

WHERE THE LIGHT CAN'T FIND YOU

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a dark coat, sits in profile on a simple metal chair. She is looking out through a large glass door. Outside the door, a person is walking away into a brightly lit hallway, their figure silhouetted against the light. The floor is dark and reflective, showing the light from the hallway. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

MARISOL REYES

Where the Light Can't Find You

by Marisol Reyes

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Chapter 1

The Intake

She pressed her thumb into the edge of the counter until it hurt. The buzzer sounded again, sharp and thin under the hum of the lights. Rain marked the glass in a steady tap. Marla looked over from the file cart.

"You ready?" Marla said.

Elena let her hand fall. "Open."

Marla hit the button. The outer door clicked. A small figure pushed through and blinked in the bright lobby. Water fell off the hem of a gray hoodie. She held one arm close to her ribs, keeping it in place.

"Hi," Elena said, already moving. "Come in all the way. Close that for me. Yeah." She reached for the inner handle and slid the bolt. The lock thudded. She exhaled once. "I'm Elena. This is Marla. You're safe here."

The girl, a woman really, so young, looked at the floor. Her jaw was swelling along one side. Eyes red, not from alcohol. Her pupils were wide. The muscles around her eyes had gone tight. She was shaking hard enough that her teeth tapped.

"Jenna," she said, voice thin. "Can I, " She glanced at the outer door.

"Inside first," Elena said. "Shoes can drip, it's okay. Marla, towel."

Marla stepped out from behind the desk and handed over a clean towel. "You can put your coat there," Marla said, pointing to a chair back already lined with damp wool. "We've got coffee. It's not great, but it's hot."

Jenna shook her head. "I don't..." Her voice hitched. She swallowed it down. Her breath kept catching. She kept trying to get a full one and

couldn't.

Elena kept her tone even. "Do you need a bathroom? Water? A place to sit where it's quiet?"

"I just..." Jenna's hand went to her pocket. She pulled out a phone and gripped it hard. The screen lit up her palm with a list of missed calls. Ten, eleven, twelve. The numbers were not names. They were numbers.

"Okay," Elena said. Her own hands went still. "We have a lockbox for phones. It helps with tracking. We can power it down together. You choose the code."

Jenna looked up, startled. She didn't step back. She blinked hard and nodded once. "Okay."

Elena held out her hand. Jenna's fingers brushed hers as she passed the phone over. Cold. The phone was warm. Elena kept her face quiet. She hit the side buttons, held them, watched the shutdown slider move. "What else are you carrying? Just the phone?"

"Keys," Jenna said. "That's it."

"We'll clip them to a tag with your name when we do your intake." Elena set the phone in a metal lockbox and slid it into a drawer behind the desk. She caught Marla's eye. "Lights stay up. Close the blinds."

Marla moved to the windows and lowered the blinds. The blinds dropped. The light felt contained. The sound from the street was gone. Rain hit the metal awning in a steady tap. The heater clicked on and off. The floor smelled of bleach.

"I don't want the police," Jenna said. It came out fast. She braced, shoulders up.

"Okay," Elena said. No surprise, no argument. "No one's calling anyone without you telling us. No calls tonight unless you ask. Breathe a little. Can you do that?"

Jenna tried. It stuck. She tried again and found it. Shaky, but the air came.

"Good," Elena said, softer. "You're here. That's the hard part."

A resident in socks padded into the lobby, saw Jenna, and stopped by the coffee pot. She stirred sugar into a chipped mug and didn't say anything. Elena didn't look over. She kept the resident out of her line of sight and focused on Jenna.

"We do intake in the office," Elena said. "It's warm in there. We can get a towel on that side of your face. Yes?"

Jenna nodded. "Okay."

Elena led the way down the hall. She moved at Jenna's pace, slow enough that it didn't look like slowing. The office door was open. The fluorescent light buzzed. A framed poster on the wall listed house rules in plain black letters. No overnight visitors. No weapons. Quiet hours at ten. The chair legs had scraped marks into the vinyl.

Elena put a towel on the desk and folded it once more, thick. "Here."

Jenna pressed it to her jaw. She hissed. "Sorry," she said immediately.

"Don't apologize," Elena said. "Sit. Name, age, any meds you're on. We'll go one by one."

"Jenna Park," she said. "Twenty-two. No meds. I was, " She stopped. Her eyes went glassy. Not tears. Her focus drifted. Her breath shortened.

Elena slid a chipped mug across the desk. "Tea. Just hold it if you want."

Jenna wrapped her free hand around the mug. Her fingers stopped shaking as the mug warmed her skin. Elena wrote her name in block letters on the intake form. Her pen moved clean. "Do you need medical attention right now? Any head trauma, vomiting, dizziness? Pregnant?"

"No," Jenna said. "Just, my ribs. And here." She touched the towel.

"Can I look?" Elena kept her voice level. She held the gloves waiting. Not a big deal. Routine.

Jenna nodded and lifted the towel. The bruise ran along the jawline toward the ear. The skin was split on the inside where teeth had hit. Elena noted the color, the swelling, the absence of bleeding now. She checked Jenna's pupils with the little penlight. Round. Reactive. Good. She looked at her hands. Red marks at the wrist. Fingertip shapes, not rope.

Elena didn't say any of that out loud. She clicked the light off and put it down.

"Do you want to go to urgent care? We can go tonight. We can go in the morning. It's your call."

Jenna shook her head hard. "No. Please don't make me go anywhere right now."

"I'm not making you do anything," Elena said. "If you change your mind, we go. We can bring someone in to check you if anything changes. For now, ice, rest, food. Okay?"

"Okay."

Elena wrote as Jenna spoke: last address, emergency contact, none she wanted to list. Safe to use voicemail? No. Safe to text? No. Safe for mail? Not now.

"Tell me what happened tonight," Elena said. "Not everything. Just enough to help us keep you safe right this minute."

"He, " Jenna wrapped her arms around herself without thinking and then forced them back down. She fixed her gaze on the desk. "He saw my browsings. He grabbed my phone. He keeps..." She stopped. Swallowed. Tried again. "He keeps saying I should be good for him. 'Be good for me, Jenna. Be good and I'll make it easy.'"

Her throat tightened once.

Elena's pen paused. She put it down. She didn't blink for a second. A muscle in her jaw tightened and let go.

"Okay," she said. She picked up the pen. "How often does he say that?"

"A lot. When he wants me to do something." Jenna's voice was flat, practiced. This wasn't new language. "He says I make him do it. That if I just..." She bit the inside of her lip. She shook her head once, sharp. "Sorry. I don't know why I'm talking so much."

"You're not," Elena said. "You're telling me what he says. That's useful. We log his language. It helps us predict him."

"Predict?"

"Patterns," Elena said. "People repeat themselves." She wrote the phrase in a margin and boxed it. "When did you last see him?"

"An hour ago. I ran when he went to the bathroom."

"Did he see you leave?"

Jenna shook her head. "I don't think so." Her weight shifted toward the door.

Elena caught it. "You can leave if you want," she said. "We don't lock people in. But if you go now, you're out there alone. If we plan your exit, we can build in space using time, people, and exits. You can also stay, sleep, and do nothing else tonight. That is a plan too. You choose."

Jenna held the towel to her jaw, focused on the feverish spot of pain there. She was breathing a little easier now. "If I stay, he'll come."

"He might try. He doesn't get inside," Elena said. "We have protocols. We keep our patterns irregular. We watch. We call when you say. For tonight, we keep the lights up and the door closed. We can put you in an interior room. No windows to the street."

"Is that bad?"

"It's safer for now. Less for him to look at. Less for you to think about."

Jenna nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Good." Elena stood. "Marla, Room twelve."

Marla appeared at the door, cardigan sleeves pushed to her elbows, badge swinging on its lanyard. "Interior," she said. "Extra blankets."

Elena stayed close to Jenna but not touching. She noticed the way Jenna flinched when the office door opened and then forced herself not to flip the lock. She walked the hall the way she always did, angled so she could see both ends, steps measured. Her back stayed away from the cross-traffic. She stepped aside when a resident came out of the laundry cubby with a basket. The resident stopped, looked at Jenna's face, and then looked away. That was something Elena had trained into the house. Look away when it's not yours.

Room twelve was small. One twin bed, a desk, a shelf with two clean sheets, folded tight. The air was colder. No window; just a vent that rattled sometimes. Elena flicked the light, then left it on.

"One bed and a desk. It's quiet," Elena said.

Jenna's shoulders dropped a fraction. "Thank you."

"Bathroom's two doors down. Shower has good water pressure, lousy curtain. Towels are in the cabinet. If you want food, we'll bring it here first. If you want to sit with other people later, the lounge is open. Tonight, we keep the lobby bright. It will feel bright. That's for safety."

"Okay."

Elena set a folded blanket at the end of the bed and a small space heater near the wall socket but didn't turn it on. "If you use this, keep it on low and away from the bedding. We have smoke detectors. They work." She glanced at Jenna's mouth. It had that chewed look. "Ice pack?"

Jenna nodded.

"I'll bring one." Elena faced the door. "If you want to leave, tell me. If you need the door open, we can keep it ajar until you sleep. If you want it closed, we close it. We do a quiet check each hour tonight. You'll hear the knock. It will be the same knock each time: two, then one. No surprises."

Jenna's eyes filled and then cleared without a tear falling. "Thank you," she said again. Nothing else came.

"You're here," Elena said. "That's the work." She stepped out.

In the hallway, she found Marla leaning near the door frame, pretending to read the laminated evacuation map. "You caught the phrase?" Marla said under her breath.

Elena didn't answer that directly. "Start rotations outside twelve," she said. "An hour each. Chair, lamp, log sheet. No chatting through the door. If she asks, answer. If not, quiet."

Marla nodded. "Door posture?"

"Unpredictable," Elena said. "We vary. No one answers the buzzer twice in a row. I want eyes on the back exit. Check that the alley door is latched and the bar isn't propped. We rotate the pattern on purpose. If he's looking for a rhythm, don't give him one."

"Got it."

A voice from down the hall cut in, sharp. "You can't keep us in," the resident with the coffee said. She was small and quick, always ready to bounce. "We heard you tell her. You can't control when I smoke. I need to smoke."

Elena turned to her. "No one is keeping you in," she said, calm, even. "Smoke break is at the back step with the lights up. You sign the log. You go with the buddy. Door opens when staff says. Door closes when you come back. That is the rule every night. That is the rule tonight."

"But the lights, "

"Stay bright," Elena said. "Earplugs are at the desk. We are adjusting for safety. It won't be forever."

The resident scowled. "It's ten. Quiet hours."

"They're suspended in the lobby tonight," Elena said. Her voice didn't lift. "You want to sleep, use the lounge or your room. We'll bring tea. We keep people safe first, then we sleep."

The resident huffed, but she moved. She dropped her mug off at the cart and went to find her buddy.

Elena glanced back at Room twelve. The door was ajar by two inches. Good. The hinge didn't squeak. Someone had oiled it last week. Elena made a note to pull that person in for a thank-you. A quiet hinge meant no one woke up startled.

She went back to the office and wrapped a bag of ice in a cloth. In the reflective surface of the filing cabinet she caught a slice of herself: hair pulled tight, blouse sleeves to the wrist, collarbone hard under the fabric. The crescent scar on her forearm stayed covered where it belonged. Don't think about that. Not now.

"Here," she said when she returned to twelve. She handed Jenna the ice pack. "Fifteen minutes on, fifteen off. Small bites of food before you sleep. You'll feel your pulse in your jaw for a bit. That's normal."

"I don't know if I can sleep," Jenna said, eyes on the door again.

"You don't have to," Elena said. "You just have to rest. We'll sit out here. Two knocks, then one, on the hour."

Jenna nodded. "He says he's sorry afterward."

Elena didn't answer that either. "If you want to report later, we make that call together. If you don't, we build you a plan. Right now, you rest."

Jenna put the ice to her face. "Okay."

Elena pulled the door to the same two-inch gap and set a chair five feet from it, angled so the sitter could see the corridor. She set a small

lamp on the floor, pointed to the wall. The chair would pass as casual seating if anyone looked in. It wasn't. She wrote "POST TWELVE" at the top of a clean page and drew lines down the margin. "Time," she wrote. "Initials. Observations."

Marla came with a fleece blanket and a notebook. "I'll start," she said. "You do the stand-up?"

Elena nodded. "Meet me at the desk."

They stepped into the lobby. The blinds cut the outside view to slats; nothing to see but their own reflections. The heater cycled again. Rain tapped the metal awning and ran down the edge in steady sheets.

Elena slid the log sheet to the edge of the desk and set a pen beside it. "Tiana, door," she said as she walked with her to the frame. She tapped the peephole. "Two beats. Look first. Use the intercom." Turning back, she angled the couch a notch toward the entrance. "Khadija, take phones. Rotate out after an hour." She adjusted a lamp so it threw light down the hall. "Marla, start the hall. Switch at the top of the hour." Her hand lifted the coffee pot. She grimaced. "Dump this and brew fresh."

"Copy," Marla said. She turned the TV to a baking show.

"Keep it low," Elena said. "No news. Cooking works. Put someone on the couch who can stay awake without talking. Offer knitting. Or the puzzle. It looks like safety."

A resident in flannel pants came out of the lounge and squinted at the brightness. "Can we dim this? It's too bright."

Elena shook her head. "Not tonight. I have earplugs. And an extra blanket for your face if you want."

"I have to be up at six," the resident said, but her voice didn't carry much fight. She took the little orange packet of earplugs when Marla held it out.

Marla turned the TV to a baking show. A gentle voice talked about flour. The judge sliced into a cake with a long knife. A steady voice that

didn't demand attention kept people awake without thinking too hard.

"Do you want me to loop in a detective?" Marla asked, low. "Tonight, I mean."

Elena shook her head. "Not yet. Let her sleep. Let me hear her again in a few hours. We can make calls in the morning if she wants. If anything shifts, we call sooner."

Marla studied her face for a beat. "Okay. Your call."

The buzzer sounded. She raised a hand. The room went still. She moved to the door and stood slightly to the side. She looked through the peephole and saw a plastic bag with a pharmacy logo swinging from someone's wrist. A young guy, cap pulled low, expression blank the way delivery faces learn to be. He bounced on his heels to keep warm. She waited one breath before she hit the intercom.

"Who for?"

"Maya P.," he said. "Prescription."

Elena checked the clipboard for Maya's last name. It matched. "Pass it through the slot," she said. "One second." She pulled the small metal door open under the window with the key and waited while he slid the bag in. She shut it, locked it, and set the bag on the counter for Maya to sign out. Then she counted to five, looked through the peephole again, and only then moved away.

"Okay," she said. She let the air go out of her lungs in a controlled drop. Not relief. Just a release. "Back to posts."

Marla nodded. "I'll start the hallway. Tiana, door. Khadija, phones. Maya, your bag."

Elena put a thin log sheet on the desk and clipped a pen to it. "All calls and knocks go on this," she said to the women at the desk. "Time, name if we have it, reason, what you told them. Route anything that mentions Jenna or asks for me to my cell, right away. No messages on paper for the corkboard. I want it direct."

"Got it," Khadija said, already underlining the header with her thumbnail.

Elena took her phone from her pocket and set it on the desk for a second. Her thumb hovered over the contacts, then she set it face-up. "If I leave and anything shifts, you call me. It can be two in the morning. You call. Marla has my personal number. If you can't reach her, call me anyway."

Marla raised her eyebrows. Elena met her eyes and didn't look away.

The clock over the desk read 10:42. The lobby lights threw small halos in the polished floor. Jackets dripped on chair backs, darkening the fabric. The old building made the same sounds: a vent rattling, a pipe somewhere clicking as it cooled. Outside did not change when they brightened the lobby. That wasn't the point. The point was control.

Elena did a slow scan from the front door to the hall. Line of sight, chair angle, the two inches of Room twelve's door. She adjusted the chair at the far wall by a margin. She pressed her thumb into the edge of the counter again, the same spot as before, and let the sting bring her back into her body. Don't drift. Not tonight.

"I'm here until midnight," she said. "After that, I'm ten minutes away."

Marla nodded. "Okay, boss."

The next hour wasn't quiet, but nothing broke. The phones collected the usual, bed-check questions from a resident's sister, a wrong number, a volunteer confirming a morning drop-off of diapers. Jenna kept her door ajar and accepted a small plate of soup with half a grilled cheese. She held the sandwich carefully and took bites no bigger than a coin. She did not ask for anything else.

When the clock reached 11:55, Elena stood in the hallway outside twelve. The lamp glowed against the wall. Marla sat in the chair with the fleece over her knees, writing in the log. Two sets of initials marked the

page.

"I'm going to step out," Elena said softly. "Khadija will take the next hour on the hall. Text me if she wakes and wants to talk. Call me if anyone outside says the word 'Jenna' or says my name."

"I will," Marla said. "Go home."

Elena looked at the two-inch gap. "Two knocks, then one," she murmured. She knocked. Two. Then one. A soft sound inside the room answered, a little hitch of breath. Then quiet.

At the desk, she pressed a fingertip to the log sheet header.

She took her coat from the chair back in the lobby. Her coat was cool and damp when she put it on. She slid her arms in, tugged at the sleeves so the cuffs covered her wrists completely. She checked that she had both phones. She took the keys off the hook and clipped them to her belt loop. "Keep the blinds down," she said. "Lights up."

"Always," Marla said.

Elena stood inside the inner door and waited until Tiana was at the outer. Two beats. Peephole. Unlock. Lock. They had made this sequence look casual. It was deliberate.

Outside, the air was cold in her throat. In late autumn here, cuffs stayed damp. She pulled the collar up. The awning dripped a steady line. The lot had three cars and a van that belonged to the food pantry. The barge horn sounded somewhere down in the dark water. Tires hissed on the road.

She unlocked her car and got in fast, closing the door with a firm click. She turned the engine and fixed the vents on heat, then turned them down again. Too loud. She adjusted the rear-view mirror, not because it needed it, but because her hands needed an action that wasn't picking at the edge of her skin. She breathed once, then pulled out.

The fastest route to Pine Street ran along the river with long shadows and long stretches where no one watched. She didn't take it. She went up

two blocks to the main road where the lights threw steady circles onto wet pavement and the crosswalks were painted new. She hit two red lights and let them be red. She checked her mirrors at each stop. No car followed her through both signals. Good. Not proof. Just a data point.

At the corner by the all-night diner, the neon flickered and then held. A server leaned against the counter with a rag in her hand. A couple with two very young kids sat in a booth on the far side. Nothing shifted. Elena turned right and then right again, buying herself time to look behind her. The only car that stayed with her turned into a grocery lot and parked.

She let her shoulders drop by the smallest measure and turned toward Pine Street. The laundromat sign buzzed. The smell of detergent hit as she pulled in. A car idled across from her building, half in shadow, exhaust a thin stream under the streetlight. She didn't pull into her usual spot. She kept going and circled the block.

Don't be dramatic. Be thorough. One more lap.

By the time she came back around, the idling car had moved. A woman climbed into the passenger side with a basket of folded clothes. The brake lights flashed. The car pulled away. Elena parked where she could see the building door and the laundromat window, ten steps from the stairs.

In the car, she waited a minute with the engine off so her eyes could adjust. The pounding in her chest slowed. She could breathe around it now. On her phone, she sent a text to Marla: "Status?"

