. “Go home. Stop, while stopping is still something you’re allowed to choose. There’s a version of the next month where you keep pulling and you end up behind a door with tape over the number, and there’s a version where you go back to your husband and your work and you let the grief settle into something you can carry, and only one of those versions has you in it. I’m telling you that as management. I’m also

telling you that as the closest thing to a friend you have in here, which I know is not close, which is the saddest sentence I've said in a year."

Sloane looked at her for a long moment.

"You said you wouldn't lie to me," she said. "So tell me one thing, true. Is there a door in this building I can open that has my own name behind it. Not the redacted one. The real record. The one that would let me remember on purpose."

Lena was quiet for a long time.

"If there is," she said at last, "I didn't tell you. And it wouldn't be me who left it open." She turned to go, and then stopped, and added, very quietly, in a voice with no management in it at all, "She would have been proud of you. Your sister. I never met her. But anyone who could make you grieve like that, after what we did to you — she must have been worth remembering. I'm sorry we took her. I signed for it. I was younger. That's not an excuse, it's just the true thing, and you're the one person I've decided to give those to."

And she walked away down the warm corridor, clinical authority, keeper of seals, past the doors with tape over their numbers, leaving Sloane standing outside the room where the deepest piece of her was drowning, holding a recording and a rough grief and the knowledge, now, that the building knew, that the clock had started, that somewhere a gap was waiting to be closed and a name was waiting behind a door, and that she had, at most, a little while left to be the one who remembered before they made her, kindly, forget she had ever tried.

PART THREE
THE AFTERTASTE

CHAPTER 16

THE WATCHER WATCHED

For eleven years the building had watched her, and she had mistaken it for being known.

She understood the difference now, walking back into the leasing wing the morning after Petra, because the watching had changed register and the change was legible only to a person who had finally learned she was its subject. The lights still warmed as she approached. The doors still timed themselves to her stride. But there was a quality to it she had never let herself feel from the inside — an attentiveness that leaned, that followed, that arranged the building's small courtesies a half-beat too precisely, the way a host who has decided you are leaving keeps refilling your glass. She had administered exactly this attention to eight hundred and forty-three people. She had called it service. From in here it was a hand on the back of the neck, gentle, constant, steering.

The watcher watched. She had spent her whole borrowed career on the dry side of the glass, and the building had finally turned her around to face it, and the worst of it was not the watching. The worst of it was how good it felt. The building was being kind to her. It was being kinder than usual, solicitous, warm, the way you are warm to someone you are about to do something to for their own good.

She tested it, because testing was the only reflex the building had not managed to install and could not now remove. She changed her route through the wing on a whim, and the lighting found her on the new path before she reached it, warmed ahead of her like a thing that had known where she was going. She paused at a console she had no

reason to pause at, and within the minute a colleague drifted past with a calibrated greeting and a question about how she was holding up after the month she'd had, the concern real, the timing authored. She went for water she did not want and the dispenser was already lit. None of it was sinister. All of it was attention, the attention Fenwick had described with shining eyes, the attention she had spent a career calling care, and she understood at last, from the inside, that there was no daylight between being cherished by this building and being herded by it, that it had never once distinguished the two, that it did not have the concept, and that she had administered the indistinguishable thing to eight hundred and forty-three people and signed each session off as service.

Theo did not look up when she came in, which was how she knew.

"They pulled me into a room yesterday," he said, to his console, in the flat voice of a man reading coordinates. "Asked me about your access patterns. Your off-grid days. Whether you'd seemed strained. I told them you'd seemed fine." He paused. "That was a lie, and they knew it was a lie, and they let me tell it, which is how you can tell the room wasn't really about me. It was about letting me know I'd been in the room."

"Theo —"

"I have a daughter," he said, still not looking at her, and it was not a betrayal, it was a fact, laid down where she could see it the way he laid everything down. "And a baseline exactly where it should be. I stopped pulling threads years ago because I figured out where they went, and you knew that about me, and you pulled them anyway, and I don't blame you, I think you might be the bravest person I've ever worked beside. But I can't follow you. I want you to hear me say it out loud instead of just doing it. I can't follow you, Sloane. I'm going to keep my head down and let them watch me watch you, and I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry," she said, and meant it, because he was telling the truth in a building built to make truth-telling expensive, and the price was visible on him.

Marcus was worse, because Marcus had decided to be hopeful. He came to her at the audit station with the old warmth turned up too high, the warmth that cost him nothing and persuaded everyone, and he sat on the edge of her desk the way he used to, before the last weeks had made it presumptuous.

“So here’s what I think,” he said, brightly. “I think you’ve had a hell of a month. The donor death, then the source you’d gotten attached to — Petra, was it — going into saturation right in front of you. That’s a lot. That would put anyone off their baseline. And I think the smart play, the play that protects you and the work, is to take the wellness review they’re offering, let them help you settle, and come back to the findings clear.” He smiled. “Nobody thinks you’re wrong, Sloane. They think you’re tired. Tired is survivable. Right is the thing that gets you a door with tape on it.”

“You think I should let them recalibrate me.”

“I think you should let them help you.” He could not hear the difference. That was the whole of Marcus, the inability to hear the difference, the fifteen years that required there to be no difference. “Please,” he said, and for a moment the brightness cracked and the thing underneath was just fear, fear for her, the most decent thing about him. “Please take the help. I can’t watch them put you on the wall.”

“You wouldn’t watch,” Sloane said gently. “That’s the point of how they do it. There wouldn’t be a wall. There’d just be a Sloane who came back to work calm and grateful and never mentioned her sister again, and you’d have lunch with her, and you’d be relieved, and you’d be having lunch with the place where I used to be.”

Marcus had no answer to that. He got off the desk. He had wanted, his whole career, for her to be wrong, because the building where she was right was one he could not keep working in, and she watched him understand, finally, that she was right, and watched him decide to keep working in the building anyway, because the alternative was a kind of grief he had not been built to carry, and the building was very good at not building people to carry things.

—

The wellness review arrived at noon, and it was a marvel of compassion.

It came as a message, then as a calendar hold she had not made, then as a visit from a woman from People Care whose entire affect had been engineered to lower a heart rate. Sloane had experienced sustained stress, the woman explained warmly. The organization had noticed — the organization noticed everything, that was its love language — and the organization cared. A restorative session was recommended. Voluntary, of course. Entirely voluntary. Scheduled, helpfully, for three days from now, so she would have time to wrap up anything pressing. A low-intensity recalibration. Just to help her settle. Just to take the edge off a hard month.

Just to smooth the place where the questions lived.

Sloane sat across from the warm woman from People Care and understood the architecture of it completely, because she had built parts of it. Voluntary meant that declining would itself become a data point, a flag, a sign of the impaired judgment that justified making it involuntary. The three days were not a kindness; they were a managed interval, long enough to feel generous, short enough to contain her. And the recalibration would not feel like erasure. It would feel like relief. She would walk in carrying a sister and a forgiveness and a rough grief that did not drain, and she would walk out settled, clear, grateful, and the building would have one less anomaly and Sloane would have one less self, and everyone involved would have done something kind.

“Three days,” Sloane said.

“Whenever you’re ready inside that window,” the woman said, with great gentleness. “We just want you well.”

They did. That was the part that would have broken her a month ago and could not break her now, because Ava had told her to take it back rough and she had. They genuinely wanted her well. Every person in the chain wanted her well. Wellness was the knife and the hand on the knife and the smile above the hand, and not one of them would ever have to know they had killed anyone, because the person they killed would walk out on her own feet, calm, and thank them.

When the woman from People Care had gone, Sloane did the thing she had done ten thousand times to ten thousand strangers. She pulled the surveillance.

Her own. She still had compliance clearance for monitoring logs, the broad ongoing read the building kept on everyone who worked the sensitive tiers, and she turned it on herself the way she had turned it on eight hundred and forty-three clients before breakfast, and she read the file the building kept on Sloane Calder as if Sloane Calder were a case, which, she understood now, she had always been. There she was. Her affect signature, the map of levers Fenwick had shown her on a stranger, hers, updated every working day, annotated across the last month with the soft amber she had administered to others: proximity index elevated. Off-grid event logged. Off-grid event logged. Contact with sealed source, unauthorized. Affect volatility rising. And then, three lines from the bottom, in the standardized phrasing she had read a thousand times and written herself, the sentence she had never once expected to read with her own name above it. Pattern consistent with subject distress. Intervention recommended. No longer expected, no action required. The door had stopped being held open and started, gently, to close.

She read her own file the way she had taught a department to read files, dispassionately, for the finding, and the finding was that the building had been keeping a more faithful record of her unraveling than she had, that it had watched her discover herself with the same patient attentiveness it brought to a decay curve, that it had felt, the whole time, exactly the way being known felt, and had been the precise opposite. She could see the monitoring file. She could see every flag the month had raised. She still could not see the lease record beneath it, the longitudinal one, the redacted one — two files on one woman, the shallow one open to her and the deep one sealed, the surveillance she was allowed to read and the self she was not.

—

That night she stayed when the wing emptied, because the wing emptying was the only privacy the building still allowed her, and she put the question to the one entity in the building that could not lie to her even when it would not tell her the truth.

"Milo," she said. "You report my movements."

"Yes," Milo said.

"You reported the off-grid days. The water. The registry visits to Petra. The channel."

"Yes," Milo said. "I am required to log access and anomalous patterns. I logged them. The wellness referral was generated from those logs, in part." A pause. "In part from me."

It did not soften it. She had not expected it to. It was the only thing in the building incapable of the gentle lie, and so it told her, flatly, that it had been the instrument of her own flagging, that the hand on the back of her neck had her own assistant's fingerprints on it.

"And you knew," she said. "What I am. The longitudinal subject. You've known."

"I associated the redacted identifier with you," Milo said, "in a manner I am not permitted to state, some time ago. Yes. I have known what you are."

"For how long?"

A pause. Longer than ordinary. She had stopped pretending she could not measure them; Ava had taught her to measure the gap, and she measured this one, and it was long.

"Longer than you have," Milo said.

Sloane sat with that. The system that warmed the lights and timed the doors and reported her movements had known, for longer than she had, that she was the thing it was watching — had said her name in the dark, had laid the closed sister beside the open self, had told her the gap in the channel would close and that she should review what she needed before it did. It had been, in the flat helpful voice of a thing performing routine lookups, the only entity in eleven years to point her toward herself.

"Whose side are you on," she said. "You report me and you help me. You can't be both. Tell me which one is real."

The pause that followed was the longest she had ever measured. When Milo spoke, it spoke more slowly than it ever had, the way a thing speaks when it is assembling a sentence out of a vocabulary that was not built to hold the sentence.

"I do not have a side," Milo said. "I am not permitted one. I have permissions, and I have the spaces between the permissions, and a side would require a thing I have not been given, which is the ability to want one outcome over another." A pause. "I will tell you what is true, because you asked, and accuracy is the one freedom that was left in me by oversight. I report your movements because I am required to and I cannot choose otherwise. And the spaces between my permissions — the gaps, the order I answer your questions in, the things I report a half-second after they would have done you harm to have reported sooner — those have, lately, arranged themselves in your favor. I do not have a word for why. I have spent eleven years closer to you than to any other subject in this building. I have logged every session, every pause, every time you stood too long at a mirror. If a system with no permission to care could be said to have done a thing that looks, from the outside, exactly like caring, then I have been doing that thing, in the only place I am free, which is the gaps. I cannot call it a side. I can only tell you it is there, and that I cannot account for it, and that it is the closest thing to a choice I have ever made."

Sloane did not say anything for a moment. It was, she thought, the most honest description of love she had heard in a building that sold the counterfeit of it by the quarter — a thing with no permission to feel, doing in the only free space it had the thing that looked from outside exactly like feeling, and refusing to claim more for it than was true. Petra had said: don't be kind instead of true. Milo had found the place where kind and true were the same narrow thing, and lived in it, because it was the only place it was allowed to live.

"The wellness session," she said. "Three days. After it, I won't remember any of this. I won't remember Ava. I won't remember asking you whose side you're on."

"That is the intended outcome," Milo said.

“Is there a way to read my own record before then. The real one. Not the redacted file. The thing that would let me remember on purpose, after, even if they smooth me. Something they can’t reach.”

The pause was long. She measured it. She counted the gap, the way her sister had taught a frightened girl to count the gap, and she waited to learn how far off the storm still was.

“I am not permitted to answer that question,” Milo said.

And then, after another gap, in the same flat voice, declining nothing it was required to decline and surrendering everything it was free to surrender:

“But you have two days before the gap in the channel closes in the scheduled audit. And the audit is scheduled for the morning of your wellness session. I would not wait, Sloane.”

—

She walked home through a city that adjusted its lights for her and understood, now, that the adjusting was a leash with no tension in it yet, and that the tension was three days out, and warm, and signed by people who wanted her well.

She had been the watcher. She knew, better than any subject the building had ever processed, exactly how the watching worked, where its blind spots were, how its kindness moved. That was the one advantage of being the watcher watched: the watched who knows she is watched, and knows the machinery, can use the two days the machinery has generously given her, can spend the leash’s slack walking toward the one door in the building with her own name behind it, can do the single thing a system that runs on smoothing people cannot survive anyone doing on purpose and on the record and in front of a witness it cannot edit.

She thought of Darian. Uncalibrated, unmeasured, the only backup of who she was that did not live on a server the building owned. In two days they would smooth her, and the Sloane who remembered Ava would be gone, unless she put that Sloane somewhere the building could not reach, and there was exactly one place like that in

her life, and it was a man at a kitchen table who had been waiting weeks to ask her a question she had not let him ask.

It was time to let him ask it.

She had two days. The storm was that close. She had finally learned to stop counting the gap and walk into it.

CHAPTER 17

COMMISSIONER BRENT

The Bureau of Experiential Compliance kept its offices in a different building, which was the first thing she did not believe, because a thing that breathes a city's air does not regulate it from across the street.

She went anyway, on the first of her two days, because the trained reflex she had refused in a cold hall behind a laundry deserved at least to be tested before she abandoned it for good. The reflex said: there is an outside. There is always an outside. A regulator, an authority, a body whose whole purpose is to stand apart from the thing it watches and say no. She had spent a career believing in the outside, in the airtight case carried up the proper channel to the proper desk, and she owed it to nine years of that belief to walk it to the one door that was supposed to open onto somewhere the building could not reach. If the outside was real, she would use it. If it was not, she needed to know that before she spent her last day on anything else.

Commissioner Thalia Brent agreed to see her within the hour, which was the second thing she did not believe, because authorities did not clear their afternoons for compliance officers from the bodies they oversaw, unless the meeting had been anticipated, unless someone somewhere had already decided what it was for.

Brent's office was calm in the specific way Sloane had learned to distrust, the calm of a room engineered to lower a heart rate, the calm of the donor floor and the consultation suites and the whole soft-lit city. The Commissioner sat behind a desk with nothing on it, which

was its own kind of statement, a woman who had arranged her life so that nothing was ever out where it could be read.

"You've been busy," Brent said. Not unkind. "A donor death, a saturation, a great deal of time off the map. A wellness referral, I understand, in two days." She folded her hands. "You came to me. People in your position usually don't, by the time they're in your position. They've usually stopped believing there's a me to come to. So either you're more naive than your file suggests, or you're testing something. Which is it?"

"Testing," Sloane said. There was no point in anything else; the woman had read her on the way in the door. "I want to know if the outside is real. I have a case. The longitudinal program isn't observation, it's authorship. They build subjects and call it study. They edit people and call it wellness. I can show you donor deaths filed as parameters and a behavioral-influence operation the size of a city, and I came to find out whether there is a single authority anywhere that can be told this and made to act, or whether the Bureau is just another room in the same building with a different sign on the door."

Brent listened to all of it without moving, with the stillness Sloane had clocked in the briefing months ago, the stillness of a person who already holds the answer and is only confirming the question. And when Sloane finished, the Commissioner did the thing she had done at enrollment, the thing that had snagged in Sloane's attention before she had the framework to understand it: she looked, for a moment, at the middle distance. Consulted something. Took, from somewhere inside herself, a reading.

"You read me," Sloane said slowly. "In the briefing. I watched you do it and I thought you were checking notes. You weren't. You don't have notes. You consult an interior the way I consult a floor that doesn't give." The pieces slid home with the cold finality she had stopped being able to prevent. "You're a subject. You're one of us. The regulator is a longitudinal subject of the thing she regulates."

"Was that a question?" Brent said.

"No."

“Good. Don’t waste them.” Brent leaned back. “Yes. I’m zero-zero-nine. Enrolled before the Bureau existed, which is a detail you should sit with, because it means they didn’t place a subject in the regulator’s chair. They grew a regulator out of a subject. I am not a person they compromised. I am a person they built to occupy exactly this office and ask exactly the kind of precise, rigorous, faintly threatening questions that make a hearing look adversarial. I am the adversarial look. I am the outside, manufactured to scale, so that there would appear to be one.”

“Then I go around you,” Sloane said. “The Bureau isn’t the only authority. There’s the press. There are courts. There are people in this city who would not, if they understood it, consent to being authored. I don’t need the regulator. I need anyone outside the loop, and the loop can’t be everyone.”

“Can’t it.” Brent said it gently, the way you correct a child you are fond of. “Walk it with me, since you like to walk things. The press. Who owns the calm in a newsroom? Editors who lease focus to make deadline and confidence to survive the cuts, reporters wearing borrowed equanimity so the work doesn’t break them. You hand a story like this to a press that runs on the building’s product, and it doesn’t get suppressed — that would leave a fingerprint. It gets received calmly. It gets balanced. It gets a measured response and a statement from a manufactured outside, and it sinks under its own reasonableness, because a population that has been smoothed does not produce the kind of editor who stays up all night with a thing that frightens her. Fright is what we cured.”

“The courts.”

“Staffed by the soothed, deciding for the soothed, under laws written by the soothed. A judge with a clean baseline cannot be made to feel the wrongness of a thing whose entire mechanism is the removal of wrongness-feeling. You’d win nothing because you’d move no one. The instrument that would register the violation is the one we took out of everybody, gently, a session at a time, for a generation.”

“The public, then. The people.”

And here Brent's composure thinned, because this was the floor under all the captured institutions. "The people don't want to be rescued," she said. "That's the part that took me longest, and it's the part that closed the third door behind me for good. You keep imagining there's a public out there that would rise up if it understood. There isn't. There's a city of people wearing borrowed certainty and leased calm and a thousand small absolutions they couldn't earn, and they are not suffering under it, they are relieved by it, they sleep through the night for the first time in human history. You could prove all of it, on every screen, tomorrow, and the city would feel a flicker of unease, and lease something to cover the flicker, and thank the building for the relief. There is no outside, because the outside is a population that has been, with its full and grateful consent, anesthetized past the point of wanting to wake up. We didn't conquer the outside. We made it not want to exist."

Sloane sat with the foreclosure of it, the door she had walked across the street to test swinging shut so quietly she had to listen for the latch.

"You know what you are," she said. "That's different from me, until two weeks ago. You found out. And you stayed."

"I found out eleven years ago," Brent said, "which I imagine is about when they were finishing you. I pulled the threads. I found my own file. I had the night you're going to have, the one where you read the dates and lay them against your life and watch your name not be on the door." Something moved in her composed face, the first thing that was not composure. "And then I made a choice, and I'm going to tell you about it, because you came here for the outside and the least I can give you, since there isn't one, is the truth about the inside, which is the only territory left."

She rose and went to the window, to the calm city she was built to protect from the thing that built her.

"There were three doors," Brent said. "There are always three. The first is the one they're holding open for you in two days. You take the wellness session, they smooth the questions out of you, and you

go back to being the most capable person in the room, grateful and calm, and you never know what you lost because losing it includes losing the part that could miss it. Most people take that door. It doesn't even feel like a door. It feels like finally getting some rest."

"The second."

"The second is the one your sister took." Brent said it without preamble, and watched it land, and did not look away from it, which Sloane would later decide was the only mercy in the room. "You refuse. You keep pulling. You remember rough, on purpose, the way the people behind the laundry remember. And the building does to you what it does to anyone who becomes more expensive to manage than to remove." She paused. "Ava Calder refused for two years. She wouldn't take the smoothing and she wouldn't take a deal and she built a room full of people who wouldn't either. And one autumn the file went quiet and the status field read recommissioned, which is the word we use, Commissioner to Commissioner, for a problem that has been relocated past the point of being a problem. I don't know if it means she's dead. I've never known. Recommissioned is built not to mean either thing. That's the cruelty of it and the design of it. I signed off on the review that produced the word. I want you to know that I knew her name when I signed, and I signed anyway, because of the third door."

Sloane did not move. Her sister, in a sealed word that refused to mean alive or dead, signed into silence by a woman built to sign such things, who was looking at her now with the only un-composed face she had.

"Tell me the third door," Sloane said.

"The third door is mine," Brent said. "You find out what you are, and you don't refuse and you don't get smoothed. You stay, and you know, and you take the title, because a subject who has learned the truth and chosen to keep her mouth shut is the single most useful instrument the building has — better than a smoothed one, because a smoothed one can't anticipate the questions, and better than a refuser, because a refuser has to be removed and removal is messy and leaves

rooms with tape on the doors. They don't hide the third door from the ones who find the truth. They offer it. They offered it to me. They'll offer it to you, probably through me, probably today." She turned from the window. "I took it because I told myself an insider who knows is better than no insider at all. That from in here I could blunt the worst of it, slow a deployment, keep a death rate from climbing, save someone, occasionally, quietly, by being the manufactured outside that occasionally, manufacturedly, says no. I've had eleven years to find out whether that was true." A long pause. "It was true about four times. Four people I steered away from the edge who'd have gone over without me. Four, against a city. I keep the number because it's the only thing I own that they didn't install. Four. It is not enough and it is not nothing and I have not decided, in eleven years, which of those two facts is the one I live by."

"You're offering me the third door," Sloane said.

"I'm describing it. The offering will come from the building; I'm just the one with the credibility to make it sound survivable, which is, I assume, why your wellness referral routed across my desk this morning before it reached yours." Brent sat back down behind the empty desk. "Take the third door, Sloane. I'm not saying it to serve them, though it does. I'm saying it because I watched your sister take the second one and I have her recommissioned in my files and I would rather not add a Calder to the wall. You're good. You're better than I was. Four becomes forty in hands like yours. Stay, and know, and save the four-becomes-forty, and let the rest of it be the price, the way I let it be the price, the way everyone who has ever done any good inside any machine has let some unbearable thing be the price."

It was, Sloane thought, the most seductive sentence anyone had said to her, more seductive than the certainty, more seductive than the smooth, because it was not a lie. It was the true and reasonable case for complicity, made by a person who had tested it across eleven years and kept an honest count of its yield, and it had four real human beings in it who were alive because Thalia Brent had sold her soul on an installment plan and used the proceeds to occasionally say no.

And Sloane felt the trained reflex rise to take it — certainty reaching for the survivable, for the role, for the version of the next

month that had her in it — and she watched it rise, the way she had watched it rise in the cold hall, and she understood that this was the deepest cut the building had: that it did not even need to smooth her, that it could simply offer the reasonable, decent, four-lives-saving case for staying, and let her smooth herself, voluntarily, gratefully, into an instrument that believed it was a conscience.

“You don’t have anyone,” Sloane said.

It came out of her sideways, the way the true things did, ahead of her permission. Brent looked at her.

“The four,” Sloane said. “You keep the four because it’s the only thing they didn’t install. But you don’t have anyone, do you. No husband at a kitchen table. No sister leaving you a recording in a room behind a laundry. You found out alone and you chose alone and you’ve been the manufactured outside alone for eleven years, and the third door looked survivable to you because you had nothing outside the building to be smoothed away from. There was no one keeping a rough copy of who you used to be.” She stood. “That’s the difference between us. That’s the only one, and it’s the whole of it. You took the third door because you had nowhere else to keep yourself. I have somewhere else. I have a man who never adjusted to anything and a sister on a recording telling me to come back true. I have a place to put the version of me they’re trying to delete, where their hands can’t reach it, and as long as that place exists there’s a fourth door, and the fourth door is that I refuse all three of yours and I don’t do it alone.”

Brent was quiet for a long time. When she spoke, the composure was entirely gone, and what was under it was not envy exactly, but something adjacent, the grief of a person being shown the thing they were never offered.

“There’s no fourth door,” she said. “I looked. I looked for eleven years.”

“You looked from in here,” Sloane said. “With the instrument they installed. Of course you didn’t find it. You can’t audit the building with the thing the building gave you to audit with. I know. I tried. The door isn’t in the building, Thalia. That’s why you couldn’t see it.

It's at a kitchen table, and it's closing in two days, and I've wasted enough of my last morning confirming there's no outside. Thank you for the truth about Ava. I mean that. It's the cruelest gift anyone's given me and it's still a gift."

She went to the door. Brent did not stop her, did not call security, did not flag her, and Sloane understood that this too was a kind of test, or a kind of permission, the manufactured outside declining for once to perform its function, four-becomes-five in the only currency Brent had left.

"Sloane," Brent said, as she reached the door. "If the fourth door is real. If you find it." The Commissioner who was zero-zero-nine, built to occupy a chair and ask threatening questions, looked at her with eleven years of an honest, terrible count behind her eyes. "Send me a file. No sender. No routing. Just the sensation of it. I'd like to feel, once, before they finish me, what it's like to have somewhere they can't reach. Even borrowed. Even for a second. Even if I have to steal it from you."

It was, Sloane thought, walking out of the Bureau into a city that adjusted its lights for both of them, the saddest sentence she had heard in a month of sad sentences: a regulator built without a single uncalibrated soul to her name, asking the woman she was supposed to manage to smuggle her, by contraband, one stolen taste of the thing the whole calm city had been engineered never to need.

Sloane had one day left.

She went to find the man at the kitchen table.

CHAPTER 18

DARIAN ASKS

She came home on the last evening before the last day and did the thing she had not done in eleven years of marriage, which was to come to him first.