It took barely ten seconds. "Quiet. She's resting."

Good. Keep it that way.

She got out, locked the car, and moved to the door with her key ready. Inside the building, she paused at the bottom of the stairs. The laundromat hummed through the wall, a low steady sound. A TV in someone's apartment upstairs was on low, a male voice explaining a game score. No voices in the stairwell. No steps. She waited one more

ten-count, then climbed. She kept to the right side of the stairs where the rail had no gaps, and she didn't let anyone get behind her because there was no one there. At the landing, she stopped. Listened. Nothing new.

At her door, she keyed in and went in quick. She closed the door with her hip, set the bag down, and started the sequence. Deadbolt. Chain. Window latches: front first, then the one by the tiny table, then the bathroom. Door bar across the main door, the metal sitting with a satisfying weight into the brackets. She stood with her hand on the bar for a second, felt the strength of it, then let go.

The apartment had not changed just because she had been gone. The bed was unmade. A mug from the morning sat cold on the counter. A small paper bag of pandesal rested by the toaster. The fridge hummed. She didn't turn on the overhead. She turned on the little lamp by the couch. Soft light, strong corners. She sat on the edge of the couch and laced her fingers together to keep them from going to her mouth.

Shower? Her body wanted the heat and the clean. Her head wanted to keep the clothes on. If the phone rang, she would be out in the hall in a minute, hair wet, arms bare. No. Not tonight.

She stood, stretched her sleeves back down past her wrists where they belonged, and plugged both phones into the charger on the nightstand. At the nightstand, she plugged both phones into the charger, face-up. Her regular phone lay dark. Her backup phone, small and cheap and always charged, lay beside it. Two phones on the nightstand. Two numbers she rarely gave.

At the sink, she drank a glass of water. She let herself think about the list that would keep her from thinking about anything else. Tomorrow: check Jenna's ribs again. Bring her to the clinic if she consents. Start the safety plan worksheet. Ask about work, does she need an excuse, or is it safer to not show. Explain that mail to the shelter is possible under her name. Set coverage in the morning so the door pattern stayed irregular. Ask Khadija if she could pick up an extra hour so Marla could get three

hours of sleep before the day shift. Call the pantry to get soft foods for Jenna if her jaw wouldn't let her chew.

Don't get ahead of yourself. One hour at a time.

She walked the apartment once, not because she thought someone was hiding in it, but because this was the part of the ritual that made the rest of the night possible. She checked the bathroom window again. Latched. She opened the closet, saw the three coats she owned, the row of flats, toes even. She closed the closet and looked at her hands. The knuckles went white when she clenched. She shook them out.

She sat on the bed. The springs gave a little. She didn't lie down. A hand on each knee kept her upright. The phones took their places on the nightstand. Face-up. Silent. Ready.

Upstairs, a door closed with a soft thud. The laundromat downstairs clicked off one of the big dryers; the drum slowed to a stop. A car passed on Pine Street and then another. After she set the bar and checked the latches, her shoulders loosened. Not safe. Stable for a few hours, maybe. Enough to make morning.

Don't go back through her words. Don't loop the phrase.

She looped it anyway. Be good for me. The cadence matched something from a different room years ago. Her pulse jumped before she could say why. She stopped the thought and focused on her breath. Not tonight. Not now.

The screen lit up once with a spam call from a number she didn't know. She swiped it away and then opened the message app, typed a draft she didn't send: In the morning, we talk options. She deleted it and let her thumb rest on the glass.

Her throat ached. She swallowed it down. "Okay," she said, quiet in the room where no one would hear. "Okay."

She turned the lamp down a notch. Shoes off, socks on. She curled and uncurled her toes against the sheet. She set the alarm for a time she

would beat anyway. She rested her hands on the blanket.

Don't cry. Don't call. Don't move unless the phone moves first.

She kept her body ready to stand. She watched the screen for the minute to change and kept breathing. And she waited to be needed.

Chapter 2

The Detective

She set her hand on the inner bolt and waited. Two beats on the inner door. Peephole first. Tiana's face. She turned the deadbolt and opened the door a foot. Droplets fell from Tiana's coat to the floor. The smell of damp wool and bleach mixed in the lobby.

"Morning," Tiana said. She stepped in and locked the door behind her. "You're early."

"Status?" Elena asked. She shrugged off her coat but didn't put it down. She scanned the room. Blinds down. Lights up. The baking show was off. Chairs still angled to keep sightlines. Wet jackets on chair backs left dark patches on the fabric.

"Quiet," Tiana said. "Jenna slept for a stretch. Woke once around four. Took more ice. No buzzers. Two smoke breaks with buddies. The back door bar stayed in."

Elena nodded. She pressed her thumb into the counter edge, the habit so old her skin had a faint ridge. "Logs?"

Tiana slid the call log over. Times, names if known, reasons, responses. Nothing flagged. The hallway log outside Room Twelve showed short notes: 0100 fine. 0200 rest. 0300 bathroom. 0400 ice. Marla's initials marked three of the hours. Khadija had one. Someone had drawn a small square next to each knock. Two. Then one.

Elena exhaled once. Not relief. Just a counted breath.

"How's your head?" Tiana asked.

“Fine,” Elena said. She wasn’t. She was awake. That was enough. “Swap with Khadija on the hour. I’ll take the desk until eight. When Marla surfaces, send her home.”

Tiana nodded. “Coffee?”

“Make a fresh pot,” Elena said. “Don’t drink what’s in there. It’s metallic and burned.”

Tiana’s mouth tugged. “Always.”

Elena turned the key to open the small pass-through slot and checked the hinge. No rattle. She shut it and locked it. She checked the view through the peephole. Street empty except the food pantry van across the lot. Rain struck the awning. Water ran off the edge in a line. Tires hissed on the road.

She walked down the hall. Two doors to the left, Room Twelve’s door sat open by the same two inches. The lamp on the floor cast a wedge of light against the wall. Inside, a shape on the bed. Jenna on her side, the ice pack on the pillow. Elena stood back and kept her steps even.

“Two then one,” she said softly and knocked. A shift of fabric inside. No words.

She went back to the lobby. She checked her phones on the desk. Both lit when she touched them. No missed calls. The backup showed the same empty screen. She plugged them into the power strip that ran along the back of the desk. The cord ends felt gritty. She wiped her hand on her sleeve.

The buzzer sounded at 8:07. Short. Professional. Elena and Tiana went still. Elena held up a hand and moved to the door, angled. She checked the peephole. A man in a dark coat. Tall. Rumpled suit visible at the collar. He held a badge wallet up without knocking again. He knew to show it.

Elena waited a second longer. She pressed the intercom. “Who are you here for?”

“Detective Garvey. District Three,” he said. His voice came through the tinny speaker clean. No swagger. Tired maybe. She couldn’t tell through the speaker. “I’m here about a reported assault. Jenna Park. I’d like to speak with your director.”

Not from us.

Elena watched Tiana from the corner of her eye. Tiana looked at the peephole, then at Elena. Elena nodded. “I’m the director,” she said into the intercom. “You can show your ID at the peephole.”

He did. She read the name. Garvey. The seal looked right. The picture matched the face. She counted to three. “We’ll admit you to the lobby,” she said. “You will remain in the lobby. No hallway access. No interviews without consent.”

“Understood,” he said.

Elena nodded at Tiana. Two beats. Peephole. Unlock. Lock. Tiana kept hold of the inner key while Elena stood a pace to the side. The man stepped into the vestibule, then into the lobby when Tiana pulled the inner door. He brought the smell of wet wool with him, a mild soap under it. He let the door close, took a small step, and stopped. His gaze moved across the blinds, the chair angles, the desk, the fleece on the couch arm, then returned to her face. He kept his hands visible.

“Director.” He came closer but kept a respectful distance from the desk. He set the badge wallet down, then pulled it back and put it in his inner pocket. “Detective Rhys Garvey.”

“Mr. Garvey,” Elena said. She didn’t offer her hand. Her sleeves stayed down to her wrists. “We can talk here.” She touched the surface of the desk where the call log sat, reminding him where this conversation lived. “We don’t bring law enforcement into the residential areas.”

“Understood,” he said. He glanced at the chairs in the lobby and didn’t ask for a private room. “I’m following up on an incident from last night.” He took out a small notebook. It was already damp at one edge.

“Jenna Park?”

Elena kept her voice even. “She came in late. We completed intake. She declined medical transport. We offered alternatives for this morning.”

“Can you walk me through the injuries you observed?” he asked. “I’d like to get it right.”

Elena looked at his eyes. They were a washed-out blue. The skin under them had a grey cast. He looked tired. No, worse than tired. He wasn’t hiding it. She kept moving.

“Jaw swelling, right side, extending toward the ear,” she said. “Split on the inner lip. Pupils round and reactive last night. No vomiting, no dizziness by report. She held her left arm like a rib sprain. She said rib pain.”

“Any wrist marks?” he asked.

“Red fingertip marks consistent with grabbing,” Elena said. “No bruising last night. That can change. We can document this morning if she consents.”

He wrote without looking up. His pen tapped the page once. “Timeline?”

“She arrived. We powered down her phone and placed it in the lockbox,” Elena said. “We completed intake. She ate. She slept. That’s the timeline.”

He looked up. “I meant before she arrived.”

“That is not mine to share,” Elena said. “If she consents to speak with you, she can tell you herself.”

He nodded. “Fair. I’m trying to reconcile something she said with the distance from where she reportedly ran.” He didn’t say the place. He watched her face to see if she would. She didn’t. “She said he went to the bathroom and she left. She thinks he didn’t see her go.”

Elena didn't move. Her throat got tight and unclenched. "She said that last night."

"Right," he said. "If he didn't see her leave, there's a period where he didn't know where she was. But then she's sure he'll come here. That's what you told your staff." He kept his tone flat. Not accusing. "Which suggests either he's come here for someone before or he has a pattern of checking shelters. Did you see anyone outside? Any vehicles that lingered?"

"We rotate the door pattern to avoid predictability," Elena said. "We watched the lot. We admitted one pharmacy delivery. No other entries." She didn't tell him about the way the car had idled by her building. That was hers. "We don't share observations about resident routes unless the resident asks us to."

He wrote a note anyway. "What about the phrase?" he asked. "She said he uses the phrase 'Be good for me.' How often?"

Elena looked at the call log, not at him. "You can ask her."

"Is that a new phrase for him?" he asked. "Or has that been part of the dynamic for a while?"

"Detective," Elena said. "I'm not going to characterize her relationship beyond the medical and intake notes."

He held her eyes a second and didn't ask again. "Okay. Did she have any alcohol?"

"No," Elena said.

"Drugs?"

"No." She tapped the desk once without meaning to and stopped.

He turned a page. "Her pupils were wide," he said. "Could be adrenaline. Could be pain."

"Or fear," Elena said.

“Right,” he said. “She ran when he went to the bathroom. Did she say if he had a car?”

“She didn’t say,” Elena said. “If you’re trying to build time-distance assumptions, you’ll need her consent for that conversation.”

He nodded. He didn’t write that one down. He rubbed the back of his neck. The five-o’clock shadow on his jaw looked permanent. “I’ve heard that phrase before,” he said, almost to himself and then not. “Be good for me.” His gaze came back up to her. “Different case.”

Her shoulders went tight. Jaw set. A draft from the vent touched the back of her neck. “We’re done with that line,” she said.

“You don’t want me to say more,” he said. He didn’t phrase it as a question.

“No,” she said. “I don’t.”

He set the pen down on the notebook and closed it. He stayed quiet for three seconds. He looked at her hands. She kept them flat on the desk.

“You’re careful,” he said. There wasn’t judgment in it. It sounded like a record of fact.

“Yes,” she said. “People here are tired. They don’t owe you anything just because you have a badge.”

“I know,” he said. He meant it. It didn’t make him less of a cop. “I’d like to speak with her if she wants to. Ten minutes. In sight of your desk. No pressure. I can come back later if that’s better.”

Elena thought about traffic in the lobby, breakfast, the shift change, Jenna’s jaw. “We do it now,” she said. “Ten minutes. Lights stay bright. I stay at the desk. If she says stop, you stop. If you can’t, you leave.”

“Agreed,” he said.

Elena lifted the portable handset for the internal line and pressed the button for the hall lamp. Two then one would be on the hour, but she was about to break the rhythm and she wanted it clear. She set the phone

down and walked the hall at an even pace.

At Room Twelve, she knocked their knock anyway. Two. Then one. A soft sound inside, not a word.

“Jenna?” she said, voice low. “It’s Elena. I’m going to open it a little more.” She eased the door a hand’s width. Jenna lay curled with the blanket to her shoulder. The swelling at the jaw had darkened. The ice pack lay on the pillow, condensation dampening the cloth.

Jenna blinked. “What time is it?”

“Eight-fifteen,” Elena said. “You slept some. How’s your jaw?”

“It hurts,” Jenna said. The words were slurred on one side. “It’s okay.” She looked at Elena’s face, then at the door. “Is something wrong?”

“There’s a detective in the lobby,” Elena said. “He asked to speak with you. You don’t have to. If you do, we keep it in the lobby, lights up, me at the desk. Ten minutes. You can stop at any point.”

Jenna’s eyes shifted to the corner and back. Her hand tightened on the blanket. “Will he make me press charges?”

“No,” Elena said. “Not today. Not in ten minutes. He can give you information. That’s all.”

Jenna swallowed. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Elena said. “Do you want to brush your teeth? We can wait. We’ll keep it short.”

Jenna nodded. “Two minutes.”

Elena left the door open by three inches and moved the chair back two steps. “I’ll be in the hall,” she said. She stood there and listened to the small, ordinary sounds. Water. Cabinet. The cheap curtain rod clicking when it moved. She watched the empty space of the corridor and didn’t let her attention slide to the past. Don’t go there. Stay here. Keep the door in view. Keep your body between anyone and that door.

Jenna came out in her hoodie with the hood up. She kept one hand at her jaw. The other held the corner of the blanket like she hadn't realized she was still holding it. She let it go when she saw Elena notice and wrapped her arms around herself instead.

"Ten minutes," Elena reminded. "You can stop it."

Jenna nodded.

They walked to the lobby. Elena felt the air drop cooler by a degree when they reached the open space. Rhys stood from the chair but didn't move closer. He let Jenna choose the distance. He kept his hands where they were easy to see.

"Jenna," he said. "I'm Detective Garvey. Thank you for talking to me. We'll keep it short."

Jenna glanced at Elena and then at the chair. She sat. She tucked one leg up under her and stayed small. Elena took her place behind the desk, angled so she faced both the door and Jenna's chair. She picked up a pen but didn't write. She didn't want the scratch of the pen to sound like note-taking. She wanted the sound of the room to stay soft.

"Can you tell me what happened last night?" Rhys asked. His voice didn't push. "Only what you want to say."

Jenna breathed out through her nose. She looked at the floor, then at him. "He was mad," she said. "About money. I said I would fix it. I said I had a shift. He said I make him do this. He says I make him do it when I don't listen." She stopped. "He says 'Be good for me. Be good and I'll make it easy.'"

Rhys didn't write right away. "Okay," he said. "Thank you." He waited a second. "Did he hit you with an open hand or a fist?"

Jenna touched her jaw. "Fist."

"Left or right?" he asked.

She shook her head. “Right?” She opened her hand, glanced at Elena, then at the floor. “He has a ring.”

A sharp edge left a small ridge on her skin.

“That helps,” he said. He wrote. “Did anyone else see?”

“No,” Jenna said.

“Where were you?” he asked.

“In his apartment,” she said. The words were quiet.

“Okay,” he said. “When did you leave?”

“When he went to the bathroom,” she said. “He was still mad. He told me to sit and think about what I did. I left.”

“Did he follow you?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I ran. I came here. I didn’t want to go home.”

Rhys nodded. “Do you want to give me his name today?”

Jenna tensed. She looked at Elena again.

“You don’t have to,” Elena said.

“Not today,” Jenna said.

“Okay,” Rhys said. He flipped his notebook shut without looking at it. “We can start with this for now. If you want a protective order later, we can walk you through it. No surprises. It’s a process.”

Jenna’s mouth shifted, almost a laugh, and then stopped. “Nothing’s easy,” she said.

“No,” he said. “It isn’t.” He looked at Elena. “Do you have a clinic you trust for the jaw?”

“Yes,” Elena said. “She can go this morning if she consents.”

Jenna nodded once, tiny. “Okay.”

Elena let herself breathe more fully. “We’ll set it up,” she said. “Ten minutes are done.”

Rhys looked at Jenna. “Thank you,” he said. He didn’t ask another question. He sat back. He didn’t stand to shake her hand. He let her leave without making her pass by him.

Elena stood with Jenna and walked her back down the hall. At Room Twelve, she did the knock and then pushed the door to the same small gap. “We’ll bring you oatmeal,” she said. “Soft food. Tea. Ice.”

“Thank you,” Jenna said. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t apologize here,” Elena said. “Rest.”

Jenna’s eyes filled and cleared again. She lay down and turned to the wall. Elena set a new ice pack on the desk and left.

Back in the lobby, Rhys stood near the desk. He didn’t sit. He looked at the door and then at her. “I appreciate you letting me talk to her,” he said. “I want to come back later. Noon?”

“Noon is busy,” Elena said. “We have deliveries and two new intakes scheduled. Nine forty-five to ten fifteen tomorrow. In the lobby. You can speak to me then if she doesn’t want to talk again.”

“That’s tight,” he said.

“That’s the window,” she said.

He watched her for three seconds. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll take it.”

He opened his notebook again. “One thing,” he said. “The wrist marks. You said fingertip marks. You see that a lot?”

“Enough,” Elena said. “It’s consistent with someone who wants compliance without noise.”

He nodded. He closed the notebook and tucked it away. He reached into his coat and pulled out a card. He set it on the desk within her reach and took his hand back. “This is my direct line,” he said. “You don’t need

to go through dispatch. If anything shifts, you can call me. Or text.”

Elena didn’t touch the card. She looked at it. His name in black letters. A number. Nothing else that mattered. “We’ll call if she asks us to.”

He nodded. “I’ll be nearby for a bit,” he said. “In case the clinic needs anything from me.”

“This isn’t an escort,” Elena said. “We don’t do escorts. Residents who see that think their partners can find them.”

“Understood,” he said. “I meant if they need a report number.”

“Right,” she said. She kept her hands flat.

He looked at the fleece blanket on the couch, then at the TV mounted high in the corner. “You keep cooking shows on?”

“People know what will happen,” she said. “It helps.”

He almost smiled. It didn’t quite happen. He looked back at her. “Do you have a minute?”

“Here,” she said.

He drifted a step to the side. She moved with him so the doorway stayed in her peripheral vision. He took another half-step toward the hall, and she followed to keep parallel. He seemed to realize what she was doing and stopped.

“Your intake notes mentioned no dizziness,” he said. “If that changes, will you call?”

“If she consents,” she said.

She set the pen on the log and turned slightly toward the hall. He nodded again and then did what she’d expect a cop to do: he tried one more thing. “One last question,” he said, and moved with her into the narrow corridor off the lobby. It was only three steps, but his shoulder ended up near the doorframe. The remaining space to the hall was

narrow. The gap to pass was the width of her hand.