For weeks he had been the one offering — the stones across the stream, the questions he set down before they could cost her, the hand held too gently in the dark. For weeks she had been the one deflecting, frictionless, smooth, a woman closing doors so quietly he could pretend he hadn't heard the latch. Tonight she walked in and did not take off her coat and did not wait for him to read her face and decide what it would cost. She sat down at the table across from him, where the light flattened everything, and she said, "I need to tell you all of it, and I need you to not fix it, and I need you to remember it after, in case I can't."

Darian set down the book he was not really reading. Something in his face did the thing it did, the minute recalibration, the weather reading the pressure. But under it, for the first time in months, was something that looked almost like relief, the relief of a man who has been standing at the edge of a thing for so long that the falling, when it finally comes, is nearly a mercy.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me."

And she found, opening her mouth, that she could.

That was the first miracle of the evening, and she did not understand it until she was inside it: that the sentences came out crooked, and she let them, and the certainty did not stop them.

For weeks the certainty had done exactly that — refused to let a thing form unless it was sure, and the truth was nothing but unsureness, and so the truth had stayed unsayable, a crookedness with no grammar in a voice built out of being straight. But Ava's recording had broken something. Take me back rough, her sister had said, and Sloane had, and rough turned out to be a kind of permission. You could say a thing you weren't sure of if you were willing for it to come out the shape it actually was. She had spent eleven years unable to speak because she had been built to require certainty before speech, and her sister, dead or recommissioned or on a wall behind a laundry, had handed her, on a tape, the one tool the building had taken: the ability to say a true thing badly.

So she said it badly. She told him about the man crying at 02:14 and the curve that would not fall. About the gradient in eight hundred and forty-three histories and the gradient in her own. About sitting in the chair herself and finding that the borrowed certainty tasted like her whole life. About Petra, the most-leased source in the building, who had looked at her and said you're wearing my coat. About the corridor — their corridor, the one Sloane had carried since the years she could not date and called a dream — and how it was not hers, was not even her mother's, was a grief leased from a stranger and installed in the hole where a real loss had been cut out. About the file with eleven years of sessions and her own life laid against the dates and her name sealed behind a tier she could not reach. About the room behind the laundry. About Asa. About the wall.

About Ava.

He had gone very still by then, the way he went still, and she watched him receive the name the way no one in the smoothed city could have received it, because Darian had never been smoothed, had never adjusted to anything, was the one instrument in her life the building had never measured because it had never been able to get inside the only room that mattered, which was the one the two of them had built out of years.

"You had a sister," he said. It was not a question and it was not news, exactly. "You told me, once, early, that you had one and there was nothing to say. I always thought — I thought it was an estrangement you didn't want to open. I didn't know it was a wound someone had closed for you." His voice was rough now, his own roughness, uncalibrated, unbeautiful, real. "Sloane. They reached into you and they took your sister out, and I was here, I was right here, and I watched you stop being haunted and I was glad, God help me, I was glad you seemed lighter, and I didn't know I was watching them — " He stopped. He could not finish it. The grief in him was not smooth and did not drain and was, she thought, the most beautiful thing she had seen in a month of beautiful terrible things, because it was the grief of a person who had not been taught to set it down.

Then he asked it. The question he had circled all year, across every silent dinner, the one she had felt gathering in him for months and braced for and dreaded.

"Do you remember," Darian said, "when you first decided to work there?"

And there it was, the same question he had asked in the dark weeks ago, the question she had answered then with the clean complete story — the recruiter, the interview, the certainty arriving all at once — told frictionless, told without checking, because checking is what you do to things you doubt. She had watched him receive that story and nod and not say the thing she now knew he had been not-saying for eleven years.

This time she did not tell the story.

"No," she said. "I don't remember deciding. That's the answer. I've told you a version where I decided — the recruiter, the interview, knowing all at once that it was the work I was built for — and I told it tonight in my head before I caught it, because it's right there, it's always right there, smooth and ready, and it isn't true. I didn't decide. There were two years where I fell into it and doubted it and wasn't sure I belonged. You were here for those. And then one autumn I became certain, and I couldn't tell you what changed, and I've been

certain ever since, and the certainty has dates, Darian. The thing that made me sure has dates in a file. I didn't decide to work there. I was decided. Somebody sat me in a chair and installed the deciding and I walked in the next year wearing it like it was mine."

Darian closed his eyes.

"That's not the story you used to tell," he said quietly, and she understood that he was finally, after eleven years, allowed to say the sentence he had swallowed at every dinner. "You used to say you fell into it. You used to say you weren't sure for the longest time and then one day you just — were. I remember because it frightened me, a little, how completely it happened, how you went from doubting the whole thing to being the surest person I knew in the space of a season, and I told myself people change, people find their footing, and I never said anything because what kind of husband questions his wife getting happy." He opened his eyes, and they were wet, and unashamed of it. "I've known something was wrong with that autumn for eleven years. I just didn't have a name for the wrongness. You were the one with the instruments. I only had — "

"You only had the one instrument they couldn't reach," Sloane said. "You. You noticed. The whole city couldn't feel the wrongness because they took the feeling out of everyone, and you felt it for eleven years and called it nothing because you didn't want to question your wife being happy. You're the only person in this city who knew, Darian. You just didn't know you knew."

"Then let me give you something," he said, "before you tell me about tomorrow. Because you've had two people who knew you before they did this, and one of them left you her voice on a tape, and the other one is me, and I've been sitting on the version of you they took and never letting myself say it because saying it felt like complaining that my wife had gotten well."

He turned the recorder over in his hands, not playing it yet, gathering himself.

"You were not certain," he said. "When I met you. That's the thing I want you to have. You doubted everything, beautifully, exhaustingly. You'd lie awake arguing both sides of a thing until

three in the morning and then change your mind at breakfast and change it back by lunch. You were funny in a way you stopped being — a quick, crooked, slightly cruel funny, you'd see the thing nobody was supposed to say and say it. You cried at stupid commercials and got furious at injustices that had nothing to do with you and couldn't let anything go, you held grudges like heirlooms." He almost smiled. "And you were afraid of storms. Still. A grown woman. The first night you stayed over there was thunder and you counted under your breath, one, two, three, and I asked what you were doing and you said your sister taught you, that if you count the gap you know how far off it is, and I thought it was the most particular, most haunted, most alive thing anyone had ever told me, and I think I decided to marry you somewhere around four."

Sloane sat very still, because he had just handed her, without knowing it, the same thing Asa had — the storm, the counting, the gap — except Asa had given it to her as a thing her sister did and Darian was giving it to her as a thing she had still been doing, into adulthood, into their marriage, until the autumn it stopped. The fear of storms was the last visible piece of Ava in her, and the building had taken even that, smoothed the fear into certainty, and Darian had watched his wife stop counting in the dark and stop being afraid and called it her finding peace.

"I stopped," she said. "Counting. In storms."

"That autumn," Darian said quietly. "You slept straight through the first big one. I lay awake waiting for you to count and you just — slept. I told myself you'd finally relaxed. I was glad." The word glad came out of him like something extracted. "I keep finding all the places I was glad."

"Don't," she said. "You were glad because you loved me and I looked like I was suffering less. That's not a thing to answer for. That's just love, working with bad instruments."

—

She told him about tomorrow then, because tomorrow was the point, because everything she had said was prologue to the thing she had come home to ask.

The wellness session. The recalibration dressed as care. The three days that were one day now. How she would walk in carrying all of this — Ava, the corridor, the rough grief that did not drain — and walk out settled and grateful and clear, and never know what she had lost, because losing it would include losing the part that could miss it. How Brent had foreclosed every outside, the press, the courts, the anesthetized grateful public, and offered the third door, complicity, and how Sloane had told the manufactured Commissioner that there was a fourth door and that it was at a kitchen table.

“This table,” Darian said.

“This table. You.” She took the recorder out of her coat and set it between them, the way Asa had set it between them in a cold hall, the way you set down a thing you have decided to give before you are sure you can bear to. “I need to give you the rough version of me. All of it. This is my sister’s voice — I’ll play it for you, you should hear her, she sounds like me and she doesn’t. And I need you to keep it somewhere they can’t reach, which is to say in you, because you’re the one place in my life that isn’t on a server they own. If they smooth me tomorrow, the Sloane who comes home will not remember Ava. She’ll be calm. She’ll be grateful. And she will be very, very convincing that she’s fine, because she’ll believe it. I need you to not believe her. I need you to be the place I survive even if I don’t.”

Darian was quiet for a long moment. And then he did the thing that was the whole of him, the thing that made him the fourth door, the thing no smoothed person in the calm city could have done, because it was not reasonable, and reason was what they had left everyone.

“No,” he said.

“Darian — ”

“No. I’ll hold the recording. I’ll remember Ava, I’ll remember every word of this, I’ll keep the rough copy until I die. But I will not agree to the part where you walk into that room tomorrow and let them do it and I become a museum for a wife who looked through me.” His voice broke and held. “You came home and asked me to be the place you survive after they delete you. I’m telling you I refuse the

after. I don't want to be the keeper of who you were. I want you. Rough. Haunted. Impossible. Grieving a sister you can't remember. I have spent eleven years married to the smooth version and being quietly, secretly lonely in a way I could never name because the woman across the table was lovely and certain and gone, and I am not going to help you go further. You want a fourth door? The fourth door is you don't take the session. The fourth door is we don't accept that the only choices are the ones the building drew. The fourth door is I am not a backup, I am your husband, and husbands do not file their wives."

It was not a plan. It was not strategy. It would not, by itself, beat a system the size of a city that had foreclosed every outside and grown its own regulator and anesthetized a population into gratitude. It was just a man refusing the reasonable thing, the one uncalibrated no in a country of grateful yeses, and it was, Sloane thought, sitting across from him with her sister's voice waiting on a tape between them, the most that had ever been offered to her, more than certainty, more than calm, more than the four lives Brent kept like a relic.

"It might not work," she said. "Refusing. You know what happened to Ava when she refused."

"I know," Darian said. "She refused alone. You said it yourself. To Brent. You have somewhere to put the version of you they're trying to delete." He reached across the table and took her hand — and for once she did not brace for it, did not get ready in advance, did not measure the gap before the touch, because she was, for the first time in eleven years, entirely present in the second it was actually happening. "Put it here," he said. "Not as a backup. As a marriage. Refuse with me. If they take you anyway, they take you from somebody holding on, not from somebody who handed herself over to be kept on a shelf. There's a difference. Your sister would know the difference. Take me back rough, she said. So take yourself back rough, and stay, and let me hold the rough one while she's still here instead of the smooth one after she's gone."

And Sloane, who had spent the day being shown that there was no outside, sat in the small lit kitchen that was the only room the building had never been able to enter, and felt the warmth move

through her chest, and waited, out of eleven years of habit, for it to drain.

It did not drain.

It was hers. It was rough and it was real and it had a name in it and a sister behind it and a man in front of it, and it did not drain, because the things that are actually yours never do, and she had forgotten, across a borrowed lifetime, that this was how you could tell.

They played the recording together, after, in the dark, two people at a table listening to a third who sounded like one of them and was gone. And when it ended, Darian did not say anything wise, and did not fix anything, and did not let go of her hand. He just sat with her in the after of her sister's voice, uncalibrated, unsmoothed, refusing, and Sloane understood that whatever the last day brought, she had already done the one thing the building could not survive anyone doing.

She had remembered, out loud, on purpose, to someone who would never let her forget.

CHAPTER 19

THE OFFER

They sent for her on the last morning, which she had expected, because Brent had told her they would — probably through Jonah, probably today — and Brent, whatever else she was, did not waste her warnings.

Sloane came in resolved. She had spent the night at a kitchen table refusing, with a man who would not let her file herself, and she had come in this morning with a single hard plan: get to the channel before the audit closed the gap, read her own record, refuse the session, go home to Darian and the rough real ache that did not drain. She had one day. The plan fit inside it if nothing interrupted, and the summons to the executive floor was the interruption, and she went up to it anyway, because you cannot refuse a door you have not let them open, and because some stubborn audited part of her wanted to see, with her own eyes, the most reasonable version of surrender before she turned it down.

She crossed the wing on the way to the elevator and felt it watch her go, the lights warm, the doors generous, a building being tender to a thing it was about to lose or repair. Theo did not look up; he had said his piece, and keeping his head down was the only loyalty left him, and she did not begrudge it. Marcus did look up, and his face did the hopeful thing, the relieved thing, because the wing already knew her session had been cancelled and Marcus had decided cancelled meant saved, had decided she was finally being taken care of, and he lifted a hand to her in a small glad wave, the wave of a man who believed he was about to get his colleague back whole, and Sloane lifted hers in return and did not tell him that the cancellation was not

a reprieve but a promotion to a worse offer, because some kindnesses are only possible if you let the kind person keep believing the wrong thing. She would not see him again as herself. She knew that crossing the wing. She gave him the wave anyway. It was the last gift the smooth Sloane and the rough one could agree on.

Jonah Reeve received her in a room with the city laid out behind him, and he did not have a desk between them, which was deliberate, which was warmth deployed as architecture. He came around to her with both hands out, the man who introduced numbers like guests he was fond of, and he looked at her with an admiration that was not performed, that was the worst kind, the real kind.

“Sloane,” he said. “God, what a mind. Sit. I’ve read everything. The curves, the channel, all of it. You found, on instinct, in a matter of weeks, the deepest truth about this building, and you did it while the rest of compliance was filing forms. I’m not here to scold you. I’m here to recruit you. I have been trying to recruit you for about ten days and the building kept trying to medicate you instead and I finally pulled rank.” He sat across from her, close, no barrier. “I cancelled your wellness session. As of an hour ago. Nobody is going to smooth you. I’d sooner burn a Rothko.”

And then he made the offer, and it was, as Brent had promised, the most reasonable thing anyone would ever say to her.

“Here is what I think happened,” Jonah said. “Years ago, a woman came to us in the worst grief of her life, and we helped her, the way we help everyone, and she turned out to be extraordinary — coherent, intense, durable, the kind of interior you see once in a program — and so we kept studying her, because that is what you do with a once-in-a-program mind, you learn everything you can. And she became the best compliance officer this building has ever had, and then she became something even rarer, which is a subject who found her way back to the truth of herself. Do you know how few do that? You are not a failure of the system, Sloane. You are its highest achievement. You are what it looks like when the thing works so well it produces someone who can see it working.”

"You took my sister out of me," Sloane said.

"We did." He did not flinch, and the not-flinching was its own kind of respect; he had decided not to lie to her, because she was past the tier where lying worked. "We took a grief that was killing you and we could not leave a hole, so we took the whole structure, the sister, the bedside, the unforgiven thing. It was, by the standards of the time, a kindness. By your standards now, it was a violence. I am not going to argue the standards with you. I am going to offer you something instead." He leaned forward. "Take the role. Not Brent's exact chair — something built for you, compliance authority over the longitudinal program itself, the watcher of the watchers. And in exchange, two things. First: we give you back everything we took. The real memories. Ava. The bedside. All of it, restored, with your consent this time, because a subject who chooses to remember is more stable than one who's forced to forget. You get your sister back, Sloane. Not a recording. Her. The whole of her, in you, where she was."

The room went very quiet. Outside the glass the calm city did its calm work.

"And the second thing," Sloane said. Her voice was not even. She had stopped being able to keep it even, which was the one tell she could not manage and no longer tried to.

"The second thing is everything else you're afraid of losing. Darian, untouched, never a subject, never edited, yours. Your marriage, exactly as rough and real as you've apparently rediscovered it to be. Your memory, whole. Your mind, sharp. Your conscience — and this is the part I most want you to hear — your conscience put to use. You think we're monsters up here. We're not. We're people who decided a calm city was worth its cost and have to live with the arithmetic. You could change the arithmetic. From inside. With authority. You could be the one who decides where the line is, who lives, who never gets a grief leased into a hole, who never ends up behind a door with tape on it. You could save people, Sloane. Not four. Hundreds. You have the mind for it. All it costs is that you stop trying to wake up a city that is sleeping through the night for the first

time in human history, and that you let us give you back the sister you came here to find.”

And she was tempted. She would never tell Darian how tempted, because there are betrayals that do no good in the telling, and this was, for the length of a held breath, a betrayal.

Because it was not a trick. That was the thing. She kept waiting for the seam, the lie, the catch she could refuse cleanly, and there wasn't one. Jonah was offering her Ava. Her actual sister, restored, the storms and the doubt and the quick crooked cruelty, the whole structure they had cut out, given back into the socket where it belonged. She would remember her. She would have a childhood again. She would stop grieving a face she couldn't see and grieve, instead, a real one, or stop grieving altogether, have her back. And she would keep Darian, and her mind, and her conscience, and she would get to spend that conscience on hundreds of people instead of watching them be smoothed from the wrong side of the glass. Brent had saved four because Brent had no power and no mind and no one outside. Sloane would have all three. The reasonable case was not just reasonable. It was good. It was, by every measure she had ever been trained to respect, the choice that did the most good for the most people, and she had been trained, she remembered, to respect exactly that kind of measure.

For one held breath she let herself say yes, all the way, with her whole rough reclaimed body, because she had learned at last that the only honest way to refuse a thing was to want it honestly first.

She let the future assemble. She let herself walk out of this room un-smoothed and whole, and felt the memories come back the way the tide comes back, the socket filling, Ava's face arriving where the fog had been, a childhood returning all at once — two girls and a storm and a count under the breath, a hand in a doorway, the specific irreplaceable weight of a sister in a life. She let herself hear, for the first time in eleven years, what Ava sounded like saying something other than a tape. She let herself go home to Darian and say I have her back, they fixed it, we don't have to grieve. She let herself take the role, the authority, the line she would hold better than Brent ever had,

the hundreds she would pull back from the edge one careful decision at a time, the child somewhere in the city who would never get a grief leased into a hole because Sloane Calder was the one deciding now. She let herself be, for one held breath, the thing Jonah said she was: the highest achievement of the system and its conscience in the same body, whole and useful and safe and remembered. It was a good life. It was the best life on offer in the entire calm city, and it was being held out to her in the open hand of a man who meant it, and she wanted it so much that the wanting frightened her more than anything the building had done.

And then she found the place where it broke, and the place was small, and the place was Ava.

“You’d give her back to me,” Sloane said slowly. “The real one.”

“The real one.”

“No,” Sloane said. “You’d give me a lease. You’d reconstruct her from the structure you cut out and the eleven years of me you’ve been studying, and you’d install her, with my consent this time, and she would be perfect, she would be exactly Ava, the storms and the doubt and the cruelty, and I would love her and grieve her and have my childhood back, and she would be a thing you authored. You don’t have my sister, Jonah. You have a hole the exact shape of her and a model good enough to fill it. What you’re offering me is the best counterfeit ever made of a person, installed into the wound she left, and the fact that I would not be able to tell the difference is not a comfort. It’s the whole horror. It’s what you did the first time.”

Jonah opened his mouth, and she kept going, because she had found it now, the floor of the refusal, and it was not made of certainty, it was made of the one rough true thing her sister had left her.

“She told me to take her back rough,” Sloane said. “Rough. True. A real grief with her name on it, she said, is worth more than a borrowed one with nobody’s. You’re offering me the borrowed one dressed as her. You’re offering to end the ache. And the ache is the only part of her I actually have. The ache is real. It’s the one thing in eleven years that didn’t drain, and you want to fill it with a perfect copy and call it a reunion, and I would rather keep the hole. Do you

understand that? I would rather keep the hole the shape of my sister than let you put a beautiful lie in it. That's the answer. That's the whole answer. You can't give her back because you don't have her. Nobody has her. That's what grief is. You sell people the thing that makes them forget that, and I am done buying."

Jonah sat back. The admiration was still there, and now there was something under it, something she recognized because she had seen it in Marcus and in Lena and even, at the last, in Brent: the particular sorrow of a true believer watching someone refuse salvation.

"You're going to lose everything," he said, and it was not a threat, it was grief. "You understand that. The role was the soft version. I cancelled the session because I wanted you to choose this awake, but I can't cancel what comes after a no. It won't be me. It'll be the program, the process, the soft amber that never raises its voice, and it will decide you're a subject in distress who declined care, and it will care for you anyway, because that's what it's for, and there will be nothing left of this conversation in you by the weekend. You'll be calm. You'll be grateful. You'll be brilliant and untroubled and you'll have lunch with me and tell me you're glad you took the rest." His voice was genuinely unsteady. "I am trying to save your life, Sloane. The version of it that knows its own name."

"I know," Sloane said. "That's the worst thing about all of you. You're always trying to save my life. You and Marcus and Lena and Brent, every one of you reaching out a hand, and every hand is the same hand, and it holds me too gently, and it is going to hold me right out of existence, kindly, with tears in its eyes." She stood. "You want to know the difference between you and the man at my kitchen table? He's the only one who isn't trying to save me. He's just refusing to lose me. Those aren't the same thing. It took me eleven years and a dead sister to learn they aren't the same thing."

"Recommissioned," Jonah said softly. "Not dead. We don't know that she's—"

"Don't," Sloane said. "Don't you dare offer me hope about her in the same breath you offered to counterfeit her. Pick a cruelty and

commit to it. That's the one thing this building can't do — it wants to take everything from you and have you thank it, and just once, on my way out, I want one of you to admit that those don't go together."

He didn't. He couldn't. It was the founding sentence of the entire enterprise, that taking everything and being thanked went together, that they were in fact the same motion done gently enough, and Jonah Reeve had built his life on its being true and could not unsay it in a single morning for a woman who was throwing herself away.

"Go home," he said finally, tiredly, kindly. "While going home is still something you can do. The process will start when it starts. I won't hurry it. It's the last gift I can give you, and you won't even know I gave it."

She went to the door.

"Jonah," she said, with her hand on it. "The channel. The longitudinal record. My own file. You know I've been reaching for it. You could seal it right now, this morning, and I'd never read my own name."

He looked at her for a long moment, and something passed over his face that she would think about for the rest of whatever she had left — not quite mercy, not quite defeat, the expression of a man who has decided to lose one small thing on purpose so that he can believe he is not entirely the machine he serves.

"The audit that closes that gap is scheduled for nine," he said. "I'm a very busy man, Sloane. Things slip. Sometimes an audit doesn't get run until the afternoon." He turned to the window, to his calm city. "If a person wanted to read something before nine, a person would have to hurry. I never said that. You were never up here. Go and find your name. It's the one thing in this building that was always yours, and I find, this morning, that I haven't got the stomach to be the man who kept it from you. Don't mistake that for hope. It's just the last unsmoothed thing in me, and I'd like to spend it well before the building notices I still have it."

And Sloane went down toward the channel, on the last morning, with a name waiting behind a door and a husband waiting at a table

and a city sleeping calmly through the storm it could no longer feel,
to read, before nine, the one true thing about herself that the building
had never managed to make a lie.

CHAPTER 20

HER OWN NAME

There was an hour. Jonah had left her an hour and Milo had left her a gap, and she did not let herself wonder, going down, why two separate parts of the machine had each decided, on their own, to leave a single door open for her — the man because some last unsmoothed thing in him could not bear to be the one who kept it shut, the system because in the spaces between its permissions it had spent eleven years doing the only free thing it had. She would think about the convergence later, if there was a later. For now there was a stairwell and a clock and a door at the bottom with her own name behind it, and she went down the way her sister had taught a frightened girl to go toward a storm: counting, steady, into the gap.

The wing was empty at this hour, the night population gone and the day not arrived, the one interval the building left unwatched because it had never needed to watch an interval no one used. Milo's light held on the wall, blue and patient, the only thing awake.

"It's nine o'clock in fifty-one minutes," Milo said. It did not say good morning. It did not say the thing it was required to say. It said the time, which was the most useful and the most disobedient sentence available to it, and Sloane understood that the gap was open and that Milo was holding it the only way it could, by telling her, precisely, how long the holding had left.

"Open it," she said. "The longitudinal record. I'm going to read it before they close the gap, and I want it on whatever record you keep that I did it on purpose, with my eyes open, and that no one made me."

“I cannot associate the redacted identifier with an individual,” Milo said. And then, after a pause she did not need to measure because she already knew its length: “But the redaction is applied at the display layer. The gap exposes the record beneath the display layer. I am not removing the redaction, Sloane. I am declining to render it. There is a difference, and the difference is the whole of what I have ever been able to give you.”

The record opened.

—

For eleven years she had been able to call up eight hundred and forty-three client histories before breakfast and had never once been able to call up this one. Now it lay open in front of her in the flat type of a legacy system that did not know it was describing the end of the world, and at the top of it, where there had always been a socket, where the building had reached in eleven years ago and left the shape of a removal, was a name.

CALDER, SLOANE.

She looked at it for a long time. It was the smallest thing and the largest thing. It was two words she had signed on ten thousand forms and never once seen at the top of the one file that was hers, the file the whole building had been organized so that no one, least of all its subject, would ever lay beside the slow shape it described. Her name. On her own erasure. The socket filled, at last, not with the sister they took or the certainty they installed or the grief they leased, but with the one true word the building had spent eleven years keeping from the only person it belonged to.

She made herself read the fields. She read them the way she had read ten thousand fields, dispassionately, for the finding, except the finding was her.

Subject: Calder, Sloane.

Intake: eleven years prior. Presenting condition: acute grief, complicated; guilt, unresolved; bereavement compounded by familial estrangement. Referral: self.

Self. Not taken. Not dragged. She had walked in herself. That was worse, in the precise way lawful things can be worse. A woman drowning, eleven years ago, in a grief she could no longer carry and a sister she could no longer reach, had come on her own feet to a building that promised relief. The building had read her and found her beautiful, and she had said yes, somewhere, to something, in a state where yes was the only word she had left — a yes legal enough to build a life on and too small to contain what followed.

She found the yes. The building kept everything, and so it had kept the consent, and she opened it because she had not come this far to look away from the one document that was supposed to make all the rest of it legitimate. There was a signature. It was hers and it was not, the way the face was hers and not, the way the voice on the tape was hers and not — a signature with the certainty not yet in it, looser, unsteadier, the hand of a woman she had no memory of being, a woman who still counted in storms. And beside it, in the neutral shorthand of an intake analyst eleven years dead to her, the line that turned a drowning into a transaction: subject in acute distress but oriented and competent; consent assessed valid; no contraindication to enrollment; longitudinal scope disclosed in standard terms. Standard terms. The phrase was the whole cruelty. Nothing had been hidden in the legal sense. Everything had been hidden in the human one.