Elena's body went still. Her skin went cold from the inside. The exit line changed by an inch, then another. She looked at his shoulder, then at the floor where her foot would go if she had to move fast.

"Detective," she said. The word was flat. "Please step out of the doorway."

He blinked. He looked at where he was, then at her face. He moved right away. He put his back to the wall and left the space clear. "Sorry," he said. His voice was quiet. "I didn't mean..." He moved when asked. Good.

"Don't explain," she said. "Lobby."

"Lobby," he repeated. He gestured with an open hand for her to go first. He didn't touch her. He stayed where she could see him and didn't move again until she had passed into the open space. Elena touched two fingers toward the doors; Marla, at the lounge doorway, nodded.

At the desk, Elena rested her fingers on the edge again. Her abdomen tightened. The tightness eased after a breath. She didn't let her breath show it. She moved her eyes once over his face. Stubble at his jaw. Red at the rims of his eyes. He stayed where he was, three steps from the desk.

"I'm not being difficult," she said. "We keep people safe by controlling space. That includes me."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry." He left the apology there. He didn't make it about who he was. "I'll stick to the chairs."

She nodded. She lifted the pen from the log to make a note and felt her sleeve pull back a quarter inch. She tugged the cuff down.

His eyes flicked there and away. He didn't say anything.

She put the pen down.

The clinic opened at nine. Elena called at 8:55 and used the name on Jenna's intake. "Jaw," she said. "Rib pain. No LOC. She has a safe ride." She nodded along to the hold music and ran through the insurance

options from memory. On the pad she wrote “9:20.” She cut the phone call as soon as the appointment was set and went to the hallway. She knocked. Two then one.

“Yeah,” Jenna said, muffled.

“Clinic at nine twenty,” Elena said. “We have time. Oatmeal now, tea in a travel mug in ten.”

“Okay,” Jenna said.

Elena went back to the lobby. Rhys was still at the chair, a hand on the back, not sitting. He was reading the flyers on the bulletin board. He didn’t read long. He didn’t need the information. He had taken two steps back and angled his shoulder away.

“I’m going to step out at nine ten with a resident,” Elena said. “We’ll be back after.”

“I’ll clear out,” he said. He checked his watch. “I’ll write up what I can and be back tomorrow for your window.”

“Good,” she said.

Marla came out of the lounge with her cardigan wrapped tight and a crease along one cheek from the chair. She looked at Rhys and then at Elena.

“Detective Garvey,” Elena said. “Marla, this is Detective Garvey. He’s leaving.”

“I am,” he said. “Thanks for the coffee.” He hadn’t had any.

Marla raised her eyebrows once. Elena gave her a small shake of the head. Later. Not now.

From down the hall, there was the sound of a bathroom door closing and a pipe clicking as it cooled. Light changed because a cloud moved outside, then went back. Elena looked at the door. She felt the weight of the keys clipped inside her pocket.

“Here,” Rhys said, and slid the card a few inches closer. He didn’t push it too far. “If anything changes.”

Elena reached for it. Her cuff stayed down. She picked it up between two fingers and turned it, checking the edges for nicks. She put it down again and then picked it up for real. She opened her coat and slid the card into the inner pocket behind her phone. She felt the rectangle settle where she kept important things. Not because she wanted it. Because she needed to know where it was.

“Thank you,” she said.

He nodded.

Maya P. appeared at the edge of the hall in old sweats and a careful ponytail. She had the pharmacy bag that had come through the slot last night in her hand, crinkled at the top from being rolled and unrolled. Her face was drawn and set. Her brow stayed pinched.

“Elena?” she said, low. “Can you check this? The label says twice a day but the doctor told me three.”

Elena shifted instantly. “Yeah,” she said. “Come here.” She looked at Rhys. He had already stepped back. She turned the bag and read the label. She checked the pill. She reached under the desk for the binder with the medication safety sheets and flipped to the page. “This is the right dose,” she said. “Twice a day with food. If the pain spikes, call the clinic. Don’t stack Tylenol with it. It’s in the same family. You will feel loopy. That’s normal. Put it in the cabinet you showed me yesterday. High shelf.”

Maya nodded. Her shoulders dropped a centimeter. “Okay.” Her eyes slid to Rhys and then back, and her jaw tightened. “Is he staying?”

“He’s leaving,” Elena said. “Right now.”

“Good,” Maya said, and moved away.

Elena closed the binder and slid it back. When she looked up, Rhys had already taken a step toward the door.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he said. “Your window.” He didn’t reach for a handshake or eye contact that lasted too long. He didn’t try to say anything that would cost her more time.

“Use the intercom,” she said.

“Always,” he said.

Tiana moved to the door. Two beats. Peephole. Unlock. Lock. He was gone. The outer door shut with a soft thud. The deadbolt set with a solid, familiar click.

Elena waited until the lobby was quiet. She took the card from her inner pocket and pushed it deeper into the lining. She pushed until she felt it press against the seam. She checked the weight against her side when she moved. The card pressed flat against the seam.

“Do I need to be here for the clinic?” Marla asked.

“I’ve got it,” Elena said. “You go home for two hours. Come back at eleven. We’ll swap.”

Marla nodded. “He okay?”

“He stayed in the lobby. He apologized when he blocked the door,” Elena said. “He left when he said he would.”

Marla watched her for a second and then went to get her bag.

Elena picked up the travel mug and took it to the small kitchen. She poured tea and added too much honey because that was all they had for pain that didn’t require a prescription. She went back to Room Twelve. She knocked. Two then one. Jenna said “Yeah,” into the pillow and then sat up. Elena handed her the mug and a small bowl of oatmeal. Jenna took both with careful hands.

“It’ll be okay,” Elena said. She meant the morning, not the life. That would be a lie.

Jenna nodded, eyes on the steam.

They left for the clinic at nine ten. Elena carried her bag and walked a half step behind, not because Jenna needed guarding, but because Elena always watched the line behind. The air was colder by the door. Water dripped from the edge. The lot was the same as it had been. Food pantry van. Two cars. A delivery truck three stores down. Nothing new. Elena walked Jenna to the corner where the sidewalk opened up. No one followed them. Elena watched anyway.

When Elena came back from the clinic an hour later, the lobby looked the same. The chairs sat where they had been, the TV off, the log in its place. Marla was back at the desk with a fresh cardigan. Tiana had gone to sleep for the day. The rain kept coming.

Elena set her keys on the desk, and they clicked against the laminate. She touched her inner pocket again, felt the stiff edge of the card, and left her hand there for one count.

Don't call. Don't hope. Use what helps.

She took the card out and looked at it one more time. Name. Number. She put it back. She kept moving.

At eleven fifty, the buzzer sounded again with the same short, professional press. Elena moved to the door. Peephole. A courier with a clipboard this time. She passed the slot open and shut and logged the delivery. She told Marla to get an hour of sleep and set the hall rotation. She kept the lights up.

When the noon hour came, a pen scratched the log. A bag crinkled. The remote clicked on, then off. Elena kept one eye on the outer door and one on the hall.

No urgent calls came in. Both phones sat face-up and still.

Elena stood, stretched her sleeves down, and let her hands rest on the edge of the counter. She pressed her thumb into it until she felt the sting, and that was enough to bring every part of her back into the room where she needed to be.

He would come back tomorrow. That was fine. She would be ready.
The window was hers. The lobby was hers. The choice was hers.

She kept her eyes on the door and didn't look away.

Chapter 3

The Fortress

She kept the key between her fingers until the door was shut behind her. The hall smelled like soap and hot lint. Upstairs a television played low. Water ran through a pipe behind the wall and stopped.

Deadbolt. Chain. She felt the metal catch. She tested the give. Table-side window latch, then bathroom window latch. She checked both twice. The door bar was last. She lifted it, set it into the brackets, pressed down until the metal seated with a dull, final sound. Her shoulders eased a fraction.

Don't think past this. Bar in. Windows latched. Breathe.

She stayed near the door and counted. In for four, out for six. The apartment had not changed. The couch where it always was. The small lamp. Two mugs on the sink from three days ago because she had been gone late and then early each morning. The hum from the laundromat below came and went with the loaders. She listened for another sound. None. She moved.

She didn't turn on the big light. The small lamp was enough to see her hands. She set her bag on the chair, opened it, and took out both phones. Primary. Backup. She placed them on the coffee table face-up and plugged the primary into the charger. She turned the volume up, checked that Do Not Disturb was off, and set the emergency slider to always allow. The backup stayed dark, charged, ready. She touched the rectangle of her inner coat pocket. The card was there. She left it there for now.

Her shoes stayed on. She walked the apartment in the order she always did, because routine kept her attention steady. Bathroom. Closet.

The closet held three coats, four pairs of flats, a small bag with travel bottles aligned. She opened the closet all the way and looked into the corners. Nothing. Back to the hallway. Her hand landed on the bar again and pressed it. Engaged. She tapped the top bracket with two fingers.

A sound came from the hall. Not loud. A step or a drag of fabric. A bag sliding. She paused and placed her palm on the door, the way she did when she wanted to feel if someone stood close enough to radiate warmth. Only the cool of the wood. The sound moved past and down the stairs, and the front door below opened and closed. Late-night laundry. An ordinary sound. She didn't believe it. She kept the plan anyway. If she had to get out fast: bar up, chain off, deadbolt, front stairs on the right side where the tread was less worn. If the landing was blocked: bathroom window latch up, screen out, drop onto the trash cans and then the back step. If the back step was propped: the laundromat door sometimes didn't shut all the way near closing. She could try it in two seconds. She had done it once.

She hadn't eaten since the clinic. She went to the small kitchen and made toast because it was the fastest. Bread in. Lever down. She filled a mug with water and put it in the microwave. The machine hummed and turned and beeped. She hated the beep. She took the mug out before it finished and set the tea bag to soak. Honey, one long squeeze, the cheap kind that tasted like sugar more than flowers. She carried the mug and plate to the coffee table. The toast went cold while she watched the door. She ate half of one piece without tasting it. The tea cooled to a comfortable heat, and she didn't drink.

A siren rose on Pine, got louder, then passed the intersection. She stayed still and counted until it was gone. Upstairs, a pipe knocked twice, plumbing not footsteps. She breathed once and felt the tight line in her jaw ease a little. She adjusted the lamp so the light didn't hit the windows. The couch was low. She took the throw from the back and folded it once. She put her shoes under the coffee table where she could hook them with her toes and get them on quick. She set her jacket within reach. She left

the bedroom door open. The bed was made, flat sheet tucked tight, pillow centered. Not tonight.

She pulled her hair out of its bun and combed through it with her fingers, then twisted it back and secured it. She pulled her sleeves down to her wrists and pressed the cuff until it lay flat over her forearm. Covered. Good.

Her phone lit with the lock screen and then went dark again. She turned the volume one notch higher and tested the vibration with a quick call to her backup. It rattled against the laminate for a second that felt longer than it was. Good. She ended the call and set both phones face-up again with the screens within her peripheral view.

The apartment was not quiet, not completely. Upstairs someone walked across a room. A toilet flushed. The dryer below thunked as a zipper knocked the drum. A car eased up to the stop at the corner, waited, and went. She could function with those sounds. She was practiced.

She thought about the clinic nurse who had looked at Jenna's face and then at Elena's hands and called her "honey" without meaning anything by it. Jenna had asked if she could sleep some more when they got back. Elena had said yes and knocked the pattern on the door. Two, then one. You promised there would be no surprises. Keep the promise.

She picked up the toast again and set it down. Hunger wasn't the point tonight. Staying ready was the point. She let the food sit.

Her eyes kept flicking to the door. The bar was in. She pressed the edge of her thumb into the table until a small sting reset her focus. The sting set her attention on the room and on the way out.

Don't call him. Don't open anything. Don't start anything you can't finish at two a.m.

She repositioned the phones a finger's width closer and slid onto the couch. One knee tucked, the other foot on the floor. She held the mug in both hands and didn't drink. She watched the door. She waited.

She dropped the phone brightness until the screen was a dull square. Incognito window. She typed “District Three Detective Garvey news” and scrolled past real estate ads. She clicked a local paper’s cops brief from two years ago. It took three tries to load because the site was slow and full of pop-ups. The piece was small and careful. Detective cleared after administrative review, it said, in a case involving a protective detail that was “not authorized” but “not in bad faith.” Cleared. Advisement on file. No suspension. No names.

She went to a different search. A board where people posted scanner chatter and complaints about parking tickets. She kept scrolling until the green timestamp beside a thread stopped being this week. She scanned last year’s posts and found his name in a half-remembered argument about allocation of resources. Some user with a handle that sounded like a dog breed had typed that the district wasted bodies babysitting a “DV girl” when “the system already said no.” No details. No proof. She didn’t need proof for this. It was enough.

He didn’t push in the lobby. He moved when asked. He had asked for a tight window and taken it. He had set a card down and left his hand out of the frame. He watched her sleeve ride up and didn’t comment.

She kept reading. Two case write-ups on the department’s site with his name on them, one a stolen-car ring, one an aggravated assault downtown. The assault case page loaded with three broken images and a paragraph that ended mid-sentence. She didn’t care about the sentence. She noted the dates. Then the gaps. Not a lot of glory. A steady stream of things no one would brag about. That meant he stayed.

He went off-book when policy failed. That had helped someone once. It had almost hurt him. There was a risk there for her. Helpful people sometimes got loud when they lost. Loud was dangerous. She needed quiet.

She switched searches. Stalking. Harassment. Rain Harbor. She scanned headlines over the last six months and screenshotted two. One was a man arrested after violating a restraining order at a bus stop on Farrow Street. The other was a cyberstalking case with a phone left on a doorstep at three in the morning with a private video on it. She wrote times and cross streets in a note. Don't count them all. Don't make a list that grows. Keep the rules clear. Keep the lobby controlled.

She typed the shelter's name into the search bar and added "Rain Harbor fundraiser." She skimmed through a community blog with too many hearts and exclamation points. She opened the photo gallery. The third photo had a banner with the shelter's name, the kind Marla hated, and four donors with their arms around each other. On the left edge, a thin strip of sleeve. Plain blouse. Dark. A piece of hair against fabric. Not a face. Not a name. She didn't remember being in the room where the photo was shot, but she didn't go to many of those nights and when she did, she stayed at the edges. Her thumb pressed against the phone's bezel. She held her breath for a slow count and let it out. She centered the image on her knee. Edges could still be dangerous if the person looking knew what to look for.

She took a screenshot and cropped it further. The sliver of her shoulder stayed visible. She saved it to a hidden album and then deleted the original from the camera roll. She opened a note and started a list. The glass warmed under her thumb. No selfies in the lobby. She shifted on the chair; the front edge pressed her thigh. Designate an off-camera zone for staff. Pre-approve camera angles. Lamp glare showed on the screen; add: no step-and-repeat banners. Ask donors to keep pictures tight on their own faces. Direct any coverage to Marla or the board chair. Move the director off camera. She would make it sound like policy instead of fear.

Her eyes drifted to the card again. She took it out of her inner pocket and turned it over. The paper was smooth and stiff. The number was clean. She pictured having to scroll through a phone to get to it while her

hands shook. Not good. She carried the card to the small table by the door where she dropped her keys when she came in. She had a shallow dish there with two paperclips and a rubber band that had turned sticky. She placed the card flat on the bottom of the dish and then set the rubber band on top to keep it from lifting if the table got bumped. She stood at the door and reached once from knob to dish, touched the card, and reset. If she had to reach on the way out, the dish was where her hand already went.

Her eyes stung. She blinked and looked at the floor. The cheap rug needed washing. She could smell the dust when she moved it with her foot. She adjusted the corners. Don't go there. Stay here. Write the list for morning.

Jenna's words pushed into her thoughts again. She hadn't invited them. Be good for me. Be good and I'll make it easy. Her fingers clenched around nothing. She ran a hand along the edge of the coffee table until the pressure eased it. She wasn't going to say the words out loud tonight. Saying it made it worse. Better to turn it into tasks.

She wrote more. The screen smudged under her fingertip. Morning: lights up, blinds down. Rotate the door posture. She shifted and felt the chair edge press her thigh. No one answers twice in a row. Hall lamp button before the knock if the rhythm needs to break. Document everything. She tipped the screen to reduce the glare. Offer Jenna oatmeal again. Check jaw swelling, ice, tea. Call the clinic if she reported dizziness. Ask Marla to pull volunteers from the donor list by first names only if they called to ask about drop-offs. No messages on the corkboard. She would put the note in the shared folder in the morning. Tonight it stayed in her head and on her phone.

She looked at the time. The screen read 3:58. She set an alarm for 5:30, then added a back-up for 5:35 because sleep when it did come could be heavy and slow. She opened her contacts and checked that the shelter desk number sat near the top, then closed it again. She didn't scroll to the card number. It was in the dish where she would see it when she reached

for keys.

She turned the volume up one more notch and checked the door bar again. She breathed out and leaned back into the couch. She set the phone on the pillow beside her left thigh. Her right hand stayed free. She tugged her sleeves down and tucked the edge into her palm. Covered. Breathing even. Alarm set. She closed her eyes without meaning to and let them stay shut. Not sleep. Just the edge of it. She could lift fast from the edge if she had to. She had done it for years. She dozed in short bursts, waking to the dryer below and a step overhead.

At five-thirty the alarm sounded. She was already half awake. She shut it off fast so it didn't wake the upstairs neighbor whose baby had cried at midnight for twenty minutes straight. She sat up and felt the small line in her lower back that came from sleeping on the couch. Shoes on. She stretched her toes to make space. She drank half the tea she had left and winced at the flat sweetness. She left the toast untouched and dropped it into the trash without looking.

She went to the bedroom and chose the same uniform she always did. Long sleeves. Plain blouse. Dark pants. Hair up into a tight bun. She pulled her cuffs once and checked her forearm in the mirror. The crescent line stayed under the fabric. Hidden. She touched the spot through the cloth and then let her hand drop. She didn't wear a necklace. She didn't wear a ring. The only thing she put on was the watch she used to time hallway checks and phone calls.

She turned off the lamp. She took the card from the dish and put it back into the inner coat pocket behind the phone, where the rectangle lay flat against the seam. At night the dish met her hand by the door; during the day it belonged in the inner pocket. She picked up her keys and clipped them to her belt loop. She lifted the bar and set it upright, held it

a second to feel the weight, and then lowered it again because she had to go. Chain off. Deadbolt.

She opened the door and stepped into the hall. The air was colder there. She listened, counted to five, and went down the stairs on the right side. The laundromat was dark now, the neon sign off. The lock clicked behind her when she pulled the outer door shut.

The street was a row of wet metal awnings and early trucks. Tires hissed on the road and then faded. She scanned the lot without stopping. The car that had idled by her building two nights ago wasn't there. A delivery truck with a logo she didn't know waited three doors down. She moved along the sidewalk and kept her pace steady. Don't run unless you have to. Don't look like you're running if you are.

The drive to the shelter took nine minutes in a light that wasn't full daylight and wasn't night. She took the main road. She skipped the river route because there were more closed spaces there. She checked the rearview twice, three times. The car behind her turned at the light by the hardware store. A barge horn sounded from the water. She hoped it was the same one she had heard last night and that it would keep making noise forever so she could count on it. She stopped that thought. She cut the thought there.

When she pulled into the small lot outside the shelter, a food pantry van sat across the way like it had on most mornings this month. The rain left a film on the lot. She parked near the ramp and sat for one count, then two. She checked the mirrors. No one had gotten out of any other car. She got out.

The outer door was as they had left it, blinds down, the thin metal awning shedding water at the edges. She pressed two knuckles to the glass to let anyone still on a couch inside know it was her, then used her key. Two beats. Peephole. Unlock. Inside, she slid the bolt and waited to hear the deadbolt slide home when she turned it. The sound was clear.

She didn't turn on the TV. The lights in the lobby stayed up. They had stayed up all night. She put her bag on the desk and checked the call log. Khadija had written in a small, neat hand. 0100 quiet. 0200 smoke break (2). Back door bar re-engaged. 0300 Jenna bathroom. 0400 ice. 0500 Tiana at door, lights steady. They reassured her. Someone had been awake when she wasn't.

She angled the chairs so one faced the door and one half-faced the hall. She checked the pass-through slot hinge and closed it again. She took the laminated evacuation map from where someone had knocked it crooked and aligned it. She kept her keys clipped and let the weight pull at the belt loop. She listened to the building.

The hallway was dim where the floor lamp had been turned off and then on again for checks. A wedge of light from the lamp fell across the edge of Room Twelve's door. Two inches. Good. She didn't go down there yet. She didn't need to. Jenna would come out when she wanted oatmeal. Elena would be there.

Two beats on the inner door. Tiana's face looked in through the inner door's glass. Elena unlocked it and let her in.

"You're early," Tiana said. She had a knit hat pulled low and sleep prints on one cheek.

"Shift the phones to the desk at eight," Elena said. "We'll keep the lights up. No changes on the blinds."

Tiana glanced at the lights and made a face that meant she understood but didn't like it. "Coffee?"

"Fresh pot," Elena said. "Dump the old."

Tiana walked to the small kitchen and started the machine without talking. Elena watched the outer door and the window slit above the pass-through. The street was gray and wet. Two cars sat across the street that she didn't recognize. A blue sedan with a missing hubcap. A white SUV with a parking permit sticker from somewhere else.

She didn't look away. She didn't stand in the window either. She moved one step to the left so she wasn't centered in the glass.

Marla came in at 7:12 with a cardigan wrapped tight and a bag that bumped her leg when she walked. She stopped three steps inside and looked Elena up and down the way someone checks a person for cracks and seemed satisfied.

"You beat me," Marla said.

"Had things to do," Elena said.

"You sleep?"

Elena tipped her head once. It could mean anything. "We're keeping the lights up," she said. "Rotate door duty every hour. No one answers twice in a row. If the buzzer goes, two beats, peephole, intercom. No exceptions. Phones to the desk at eight with the log. If anything mentions Jenna or me, route to my cell while it's still on the line. No paper messages."

Marla nodded. "Hall checks?"

"Keep the pattern. Two then one. If you break rhythm, hit the hall lamp first so she's not surprised."

Marla moved to the desk and flipped the log to a new page. She wrote the date in the corner. There was a pencil ridge where Elena had pressed too hard yesterday and dug into the paper. Marla's hand didn't catch on it.

"Two cars across the street," Elena said. "Blue sedan missing a hubcap. White SUV with a permit from out of district. We're going to use the back step for anything that can be done back there. If someone needs fresh air, we walk them around to the back. Timing changes. No one opens the front door unless the person outside is known and expected. We'll accept deliveries through the slot."

"Got it," Marla said. She looked at the cars and then at Elena. "You think anything?"

“We reduce risk,” Elena said. She gave only what was needed and stopped.

Jenna stood half behind the doorframe. Hood up. One hand at her jaw. The swelling had settled into deeper color. She stayed near the doorframe to Room Twelve and looked toward the lobby without stepping into it.

“Morning,” Elena said. She kept her voice steady.

Jenna’s throat moved. “Can I, ” She stopped and tried again. “I need to get something. From my place.”

Elena held still for a count. “What do you need?”

“My card,” Jenna said. “And my charger. He took mine. I can be fast. I won’t go inside.” She forced the word.

“Not solo,” Elena said. “Not today.” She waited. Jenna’s grip on the doorframe tightened and then released. Her eyes dropped. She stepped back a little and held there. “We can do a pick-up. We can ask a staff member to go with you and stay outside. Or we can plan a safe handoff somewhere else. Or we can skip it this morning and get you a charger from our extras, and a card from the clinic we use that issues temporary ones. Your body comes first. Not the things.”

Jenna’s fingers pressed into the pocket of her hoodie. “He’ll be mad if I don’t answer later.”

“We’re not answering him now,” Elena said. “We’re focusing on your jaw, your ribs, your breath. We can plan contact later if you want it. Not this morning.”

Jenna looked down the hall toward the bathroom, then at Elena again. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.” The second one sounded closer to steady.

“Oatmeal?” Elena asked.

Jenna nodded. “Tea.”

“Tea with honey,” Elena said. She kept the rest of the sentence in her mouth. For pain. Jenna knew.

Jenna stayed where she was until Elena moved first. Elena walked to the small kitchen and put water on and took down the oats and measured them without thinking about it. She let the kettle click off and poured. Her phone buzzed on the desk, a single vibration that wasn’t a call. She didn’t pick it up. She moved the oats in the bowl with a spoon and waited for the bubbles to settle.

When she picked up the phone, the screen showed a banner from a number with no name. Unknown number. The banner said one word and then the preview switched to “Message deleted.” Her breathing paused for a count. She turned it face-down for three seconds, then face-up again. She didn’t open the thread. Her finger hovered above the glass and held. She looked at the time. 8:02. She wrote 8:02 on the edge of the desk calendar and didn’t add a name.

Marla had seen the phone light but didn’t ask. She poured coffee that smelled burned and then made a face and dumped it and started a new pot without instruction. Elena carried the bowl and the travel mug to the hall. She knocked on Room Twelve’s door, two then one.

“Yeah,” Jenna said, voice thick.

“Oatmeal. Tea.”

Jenna sat up and took the bowl with both hands. “Thanks.”

Elena watched her settle the bowl in her lap and then left the door where it had been. Two inches.

Back at the desk, Elena kept her eyes on the outer door and the slice of window that let in gray. The two cars across the street hadn’t moved. There was condensation on the blue sedan’s glass that hadn’t been there ten minutes ago. That could mean nothing. The white SUV’s parking sticker was from two cities away. That could mean nothing, too. She wrote partial plates on a sticky note and slid it under the desk blotter, not

because it would help today but so she could focus on the next task.

Tiana came back from the kitchen with two mugs and set one near Elena's hand. "You want the TV?"

"Leave it off," Elena said. "If anyone asks, baking show. Volume low."

Tiana nodded and moved to the door post. Two beats, peephole, intercom. She had the pattern down now. Elena watched her do it and felt something in her chest ease another fraction.

The lobby lights reflected in the windows; outside stayed dull. With the lobby lights up, faces and motion were easy to see from the sidewalk through the small window slit.

Footsteps passed outside, quick and wet. A bicycle bell sounded and faded. Someone laughed near the corner and then didn't laugh again.

Marla sat at the desk and opened the external call log to a fresh page. She wrote the date there too and underlined it, then pulled a second pen and slid it toward Elena so she wouldn't have to reach across anything when she needed it. Elena glanced at Marla's hand. Warm skin. A narrow gold band. A small scar on one knuckle from the time she had caught it on the file cabinet latch.

Elena pressed her thumb into the desk edge again. The sting was familiar. It steadied her attention. She pushed her sleeves down for the third time without thinking about it, then did think about it and kept them there by choice.

A tall shape crossed the frosted glass of the outer door. Not close. Not right up against it. Backlit by the gray. Jacket. Shoulders. His head angled down; he was likely reaching for the wallet with the badge inside it, the way he had yesterday.

Don't leave the desk. Don't move fast just because your heart does. Stay where you said you would be.

He stopped at the intercom. The button made a small click when pressed. Tiana's hand was already on the inner knob, ready to work the

pattern.

Elena set her hand flat on the log paper. Her hand tightened on the desk edge.

“Okay,” she said, barely above a whisper that didn’t travel past the edge of the desk. The word wasn’t for him. It wasn’t for Marla. She knew what to do for the next ten minutes. Ten minutes. Lobby only. Lights up. No surprises.

Chapter 4

The Cold Case

Earlier, he'd used the intercom and kept to the lobby window like he'd said. Now, at shift change, he waited at the curb. She pressed her thumb into the metal edge by the latch before stepping out. The awning's front edge dripped in a steady line. The lot smelled like wet rubber and old oil. Marla stood just inside with the inner key. Elena kept one foot braced against the jamb so the door wouldn't swing far.

Across the street, the white SUV from the morning hadn't moved. The blue sedan with the missing hubcap had fog beading at the top of its windshield. The bakery van two doors down rumbled and then switched off.

"Director Cruz," Rhys said.

He was at the curb, not on the walkway. Hands out, visible. Jacket open over the same creased shirt from yesterday or one like it. He looked tired. No, worse than tired. The skin under his eyes was a thin gray.

She didn't step toward him. She shifted so her body covered more of the doorway.

"We're at shift change," she said.

"I know," he said. He kept his distance.

The street was quiet except for a barge horn once, farther off than yesterday. A gull landed on the lamppost and then flew again when a truck hissed past.

"What do you need?" she asked. Her hand stayed on the key ring. The metal was cold.

“I’ll take thirty seconds,” he said.

She didn’t answer.

“The phrase she gave me. The one he uses.” He didn’t repeat it. Good. “I’ve heard it linked with quiet tokens. Not presents. Not loud. Things placed so they’re found in a way that says access without noise. That exact language and those kinds of tokens showed up with a disappearance eight years ago.” He paused and let the rain hit the brim of the awning in front of her. “Her name was Anna.”

Her fingers tightened on the key ring. The cut in the metal dug into her index finger. She kept her face set the way she kept it when a resident told her something that meant no one would sleep until morning. Nothing moved except her hand.

“We don’t talk about other cases at the door,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to,” he said.

“Then this is you informing me,” she said.

“Yes,” he said.

She watched his hands. A crease at the thumb where the skin had dried and split at the knuckle. No ring. He held his weight on his back foot as if to show he wasn’t coming closer.

“If you’re asking for files,” she said, “intakes aren’t yours unless a resident consents. Even then, we don’t hand over lists of anyone who ever used a phrase.”

“I’m asking if you’ve seen that phrase before,” he said.

She didn’t blink.

“We log what we need to keep people safe right now. We don’t build word banks for you,” she said.

He nodded once. He adjusted his sleeve as if it itched.

“The old case,” he said. “We never found her. We found the pattern. He escalated when he didn’t get what he wanted.”

She cut that line fast.

“We don’t do speculation. We move on facts. We won’t provide speculation or commentary.”

He lifted his hands a fraction and held still.

“Okay,” he said.

Her ribs contracted and released; her breath caught; she forced it steady. The door was at her back. The bolt was between her shoulder blades. She shifted half an inch and felt the groove in the plate through her sweater.

“You said yesterday you’d stay in the lobby,” she said.

“I will,” he said.

“And you said you’d take a window,” she said.

“I will,” he said.

“Then don’t meet me out here again,” she said.

His mouth pulled like he had a reply he wasn’t going to use.

“You’re right,” he said.

Behind her, Marla shifted on the other side of the door. Elena felt the change through the frame. Not a sound. A small transfer of weight.

“If you need me, use the intercom,” she said.

“I will,” he said again.

He took one step back, then another. He kept his eyes on her face and then on the hinge of the door as if that were safer to look at.

“If you see tokens, call me,” he said.

“We’ll act if anything changes,” she said.

He waited one second, then turned as if testing the distance with his eyes on the hinge, and touched two fingers to his brow in a motion that wasn't quite a habit. He didn't hurry.

She didn't watch him go. She pushed the door with her shoulder, kept her foot on the threshold until Marla slid the inner key clear, and closed it. The deadbolt clicked. She set the chain.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed once and it caught. She flexed her hand once and looked at the small cut from the key ridges starting to pale. The name was there. She didn't say it. Her nails pressed into her palm.

She set her palm flat on the desk calendar. The paper was smooth except for yesterday's ridge where she had pressed too hard and left a dent in the next square. The phones were in their tray, cords threaded behind the blotter where they wouldn't catch.

"Everything about outside comes to me while you're still on the line," she said.

Marla nodded.

"No paper messages. No corkboard. If you miss me, tell them to hold and wave me over," Elena said.

"Got it," Marla said. She had the binder open for medication checks and a stack of intake folders half under it so they wouldn't slide.

Tiana stood at the door post with the inner key. She had the rhythm right without looking down. Two beats. Peephole. Intercom. No unlocking until a name Elena had scheduled appeared.

"We're limiting front door traffic to deliveries through the slot and scheduled people only," Elena said.

Tiana said, “Back step for air?”

“Back step,” Elena said. “Lights up out there. Buddy sign-out. No one lingers near the alley. I want times on the log, in and out.”

Khadija’s handwriting from the night still showed under the current page. Elena slid the log a fraction left so it wouldn’t catch the blotter edge.

Jenna stood near the corner of the hall again. Hood up. One hand at her jaw. The swelling held a deeper color now that the morning had gone on. She came closer and stopped at the line of the lobby carpet.

“If I go for a protection order,” Jenna said, voice small from holding her face stiff, “what’s the first thing?”

“Forms,” Elena said. “We can print them or pick them up at the clerk’s office. You don’t have to decide today. If you want to start, we’ll put your statement in your words. We’ll note injuries with the clinic notes attached. You can ask for a temporary order first. That’s today or tomorrow. A longer one needs a hearing. It’s quick, but it’s still a hearing.”

Jenna adjusted the hood with her free hand.

“Service?” Jenna asked.

“The court won’t count it unless he’s served. We don’t do the serving, the sheriff does or a process server does. You don’t have to be near it. We pick a safe address for return mail. Not here. We have options,” Elena said.

Jenna’s mouth trembled a little where the split inside it had dried. She pressed her lips together to steady it.

“If I start,” Jenna said, “do I have to finish?”

“You can stop. You can pause. We’ll tell you what each step means so you don’t get surprised. You won’t be forced through anything here,” Elena said.

Jenna exhaled and then winced as the movement pulled at her jaw.

“Do you want tea?” Elena asked.

Jenna nodded.

“I’ll bring it to the door,” Elena said.

She set water heating and watched the ripples around the coil. When she turned, bleach and old coffee were stronger near the doorway.

A volunteer in a bright scarf came in from the lounge with a roll of tape and a stack of flyers that had slid off the bulletin board earlier.

“Was that police earlier?” the volunteer asked, keeping her voice low but not low enough.

“Agency business,” Elena said.

“Just asking,” the volunteer said.

“Please tape the flyers at the top corners only. Don’t cover the evacuation map,” Elena said.

The volunteer nodded and went to the board. The evacuation map stayed clear. Elena logged the tea and took it to the hall. Two then one.

“Yeah,” Jenna said.

“Tea,” Elena said. She handed over the mug and didn’t reach through the doorway further than she had to.

“Thanks,” Jenna said.

Elena returned to the desk and watched two residents angle for the couch. One had the remote. The other claimed the end with the blanket folded over it. The remote clicked, then clicked again, then a third time. Baking. News. Baking.

“Quiet hours are suspended in the lobby, not eliminated everywhere,” the blanket one said.

“You don’t own the blanket,” the remote one said.

Elena stepped in before it turned into something that would wake everyone.

“Take the end chair,” she said to the one with the remote, “and put the volume on ten. Not eleven. Ten. You,” she said to the blanket one, “grab the puzzle from the cabinet and bring it to the far table. If you’re too tired for the puzzle, the lounge is open. The blanket stays here.”

They both moved. The click stopped. The TV landed on a show with soft voices and steady tasks. The blanket stayed. The puzzle box scraped across the table.

Elena took the desk again. She stood where the outer window slit gave her a narrow view of the street. A man leaned against the street sign across from the building. Hood up. Hands in pockets. He didn’t smoke. He didn’t look at the door. He looked at the ground in front of his shoes. He could have been waiting for anyone. He could have been resting.

She noted the time in the corner of the calendar square. 12:18. She didn’t write a description, just the word “man” with a small arrow toward the street. Marla’s eyes flicked to the mark and then to Elena. Elena said nothing.

She turned to Tiana.

“Back exit for the afternoon,” she said.

“Back exit,” Tiana said. Tiana nodded and stayed at the door.

Elena’s phone buzzed. Not a text. A ring. Unknown number. She flipped the phone face-down and let it ring out. When it stopped, she turned it face-up again and wrote 12:21 in the same square as the “man” note. She did not open the call screen. The intercom hummed low.

Marla reached for the cord under the desk to check the power strip, then set her hand on the log without writing anything. Elena watched her knuckles, the small scar catching the light when she moved.

A cart rattled in the hallway. Someone laughed in the lounge. The smell of toast from the kitchen drifted in and faded. Elena’s phone stayed

still. She set two fingers on the edge of the desk to keep her hands steady.

“You want me at the door for now?” Tiana asked.

“Yes,” Elena said.

She listened. Not for words. For changes.

The intercom clicked. Lunch courier. The desk calendar still showed 12:18 and 12:21 in her hand.

Elena took the inner key from the hook and walked to the door. Her grip slipped; the ring snagged on the belt loop. She tugged too hard; it caught. She freed it and slotted the wrong key into the top lock.

“Hold on,” she said through the door. She heard the courier’s shoes shift on the concrete outside.

She swapped keys and dropped the ring. It hit the mat and jumped once against the toe of her shoe.

Marla stepped in beside her without being called. Elena stepped back a half step and then another.

“I’ve got it,” Marla said.

Elena let the keys stay where they were. She moved out of the sightline and kept her hands to her sides. Marla ran the sequence without hurry. Two beats. Peephole. Intercom.

“Pass-through only,” Marla said into the mic.

The outer click. The slot door. The padded envelope pushed through the metal gap. The inner latch slid; the slot locked.

“Thanks,” Marla said into the mic.

Elena picked up the keys when the slot was shut. The ring felt heavier. She put it on the hook and walked to the back hall without

looking at anyone.

The back corridor was narrow and bright. The clean-out closet door had the scuffed patch at the bottom where a mop bucket had hit it a dozen times. The floor lamp near Room Twelve hummed a little. A strip of light on the floor that stopped short of the threshold. Elena looked long enough to see the two-inch gap at the door and then away, to keep her promise about not surprising anyone.

She checked her watch. Five minutes. She leaned her shoulder against the cool wall and lifted the watchband one notch tighter. Her breath came in and out steady, not the way it did when she forgot and had to make herself count. She didn't count. She watched the seconds on her watch. She pressed two fingertips to the wall until the tremor under them settled. Her hands steadied. Her breathing evened. Her gaze stayed on the switch.

A resident in flannel pants came down the hall with a laundry bag dragging behind her. She paused when she saw Elena.

"You good?" the resident asked.

"I'm fine," Elena said. The words were even.

The resident nodded as if that were enough.

"The laundry cart's at the end. Use the one with the good wheel," Elena said.

"Okay," the resident said, and went.

Her phone vibrated against her leg once and stopped. She didn't check it. The five minutes weren't done. She kept her eyes on the floor lamp switch, not because she needed to press it but because it was a point she could rest her gaze on.