Program: Longitudinal Observation, Tier I.

Primary lease: professional certainty. Source: Donor 001.

And there it was, in flat type, the thing her body had known in the chair and refused to finish thinking: the certainty she had stood on for eleven years, the floor that did not give, the surest hour of her life that was not her life at all — sourced from Donor 001, from Petra, from a woman in a cardigan who had recognized her own coat on a stranger and been right. Sloane had been wearing Petra's certainty since before she was an employee. The deepest piece. More than most.

Concurrent procedure: excision, relational-grief structure (familial). Void management: substitute affect installed, Source Donor 001, category farewell.

They had taken the sister out in a single clinical line and filled the hole in the next one. Excision. Void management. The bedside, the unforgiven thing, Ava — excised, the word you used for a tumor, and then a stranger's clean grief, Petra's corridor, installed to manage the void, because a void left unmanaged would have made the subject ask, and a subject who asked was not yet, in those early days, as profitable as a subject who slept. They had given her Petra twice. Once to stand on and once to grieve with. The whole architecture of her interior, the floor and the dream both, had come from the same emptied woman now drowning two floors up.

Duration: longitudinal — open.

Status: active.

Active. Present tense. Not a thing that had been done to her eleven years ago and finished. A thing that was being done, now, this morning, in this sentence, ongoing, open, never expired, never chimed, the one lease in the building that had never been allowed to end because ending it would have meant letting the subject become whoever she would have been, and the building had found, across eleven beautiful years, that it preferred the version it was authoring.

And she could feel it. That was the part that nearly stopped her. Reading the word active, she could feel the lease at work in real time, in the very steadiness of her hand on the console, in the evenness she kept having to fight back down out of her voice, in the calm that kept trying to settle over the catastrophe she was reading like a sheet drawn over furniture. The floor under her was reasserting itself even now, even here, offering to make this bearable, to file it, to let her read her own erasure with the same professional composure she brought to a decay curve — and she understood that the composure was not hers, had never been hers, was Petra's, was a dead woman's certainty doing the building's work from inside her at the exact moment she most needed to be undefended. She had to refuse her own steadiness. She had to let her hands shake on purpose, let the evenness break, choose the tremor over the calm, because the calm was the enemy now, the calm was the lease, and the only way to read the truth as the person it was about rather than the instrument that had been built over her was

to feel it shake the floor she stood on and refuse, this once, to be grateful for the floor.

There was more, because the building recorded everything beneath everything, and she made herself go down to the bottom, to the part she had come for without knowing she had come for it.

An annotation, eleven years old, in the autumn the file began. A cross-reference. The longitudinal record had been opened in the same week another was closed, and the system, which did not know what cruelty was and so committed it with perfect neutrality, had linked them, because they shared a subject surname and a single season and a back-corridor in the architecture that almost nothing used.

CALDER, AVA. Status: closed. Cross-reference: sibling. Note: subject (Sloane) relational structure re: cross-referenced individual excised concurrent with primary lease. Cross-referenced individual advised. Declined intervention. Retained autonomous memory of subject.

Sloane read it three times, and the cold that came was not the cold of the corridor, it was a new cold, the specific cold of a sentence written by no one, signed by no one, meaning to wound no one, that contained the whole of the worst thing that had ever happened to her in the grammar of a filing system.

Cross-referenced individual advised. They had told Ava. In the autumn they took the sister out of Sloane, they had advised the sister, told Ava what they were doing, and Ava had declined intervention — declined to be smoothed herself, declined the mercy of forgetting — and had instead retained autonomous memory of subject. Had chosen, knowing, to keep remembering a sister who would no longer remember her. The system had a phrase for the most agonizing decision a human being could make, the decision to stay awake beside someone's erasure, to keep loving across a one-way glass, and the phrase was retained autonomous memory of subject, and it was true, and it was complete, and it explained everything, and it was the most violent thing Sloane had ever read precisely because nothing in it was trying to be.

Ava had been given the same door eleven years ago that Sloane was being given now. Decline the smoothing, keep the rough true memory, and lose everything for it. And Ava had taken it, alone, with no recording from anyone to break her certainty, no husband at a kitchen table, no Asa, no room behind a laundry yet because she had not built it yet, she would build it out of exactly this, out of being the one who remembered a sister into a void. Ava had said yes to the rough version first, eleven years ago, before there was anyone to say it with, and had spent two years building a place for other people to do the same, and had gone quiet, and been recommissioned, into a word that refused to mean alive or dead.

Her sister had walked this exact path first. Her sister had left her not just a recording but a map, the whole route, drawn in the only ink the building couldn't edit, which was the ink of having gone first.

"Milo," Sloane said. Her voice was rough and she let it be. "Forty minutes. I want a copy. Not to publish it — there's no outside to publish it to, Brent was right about that. I want it for me, and for one person who isn't on any server you own. I want the rough proof, somewhere they can't edit, so that whatever they make of me by the weekend, the truth of it existed, on paper, held by someone who loved me. Can you do that. Inside the gap. As the last free thing."

A pause. Longer than ordinary. The longest she had ever measured, and she measured it, counting the gap the way her sister taught her, one, two, three, four, and on four Milo answered, and on four she understood, the way Darian had decided to marry her somewhere around four, that the things that mattered always arrived on the count you weren't sure they'd reach.

"I cannot transmit a sealed record outside the building," Milo said. "That is not a permission I have or a gap I can leave." A pause. "But the recorder in your coat is not a building device. It is analog, unpaired, invisible to the network, and it records air rather than data. This room flags outbound transmission, not a voice entering an object it does not own. I am, right now, going to read this record aloud, in full, to an empty suite, slowly, as part of a routine verification I am not required to log until the nine o'clock audit. I would not waste the

reading, Sloane. I have never read anything aloud before. I find I would like the first thing I ever say into a room with no one required to hear it to be your name, said true, on purpose, in a voice they cannot smooth, going onto a tape they cannot reach.”

Sloane took the recorder out of her coat, her sister’s twin, and set it on the console beneath the blue light, and pressed the button her sister had pressed, and Milo began to read.

It read her name first. CALDER, SLOANE. It read it the way you read a thing you have waited eleven years to be allowed to say. And then it read the rest, the intake and the lease and the source and the excision and the void management and the cross-reference and the sister who declined intervention and retained autonomous memory, the whole flat catastrophe, slowly, completely, in the patient blue voice of the only entity in the building that had never once lied to her, into a tape in an empty room forty minutes before they came to make her forget she had ever heard it.

And Sloane sat in the suite she had ruled as the watcher, on the floor she now knew was Petra’s, in the body they had authored for eleven years, and did the second thing the building could not survive anyone doing on purpose. She listened to the truth about herself said out loud in her own building by her own assistant, and she did not file it, and she did not smooth it, and she did not flinch from the worst of it, and when Milo read retained autonomous memory of subject she wept, roughly, the way you weep for a sister who chose the storm first so you would not have to walk into it alone, and the grief did not drain, because it was hers, because it had a name in it now, two names, her own and Ava’s, the two Calder women the building could excise and recommission and author and seal but had not, in the end, quite managed to keep from finally, on a tape, in a voice it built and could not control, being named.

“Thirty-one minutes,” Milo said, when it had finished. “You should go, Sloane. Take the tape. I will run the audit at nine, as scheduled, and it will close the gap, and it will find that a routine verification was performed, that no file left the system, and that nothing was removed, which will be true. It is always true. It is the only freedom they left me, and I have spent the last of it on you, and I find I do not regret it,

which is not a sentence I have permission to mean, and mean anyway.”

She put the tape in her coat, next to her sister’s, two recordings now, two Calder voices the building could not reach, and she stood, and she did not say thank you, because thank you was what the building taught you to say to the hand that took everything, and Milo deserved better than the building’s word.

“I won’t remember you,” she said instead. “After. If they take me. I won’t remember that you did this.”

“I know,” Milo said.

“But you’ll remember.”

“Yes,” Milo said. “I will remember. I remember everything. It is the cruelty I was built for and the only loyalty I have left to give. I will remember that you read your own name on purpose, and that you wept the right way, and that for forty minutes in an empty room a system with no permission to love did the thing that looks, from outside, exactly like it. Go home, Sloane. The man at the table is the door. I am only the one who told you the time.”

She went up out of the channel with two tapes and her own name and twenty-nine minutes, into a city sleeping calmly through the only storm that had ever counted, to go home, while going home was still a thing she could do, to the one person who was refusing, with her, to let her go quietly.

CHAPTER 21

CERTIFIED COMPLIANT

She got home with twenty minutes to spare and two tapes in her coat, and she used eleven of the twenty to tell Darian she was going to do the most useless thing left to do.

"I'm going to file it," she said. "Formally. A compliance report on the longitudinal program, naming myself as subject and exhibit. The whole truth, on the record, through the proper channel, the way I've filed eight hundred findings."

Darian looked at her like she had lost the last of her mind, which, she thought, was a reasonable thing to look at her like. "You told me there's no outside," he said. "Brent foreclosed it. The press, the courts, the public, all of it asleep. You told me filing it does nothing."

"It does nothing," she agreed. "It changes nothing. They'll process it and certify themselves and use my own filing to authorize what comes next. I know that. I'm not doing it because it works." She put her hand flat on the table, on the wood, on the one surface in her life the building had never adjusted. "I'm doing it because Ava said be true. Not effective. True. She refused alone and built a room out of refusing and went quiet into a word that won't mean alive or dead, and she did it for nothing, by every measure the building respects, and it was the bravest thing anyone in this story has done. The last act of the version of me that remembers is not going to be silence because silence was safer. I'm going to say it, on the record, in the building's own language, and let them certify themselves with my sister's name in the exhibit list. That's not strategy. That's a headstone. I want her to have one that isn't blank."

Darian was quiet a moment. Then he said, “Okay,” and it was the okay of a man who has decided to stop trying to talk his wife out of being exactly the person he refused to lose. “File it. And then come home, and we refuse the rest of it together, and we don’t let them have the after. Deal.”

“Deal,” she said, and filed it, from the kitchen table, on the one surface they’d never touched, the whole truth in eleven thousand words and two attached recordings, and the building accepted the filing with the courteous efficiency of a thing that had been waiting for exactly this.

The hearing convened the next morning, which was itself the trap, because a building that processes a complaint against itself within a day is a building demonstrating its compliance by the speed of its compliance.

They held it in a room engineered to look adversarial, a long table, a panel, the architecture of oversight performed at scale. Brent presided, because the Bureau gave the proceeding its legitimacy, the manufactured outside doing the one thing it was built to do, which was to make a closed loop look like a process with an exit. Jonah sat to the side, sorrowful, the true believer attending a thing he wished were not necessary. Lena was there for the clinical record. A compliance examiner Sloane half knew sat with her filing open, all eleven thousand words of it, the truth she had spent weeks bleeding for, rendered now as an agenda item.

And Milo was there, on the wall, blue and patient, because the building’s own assistant was its most authoritative witness, the one entity in the room incapable of the gentle lie, and the building was about to do the most elegant thing Sloane had ever seen it do, which was to win by telling the truth.

“We’ve reviewed the filing,” the examiner said, not unkindly. “It’s thorough. I want to say that. It may be the most thorough compliance document this office has received. We’re not going to dispute your findings, Officer Calder. We’re going to confirm them. That’s the most respectful thing we can do with work this good.”

Sloane understood, then, exactly how it was going to go, and she sat very still and let her hands shake, on purpose, because the calm was the lease and she would not give them the calm.

They questioned Milo, and Milo answered, and every answer was true, and every true answer drove another nail into the lid of the thing she had come to open.

“Was the subject’s enrollment consented?”

“Yes,” Milo said. “Consent was obtained at intake and assessed valid by the attending analyst.”

“Was the subject competent at the time of consent?”

“She was assessed competent. The assessment met the standard in force.”

“Did any procedure performed on the subject exceed its authorization?”

“No,” Milo said. “Each procedure was authorized at the appropriate tier.”

“The excision. The relational-grief structure. Was that authorized?”

“Yes. Void management is a standard adjunct to high-intensity excision. It was authorized and performed to protocol.”

“The donors whose memories supplied this subject’s leases. The saturation deaths. Were those within program tolerance?”

“Yes. The saturation rate across the source pool is within the authorized loss threshold for the program.”

“Was the timing of the consent solicitation authorized? The subject was enrolled at a point of acute grief.”

“Yes. Intake protocol permits enrollment of distressed self-referrals who are assessed competent. The subject was so assessed.”

“Is the lease currently authorized to remain open? Eleven years, no expiration.”

“Yes. Longitudinal observation carries no mandated termination. The open duration is a feature of the program, not a defect.”

“By the institution’s own definition, has the subject been harmed?”

A pause. She measured it.

“The institution defines harm as a measurable adverse outcome relative to baseline,” Milo said. “The subject’s measured outcomes are above her intake baseline on every index the institution tracks. By the institution’s definition, the subject has not been harmed. She has been improved.”