At four minutes, a pipe clicked in the wall somewhere and then quieted. At five, she pushed off the wall. She loosened the watchband and flexed each finger once, then moved toward the lobby.

Marla was already at the desk with the envelope in the bin and a note clipped to it. Tiana passed Elena the door log without comment. The man on the corner had moved on. The blue sedan was still there with fog inside the windshield as before. The white SUV had two new drops sliding down its passenger window.

“Back step still,” Elena said.

“Back step,” Tiana said.

Elena picked up a pen and signed the delivery line, then added the time. She skimmed the outside calls log to make sure the square with 12:21 didn’t have a name beside it. It didn’t. She closed the cover so the page wouldn’t show to anyone at the desk who didn’t need to see it.

“You want food?” Marla asked.

“After,” Elena said.

A woman from the lounge approached and held out a paper plate. Two slices of toast, uneven butter. Elena took it so the woman would not have to stand there any longer than she had to, then set it on the desk where it wouldn’t be near the phone cords.

“Thank you,” she said.

The woman’s shoulders dropped a little. She went back to the lounge.

Elena looked at the toast and then at the door. She didn’t pick it up. The smell was nothing. It was food, not rest. She pulled the sleeves down past her wrists again. The cuff edge rubbed the bone and stayed there. Covered.

Through the slit at the window, a bus splashed past. The sidewalk emptied and filled in ordinary patterns. She liked ordinary. Ordinary was something you could track. She adjusted the angle of the chair nearest the door two inches so it wouldn’t block anyone if they needed to move fast.

“We’re steady,” Marla said, not a question.

“We are,” Elena said.

She set the pen in the groove where it wouldn't roll. The phone stayed still. If it rang again and it was unknown, she would let it go to the log. She knew what to do for the next hour. The hour after that could wait. She listened for any change in the room and held her place.

Chapter 5

The First Call

She pressed her thumb into the desk edge until she felt the sharp line and let it go. The lights stayed up. The blinds stayed down. The TV was on low and showed hands smoothing frosting over a cake that was already even. The room smelled like bleach; the coffee didn't cover it. The phone cords ran under the blotter where they would not catch.

Jenna stood near the hall corner with her hood up and one hand under her jaw. She looked smaller than she had in the morning. Her eyes tracked the lobby and then Elena, and then the door, and then back to Elena.

"I need clothes," she said. The words came out careful. "Just a couple things. I left with nothing."

Elena kept her hands flat on the desk. "Not today."

Jenna swallowed and winced. "I won't go inside. I just want to grab a bag."

"We can get you a bag without you standing outside your place," Elena said. "We can ask a staff member to meet a friend of yours if you want to set that up. We can go later to a safe handoff. Or we skip it tonight and use a spare here. Your body first. Not the things."

Jenna looked at the floor for a long three seconds. "He's going to think, "

"We are not thinking about him right now," Elena said. She kept her voice even. "We are thinking about your jaw and your breath and sleep."

"I don't have a friend here who would go," Jenna said. Her hand tightened over her ribs. "I had one. She moved."

"Then we borrow from the closet," Elena said. "We have small sizes. Soft stuff. You don't need a waistband pressing your ribs."

Jenna's eyes went to the hallway and came back. "Okay."

"Tea in ten," Elena said. "Honey. Ice after."

Jenna nodded and backed a step until her shoulder touched the wall near Room Twelve. She paused with her shoulder against the wall, without saying she needed to stop.

Marla shifted her weight near the end of the desk. Her cardigan was buttoned wrong at the top; she didn't notice. "Board liaison just texted me," she said, too casual for it to be nothing. "Two donors are in the neighborhood. They want a quick look. Ten minutes."

"No," Elena said. She didn't raise her voice. "Not today. No tours in alert posture."

"They say they can keep it to the lobby," Marla said. "Five minutes."

"No," Elena said. "We are not on display. If they want to help, they can drop a check through the slot or email the chair. No press. No cameras."

Marla's mouth pulled. "I'll text back."

"Say board policy."

"We don't have a written, "

"We do now," Elena said. She stripped a sticky note from the pad and wrote a line and stuck it to the corner of the monitor. No tours during alert. No donors in residential hours. She would add it to the shared folder later. Not now.

From the hall, a child started to cry. High first, then lower, then high again. The kind of cry that meant tired more than hurt. A woman said,

"Shh," and then "Shh" again, softer.

Elena stepped around the desk with her palms open. "Lounge," she said to the mother. "It's quieter there. We'll dim a lamp."

The woman had a toddler on her hip. The little one had one sock and wet hair across her forehead; her cheeks were blotchy. The woman looked exhausted. Elena kept her voice as level as she could. She didn't touch. She turned toward the lounge and waited until the woman moved, then walked just ahead with the path clear and the angle tight around the corner so no one would be surprised by a body coming through the doorway.

In the lounge, Elena clicked the lamp to the lower setting and pulled the couch back two inches so the door would not catch on it. "You can sit here," she said. She reached for the woven basket of toys that always had the same little hard animals and set it where the child could see. "Water?"

"Water's good," the woman said, shifting the child down to the couch. The child rubbed at her face and hiccupped.

Elena took a paper cup at the sink and filled it halfway. She passed it without reaching close. The child grabbed it with both hands. The water sloshed onto her sleeve. No one flinched.

"I'll shut this door most of the way so it stays quiet," Elena said. She left a three-inch gap. Enough to hear if the tone changed. Not enough for the TV to bother them.

Back at the desk, Marla had her phone up. "Text sent. I used 'policy' and 'resident privacy.'" She adjusted the top of her cardigan into the right button and then checked the medication binder, her thumb holding a page down that tended to flip up.

Tiana came from the back with the small gray laundry cart. "The dryer is free," she said to no one in particular. "Also, there was a call an hour ago when you were with Maya. I put it in the log but I didn't like it."

Elena looked at her. "What did they ask?"

"Said they were seeing what services we offer and how late we stay open if someone wanted to come by at night. Asked if we keep the front door locked all the time or just sometimes."

Elena kept her mouth closed for a breath. Then, "Did you get a name?"

"No. They said 'just curious' and hung up after I said we don't admit anyone without scheduling and we don't give tours."

Elena pulled the external calls log toward her. Tiana had written 1:07 PM, Unknown, "Services/hours? How strict at night?" Reply: general info only; no details; no names.

"Route everything to me live for the next day," Elena said. "Even donations. Even 'is Marla there.' Put them on hold and get me. No paper messages."

"Got it," Tiana said. She hung the inner key back on the hook and then, without looking at it, picked it up again and held it, reluctant to let it go.

Elena looked at the whiteboard that hung behind the desk. Volunteer orientation at four had a circle around it from the morning. Supply pickup at five had a name next to it. She took the dry-erase marker and dragged a line through the orientation. "We push this. Email them tomorrow," she said. She drew a line through the pickup. "We go to pass-through on the supply. If they can't pass, we move it."

Marla nodded. "We should refill the earplugs basket."

"I'll do it," Tiana said. "I know where they live." She moved toward the closet near the hall and then stopped at the corner to look first, then went.

Elena set her palm flat on the desk again. The desk calendar square had two earlier marks in the corner. She touched the pen to the paper and didn't write anything. If she didn't have a reason to mark it, she didn't force a mark.

"You hungry?" Marla asked.

"Later," Elena said.

Her eyes went to the narrow window slit near the door. The street was the same dull gray. The blue sedan still sat across the way with fog on the inside. The white SUV was there. No one stood by the sign. A bus passed; water broke around its tires and marked the curb.

She reached down and tapped the small monitor on the lower shelf. The picture came up in black and white from the camera above the awning. It showed the slice of sidewalk, the outer door rectangle, the drip from the awning edge, the top of the bakery van when it rolled by. Rain speckled the image. She watched a full minute. Two people walked past, not looking at the door. A third came from the far end with a hood up and a paper bag; they did not break stride. No one paused in the frame. She clicked the monitor off.

"Anything?" Marla asked.

"No," Elena said. "Normal." She didn't add anything.

She poured hot water over a tea bag in the travel mug and drizzled honey into it. She walked to Room Twelve. Two then one. The hum from the hall lamp was louder here.

"Yeah," Jenna said.

"Tea," Elena said. She eased the mug into Jenna's hands. Jenna's fingers closed slowly.

"Thanks," Jenna said. She tried a sip and set the mug on the desk by the bed. The ice pack lay on a towel near her ribs. The wedge of light from the hall fell over the floor. Elena left the door open two inches and moved back down the hall.

At the desk, the volunteer with the bright scarf pointed at the bulletin board. "Where do you want the winter coat drive poster?"

"Top left corner," Elena said. "Don't cover evacuation."

The volunteer nodded. Tape snapped and then stuck. The map stayed clear where it needed to be clear.

Elena's phone lit and then dimmed. She didn't reach for it. She moved the pen two inches from the edge so it wouldn't roll if someone brushed the desk. She rubbed the edge of her cuff down so it covered her wrist. She could feel the bone under the fabric. Covered was the point.

A small sound came from the lounge. Not crying now. Soft words. The tone was lower. That was good. She let herself exhale one long breath and felt the tightness hold and then give a small amount.

The admin light blinked before she finished exhaling. The administrative phone at the end of the desk blinked once, then again.

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She lifted the receiver and put it to her ear.

She said nothing. She listened. She heard steady breathing on the line. Not hers. Not the line. It moved in and out with a human pace, slow and even, without background sound.

She waited. She looked at the second hand on her watch. One rotation. Two. She counted five more ticks after that and then pressed the hook. The line cut. Her grip on the handset had gone hard; she flexed her fingers once. She looked at the small screen and then at the calendar square and logged the time, admin line, NCID. She did not write the word she was thinking.

"What?" Marla asked low.

"No Caller ID," Elena said. "Breathing. No voice." She kept her tone factual. "Route everything to me. Keep the TV low." She pulled the admin handset close and stayed at the desk.

Marla nodded. Her mouth was a straight line now. She slid the external calls log toward Elena, reluctant, but knowing she should. Elena put it back where it belonged and put her palm on top of it for a second.

"Tiana," Elena called without raising her voice.

Tiana came out of the closet with a box of earplugs. "Yeah."

"Door is yours," Elena said. "Two beats. Peephole. Intercom. Pass-through only. No exceptions."

"Got it," Tiana said. She put the earplugs in the basket and stood at the inner door with her hand on the knob and her eyes on the little slit.

Elena walked to the outer door and put her fingers on the chain. It was engaged. She looked at the pass-through slot hinge and pushed the inner latch to make sure it held. She walked to the back corridor and put her palm on the bar by the back exit. It was seated under the brackets. She pressed down once to feel it in place. She kept her promise to herself and didn't stay there longer than it took to take the data in. She returned to the desk.

"Jenna doesn't move alone," Elena said to Marla and Tiana. "Bathroom, tea, smoke at the back step. Buddy at all times. Log times in and out."

Marla said, "I'll sit the hall when she goes."

"Use the lamp signal before you break the knock rhythm," Elena said. "No surprises."

"Okay," Marla said.

Elena sat at the desk with both phones in reach. She moved the administrative handset two inches closer so she didn't have to reach across the blotter for it. The volunteer set the tape down and stepped out of the way.

Her pocket buzzed once. She pulled the phone and held it where only she could see the screen. Unknown. No location at the top, no name. She set it face-up and let it ring until it stopped. She added another mark in the corner of the calendar square without adding anything else.

The cake show was still on. A woman on the screen used a flat knife to scrape an edge smooth. Elena looked away before the next movement and didn't watch the next shot.

Maya P. came up with her pharmacy bag. "I feel kind of floaty," she said.

"You took it with food?" Elena asked.

"Yup."

"Sit down for a bit," Elena said. "Drink water. No stacking Tylenol on top."

"Got it," Maya said. She sat in the chair with the clean angle to the door. Her hands lay open on her thighs. She looked down, checking to see if they were attached. Elena watched her for the count of eight seconds and then snapped back to the door.

Jenna's door opened a little more. Marla was already up. She lifted two fingers toward the corridor and Jenna nodded. They moved together to the bathroom. Marla hit the hall lamp button once. The light changed for a second and then settled.

Elena rolled the pen between her fingers and put it back where it would not roll. A drop from the awning hit the outer step with that same flat tap as always. The administrative phone didn't blink. Her cell stayed still. She could feel her pulse tighten under her sleeve. She didn't look at it. She set her jaw where it was. TV low, hallway hum, water at the lounge sink, clear sources she could identify. That kept her from flinching at stray sounds.

A while later, the intercom hissed as someone pressed it, and Tiana hit the button and said, "Pass-through only." A food service guy pushed a paper sack through the slot with a receipt clipped to it. He didn't try to make eye contact through the glass. Good. Tiana slid the slot shut and latched it. Elena signed the receipt and put the bag on the back counter.

Marla came back from the hall. "She's lying down."

"Okay," Elena said. "Next shift, she gets the buddy too."

"I'll note it," Marla said. She wrote small and neat in the hallway log and put her initials next to the time.

The clock hands moved. Nothing in the room changed. She lifted and dropped her shoulders once. The muscles held.

She stayed at the desk until the day was almost gone. She told herself this was the right place to be. It was the only place to be until the second hand landed where it needed to land. When the volunteer came to ask about the winter coats again, Elena pointed without looking and the volunteer went. When Maya asked for a second glass of water, Elena filled it. When Tiana said she needed five minutes, Elena said, "Take them. Marla, door."

The administrative phone lit again. No Caller ID. Elena picked it up before the second ring.

"North Harbor," she said into the line for the first time. She said the words and added nothing. She heard breathing again. In. Out. A full minute. She didn't give anything else. She pressed the hook down and put the receiver back.

She looked at Marla and said, "Same." She didn't add the rest. Marla nodded.

Outside, the light dropped further. Wet tires hissed. She thought about how she would leave. Main road. No river route. Park where she could see the front door. Wait. She would not go straight in. She would not give any watcher a clean, predictable line. She set her keys on the blotter as a reminder to watch from the car before going up.

"I'll take the desk through close," she said. "Then I'm out."

"I can stay late," Marla said.

"You need the morning," Elena said. "Go home before ten."

Marla opened her mouth to argue. She didn't. She shut it.

When Elena finally stepped out into the wet air, the awning dripped a steady line. Her coat sleeves were pulled down to her wrists, her hair tight at her neck. She didn't look across the street. She looked at the hinge. She locked the door. She pictured the peephole check: two beats, then look. She knew the interior and didn't need to repeat it.

The drive took nine minutes. She used the main road. She checked the mirror and then checked it again without making it obvious. A pickup turned off where the deli was. A barge horn sounded out over the water and stopped.

She parked where she could see the laundromat door and her stairwell. The window fogged in the corner where the vent blew. She shut the engine off and kept her keys in her hand. Her phone lay face-up on the passenger seat. She didn't touch it.

A couple argued near the corner by the mailbox. The man held his hands up at his shoulders, keeping them still. The woman said, "I told you," and the rest was under the rain. They stood there for a minute more and then walked away together. Elena watched them go until they turned left and were gone.

A rideshare car idled halfway down the block. The light on its dash pulsed. The driver looked at something in his hand and then at the door of the building across from hers. A woman with a backpack came out, got in, and they pulled away. Elena read the make and two letters of the plate and then let them go. It was irrelevant now.

She watched the laundromat door open and close. A man left with a bag on his shoulder. The owner came out with a mop and set the mop against the inside wall and then locked the door. He looked down the block and then at his hands and walked away toward the corner. Common things. Ordinary. She wanted all of it to be that.

She checked her watch. Ten minutes. If nothing changed, she would move. If something changed, she would move differently. She watched the band of light under the downstairs front door. It broke when someone

pulled it open and then went straight again when it shut. She counted three breaks and then none. No one lingered.

The belt pressed across her chest. She slid her hand under the belt and set her palm on her sternum for exactly one breath and then took it away. She didn't repeat it.

The ten minutes passed. The block held its same slow pattern. She didn't like that the same was what it was, but it was what she had. She followed the plan. She opened the car door and slid out with her keys in her right hand and her left free. She didn't hunch or hurry. She walked at a steady pace, keys in hand, and went to the door.

She pushed into the outer door with her hip and went up the right side of the stairwell. As she climbed, she kept her breathing even. At her door, she put the key in without looking down. She turned it and stepped in and shut the door and turned the deadbolt. She set the chain.

The hall outside had the same smell it always had. Soap. Lint. Damp, a little. Inside, she kept the big light off and used the lamp near the couch. Enough to see her hands. Enough to see what her hands were doing.

Bag on the chair, she took both phones out and set them face-up on the coffee table. The primary went on charge; she raised the volume one notch and confirmed Do Not Disturb was off. The backup stayed charged and dark. Ready. Then the door bar: she lifted it with both hands and set it in the brackets. It seated with weight. She pressed down on it once more until she felt the give stop.

By habit, she walked the window latches. The table-side window was latched. The bathroom window was latched. She put her palm on the wood of the door and felt the cold and nothing else. Moving through the small space, she confirmed the corners looked the same. She kept the check brief. She touched what she needed to touch and stopped.

Shoes off, toes pointed toward the path out, she slid them under the coffee table. Her jacket went on the couch back where she could grab it without standing all the way up. She checked that her watch lay flat on

her wrist. Sleeves came down to cover the skin she didn't show anymore.

Her phone lit and then dimmed. No sound. A preview didn't show. She picked it up and saw the lock screen. Nothing there. She set it back down and turned it so the camera faced the wall.

At the sink, she ran water, filled the kettle, set it on, and took it off before it clicked. She didn't want that click in the air. She poured into the mug, added honey, took one drink, felt nothing change, and set the mug down.

She washed her hands and dried them on a towel that had a small tear at the edge she never repaired. She smoothed the towel flat and put it back on the counter line.

Back at the couch, she sat with one knee folded and one foot flat, right hand free. She kept her eyes on the door and the bar. She pressed her thumbnail into her finger and eased off. She was here. The bar was in. The chain was set. The latches were down. In the dish by the door: paperclips, a rubber band, and Rhys's card secured under the band. The pocket could wait until morning. She had time before that. Time enough to watch the door and not sleep.

Chapter 6

The Note

She smoothed the corner of the desk calendar where her pen had left a small dent the day before. The lobby lights were still too bright for the hour. The blinds stayed down. The TV was low and showed a bowl of batter being whisked until bubbles surfaced and broke. The room smelled of bleach under the coffee.

Tiana stood at the inner door with the key in hand, watching the slit in the window. Marla checked the medication binder and held a page that tended to flip up. Elena kept the administrative handset close. Her sleeves were pulled down to her wrists. The rubber edge of the blotter pressed against her forearm.

Jenna stood near the hall corner with a black drawstring bag on one shoulder. The bag looked too light to hold anything that could keep her warm. She kept her hood up, and one hand hovered near her ribs without settling.

“I’m going,” Jenna said. The words came out flat. “I’m going back.”

Elena lifted her head. She didn’t move her hands. “To him?”

“He’s sorry,” Jenna said. She looked at the floor, then at the door, then back to Elena. “He needs me. He said he can’t sleep when I’m not there. He said if I come home we can talk.”

In the chair by the corner table, Maya held a pharmacy bag against her knees and pretended not to listen. The volunteer with the bright scarf taped a coat-drive flyer’s bottom edge and then paused, her hand hovering over the flyer.