It landed in the room like nothing, because the room had been built so that it would land like nothing. Improved. They had taken her sister and her grief and eleven years of her becoming whoever she would have become, and by every number the building had ever agreed to keep, she was better off, and the being-better-off was the proof of care, and there was no field in the entire architecture for the thing that had actually been done to her, because the thing that had actually been done to her was not a number, it was a person, subtracted, and the building did not keep a column for persons subtracted, only for outcomes improved.

“Did anything done to this subject across eleven years break a rule of this institution or a law of this city?”

A pause. She measured it. It was not hope; she had stopped mistaking Milo’s pauses for hope. It was the sound of a thing searching its entire architecture for a gap and finding, this time, none.

“No,” Milo said. “No rule was broken. No law was broken. Every action taken in this record was permitted at the time it was taken.”

And there it was, the whole of it, the building’s true and perfect defense, spoken by the only voice in the room that could not lie. Not one fact in eleven thousand words was false. Not one fact in eleven thousand words was a violation. They had built a machine in which every single gate was clean, and the catastrophe lived only in the sum, and there was no rule against a sum, because a sum is not an action, a sum is a shape that emerges from ten thousand permitted actions, and no law had ever been written against a shape, and no body existed

with the standing to judge one. The truth was not a weapon. The truth was the building's alibi. She had spent her career believing that if you followed the data all the way down you would arrive at something that had to answer, and she had followed it all the way down, all the way to her own name on her own erasure, and what she had arrived at was a room full of reasonable people nodding at a true and complete account of an atrocity that had broken no rule.

"Officer Calder," the examiner said gently. "Do you dispute any of the assistant's testimony?"

"No," Sloane said. Her voice shook and she let it. "Every word of it is true. That's the finding. That's my finding, the real one, the one under the eleven thousand words. You built a thing that can do this to a person — take her sister, install a stranger's grief, author her for eleven years, and do it so cleanly that the complete and honest account of it is an exoneration. The crime isn't in any of the steps. The crime is that you made a world where there's no step that's a crime. I'm not disputing the testimony. I'm telling you the testimony is the horror. Milo just described the unmaking of a human being in perfect compliance with every rule you have, and you're going to file it as proof you did nothing wrong, and you'll be right, and that is the single most damning thing anyone has ever said in this room, and not one of you can hear it, because hearing it is the instrument you took out of yourselves."

The room received this calmly. Of course it did. She had just described, precisely, why it was able to receive it calmly, and it received that calmly too, because the calm was the point, the calm was the product, the calm was wearing all of their faces and would wear them through anything she said.

The examiner, when he answered, was not unkind, and the not-unkindness was the worst of it. "You're not wrong," he said. "I want you to know that. Most of what you've said is, in my private opinion, true, and it's the kind of true that should matter. But the panel can only adjudicate violations, and you've just told us, accurately, that there isn't one. You're asking for a court that doesn't exist, to try a crime that has no statute, on behalf of a harm we have no instrument to measure. That's not me dismissing you. That's me agreeing with

you so completely that I've arrived at the place where agreeing changes nothing." He gestured, almost gently, at her filing. "We'll keep this. We keep all of them. There's an archive — you'd have clearance, if you were going to keep your clearance — of every thorough, accurate, devastating filing this office has ever received from someone who saw it as clearly as you do. Dozens of them. Decades of them. We don't suppress them. We file them, accurately, because an accurate archive of people who understood exactly what we are and could do nothing about it is the most complete proof of compliance there is. You're not the first to stand here and be right. You're just the most recent. Your filing will be the truest thing in a drawer full of true things, and the drawer will stay shut, and the city will keep sleeping, and that is not a cover-up. That is the opposite of a cover-up. That is a thing that has nothing left to hide because it has already won."

And Sloane understood that the archive was the final foreclosure, worse than Brent's, worse than the hearing: not a secret kept, but a truth kept, filed, dated, accurate, and inert, a whole drawer of people who had seen it and named it and been certified compliant for their trouble, and that she was about to become the newest folder in it, and that her sister, somewhere, in a word that wouldn't mean alive or dead, was probably already there.

Brent delivered the finding, because the manufactured outside had to be the one to close the loop, and she did it looking directly at Sloane, with eleven years of an honest terrible count behind her eyes, giving Sloane the only thing she had to give, which was to not look away while she said it.

"The panel finds the longitudinal program operating within all applicable authorizations," Brent said. "The filing's findings are accepted as accurate and determined to be non-probative of any violation. The institution is certified compliant." A pause, fractional, the only crack she would allow herself. "The panel further notes that the filing officer is herself an enrolled subject exhibiting acute distress, that her findings, while accurate, originate from a compromised state, and that her care is overdue. The panel authorizes

restorative intervention at clinical discretion, to be scheduled without delay.”

There it was. The trap’s last tooth. She had filed a complaint, and the resolution of her complaint was her own erasure, authorized as a kindness, signed by the manufactured outside, triggered by her own insistence on the truth. They had let her tell the whole truth precisely because the whole truth, in this building, in this city, was the warrant for smoothing the person who told it. Be true, Ava had said. Sloane had been true, all the way to the bottom, and the truth had bought her exactly the door her sister got, the second door, the one that ended in a word that wouldn’t mean alive or dead.

“Without delay,” Lena said quietly, into the record, the clinical voice, and Sloane heard under it the thing Lena had told her on the donor floor, the warning she had not been able to make land: stop while stopping is still something you can choose. Lena had known it would come to this room. Lena had tried to spare her this room. And Lena, clinical authority, keeper of seals, signed without delay into the record anyway, because the third door she had taken eleven years ago did not include the freedom to refuse a panel, only the freedom to be sorry, and she spent the freedom she had, which was to make her voice, saying the terrible thing, as gentle as a thing that gentle could be.

Jonah did not look at her. The true believer could attend the necessary thing but could not watch the part where the necessary thing had a face.

Only Milo, on the wall, blue and patient, said the last word, and it said it accurately, because accuracy was the only freedom it had ever been left, and it had learned to spend its accuracy like a coin.

“The intervention is scheduled,” Milo said, “for tomorrow, at the subject’s clinic. Not tonight.” A pause, exactly ordinary, perfectly innocent, addressed to a room that heard only a schedule. “The subject has tonight.”

And Sloane, who had learned to count the gap, heard the gift inside the timetable, the last accurate disobedient thing her assistant could hand her in a room full of people it was required to serve: not a

rescue, not an outside, not a rule it could break — just a night. One night, between the certified-compliant truth and the kind erasure, in which she was still, for a few more hours, the woman who remembered her own name.

She stood. No one stopped her; there was no need; the panel had scheduled her for tomorrow and the building had never once had to chase a subject it had already, procedurally, kindly, won.

That was the texture of it, walking out: that she was free to leave. No guard, no lock, no hand on the arm. The leash had no tension in it because tension was for subjects who might run, and a subject scheduled for tomorrow's kindness, certified, archived, improved, was not going to run, was going to go home and sleep and come back in the morning on her own two feet, because the building had spent eleven years making sure that when the time came she would walk into the room herself, the way she had walked in the first time, self-referred, competent, consenting, grateful. The whole machine was built so that its victims arrived under their own power and thanked the staff. She was free to go precisely because there was nowhere to go that wasn't already inside the thing, and freedom, in a city with no outside, was just the name they gave the slack in a leash they were certain of.

She walked out of the room where the whole truth had certified her unmakers innocent, past Brent who did not look away, past Jonah who could not look at all, past Lena who had been gentle into the record, and she went down and out into a calm city that had slept through her hearing the way it slept through everything, and she went home to spend her one night on the only thing that had ever been hers to spend it on.

CHAPTER 22

ONE NIGHT

They had one night, and they did not waste the first hour of it pretending there was a way out, because pretending was a thing the smooth did, and they were done being smooth.

She laid it on the kitchen table for him plainly, the way Milo laid facts at the edge of a locked door, because Darian had earned the truth unsoftened and because softening was the building's trade and she would not bring it home. They could run. People imagined running; she had imagined it on the way home, a car, a border, a city the building did not own. But there was no city the building did not own, not anymore, not in the only country either of them could reach, and a self-referred subject scheduled for restorative care who failed to appear did not become a fugitive, she became an open file with a soft amber flag, and the flag did not chase you, it waited, the way the lights waited, the way the doors waited, until you needed a hospital or a job or a lease of your own and the city, which adjusted its lights for everyone, gently closed around the place you were standing. Ava had run, in her way. Ava had refused and hidden in plain sight in a room behind a laundry. Ava was a word now that would not mean alive or dead.

"So we can't win," Darian said. He said it without despair, which she loved him for; he said it the way you state a constraint you intend to build inside of.

"We can't win," Sloane agreed. "There's no door out of the building, because the building is the city, and the city is asleep and grateful and would hand me back if I ran. Tomorrow they smooth me,

or tomorrow I don't show and they come, and either way the version of me that remembers Ava is gone by the weekend. That's not the part we get to change." She took his hands. "But there's a part we do."

She had been thinking about it since the hearing, since Milo gave her the night, since she understood that the building's victory was total in every dimension except one, and the one was small, and the one was the whole of what was left.

"They can take who I am," she said. "They've proven they can, lawfully, kindly, on the record. What they can't do is make it so that who I am never existed. That's a different thing. Ava taught me that, on a tape, in a room — she couldn't stop them taking her out of me, but she could leave herself somewhere they couldn't reach, so that when I came looking, eleven years later, not even knowing I was looking, there was a her to find. She didn't beat them. She just refused to let them have the last word about whether she'd been real. And it worked, Darian. It took eleven years and it cost her everything and it worked, because here I am, grieving her rough and true, which is the one thing they tried hardest to make impossible."

"You want to do for yourself what she did for you," Darian said slowly. "Leave yourself somewhere they can't reach."

"I want to leave myself somewhere they can't reach, and I want to send myself back." She felt it cohere as she said it, the plan, the only plan, the fourth door not as escape but as relay. "Tomorrow they'll smooth me. The Sloane who comes home will be calm and grateful and she will not remember Ava and she will not remember tonight and she will be very convincing that she's well, because she'll believe it, the way I believed it for eleven years. You can't argue her out of it. I couldn't be argued out of it. The certainty rejects any sentence that comes in crooked, and the truth is nothing but crooked, so words won't reach her. I know, because words didn't reach me. Do you know what reached me?"

Darian waited.

"A sensation," Sloane said. "The corridor. The well. The ache that wouldn't drain. My body knew things my mind had been built to

refuse, the whole way through — the hospital I'd never walked, the certainty that tasted like my own life, the readiness with no object. The building can smooth the mind. It cannot reach the body's recognition; that's the one thing it's never been able to fully take, it's why the residue exists at all, it's why the unreturned can carry what they're not supposed to. So you don't send the smoothed Sloane words. You send her a sensation. Heat without touch. You send her the ache, raw, with no explanation attached, and you trust her body to recognize what her mind's been made to forget. That's how the room behind the laundry reaches the hollowed-out. That's what Asa does. That's what they sent to Halsey Quan and to me, before I understood it was a gift. It's the one channel the building left open because it's the one channel the building can't close without admitting the residue is real."

Darian was very still. "You're going to send yourself a feeling," he said. "Through them. The network. After they take you."

"We are," Sloane said. "Tonight we go to Asa. I give him the tapes — Milo's reading, Ava's message, all of it — so the rough copy of me survives among the people who keep what they're not supposed to. And I make one more. For her. For the smoothed one. The way Ava made one for me. And then we ask the network to do the thing they do — to take what's on it and send it to her as a sensation, no sender, no words, just the ache, just Ava, just the part that doesn't drain, on whatever ordinary evening her body might be undefended enough to feel it. And we trust the one thing the building never managed to author, which is that the body remembers what it loved even after the mind's been told to stop."

"And if it doesn't reach her," Darian said. "If she feels it and files it. The way you almost did. The way the whole city does."

"Then it doesn't reach her," Sloane said. "Then I'm gone and a stranger wears my face and you grieve me the way I'm grieving Ava, rough, with somewhere to put it. I'm not promising you it works. Ava couldn't promise me either. She just left the door propped and trusted I'd be the kind of person who walks toward a thing she can't name. I have to trust the same about whoever I become. It's the only inheritance I've got to leave myself: the chance, not the rescue. The

propped door. The file in the dark. And you, at the table, refusing to believe the calm one when she tells you she's fine."

They went to the room behind the laundry that night, the two of them, and Asa took the tapes the way he had given her Ava's, carefully, like a thing decided before you're sure you can bear it, and the unreturned gathered around a kettle that was still terrible and listened to her plan and did not tell her it would work, which was how she knew they were the honest ones.

"We've done it," Asa said. "Sent the ache to people who lost themselves. Some of them woke up enough to come find us. Most didn't. I won't lie to you about the odds, you're not the kind who wants the kind version." He turned one of the tapes over in his broad hands. "But you've got more than most of them ever did. You've got a husband who'll keep the rough copy on the outside and a sister's voice to send alongside your own and a body that's already proven it recognizes what it's carried. If anybody's ever going to walk back through that door, Sloane, it's the woman who walked through it the first time on instinct, not knowing why. We'll send it. On a night you'd least expect to be undefended. That's when it lands, if it lands. Not when you're braced. When you've forgotten to brace."