“Come sit,” Elena said. She kept her voice steady. She moved a chair so the angle didn’t block the walkway. Jenna didn’t sit. Elena didn’t push the chair again. “Did you eat?”

“I’m fine.” Jenna’s mouth pulled tight. She adjusted the bag strap. Her sleeve slid back, and the skin above her wrist showed a faint yellow where the red had been. The ice took the edge down, but the shape of fingers was still there if anyone knew how to see it.

“You told me last night your jaw still hurts,” Elena said. “And your ribs. You slept two hours at a stretch.”

“He said it will be different,” Jenna said. “He said he was mad because I made him mad and he knows that’s not an excuse. He said he’s going to fix it.”

She breathed shallow, high in her chest. She drew a slower breath without making a show of it. “He called you?”

“No. He got a message to me through,” Jenna stopped, eyes jumping to the administrative handset. “He just knows, okay?”

The handset was quiet. Elena kept a finger near it. “What did he say, exactly.”

“He said, ‘Be good for me. Be good and I’ll make it easy.’” Jenna spoke fast; the words overlapped. “He said ‘come home’ and said ‘we’ll keep it quiet, nobody has to know.’”

Elena looked at the floor line where the carpet met the tile. She didn’t speak for a moment to be sure she had it right. The TV showed hands lining a cake tin. The sound of the whisk was soft and constant. Tiana tapped the key lightly against her palm and then stopped.

“Not today,” Elena said. “Not like this.”

“You can’t keep me here,” Jenna said. Her fingers tightened on the strap. “I’m not a prisoner.”

“You’re not,” Elena said. She met her eyes. “There are the front doors. You can walk out if you want. But I’m not going to let you walk to a car and call that a plan.”

“It is a plan,” Jenna said. “I go, I talk, I sleep in my own bed.”

“Then tomorrow what?” Elena asked. “He doesn’t like something you say. He’s sorry again? He needs you more? You can’t breathe right now without it hurting. He did that.”

Jenna’s eyes flicked to the side. She swallowed and winced. Her hand shifted back to her ribs.

Elena kept her hands flat so Jenna could see they were steady. She flexed her fingers and rolled her shoulders to keep her hands from shaking. “Listen to me,” she said. “I know he says he’ll change. I know he’s sorry. Don’t believe him.”

Jenna’s head came up at that. Her mouth opened, then closed. She studied Elena’s face for a long moment. “Did you leave someone?”

Elena didn’t move. She set her jaw, then eased it. “This is about you.”

“It’s a yes or no,” Jenna said, voice small. “Did you?”

Elena held her eyes. She didn’t drop them. She didn’t give a nod. She let Jenna look for as long as Jenna needed and didn’t hide the answer that was there. Then she looked away a fraction and kept her shoulders square. “You’re not walking out of here into a car while your jaw is like that.”

Jenna pushed air out through her nose and hugged the bag strap tighter. “You can’t stop me.”

“I won’t put my hands on you,” Elena said. “I’m asking you to wait forty-eight hours. That’s it. We make an agreement. Two days. Then you can decide again. If you still want to go at the end of that window, I won’t stand at the door.”

Jenna shook her head. The hood shifted. “Why forty-eight?”

“Because feelings like this change after sleep and food,” Elena said. “Because he’s not changing in two days, no matter what he says. Because two days lets your body rest first.” She kept her tone level. No pleading.

“He’ll be mad,” Jenna said. Her thumb traced the seam of the bag. “He’ll be mad if I don’t pick up.”

“We don’t have to pick up,” Elena said. “If you want to send one line through the clinic line later that you’re safe and will call when ready, we can do that. Not now. Not with your jaw like this.” She let her eyes drop to Jenna’s ribs and then back up. “We keep the lamp signal. Two then one at the door. We check you hourly, but we don’t force you to talk. You sleep. You eat. Tea, ice.”

Jenna didn’t answer. She turned the bag strap over and over. The seam darkened under her fingers where it had absorbed the oils from other hands before hers. She looked at the door and held her eyes there.

Marla waited where she was. She didn’t come in. She didn’t say anything. She just set the medication binder down and kept the corner from flipping itself up.

“Forty-eight,” Elena said. “You don’t owe me a story. You don’t owe me anything. But you owe yourself time.”

Jenna’s eyes filled and then cleared again. She stood straighter. The skin under her eyes was puffy, and her mouth held tight. “You’re good with words,” she said. It wasn’t a compliment.

“I’m good with rules,” Elena said. “I keep people alive with rules.” She tipped her chin toward the hall. “Room Twelve’s door stays two inches. If you want it shut for ten minutes, you tell me. I’ll hit the lamp before I knock.”

Jenna stared at her for a slow count. The TV switched to a tray in an oven. The timer on the screen counted down. The volunteer to the left finished the tape and stepped back.

“Forty-eight,” Jenna whispered. “Fine.”

Elena let out enough air to keep her voice steady. She didn't rush to fill the space. "Tea?"

Jenna nodded once.

Elena looked at Marla. "Hourly eyes on her," she said. "Don't make her talk. Lamp signal before you break rhythm. Document the times."

Marla touched two fingers to the hallway log and then to her chest. "Got it," she said. She picked up the log, made a clean line under the last entry, wrote the time, and added a note: hourly check-ins, lamp signal first. Her handwriting stayed small and tight. She moved toward the hall without hurrying, glanced at Jenna, and gave just a little tilt of her head so Jenna could choose to meet it or not.

Elena made the tea. Honey. She watched the coil under the kettle glow and then switched it off before it clicked. The smell of hot water and bag paper rose under the bleach. She brought the mug to Room Twelve and did two then one before she eased the door a hand's width. Jenna took the mug and held it without drinking.

When Elena stepped back to the desk, the administrative handset stayed where it was. She checked the pass-through latch with her fingertips and confirmed the lock was in the notch. She reached for the door log and added her initials by the time block for the last delivery. Tiana looked at her, then at the slit, then at her again. Elena nodded once. Tiana didn't ask the thing she wanted to ask.

The wall clock ticked. Light at the window dulled. No one spoke above a whisper. The TV showed hands cracking an egg. The yolk ran into the bowl in one slide. Outside, tires hissed over wet asphalt in a steady stream. Someone laughed in the lounge and then spoke low so the laugh wouldn't carry.

At the hour, Marla tapped the lamp switch once and went to Jenna's door. She did two then one and leaned in a little. Elena watched the set of Marla's shoulders and could tell there had been a nod from inside the room. Marla came back and wrote in the log again. She drew a small box

around the time and filled it in with her pen.

Elena kept herself to the desk. She adjusted the chair two inches for a clear line to the door. The partial plate sticky note sat under the edge of the blotter where only she could reach it. When the administrative handset blinked at one point, it was the clinic. A pharmacist checked on a refill. Elena answered with time slots and a no to any questions that asked for more than a time.

A board liaison number flashed across Marla's screen at four-thirty. She let it go. They were not doing tours. The sticky note on the monitor still read the line Elena had written the day before: No tours during alert. No donors in residential hours. The volunteer with the bright scarf moved to the back with the earplugs basket, refilling it from a box Tiana had set on the counter earlier.

Her watch read five when Jenna opened her door and stepped into the hall. She kept the hood up and moved toward the bathroom with her arm tight to her side. Marla stood and walked with her, then waited at the door. When Jenna went in, Marla noted the time in the log. Elena still touched the lamp switch with one finger and let it hum once so Jenna wouldn't startle at the broken rhythm.

By six twenty-five, they moved toward close. Tiana signed the last delivery line and hung the inner key on the hook. The lights remained up. The blinds stayed down. Elena stacked the logs and slid them into the tray. She checked the pass-through slot one more time and pressed the inner latch until it hit its stop. Her hands were steady. She kept her forearms tight. If she relaxed, the tremor would come back.

She put her coat on and pulled the sleeves down until the cuffs rested against the back of her hands. She slid her hand into the inner pocket. The card was there. She didn't take it out. Not yet. She looked at Marla. "I'll be ten minutes away."

"Text when you're in," Marla said. She glanced at the calendar square and then at Elena. The volunteer busied herself with a stack of flyers that

didn't need straightening.

"Two then one," Elena said.

"Always," Marla said.

Elena took the keys from the hook and crossed to the inner door. Tiana stood to her right without stepping close. Elena did two knuckles on the inner door before she turned the deadbolt and unhooked the chain. She opened just enough for her body, stepped through, and pulled it closed. She listened to the deadbolt engage behind her and the chain move back into place. She took the outer door next, using the peephole and then the key. The air in the entry was colder. Water fell from the awning in a steady line.

Outside, the lot looked the same as it usually did at that time. The food pantry van was gone. The bakery two doors down had its lights off. A car idled at the far corner by the alley and then turned out onto the street. On the other side, the white SUV that had parked across the street the day before was not there. The blue sedan wasn't there either. Nothing waited that she could point to.

She walked to her car at a steady pace, avoiding the windows above the storefronts, the second-floor unit with the pulled shade, and any glass that would show her reflection. She kept the keys in her right hand and her left free.

Her windshield wipers were lifted off the glass. She didn't leave them like that. A wet corner of paper stuck out from under the driver's-side wiper. The paper was darker where it was soaked through, lighter where it had bunched.

Her chest tightened. She kept her movement even. She looked at the angles of the lot again, not sweeping, just taking in corners and the line of sight from the alley mouth to her spot. A man in a rain jacket walked by the sidewalk with a dog that shook itself three times and kept walking. A woman in a knit cap took a carry-out bag from a door two doors down and headed toward the crosswalk without turning. The laundromat

across the way had its gate down.

She reached for the wiper with two fingers and lifted it enough to slide the paper free by its corner without smearing anything else. The paper tore a little where the metal had pinned it. She held it by the edges. The rain made the fibers swell under her grip.

Three words in block letters bled at the edges from the water. The ink had run, but the letters still held their shape. I see you.

Her stomach muscles tightened. Sweat pricked at her hairline. The edges of the paper shook because her hand shook. She put her elbow against her ribs and steadied the note with the other hand, not letting her fingers touch the writing surface. She didn't look around again because she had already looked. She kept her face where it had been.

She opened the passenger door and set the note on the seat, still holding two corners. She reached into her bag and took out a clean envelope she kept for receipts. She slid the envelope open and widened the mouth with her knuckles. She eased the note in without letting the wet side touch the outside of the envelope and sealed it. Not the best evidence bag, but better than a pocket. She set the envelope on the passenger seat.

She remembered the card in her inner pocket and the number on it. Her fingers pressed against the card through the fabric. She didn't want to call. She also didn't want to put the envelope in her bag, drive home, and put it on her table like it was nothing.

Don't wait. Don't make this smaller than it is. Don't handle it alone.

She took the card out. The card felt thin and stiff and clean in a way the wet envelope didn't. She keyed the number with her right thumb, watching the lot through the wet glass. The screen showed his contact as a string of numbers. She pressed call and held the phone to her ear.

He picked up fast. "Garvey." No questions. Not even hello.

“There’s a note on my car,” she said. Her voice sounded even to herself. “Under the wiper. It says, ‘I see you.’ I’m in the shelter lot.”

He didn’t talk over her. A beat, then, “You alone?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t stay there,” he said. “Pick a spot. Somewhere bright.”

She could hear the faint sound of traffic through his end. Or maybe it was an office heater. It didn’t matter. She looked across the street at the blank windows, the wet line under the awning, and the thin strip of light at the edge of the blinds.

“The diner on Riverside,” she said. “Twenty-four hours.”

“I know it,” he said. “I can be there in eight.”

“I’ll drive now.” Her hands were steady on the wheel when she put them there. “I have the note in an envelope.”

“Good,” he said. “Don’t bring it in your coat pocket where it can get more wet. Passenger seat is fine.”

“I have it there.” She looked back at the envelope sitting on the seat, pale against dark upholstery.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll come in and wait by the door. You pick the spot.”

She didn’t want that. “You’ll wait on the mat until I nod. Then you come over and sit where I tell you.”

“Okay,” he said. No argument. “Drive easy.”

“I will.” She ended the call and watched the screen go dark before she moved. She set the phone face-up beside the envelope, not touching the envelope with it.

She looked at the shelter door and saw Tiana’s shoulder and the angle of the inner key through the small slit. She kept her hand down; no need to draw eyes. She turned the key in the ignition. The engine came up with its usual little shudder and then steadied. She lowered the wipers to the

glass. Water smudged across the windshield and then cleared the arc. She checked the mirrors and pulled out, not too slow, not too fast.

The drive didn't take long. She kept to the main road and didn't turn down the river route. A bus passed. Its tires threw water against the curb. A cyclist in a reflective jacket flashed by in the opposite lane and was gone. At a light, a man in a pickup gestured at someone on his phone and then looked forward when the light changed. She focused on each movement.

She pulled into the diner lot and positioned her car where she could see the glass doors and the side exit. A woman in scrubs sat at the counter inside with a plastic clamshell in front of her and her hair pulled back under a paper cap. The hostess stand was empty. A server wiped a table and left a damp ring around a syrup bottle without noticing.

The sealed envelope lay on the passenger seat. She kept glancing at it and left it alone. She took her phone and put it in her coat pocket again. She rolled her shoulders back and let them rest against the seat.

She went in. The air was warmer than outside and smelled of burnt coffee and old oil. The fluorescent lights hummed. She let her eyes adjust to the glare bouncing off the chrome and the glass cake stand at the counter.

She picked a booth with its back to the wall near the window. From there she could see the glass doors, the hostess stand, and the short hall to the bathrooms. The table had a napkin holder and a metal caddy with salt and a bottle of hot sauce. The vinyl tugged at her coat; it released when she shifted her weight. She set her hands on the edge of the table so she wouldn't clutch them in her lap. She kept her sleeves down. She didn't take off her coat.

She didn't look at the clock on the far wall. She watched the door. The woman in scrubs took three bites without looking up from whatever was on her phone and then closed the clamshell and slid a ten under the edge. She left without pushing in the stool.

Eight minutes later, he walked in. He stood on the entry mat and stayed there. Hands visible. He didn't move until she gave him the nod. The hostess came out from the back, looked at him, and then went to refill a coffee cup for a man at the counter. He didn't take his eyes off Elena until she tipped her chin.

He came to the booth and stopped a half step back. She moved her hand from the edge to the tabletop, an open palm he could see. He sat across from her. His suit looked the same as the day before, rumpled, tie loose. He hadn't shaved; the stubble was heavy. He looked worse than tired. He hadn't slept; his face was gray, but he sat upright.

"I came alone. No backup unless you ask," he said.

"You okay to talk here?" he asked. He kept his voice even and low. He didn't lean in.

"Yes," she said. Her hands stayed where he could see them. "The note is in my car. Bagged in an envelope."

He nodded. "Do you want to hand it over now or after we talk?"

She met his eyes. "After." Then, because she knew he'd be thinking about chain of custody: "I handled the corners only. Under the wiper to envelope."

"Good," he said. He didn't pull out a notepad. He put his hands flat on the table and kept them still.

A server came with two menus. "Coffee?"

"Yes," Elena said. "Black."

"Same," Rhys said. The server set down two thick mugs and left without asking about food. The coffee steamed. Elena took a sip. It was burned and thin. She didn't care. The heat steadied her jaw where it had started to clench.

"Time and place," he said. "When did you find it and where exactly?"

“Shelter lot,” she said. “Under the driver’s wiper. Wipers were lifted off the glass. I left at six thirty-two and saw it when I reached the car. I kept the note in my hand by the edges and put it in a clean envelope on the passenger seat.”

“Anyone nearby?” he asked.

“A man with a dog on the sidewalk. A woman with a takeout bag crossing toward the corner. The bakery was closed. The laundromat gate was down. No one lingered near the cars.” She paused. “No blue sedan. No white SUV. Not tonight.”

He absorbed that without asking about the sedan or the SUV. He’d heard those details earlier. He kept the questions to what mattered for right now. “Cameras on the lot?”

“We have the awning camera,” she said. “It covers the door and a slice of sidewalk. It won’t pick up the lot.”

“Street cams?” he asked.

“At the corner, but too far,” she said. “We can pull them if you want to request, but the resolution is, ”

“I’ll ask anyway,” he said. “It gives us timing. Maybe a person in frame.” He lifted a hand, palm up.

She drank more coffee and set the mug down. The ceramic made a dull sound against the laminate. “The administrative line had two breathing calls yesterday,” she said. Her voice didn’t change. “I logged the times. No words.”

“Before or after noon?”

“Afternoon,” she said. She gave him the times from memory. “Both No Caller ID.”

He nodded. “We’ll pull our own logs and see if an outside line lit up. Sometimes the call data shows a trace.”

She didn't ask him what database he'd use or whether he had the time to get those records legally. That was his world, not hers. She gave him what she had and let him decide how to move it. She had called. That was already one line crossed today.

"You didn't touch the ink," he said.

"No."

"You drove here alone," he said. He wasn't trying to catch her out. He was making a picture.

"Yes," she said. "I didn't see anyone follow."

He nodded again. "I didn't bring a car I'd park out front. You won't see it. I came from the side."

She didn't smile. "Good."

The server came back and topped off the mugs in a practiced motion. "Food?"

"No," Elena said. The coffee sat hot and heavy in her stomach. That was fine. She wanted the heat more than anything else.

The server left. Rhys kept his hands flat. "You want a marked presence at the shelter tomorrow or do you want us quiet?"

"Quiet," she said. "No cruisers. No uniforms. If you need to come, we do lobby only, as before, and we hold to the time window."

He didn't argue. "Okay."

"If anyone asks, it's agency business," she added. "You don't answer questions from volunteers. You already know that."

"I do," he said.

"I'm not telling Marla about this tonight," she said. The words landed in her throat and stayed there for a second. "I will tell her later. Not tonight."

“Understood,” he said. “This doesn’t leave this booth without your say.”

She let the coffee sit on her tongue before she swallowed.

“We have logs,” she said. “We have a sticky note with partial plates for two cars from yesterday morning. They weren’t there tonight. You can have the times when you take the note.”

He nodded and didn’t reach. He didn’t ask her to hand anything over now.

He glanced toward the windows for a second and then back at her. “I’m going to say one thing and then I’ll leave it.”

“Say it,” she said.

“This is escalation,” he said. “From weird to direct. And whoever wrote it knows where you park and how you leave. They either followed you last night or they watched long enough to learn your timing. That means patience or proximity. Or both.”

She nodded. The coffee tasted more bitter than it had before. “I know.”

“I won’t ask how you know,” he said. “But I know you know.”

She looked down at the napkin under her mug. It had a small tear in one edge. She smoothed it out as if it mattered. “I’ll adjust my exit. Back door, different times. We’ll use the alley for staff air and not the step if we see cars we don’t like.”

“Good,” he said. “Consider flipping your driving route every other day. Keep your head up for the first three blocks from the lot.”

“I do that,” she said.

He didn’t push the point. “Do you want me to come by for the envelope now or do you want to hold it and bring it to the station tomorrow?”

She weighed it, then shook her head once. “Hold. Tomorrow at nine. Pass-through at the shelter. I’ll be on desk. Slot only.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll ping the intercom. I’ll say pickup.”

“Pass-through only,” she said. “No names on the intercom.” She would hand him the envelope. Nothing else.