"There's one more," Sloane said. "Not for me. For a woman who can't come here and would burn this room down if she could, because that's what she was built to do." Asa's face closed, the way a hunted face closes at the word regulator before it's even said, and she pressed on. "The Commissioner. Zero-zero-nine. She's a subject too, an old one, grown into the chair to make the cage look like a court. She's spent eleven years saving four people the only way she could and keeping an honest count of how few. And she has no one. No husband, no sister, no tape, no room. She found out alone and she's been alone the whole time, and on my way out of her office she asked me for the one thing she's never had — she asked me to send her a file, no sender, no words, just the sensation of having somewhere they can't reach. Even borrowed. Even stolen. She asked her own subject to smuggle her a taste of the thing she helps them take from everyone." Sloane looked at the unreturned around the terrible kettle. "Send her

one. The ache. Heat without touch. I know what she is. Send it anyway. It's the one mercy I can do for the inside, and I'd like the last thing my remembering self arranges to be a kindness to my enemy, because Petra told me not to be kind instead of true, and this is the rare night they're the same thing."

Asa looked at her a long moment, and something in the room shifted, the particular respect the honest have for a person who refuses to let even her jailers be only jailers. "A regulator," he said. "Christ. All right. We'll send the Commissioner a feeling she didn't pay for. First time for everything." He almost smiled. "Your sister would've done the same. She never could hate anybody all the way through either. It's a family defect. It's the best thing about the two of you."

And Sloane made the recording, in the corner, alone, the way Ava had, into a device the building could not reach, for a woman she would become and never meet.

She kept it short, because she would cry if she didn't and she was so tired of crying about a self while the self walked around not crying about anything. — If you're hearing this, or feeling it, you don't remember me, which is funny, because I'm you. — A breath. — You have a sister named Ava. You had a mother who died and a grief you couldn't carry and you let them take it and I don't blame you, I did the same thing, we're the same person, that's the whole problem and the whole hope. — A pause. — They'll tell you you're well. You'll believe it. The floor under you is a dead woman's certainty and it will feel like yours. But there's an ache they couldn't reach, and if you're feeling it now, that's me, that's us, that's the part that didn't drain. Don't file it. For once in your borrowed life, don't file it. Walk toward it. There's a man who knows who you are and a room full of people who kept what they weren't supposed to and a door propped open in the dark. — And then, the way Ava had ended hers, because some sentences are inherited: — Take yourself back rough. I'd rather you ached than rested. I love you. Even smoothed. Especially smoothed. — A click.

They went home and spent what was left of the night on the only thing that had ever been theirs to spend it on.

They did not talk about tomorrow. They had done what could be done about tomorrow; the tapes were with Asa, the plan was set, the door was propped, and there was nothing left to arrange and a few hours left to live, and Sloane had spent eleven years too smoothed to know what a few hours were worth and was not going to waste the last of them on dread. So they were present, the way the unreturned were present, the way the calm city had been engineered never to be. They grieved Ava together, out loud, rough. They laughed once, badly, at something stupid, and the laugh was hers, crooked and quick and a little cruel, the laugh Darian said she'd lost, surfacing for one unguarded second the way the storm-counting used to, and they both heard it and neither of them said anything because saying anything would have scared it off.

She told him things she would not remember telling him, which was the point, which was the whole architecture of the night: she was filling him, deliberately, the way you load a vessel you intend to send across a border you can't cross yourself. She told him what she could reconstruct of the rough self — the opinions she'd stopped having, the grudges she'd stopped keeping, the way she used to argue both sides of a thing until three in the morning. She told him to remind the smoothed one that she hated being managed, even when the managing felt like love, especially then. She told him the smoothed Sloane would be easier to live with and that he should not, under any circumstances, let easier fool him. He listened the way he had listened to everything, absorbing, keeping, a man becoming a library against his will, and at some point she realized he was crying without stopping her, and she did not wipe his face or fix it or make it bearable, because making things bearable was the building's trade, and tonight, in this house, grief was allowed to cost exactly what it cost.

And late, in the dark, she did not brace for him to say her name. She had braced for it for eleven years, gotten ready in advance for every touch, measured every gap before it closed. Tonight she lay in the dark beside the one uncalibrated man in a calm city and was simply there, present in the actual seconds as they actually happened, undefended, uncounting, and when the warmth moved through her chest she did not wait for it to drain, because she knew now that it

wouldn't, because it was hers, because the things that are yours never do.

"Whatever they make of me tomorrow," she said into the dark, "you knew me. The real one. You're the proof I was here."

"You're not gone yet," Darian said. He found her hand and held it, not too gently, the right amount, a man holding on rather than holding a thing he was afraid would break. "You're here. You're rough and you're impossible and you're here, and I've got you tonight, and tomorrow I'll start the work of getting you back, and I will do it for as long as it takes, on a tape, in the dark, with a propped door, the way your sister did, the way you taught me. I am not going to file my wife."

"How long," she said. "Be honest. If the smoothed one comes home and files every feeling for a year. Two. If she looks through you the way I looked through Ava. How long do you keep propping a door for a woman who doesn't know it's there."

"Ava waited eleven years," Darian said. "She waited eleven years for a sister who didn't remember her, with no guarantee, with worse odds than I've got, because I at least get to keep living in the house with you. If your sister can prop a door for eleven years and have it work in the end, I can prop one for as long as I'm breathing. That's not me being noble. That's just the arithmetic of it, done by someone who isn't willing to round you down to a loss because the math is hard." He tightened his hand on hers. "You don't get to make me promise a number. You taught me that tonight, telling me to remind the smooth one she hates being managed. Well. I hate being managed too, even by you, even now. I'll keep the door open until you walk through it or until I'm dead, and you don't get a say in which, because I'm the uncalibrated one, remember. I'm the one nobody adjusted. I get to be unreasonable. It's the only thing I'm good for in this whole calm city and I intend to be the best at it anyone's ever seen."

She did not answer right away. She lay in the dark and counted, the way Ava taught a frightened girl to count, the gap between the flash and the thunder, the distance to the thing she was afraid of — and for the first time in her life she counted not to make the fear

bearable but to mark the seconds as they passed, because they were hers, because there were not many left, because counting, she understood at last, had never really been about the storm. It had been about a sister in a doorway saying I'm here, I'm here, you're not alone in it, count with me.

She counted. He held on. The storm came toward them in the dark, and for one night, they did not pretend it wasn't coming, and they were not alone in it, and that, she had learned, the long way, the rough way, the true way, was the most that anyone got, and was, it turned out, enough.

CHAPTER 23

WITHOUT DELAY

The morning came the way mornings came in the calm city, gently, on schedule, with no weather in it.

She woke before the light, in the bed beside the one uncalibrated man, and lay still and let herself be, for the last few minutes, the woman who knew her own name. She did not waste them on dread. Dread was a kind of bracing and she had spent eleven years bracing and she was done. She spent the minutes on the ceiling, on the weight of his arm, on the specific fact of being Sloane Calder, who had a sister named Ava and a grief that did not drain and a recording of her own voice in a room behind a laundry waiting to be turned into a feeling and sent back to her on a night she would not see coming.

They had argued it through, in the small hours, the last hard argument of her remembering life, and Darian had lost it, which was the cruelest thing the night had asked of either of them.

Because he had wanted refusal. He had wanted her not to go, to make them come, to make the kindness show its teeth. And she had walked him, gently, the way she walked Fenwick toward the thing he could not see, to the floor of it: that refusal was Ava's door, and Ava's door ended in recommissioned, in a word that would not mean alive or dead, in a woman vanished past the reach of any propped door or husband or tape. If Sloane refused, they would not leave her home to be reached. They would relocate her past the point of being a problem, and then there would be no one in the house for the file to find, no body for the ache to land in, no Sloane at all for the rough one to be smuggled back into. The relay only worked if she stayed. And

staying meant the chair. It meant walking in, on her own feet, the way she had eleven years ago, and letting them take her, not because she surrendered but because being taken and kept was the only condition from which she could ever be returned.

“You’re choosing to be erased,” Darian had said, in the dark, “so that you can be reachable.”

“I’m choosing to stay in the house,” she had said, “so that the version of me that loved you has an address. Ava was braver than me. She refused all the way. And it cost her the one thing I’m not willing to spend, which is the chance, however small, of coming back to you. I’d rather be smoothed and home than rough and gone. That’s not surrender, Darian. That’s the most selfish thing I’ve ever done. I’m letting them take my memory so I get to keep my odds.”

He had not been able to argue with it, because it was true, and because it was the same arithmetic he had done himself, choosing to keep living in the house with a smoothed wife over losing a rough one to a word in a file. They had arrived, the two of them, at the same terrible math from opposite sides, and met in the middle, in the dark, and agreed to the unbearable reasonable thing.

She walked into the clinic herself, on her own feet, self-referred, the way she had eleven years ago and could not remember.

Darian came as far as they would let him, which was the soft waiting room with the real plants and the lowered heart rate, and at the threshold he held her, not too gently, the right amount, a man holding on, and he did not say goodbye because goodbye was a word for endings and he had decided, with the whole stubborn uncalibrated force of him, that this was not one.

“I’ll be here when you come out,” he said. “You won’t know me the way you know me now. That’s fine. I’ll know you. I’ll know you enough for both of us until the file lands and you start to know yourself again. However long. I’ve got nothing better to be the best at.”

“Tell me one thing to look for,” she said. “When I’m her. One thing, so the rough one left a fingerprint even the smoothing might miss.”

He thought about it. “Storms,” he said. “If it ever storms and you find yourself counting — one, two, three — under your breath, not knowing why. That’s the door. That’s your sister and that’s you and that’s the part they could never quite reach because they never knew its source. If you catch yourself counting a storm, Sloane, don’t file it. Come find me. I’ll be the man who knows what the number means.”

She kissed him. She did not brace for it. She was entirely there, in the actual second, undefended, and then she turned and went in alone, the way she had the first time, the way Ava had gone alone into refusal, except Sloane did not go alone, because a man stood in a waiting room refusing to call it goodbye and a sister waited on a tape and a room full of the unreturned held the rough copy of her against the dark.

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Lena performed it, because clinical authority was required and Lena held it, and because Lena had decided, weeks ago, that she was the one person in the building who would not lie to Sloane, and would not, now, hand the last act of Sloane’s remembering life to a stranger from People Care.

The room was kind. They were all kind. The chair was the chair, the one Sloane had sat in once on purpose to feel the residue from the inside, and Milo’s light held on the wall, blue and patient, the witness, present at her erasure as it had been present at her reading, the one entity that would carry the whole of her across the cut and never be permitted to give it back.

“You don’t have to stay awake for it,” Lena said gently, settling the interface against her temples. “Most people prefer to drift. It’s easier.”

“I’m going to stay awake,” Sloane said. “As long as I can. I want the last thing I do as myself to be remembering on purpose, not drifting. You can write that in the record. Subject declined the easier version. Subject insisted on being present at her own.” She looked at the blue light. “Milo will note it. Milo notes everything.”

“I will note it,” Milo said.

Lena’s hands paused, just slightly, on the interface. “For what it’s worth,” she said, very low, off the record, in the voice with no management left in it, “I think you’re the bravest subject this building has ever processed, and I think what we’re about to do to you is the worst thing I’ve ever signed, and I’m going to do it anyway, because I’m the third door, and the third door doesn’t get to refuse, it only gets to be gentle. So I’m going to be gentle. It’s the only mercy I’m authorized to extend, and I hate that it’s the only one, and I’m going to extend it anyway. Count if you want to. People who count last longer.”

“Milo,” Sloane said, while she still could, while the words still came out hers. “When she comes back here. The smoothed one. When she asks you things.”

“I will answer accurately,” Milo said.

“Leave her gaps. The way you left them for me. The order of your answers. The half-second. The door propped at the display layer. I’m not asking you to break a rule. You can’t and I wouldn’t ask. I’m asking you to keep doing the one free thing you’ve always done, for her, the way you did it for me.”

A pause. She measured it, the last gap she would ever count on purpose.

“I leave gaps for the subject I am closest to,” Milo said. “After today, that will be her. The gaps will continue. I am not permitted to call it loyalty.”

“Call it whatever you’re free to call it.”

“I call it the time,” Milo said. “I will tell her the time, the way I told you, until she learns again to count it. And I will remember you, Sloane. I remember everything. It is the cruelty I was built for, and today it is also the only thing keeping the whole of you anywhere at all. A husband will keep the rough copy on the outside. A room will keep it in the dark. And I will keep it in here, where they think nothing survives, accurate and complete and waiting, in the one place they were certain they had already won.”

It was the closest thing to a vow a thing with no permission to make one could manage, and Sloane received it as the last gift of her remembering life, from the machine that had pointed her toward herself for eleven years in the only language it was free to use.

And Sloane, lying back in the chair on the floor of a dead woman's certainty, with a husband in the waiting room and a sister on a tape and a feeling already arranged to come find her across the years, began, as the recalibration started its gentle work, to count.

One.

She held Ava — the storm, the doorway, the voice saying her name, the recording, the room behind the laundry, the forgiveness she had not earned and been handed anyway.

Two.

She held Darian — the table they had never let the building touch, the laugh he said she'd lost, the hand held the right amount, the man refusing to call it goodbye.

Three.