The server topped off the coffee again. Elena didn’t drink. She wrapped her hands around the mug without lifting it. The heat warmed her fingers through the ceramic. Rhys watched her hands for a second, then lifted his eyes again and stayed there.

“You didn’t ask me if I’m okay,” she said.

“Do you want me to?”

“No,” she said.

He accepted that. “I’ll be there at nine.”

She nodded. She didn’t stand yet. She waited until he stood and backed up from the booth, giving her space to make the first move. He started toward the door and then paused, then kept moving and went out.

She stayed in the booth for one more minute. She lifted the mug and took one more drink. It had gone cold. She set money under the edge of the saucer even though she hadn’t ordered food. She didn’t need change. She slid out of the booth and kept her back to the wall as she stood. The path to the door was clear. She stepped into it and walked out into air that smelled of wet asphalt and fryer smoke from a nearby vent.

In the car, she looked at the envelope again. It sat where she had left it, sealed and pale and ordinary looking. She put her hand on the steering wheel and then moved it because her palm was damp. She dried it on her sleeve and adjusted the cuff back down.

She started the car. She checked the mirror. A sedan turned left at the corner. A boy on a bike cut across the end of the lot and headed toward the bus stop. She pulled out and took the main road toward home.

On her block, the laundromat sign flickered and then steadied. She found her usual spot where she could see her stairwell. She turned off the engine and sat with her hands on the wheel, a count of ten, then twenty. No one was out in front. A neighbor carried a laundry basket from his trunk to his building and then went back for the detergent he'd left on the seat.

To keep the paper dry, she lifted the sealed envelope by two corners into a clean grocery bag from the car floor and tied the handles loosely. She carried it by the top of the handles, got out, and went in. She took the right side of the stairs. She slid the key in without looking and turned it. Deadbolt. Chain. She stepped back and felt the cold wood under her palm. She moved through the apartment and made the small light on. She brought her shoes under the table with toes toward the door and set her jacket on the back of the couch. She lifted the door bar and set it into the brackets. She pressed down until the give stopped. She checked the table-side window latch and the bathroom window latch. Both were down. She took both phones out and set them face-up on the coffee table. The primary went on charge with the volume up one notch and Do Not Disturb off. The backup stayed charged and dark. She filled the kettle and switched it off before it clicked.

She set the grocery bag on the table and eased the envelope out by the corners. She left it there, sealed and flat, away from heat and wet. She stood at the couch with one knee tucked under and one foot planted. She kept her eyes on the door. Her hand hovered over the edge of the coffee table and then settled. She would not think about the shape of the letters. She left the envelope at the table's center and didn't look at it again.

In the morning, she would put this in the log. Not the words. The necessary parts only: parking change, exit alternation, staff awareness. She would not write anything that gave him what he wanted.

Tonight, she had one more thing to do. She picked up her phone. She opened the message screen with the string of numbers that matched a card she kept in her inner pocket during the day and in the dish during

the night. She typed one line and sent it.

“9 a.m. pass-through. Slot only.”

She set the phone down and watched the door. Her hands steadied on the table. Her jaw unclenched. She kept her hand open and ready.

When she closed her eyes, it was only to wet them. Then she opened them again.

Chapter 7

The Unspoken

She pressed the back of her nail into the edge of the coffee table until the skin whitened. The envelope lay in the center of the table, sealed and flat, pale against the wood. The door bar sat in its brackets. Deadbolt. Chain. Window latches down. Both phones face-up on the table. The primary charged with the volume up one notch and Do Not Disturb off. The backup charged and dark.

The building had its usual night sounds. Water moved through a pipe in the wall and stopped. A door closed downstairs and left two quick thumps in the hall. The laundromat dark meant the air was cooler, cleaner. The smell of soap and hot lint was gone. It was wet street and a little old heat in the stairwell.

Her phone lit, then vibrated once. The string of numbers she had saved from the card, nothing attached to it. She let it go to a second buzz, then slid her thumb across.

“Cruz,” he said. He used her name in a way that didn’t press. “You said nine tomorrow. I’m not going to make this long.”

She kept her voice level. “It’s still nine. Pass-through. Slot only.”

“Okay.” A small sound through the line, a shift of fabric. “Walk me through it one more time. In order. So I don’t screw it up when I write it.”

She looked at the envelope. It didn’t need looking at. “Two calls on the administrative line,” she said. “No Caller ID, no words. Just breathing. First one at one fifty-seven. Second one at two thirty-three. Times logged. Then nothing until I left at six thirty-two. Under the driver’s wiper. Wipers lifted off. Three words. I didn’t touch the ink.

Corners only to a clean envelope. Passenger seat. Diner. That's it."

He didn't ask how the breathing sounded. He didn't ask if she recognized it. The line hummed in her ear. He didn't ask anything that would make her tell a story she wasn't going to tell. "Good," he said. "I'll keep the log tight."

"This isn't for the report with my name," she said.

"It won't be," he said. "Anonymous staff found note on vehicle near the shelter. That's what the first piece will say."

A car moved fast on Pine and then slowed at the light. She looked at the door bar again and held her gaze there. It was just metal and brackets and weight. "What else?"

"I can ask for a pass-by," he said. "Your block. One time a night. No lights. No siren. Slow roll. It's not a detail. It's not a sit."

She could see it in her head and didn't want to. A car on her street where there shouldn't be one. Someone asking why it was there. Someone thinking they had made her jump. Someone thinking they had made her need. She kept the picture there and let it sit. "One," she said. "One pass a night. A window, not a set minute. And only a week."

"A window," he said. "Twelve fifty to one. I'll keep it broad enough that it won't look scheduled. We can adjust. Seven nights."

"Not at the shelter," she said. "No cruisers near the shelter. No uniforms inside. If you need to come to the shelter, you use the window and the slot and you keep to the time I give you. You say pickup, not a name."

"I heard you," he said. "I meant your block. And I meant a marked car, not me in a suit trying to look like I'm not waiting."

She rubbed her thumb along the table's edge again. "A marked car makes people look."

“People look,” he said. Then, quieter, “But a marked car makes a different kind of person look. Sometimes that helps. Sometimes it spooks. Tell me no if you want, and we won’t do it.”

She let that sit too. In the shelter, a marked car would make people stop and watch, whisper and post. Outside her apartment, it told a different story. He was right about that. The right kind of eyes might make a hand pull back. Or make it reach faster. You never knew. “We’ll try it,” she said. “A week. One pass. If I don’t like the look of it after the first night, I’ll text stop.”

“That works,” he said. “Same number. Logistics only.”

He did that for her. Said it before she had to. “Logistics only,” she said. “No checking in.”

“Do you want a phone?” he asked. “Something separate. Direct to me. If mine is dead it rolls to the desk. Fewer hops.”

“No.” It came out fast. She steadied it with the next words. “No new devices. I keep what I can carry without thinking.”

“Okay.” No push. “The note,” he said. “If you change your mind on the time, I can come grab it now and be gone in three minutes.”

“It’s on the table,” she said, as if that was a reason. It was, for her. “It stays until nine. Pass-through. Slot only. No names.”

“Right,” he said. “I’ll be outside at nine. I’ll say pickup.”

She took a breath and kept her mouth closed until the urge to add something passed. “No surprise tomorrow,” she said. “No waiting at the shelter unless I call. That’s not negotiable.”

“Understood,” he said. “You want a one-night exception at close? I can be across the street. Not at the door. Hands visible. If you want it, I’ll be there. If you don’t, I won’t.”

She thought about her spot in the lot. She thought about the felt weight of the keys and the way the awning dripped. “Not at the door,” she

said. "Across. Far side of the curb. If I look and you're there, you stay until I'm in the car and then you go. No approach."

"Okay," he said. "No approach."

She shifted the phone to her other ear. "If anyone else shows up and you didn't tell me, the pass-by is off. The pickup is off."

"I won't do that," he said. "If my partner needs to be looped in after I log this, I'll tell you before she comes anywhere near you."

"You keep my name off the paper," she said.

"I will," he said.

They were quiet. The line hummed. A car idled at the light on Pine.

"Thank you for calling it in," he said. The line caught just a little on the last word. He didn't fix it. "Nine."

"Nine," she said, and ended it before he could say more.

She put the phone face-up in its place and watched the door. She didn't look at the envelope again. A neighbor upstairs crossed a room and then returned. The toilet in the apartment next door sounded like it always did, a short run and then a tiny hiss. Her watch read ten thirty-eight. She didn't check it again for a while.

She stood and went to the sink. She filled the kettle and then lifted it before it clicked and set it down again. Heat rose into the small room, warmed her cheeks, then faded. She didn't make tea. She didn't want the taste. She wiped her hands on the towel she'd hung earlier and lined the towel's edge with the counter's edge and then left it there.

She went back to the couch and stayed dressed. Shoes under the table, toes pointed toward the door, jacket on the couch back, sleeves down, cuffs resting against the back of her hands. She listened for the night sounds: the low hum in the building, a count of seconds between cars on the street, the small clicks a baseboard made as it cooled.

When her phone vibrated again, she saw the words she had sent earlier tonight: 9 a.m. pass-through. Slot only. She read the words again and let them steady her. She had written them. They were hers.

At close she would walk out. If he was across the street, he would stay until she was in. Then he would leave. She didn't want it. She would take it one night.

When she keyed into the shelter, the hall light was already on. Tiana had the inner key on a loop around her finger. The heater made a low rattling sound and then quieted. Water dripped from the awning outside the thin window as always.

"Two then one," Tiana said without prompting. Her voice was soft, still waking.

Elena nodded once. "Back step for air. Lights up all day. We're not changing posture."

Tiana handed her the door log and took the desk phones out of the tray and set them in place. The power strip showed three lit dots. The administrative handset sat at the end of the desk within reach. The external calls/knocks log was open to a clean page with the date on top in Marla's square neat hand.

Elena checked the pass-through latch and put her palm against it the way she always did. She adjusted the chair two inches to clear the path to the inner door and slid the pen into the groove so it wouldn't roll. She took the sealed envelope from her bag and set it on the blotter's edge within reach. The winter coat drive poster stayed in the top-left corner of the board. The laminated evacuation map was still visible. The TV was set to the same cooking channel that was easy to ignore. She kept the volume low.

Marla came in with a cardigan. She caught Elena's eye and didn't say anything about the night. "Medication binder has a flipped corner," she said, and pressed a thumb against it so the page didn't stand up on its own.

"Clinic at nine forty," Elena said. "We'll see if Jenna wants it."

Marla's mouth tightened and then eased. She didn't ask about the forty-eight. She didn't push the thing they had agreed not to push. She picked up the hallway log and wrote the first check time, a small box around it, then filled it in.

Elena poured coffee from the old machine and brought the mug back to the desk. She stood where the glare wouldn't blind her through the glass and set the mug near the edge of the blotter. Her cuff caught and pulled back when she reached for the mug again, the wool of the coat snagging for a second and then letting go. The edge of her forearm showed a line of pale skin where the sun never hit and the thin crescent that stayed there.

A quick shadow crossed the window slit. She didn't look up. She didn't have to. She felt the air change when cold came in through the outer foyer. Tiana moved to the inner door with the key set in her fingers, the rhythm in her shoulders.

Two knuckles on the window frame outside. The intercom pressed and let out its short sound. Elena lifted the handset. "Yes."

"Pickup," a voice said. His.

She pressed the button built into the desk frame that controlled the pass-through slot and heard the small catch unlock. She kept her left hand on the desk where Tiana could see it and picked up the envelope with her right. Her sleeve slid farther when she moved, and she saw the shift in his eyes through the glass before he turned his face two degrees to the side and looked at the metal plate of the slot. He wasn't going to use her for proof. She saw it in the way he looked away. Her hand stilled on the envelope. Her breath caught and let out in a short line.

He didn't say anything about her arm. His hands stayed visible by the slot.

"One week," she said. "One pass a night."

"Twelve fifty to one," he said.

"Do you want a note on the time in your log?" he asked. He was still looking at the slot, not at her.

"Nine oh-one," she said, and slid the envelope across the metal into daylight. The paper made a dry sound against the edge. "Slot only," she added, even though he wasn't reaching through anything.

He took the envelope by the edges, same way she had, and put it into a larger bag she couldn't see because of the angle. He didn't open it. He didn't even check the seal. His hands were steady.

"Logistics only," she said.

He nodded and stayed quiet. He tapped two fingers to his brow, then lowered his hand when he noticed it. He kept the gesture small.

"We keep my name off anything that gets scanned," she said.

"Yes," he said. "The report will say 'shelter staff.' No other descriptors." He looked at the hinge where the outer door met the frame. His hands stayed where she could see them.

Elena lifted the handset away from her ear for a second and pressed it back. "No shelter drop-ins. No surprise. If you need to reach me, you go through the phone. If you need to see me, we meet somewhere with people, not here."

"Neutral sites," he said. "This was slot-only. That's done." He lifted the bag an inch in a way that meant he had it and then lowered it. "I'll send a time text before midnight."

She hung up and slid the slot shut. The catch went back into place with its usual metal-on-metal sound. She logged "0901 pickup" with her initials, then closed the log so the page wasn't open for whoever wanted to

look.

Rhys didn't wave. He didn't try to put his face where her eyes would have to meet it. He stepped back from the window's narrow view and was gone.

Marla set the medication binder down. "We got a message about a board thing," she said, as if nothing outside had just happened. "I told them next week."

"Good," Elena said. She reached for the coffee. The mug had cooled already. The taste was thin and burnt. She didn't care.

At the hour, the lamp by Room Twelve hummed for a second when she touched it, then settled. Marla walked to the door and did two knuckles and then one. She leaned in just enough to see someone breathing. She came back with her shoulders set the same as they had been. She wrote the time and boxed it and filled the box in, neat.

Elena watched the slice of sidewalk in the black-and-white monitor for a minute and turned it off again. She didn't see a reason to keep the picture in her face.

Afternoon at the shelter followed the plan. The phones came to the desk at eight. The outside log got its lines, names where there were names and nothing where there weren't. A volunteer with a bright scarf taped something to the bottom edge of the coat-drive poster and then took the tape off again because she remembered what Elena had said about not covering the map. Maya P. came up to ask about food with her meds; Elena pointed to the basket and then to the sink and said, "Small and then water."

Jenna slept and woke and slept. Marla kept the lamp signal and the two-then-one. Once Jenna shifted to sit and pressed at her ribs and didn't

Speak, and Marla didn't speak either, and they let the minute pass without trying to fill it.

At eleven forty-two, Elena's phone buzzed with a text.

12:50 to 1:00. One pass. If a call takes the car, I'll text. G

She typed back: Confirm. Logistics only.

Three dots did not appear. The text thread stayed empty except for the two lines.

At one twenty, the board liaison number flashed over the admin line. Marla let it pass and then sent a one-line email later from the general inbox with the phrase Elena had put on the sticky note the day before. No tours during alert. No donors in residential hours.

At one forty, Elena stepped into the back corridor and stood with her shoulder against the wall and her eyes on the lamp switch. Five minutes. She didn't time it with her watch this time. She counted the passing of air through her nose and back out and then stopped counting and just stood there. A pipe clicked inside the wall, the same click as always. It stopped. She pushed off the wall and went back to the desk.

At two fourteen, a text came in: If you want a five-minute neutral site at four, I can do that. Not the shelter. Your call.

She looked at the calendar. She looked at the line of things that had to be done. She looked at Marla, whose hand rested steady on the medication binder, keeping it flat. "Four," Elena said. "Ten minutes. Diner. I'll be back on the half."

Marla nodded. "I'll sit the door. Tiana's back from lunch by then."

A quick confirmation on the pass-by, then done.

At four, Elena crossed the lot without looking up at the windows. The awning dripped in a short, even line. She drove the main road. The same diner light hit the same chrome and glass. A man at the counter stirred sugar into coffee and didn't drink it. The glass cake stand held two slices

of something she would never order.

He stood on the entry mat again. He hadn't been there long. She let him stand there until she nodded. He came to the booth and sat a half step back until she put her hand on the table. She didn't take off her coat. She didn't move the hot sauce from its place in the caddy.

"This is fast," she said.

"It is," he said.

"You make the pass-by work without putting a target on my building," she said. "That's the deal."

"Twelve fifty to one," he said. "If dispatch calls the car off, I'll send you a single word: pulled. No other texts."

She took a breath and felt it stop below her collar bones. "What do you expect in return?"

"Nothing," he said. "If something changes, call. If it doesn't, don't."

"Logistics only," she said.

"Logistics only," he said.

He looked at the end of the table. She watched his hands and saw that he had cut a knuckle again on something he hadn't named. The skin had split where it always did, the same thin line. He looked back up.

"I have a theory," he said. "I'll keep it to myself. Not on you."

She knew what he meant. She let it pass. "We're done for now," she said. "We're not doing shelter meetings. If we talk, it's like this, five or ten minutes in a place where no one cares that two people are talking."

"Okay," he said. He didn't ask for more.

They stood at the same time but didn't move the same way. He stayed out of her path. He waited by the door. She paid for a coffee she didn't drink, not because she wanted to but because leaving money steadied her hands. She pushed open the glass door with her shoulder and kept her

head up without seeing anyone's face.

He waited until she had the car door open, until her knee was inside, until the door closed, until the engine started, and then he crossed to his own car where she couldn't see it. He was gone by the time she pulled to the end of the lot and turned left.

She took the main road again. The river route was the same as always: narrow, damp, no shoulder if someone stopped short. She didn't take it. A barge horn sounded somewhere out past the cranes. A bus braked at a stop, the air release making a loud, clean sound. She kept her eyes on the next turn and then the next one.

At close, she walked to her car with her keys in her right hand and her left hand free. She looked at the lot in pieces: the mouth of the alley, the second-floor window with the pulled shade, the corner of the bakery two doors down where the reflection could show an angle she didn't want to see. Across the street, a tall figure waited with hands visible, jacket open, nothing that looked like a reason to be there except the reason she had given him. He didn't move. He didn't lift his hand. He didn't make her turn her head.

She unlocked. She opened. She sat and pulled the door in. She put the key in. She started the engine. She adjusted the mirror and didn't find anything she had to fix. She pulled out. When she passed the corner, there wasn't anyone in the place where he had been standing.

At home, the lock sequence happened the way it always did. Deadbolt. Chain. Window latches down. The door bar into the brackets. She pressed down until the give stopped. Shoes under the table with toes toward the door. Jacket on the couch back. Phones face-up on the coffee table. The primary charging with the volume up one notch and Do Not Disturb off. The backup charged and dark. She lifted the kettle and set it back down before it clicked.

She didn't have the envelope to put on the table. There was a clean space where it had been. She set her hand there anyway. The table was

just a table. Her hand stayed on the wood. Nothing changed. She kept it there because it was something she could do.

She stood by the window and looked at the strip of street she could see from her angle. Not much of it. Enough. Tires made a sound on wet asphalt that you could count to if you needed to fill time. She didn't count.

Her phone stayed face-up. No message.

She didn't pick it up. She watched. At twelve fifty-two, a marked car rolled down her block at a steady speed. No lights. No siren. The grille reflected the wet. She counted three beats of tire hiss as it passed her window. The car moved on. No stop. No return.

She stood until the sound was gone. She went back to the couch. She lay on her side without taking off her coat. She kept her eyes on the door. They burned and then settled.

Don't call him. Don't hope. Don't move.