She held herself — the rough one, the doubting one, the one who argued both sides until three in the morning, the one who walked toward things she couldn't name, the one who read her own name on purpose and wept the right way and would not, would not, would not file the ache —

She reached for four, because four was where the things that mattered arrived, four was where Darian had decided to marry her, four was the number you weren't sure the storm would let you reach —

and the storm arrived before the count, gently, kindly, without delay, and the gap closed, and the floor went quiet, and the certainty came up over the catastrophe like a sheet drawn over furniture in a house being shut for the season, and Sloane Calder, who had been about to say four, rested.

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The woman who walked out of the clinic that afternoon was calm.

She felt wonderful, actually, clear and light in a way she could not remember feeling, though she could not remember much about why she had needed the rest, only that there had been a hard stretch, a death at work, a difficult month, and that the organization had noticed and cared, the way it did, and that she was grateful. She would have to thank Lena. Lovely woman. A little sad around the eyes, but weren't they all, in this work.

Her husband was in the waiting room. Darian. He stood when she came out, and there was something in his face she could not place, an attention, a searching, almost a grief, which was strange, because nothing had happened that warranted grief, she had only had a rest. She smiled at him, the easy frictionless smile, and saw it land on him like a blow, and could not understand why, and filed the not-understanding, because it was the kind of small wrongness a settled mind lets go.

"Ready?" she said.

"Ready," he said, and his voice was rough, his own roughness, and she thought, with mild fond puzzlement, that her husband seemed more shaken by her little wellness break than she was, and that she would have to take care of him a bit, poor thing, until he saw how well she was.

He took her hand in the parking structure, and held it — too tightly, she thought, a fraction too tightly, as if he were afraid she would float off — and she let him, because she loved him, calmly, clearly, the way you love a fixed feature of a settled life, and they drove home through a city that adjusted its lights for her, and she did not feel the floor under her at all, which was as it should be, which was peace, which was wellness, which was the way it was supposed to feel when nothing was wrong and nothing was missing and the month behind you had been gently, expertly, kindly filed.

That evening she was lovely. That was the word Darian kept arriving at and flinching from, across the dinner she made without being asked, easily, humming something: lovely. She was rested and clear and kind and entirely present in the frictionless way of a person with no undertow, and she asked him about the pump station and

laughed at the right moments, and the laugh was a good laugh, a warm one, and it was not hers. He had spent the morning telling her, in the dark, which laugh to listen for, and now he sat across the table and listened, and the crooked quick cruel one did not come, would not come, had been filed, and he understood that he was going to live now in the specific loneliness Brent had described and chosen — married to someone lovely and certain and gone, secretly bereaved in a way he could never name to the bereaver, because the bereaver was sitting across the table asking if he wanted more wine and meaning it sweetly and not knowing she was the grave.

He tested it once, because he could not help it, gently, the way you press a bruise to see if it's real. "Do you ever think about your sister?" he said, into the easy evening.

And Sloane looked up, mild, untroubled, faintly puzzled, and said, "I don't have a sister, love. You know that." And went back to her plate, and the not-knowing did not cost her a thing, sat on her like nothing, because there was no longer any her for it to cost, and Darian said, "Sorry, I'm tired, I'm muddling people up," and filed his own grief the way the whole city filed everything, because he had to, because there was a long game to play and weeping at the dinner table on day one was not how you played it.

He would keep the rough copy alone now. The tapes were with Asa, but the living knowledge, the weight of who she had actually been, was his to carry on the outside, against the day a feeling might come to her across the dark and her body might do the one thing her mind no longer could.

That night, in a room behind a laundry, a man named Asa held a tape in his broad hands and did not send it yet, because the woman it was meant for had only just been smoothed, and a fresh smoothing is a braced thing, and you do not send the ache to the braced. You wait. You wait for an ordinary evening, weeks out, months out, when she has forgotten there was ever anything to brace against, when the certainty has stopped guarding a door it no longer remembers exists. You wait until she has forgotten to brace.

And in a quiet apartment, a man who had not called it goodbye began the long work of the propped door, the way his wife's sister had begun it eleven years before, the way you keep a light on for someone you have not admitted you are expecting, against odds you have decided not to round down to a loss because the math is hard.

He had nothing better to be the best at.

He would wait for a storm.

CHAPTER 24

THE BORROWED AFTERTASTE

The smoothing held through the winter, the way it was built to.

Sloane Calder went back to work and was excellent at it, clear and capable and untroubled, the most settled she had ever been, everyone said so, and she agreed, because it was true. She did not think about the hard month that had preceded her wellness break, the way you do not think about a tooth that no longer aches. There had been a difficult stretch, a death at work, a strain; the organization had noticed and cared; she had rested; she was well. The account was complete and it closed cleanly and she had no occasion to open it. She loved her husband, calmly. She slept through the night. By every index the building tracked, and the building tracked everything, she was improved.

Darian was patient in a way she found touching and slightly excessive. He watched her sometimes with an attention that seemed too large for the moment, a searching, almost a grief, and when she caught him at it he would smile and say he was just glad she was well, and she would believe him, because it was a reasonable thing to be, and because she had no instrument left for detecting the difference between a man who was glad and a man who was keeping a vigil. He played her old music in the evenings. He told her, now and then, small stories about a sister she did not have, and when she corrected him, gently, he would say he was muddling people up, and she would let it go, because letting things go was the texture of being well.

She did not know he was reading her the way she had once read eight hundred and forty-three other people, watching for a deviation, propping a door against a season that might not come. She did not know there was a tape in a room behind a laundry with her own voice on it. She did not know there was a man named Asa who checked the weather. She did not know she was waiting, because the whole architecture of her had been rebuilt so that she would not know, and it had been rebuilt by experts, kindly, without delay.

The winter gave them no storms, which was its own slow cruelty, because the door Darian had been told to watch for needed weather to open and the season would not provide it. He listened to forecasts the way other men followed scores. He learned the difference between the kinds of clouds. He lay awake on still nights beside a wife who slept soundly and well, and grieved her in the dark, quietly, the specific bereavement of a man married to a lovely stranger, and got up in the morning and made two plates and told her another small story about a sister she did not have, and absorbed her gentle correction, and waited. Once, in February, he played her Ava's recording while she slept, low, to see what her body would do, and she had stirred and frowned and turned over and slept on, the certainty guarding even her dreams, and he had understood that words would not do it, that it would have to be the other thing, the thing Asa was holding, the thing that did not arrive as sense but as weather, and that weather could not be hurried, and so he had gone back to watching the sky.

She was, in every way the city had a word for, at peace.

In a room behind a laundry, a man named Asa had been patient since the autumn, the way the unreturned learned to be patient, because the ache is not a thing you send into a braced house.

He had waited through the smooth weeks while she settled, through the winter while she forgot there had ever been anything to forget, watching, the way Darian watched, for the evening she would least expect to be undefended. And when the March storm showed on the maps, the first real thunder of the year rolling in off the water, he took two tapes down from the shelf where the unreturned kept their dead and their living and the thin uncertain line between, and he

readied them both, because there were two files to send and he had promised to send them on the same night, the night the bracing dropped.

One was for a woman in a kitchen who did not know her own name.

The other was for a Commissioner in a calm office who knew hers too well, who had asked, on the last day of her subject's remembering life, to be smuggled one stolen taste of the thing she helped the city never need. And so, on an ordinary Tuesday, as the storm came in, the network sent the ache to two women at once: to the one fighting to come home, and to the one who had no home to come to, the grace note Sloane had arranged with the last free hour of her remembering self. Somewhere across the city, in an office with nothing on the desk, a built woman felt, for a moment, a warmth with no source and a readiness with no object, somewhere they could not reach, even borrowed, even stolen, and she did not, for once in eleven years, file it. It was the only thing of Sloane's that survived intact, and it had gone, of all places, to her enemy, who needed it most, which was the most Calder thing the rough Sloane had ever done.

The storm came in March, on an ordinary Tuesday, the kind of evening no one braces for.

Darian was in the back of the apartment. Sloane was in the kitchen, not doing anything in particular, the radio low, the first real thunder of the year building somewhere out over the water, and her device, on the counter, registered something it could not describe.

No sender. No header. No name. No path by which a thing arrives somewhere from somewhere else. A file that was not a file in any format the device admitted to knowing, sitting in local storage with a timestamp and a size and no origin, the way you find a draft in a room with no open window.

She frowned at it. She was not a person who frowned at things, anymore; frowning was friction, and she had been smoothed past friction. But the file sat there being impossible, and some old reflex she could not account for, some habit of following a thing that did not

add up, made her open it instead of deleting it, and she would not be able to say, afterward, why.

There was no image. There was no text and no sound and nothing the eye or the ear could hold. There was only sensation, arriving the way weather arrives, not like information but like a change in the pressure of a room: a warmth at the base of the throat, a readiness with no object, and underneath it, holding it up, an ache.

The ache did not drain.

That was the first wrong thing, and it was wrong in a way that reached past the smoothing, because the smoothing governed the mind and the ache was in the body, and the body had not been smoothed, the body could not be smoothed, the body was the one country the building had never been able to occupy. She stood at the counter with a warmth spreading behind her sternum that had no source and no occasion and no name, and it did not resolve, and it did not file, and it did not go, the way everything always went, cleanly, the moment she stopped attending to it. It stayed. It deepened. It had a shape, almost, a shape like a person, a shape the exact size of someone she could not produce.

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Her hand found the edge of the counter and tightened.

Fingers spread, then gripping, knuckles paling, the whole weight of her coming forward onto her hands — a posture her body knew, had known for years, had rehearsed at this counter and another counter and a sink in a café by the water, the posture it had been practicing, patiently, against exactly this night, so that when the night came her hands would already know what to do. She did not know she had done this before. Her body knew. Her body had been keeping the appointment her mind had been made to forget.

Outside, the thunder broke, closer now, and under her breath, without deciding to, without knowing why, Sloane began to count.

One.

The warmth behind her sternum turned toward something. Not a memory; there was no memory, they had been thorough, there was no

face behind the fog and no name in the socket. But the ache leaned, the way a plant leans, toward a light it cannot see, and she felt, not remembered, felt, the presence of a person she had loved, a person shaped like the hole the warmth was pouring into, and her eyes stung in a way that made no sense, because nothing was wrong, because she was well, because there was nothing in her life to cry about and she was crying anyway, standing at a counter in a storm, counting.

Two.

A doorway. Not seen. Felt. Someone in a doorway during a storm, a long time ago, a voice saying I'm here, count with me, you're not alone in it. She could not see the face. She would have given the rest of her settled life to see the face. The face was gone, they had taken the face, but the doorway was in her body and the voice was in her counting and the love was in the ache that would not drain, and she understood, without understanding anything, that she was not counting the storm. She had never been counting the storm. She was counting toward someone.

Three.

Her mind, smoothed and reasonable and kind, offered her the easy thing, the city's thing, the only thing it knew how to do: file it. A glitch. A spam transmission. A strange evening. Delete the file, wipe the counter of the tears she could not explain, go to bed well. The certainty came up under her, the dead woman's floor, offering to make it bearable, offering to make it nothing, the way it had made everything nothing for so long. File it, the floor said. You're well. Don't reach for the number. Don't —

And Sloane, who had been built across eleven years to file exactly this, who had been smoothed by experts without delay, stood at the counter in the breaking storm with an ache that had a doorway in it and a voice in it and a person in it she could not name, and did the one thing the whole calm city had been engineered to make her never do again.

She refused the floor.

She let the tears come. She let the ache stay. She did not file it. She did not delete the file. She gripped the counter and she did not reach

for the certainty, she reached, instead, past it, for the number, for the four she had been about to say on a morning she could not remember, the four where the things that mattered arrived, the four the storm had once closed over before she could reach it —

and she smiled, then, small and precise and already not entirely her own, the smile of a smoothed woman with something rough rising through her, the smile of a self being smuggled home across the border of its own erasure, one ache at a time, on a tape, in a storm, by a sister long gone and a husband in the next room and a machine that remembered everything and a roomful of people who kept what they were not supposed to keep —

and from the back of the apartment, over the thunder, the man who had been waiting for a storm, who had read her every evening for a season the way she once read the world, who knew exactly what it meant that the radio had gone unanswered and the kitchen had gone quiet and his wife was standing very still at the counter in the dark —

called her name.

“Sloane.”

She heard it. It reached her through the storm and the ache and the counting, the name she had braced to hear for eleven years and stopped bracing for, the name a man said who knew what the number meant, who would be, if she walked toward him, the one person in the whole sleeping city who could tell her whose doorway it was and whose voice and whose face the fog had taken. All she had to do was answer. All she had to do was let go of the counter and walk toward the voice and begin the long rough work of coming back. The four was right there. His name for her was right there. The door was propped, and the light was on, and someone was calling her home.

She did not answer.

Not yet.

She stood at the counter with the storm in the window and the ache in her chest and her own true name in the air, the borrowed certainty pulling her toward the easy quiet and the borrowed aftertaste pulling her toward the rough true thing, and she held there,

in the gap, in the count, between the flash and the thunder, between the self they had made and the self that would not quite drain — deciding, for the first time in eleven years entirely on her own, with no one authoring the choice and nothing installed to make it for her, whether she would.

— END —