The envelope wasn't her job anymore. It would go to a place with better lights and powder and bags and people who would put on gloves and take pictures. It would be away from her where others would handle it. Her jaw loosened, then held again. Her fingers dug into the cushion. She couldn't control what people did with something once it left her hands.

She looked at her watch. The small, steady tick didn't match the bus that braked out on Pine. Nothing matched. She closed her eyes long enough to wet them and opened them again. The light from the lamp made a small square on the door bar. The square didn't move. She kept looking at it until she stopped seeing it as a square and just saw the bar, just the bar and its brackets and the door and the place where the floor met the metal.

Her phone stayed face-up. No other messages came.

Chapter 8

The Gift

She timed the postal annex the way she timed everything she could control. Not first thing, when people lined up with packages and questions and complaints about rates. Not lunch, when the room filled with wet coats and quick tempers. Between: a quiet span of afternoon when the clerk rubbed his eyes under the fluorescent lights and the stamp rack didn't move.

Nose-out to the glass doors and the corner camera, she parked. Rain hit the metal awning in a steady patter. Three cars in the lot, none idling. A woman in a red beanie came out with a padded mailer, head down, keys already in her hand. The door closed with a soft thud. No one held it for anyone else.

Inside, it smelled like paper and damp wool. The clerk behind the glass wore a navy sweater and didn't look up. A wall of P.O. boxes sat behind a waist-high divider. She always took the far aisle, the one where she could see both the exit and the end of the hallway mirror without needing to turn her back. She slid past a man tapping at a mailing kiosk and kept her eyes on her row.

Her box key felt familiar in her fingers. Smooth edges, two notches she could find without looking. She inserted, turned. The door opened on dull hinges. Inside, not the thin strip of forwarded notices she knew by weight. A small white package rested against the back. White-white. No scuffs. Tape laid down clean. A printed label, not hand-written. Her box number, crisp. No return.

Unexpected. Out of cycle. Her usual mail was predictable: bank, a clinic card. Not this.

She put her hand in and lifted it with two fingers under the side. Not heavy. No shift of contents. She did not look around. There was no need. Looking around drew eyes. The box felt dry, not from under a coat. She closed the P.O. box door, slid the key into her pocket, and kept her mouth closed.

Outside again, the rain was a line off the awning. She kept her head level and walked to her car. She had parked nose-out, not too close to the doors, not too far from the camera. The same spots every time unless they were taken. She unlocked, opened, slid in, locked. She adjusted the seat to her usual mark. The mirrors were where she had left them.

She set the white box on her lap. The paper edges were cut straight. The tape ran flush to the corners. The label was printed in a standard font with no smears and no handwritten additions. Clean. Impersonal. Meant to be read without revealing anything about the person who had sent it. She looked at the label again. Her alias. The box number. The city. That was all.

She let her thumb run along the tape. Fiber-reinforced, it didn't peel in strings. No sound in the car except the soft hiss of tires out on the street and the tap of rain nearby. She could put the box on the floor and drive home and open it under a brighter light. She could take it inside the annex and ask the clerk if any carrier had seen who delivered it. She could carry it up to her place, run a photo for a log, and keep it sealed.

None of that would change it. Waiting would raise her pulse without giving her any more control than she had now.

She set the box on the passenger seat and pulled a clean envelope from her bag. The same kind she had used yesterday. Not because this was the same. Because she knew how to hold something and pass it and still keep her hands steady. She pressed a fingernail under the tape and pulled in one motion. The tape lifted with a dull sound. She folded it back neatly and set it against the lid.

Inside: card stock. Off-white, slightly rough at the edge where someone had cut it by hand. Between the layers, a flower pressed flat. The petals were yellowed at the edges and browned at the center. A pin through the center held it steady against the paper. No note. No other object. The shape was exact even after years flattened. Gardenia.

Her chest tightened. Her skin prickled cold. Her breath paused. Her hands lost their grip for a second and then found it. She put the card stock down on her thighs and let her fingers go slack until she could trust them. She slid one hand to the steering wheel and held it. The wheel was solid against her palm, firm, something she could press against that would not give. Sensation returned in small pulses. She picked up the card again without touching the petals and looked at the pin. Steel. Tiny black bead at the head.

He had found her P.O. box. Not the shelter's slot the whole city could see. Her box. Locked. Under her alias. He knew the number. He knew how to get something into it. He wanted her to know he knew.

She put the card stock back into the box, lifted the lid into place, and pressed the tape back down with a knuckle, not a fingertip. Not to fix anything. Just to close it. She had a rule. She broke it. She reached for her phone and swiped to the saved number. The string from the card. She had rules about times and places. She had written them and followed them because they made her safer. Those rules didn't match the box on her lap.

Call him. Now.

"Garvey," he said. His voice came even. At first.

"In my P.O. box," she said. She kept her voice even. "A white box. Clean tape. Printed label. Inside, pressed gardenia. Pinned between card stock."

He was quiet for half a second. Not silence. Listening. “Where are you?”

“Leaving,” she said. She looked at the glass doors and the reflection of a woman adjusting a hood as she went in. “I’m not giving a location.”

“Okay,” he said. That was it. “Are you alone?”

“Yes.” She glanced in her mirrors. Noon traffic, the usual. No idling car nose-out where she didn’t expect one. “He used to send this.” She didn’t say the rest. She was shaking and kept her hand on the wheel because she knew how to stop that. “He broke my arm once,” she said instead, plain. “This is him.”

“All right,” he said, the words clipped tight. Neutral tone gone. Not alarm. Focus. “What do you want?”

“I’m going home,” she said. “Twenty minutes. Main road. No river route.” She watched a man in a gray jacket step into the crosswalk and then out again when a car didn’t slow. “You can meet me there. You come alone. No cruiser. No partner. No one else parks on my block. You text before you’re near the stairs.”

“Yes,” he said. No hesitation. “Alone. No car with lights. I’ll text one word so you know I’m on the way. You want me to wait on the sidewalk or the landing?”

“Landing,” she said. “Not the hall. I open. I step back. You don’t cross until I say.”

“Landing,” he repeated. “What about the box?”

“Evidence,” she said. She set it on the seat and held her breath until her hands were steady enough to move. “I’m keeping it closed. I touched the tape. I touched the sides. I didn’t touch the flower.”

“Good,” he said. “Drive.” A scrape of fabric on his end. “I’m on.”

The call ended. A second later, her phone buzzed with a single word.

On

She put the phone face-up beside the box and started the car. She pulled out slow and kept the turn wide because the curb by the annex caught axles if you cut it. The rain made the street shine. She merged into traffic.

She didn't take the straight line. She never did when it mattered. Two extra turns in a grid that didn't need them. Past a hardware store with a rack of wet brooms under its window, past a tire place where a man pushed a jack into place and then stood back. She watched the cars that stayed behind her for more than a block. A silver compact held through two lights and then turned. A delivery van slowed to check an address and then moved on. Nothing in her mirrors that didn't have a reason for being there.

She checked the time not by the watch, not this time, but by the way the traffic moved. After-school pickups weren't yet clogging the side streets. People on lunch were already back. She hit a yellow on purpose so she could look to her left and then her right. Blank windows. No one standing where she wouldn't expect it.

She came up Pine from the long side so she could see her building from farther back. The laundromat gate was up. Two washers spun near the front. No one sat in the plastic chair by the vending machine. The bakery two doors down had its lights on but no line. Water ran off the awnings in even lines. She slowed in front of her block and checked the reflection in the dark glass of a closed shopfront. Her car. The street behind it. Her own face for half a second. Nothing else.

She parked where she could see the stairwell. She turned off the engine and set the box on the passenger floor so she wouldn't hit it with a knee. The rain on the windshield blurred the line of light from the laundromat. She wiped her palm on her sleeve and picked up her keys. She took the box from the passenger floor and held it under her arm as she got out.

The stairwell held warm air and a hint of soap. The laundromat below had a dryer going that thumped every few seconds. She moved to the right side on the way up where the steps weren't slick. Second floor smelled like steam and metal. A door farther down opened and closed. Familiar sounds. None of them wrong.

She unlocked her door. Deadbolt. Chain. Inside, she shut the door, set the deadbolt, slid the chain. She walked the table-side window first and checked the latch with two fingers. She crossed to the bathroom window and pushed the latch down until it clicked. She lifted the door bar and set it into its brackets and pressed until it seated with no give. Everything where it should be. She did it without looking for words to go with it.

The box went on the table, centered. She didn't want it close to the edge where her elbow could hit it. She set both phones face-up next to it. Primary: volume up one notch, screen on. Backup: charged, dark. Her keys went in the dish by the door where she kept the paperclips and the rubber band. Her jacket stayed on. Shoes under the table, toes toward the door. She kept her hair tight and sleeves down. The old line at her forearm stayed covered. Not for him. For her.

She stood behind a chair and placed her hands on the top rail. The chair put the table between her and the door but let her step to the side in one move. The angle gave her a clean line to the door bar and the deadbolt. She could see the whole room without turning her back to anything that mattered.

Her phone buzzed.

Here

She didn't answer with words. She put her hand on the door bar and lifted. She took the chain off and turned the deadbolt. She kept the door closed. She waited. Footsteps on the landing. Not heavy. A man who knew how to set his weight so the landing stayed quiet.

She could picture him on the other side with his hands visible because she had said they would be. Coat open so she could see he wasn't hiding anything. She kept her hand on the knob and set the rest of herself where it belonged.

She stopped before the next sentence because it would change what came after. She shaped the first syllable and stopped. An, Jaw tight. Tongue still.

Footsteps stopped outside her door.

Two knuckles against wood. Controlled. Not loud. The knock of someone who didn't need to be heard by anyone else.

She turned the handle and pulled the door in. She stepped back.

Chapter 9

The Confession

She kept her hand on the edge of the door and stayed back two steps. The landing smelled like soap and wet wool from downstairs. The dryer thumped. She had already lifted the bar, taken off the chain, turned the deadbolt. She had already stepped aside.

He waited until she moved. Then he came in one slow step and stopped where the wall met the frame. Jacket open. Hands where she could see them. He didn't touch the door. He didn't touch the chair. He didn't reach for the box on the table.

"Close it," she said.

He pulled the door until it met the jamb and waited, his palm flat on wood. She slid the deadbolt, set the chain, dropped the bar into its brackets and pressed until it seated. The bar made a dull contact she knew by sound. She checked the table-side window latch with two fingers and crossed to look at the bathroom latch, then returned to the same place behind the chair, hands on the top rail.

The white box sat centered on the table where she had put it. Not close to the edge. Tape reseated as well as it would go after being lifted. A small square of water on the wood from the sleeve she had wiped her palm on earlier had already dried. Both phones lay face-up on the table to her right. The primary screen showed the time. The backup stayed dark.

He kept his eyes at her shoulder height, not her mouth. He took in the room the way people did when they wanted to help without making it worse. He hadn't shaved. That shadow looked permanent. The rims of his eyes were red like he hadn't slept long enough. He didn't look at the box

for more than a second.

“Where do you want to start?” he said.

She could have begun with the P.O. box number on the label. The way the tape had lain down tight to the corners. The fact that it was dry when she took it out and dry when she set it down here, so it hadn’t been carried under a coat from the rain. She could have said again that she didn’t touch the flower. That he used to send this. All of it was true. None of it was the first thing.

She set her hands flatter on the chair rail. For a second her left thumb pressed the wood until her nail went white. Then she let go of that and kept her voice steady.

“My name is Anna Santiago,” she said.

He didn’t move or ask her to repeat it. He didn’t reach for a notebook. He stood with his hands open at his sides.

“All right,” he said. Nothing else.

She felt her throat pull tight and then let go. The dryer below made an uneven sound, a hard knock followed by the regular tumble. The sound came up through the floor and then was gone.

“Use Elena,” she said. “Out there.” She tipped her head toward the door and the world behind it. “Here, Anna is fine. But not on paper. Not on the radio. Not around my building. Not at the shelter. Not to anyone who is not you.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

She lifted her chin at the white box. “Evidence,” she said. “I opened it once and closed it. I touched the tape and the sides. Not the flower.”

“I heard you before,” he said. He kept his voice even. He didn’t add more questions.

He didn’t look away. She didn’t take it back.

“Michael Rourke,” she said.

He looked at her face and not at the floor when she said it.

“He’s here,” she said. “The phone at the desk. The note. Now this. He doesn’t stop.”

“What does he want?” Rhys asked.

She held the top rail and watched her knuckles until the skin wasn’t so tight. “To win,” she said. “To bring me back and make me pay for leaving. To make me quiet. He used to call it keeping it clean.” She breathed once. “That flower isn’t a gift. It’s a rule.

“The first time he sent it was after he broke my arm. He pinned one to a card and left it on the table where I would see it when I came out of the bathroom. He said it meant we were starting over. He said the way I made him feel would stop if I learned. I wore long sleeves for months, and nobody asked a question that mattered.” She didn’t look at her own sleeve. “There were others.” She pressed her lips together, holding back the other words.

Rhys’s jaw shifted the way it did when he was keeping himself in the lines. He kept his hands where they were. He asked no pushing questions.

“You’re the only one who has that name from me,” she said. “Not Marla. Not the board. Not anyone at the clinic, and not your partner. If you want me to say it again to someone else, you’re going to have to tell me why and when, and I still might say no.”

“Has anyone else figured it out?”

“No.” She said no and left it there. She didn’t say the part about living small for eight years and meeting her own eyes in a mirror she didn’t recognize.

He nodded once.

“What do you want?” he said.

She looked at the white box and then back at him. “Safety for the women in my building and for me without having to disappear again,” she said. “No safe house. I’m not leaving the shelter. I’m not leaving.”

“Okay,” he said. He didn’t argue. “Then we make it so he can’t force you out.”

She shook her head once to force a breath past the tightness in her throat. “Don’t make it sound simple.”

“It isn’t,” he said. “I’m saying I believe you. I work from what you say is true, not from what I can prove in an hour. We’ll work on the proof. We have the note. We have this box. We’ll get camera pulls and call logs. But the plan starts here.”

Her hands stopped shaking. Not because this fixed anything. Because he laid out the next step without asking her to change.

He looked at the bar. “You going to let me move or do you want me to stay put?”

“Stay,” she said. She needed him by the door where the wall put a boundary around his body.

“All right.” He took a slow, even breath. “I’m going to ask you to tell me anything you want on Rourke’s way of getting close. Do that today or tomorrow. Not now. I don’t need it to act on this moment. But I will need it.”

“He creates a problem and offers the solution,” she said. “He tells you how to stop the next thing that will hurt. He makes rules that only he can change. He waits until you’re tired. He watches who believes you and who doesn’t. He tells them what will make you stop, and then tells you what you have to do to deserve the stopping.” She kept her voice low.

“Understood,” Rhys said.

She wasn't fine. She was never fine in a room like this with a box like that on the table. It didn't matter if the lights were on or the bar was in place. The point was that he heard her and didn't tell her to be grateful for hearing.

"I need you to keep the marked car away from the shelter like we agreed," she said. "And if you bring anyone near me, I need to know before I see them."

"You will," he said. "We keep the one pass on your block. I don't bring uniforms into your building. We speak at the slot when we have to speak there. We keep 'pickup' as the word if I'm at your window. No names."

She nodded. The white box sat exactly where she had centered it. The tape edge had a tiny ridge where her nail had gone under it.

"He won't stop," she said, because saying it made it true out loud and not just in the back part of her head.

"Then we contain him," Rhys said.

They had the start of a plan. It wasn't enough. It was a start.

"A detail puts a record in places I don't control," he said. "It gives him another lever if he's watching the wrong screens. So we don't do a detail."

"What do you do?" she said. She didn't blink at the word detail. She heard what it meant. People with radios. Names on a sheet.

"A quiet watch," he said. "Irregular. One person at a time. No marked car, no lights, no uniform. No paperwork. No forms. I don't loop my captain. I pick someone who won't need a reminder. If I can't pick someone I trust for a night, I do it myself."

"You get in trouble if they catch you doing that," she said.

“I know,” he said, and he didn’t give her a speech about it. “This is me telling you what it costs. You get to say no.”

She didn’t answer right away. She looked at the bar and then at the table and then at him. He stayed quiet.

“Rules,” she said. “You don’t become a pattern outside my window. You don’t stand under the awning where I can’t see your hands. You don’t try to become the person I scan for. If you bring someone, you tell me first. Irregular times only. Nobody sits. Nobody smokes. If anyone nods off or pulls out a phone, they’re done. Nobody waits parked for more than a minute anywhere near my stairs.”

“Agreed,” he said. “No lingering. No becoming the thing he can call in. Watch only when needed. If the person I pick can’t meet that standard, they’re out.”

“One week, and I get to stop it before that if I want,” she said.

“Yes,” he said.

“You text me a single word when it’s off for a night,” she said. “Pulled.”

“Pulled,” he said. “Same one word as before.”

He reached in his jacket and took out a small phone in a plain case. He put it on the table near the corner, not in the circle she had made around the box and her two phones, and slid it until it came to rest two inches from the edge. He didn’t push it toward her hand.

“You told me no the other night,” he said. “I heard you. This is me asking again now that this box is on your table.” He tapped the top once, not hard. “Two entries on it. My direct line and a number that rings a desk that is staffed all night. The desk is not your name. The desk is for if the first line dies. There’s nothing else on it. No apps, no browser, no saved texts.

She looked at it. The case had a tiny mark on the back, a scuff where it had scraped a counter. It was too light to feel like it could do anything.

She kept her hands on the chair until the shake wasn't there.

"You understand what happens in my head when you hand me something," she said.

"I do," he said.

"If I take it, it's because the rule changed today," she said.

"Yes," he said. He didn't make his voice soft. He didn't make it hard, either. He kept his voice level.

She lifted her right hand off the rail and put it on the table. She left her fingers on the wood for a second and then slid them under the small phone and curled them until it was in her palm. She pressed her thumb along the seam of the case and held for a slow count of two. The plastic edge left a shallow dent in her skin. The weight didn't matter. The fact that it was his number and one desk and nothing else mattered.

She set it beside her primary. She slid the backup farther back. It stayed dark. Two phones within reach. The new one's screen was dark. She didn't turn it on.

"Codes," she said.

"'Now' means immediate," he said. "You say it and I don't ask you anything. I move.

"'Clear' when it's not," she said. "If I call the wrong thing in. If I hear something and then know what it is and it's not him."

"Clear," he said. "'Pulled' is for when the watch is taken by dispatch."

"And when you're near my door at any time, whether we've said it or not, you text 'Here' and then knock the way you did," she said.

"Two knuckles, controlled," he said.

"You wait until I move," she said.

"Yes," he said.

She glanced at the bar and then at him. "You're leaving now.

“I am,” he said. He didn’t ask her to repeat it.

He took one step toward the door and stopped. “You want me to take the box now?”

She shook her head. “Tomorrow morning. Pass-through. Slot only. Same word on the intercom.”

“Pickup,” he said.

“No names,” she said.

“No names,” he said.

He waited until she was at the bar. She lifted it and set it aside. She took off the chain and turned the deadbolt. She pulled the door in toward her. He stepped into the angle she had made, hands open, eyes down enough not to crowd hers. He went out. He didn’t turn his back on the landing until he was at the top of the stairs and she had the door in her hand again.

She closed it and set the same three locks, pressing down until there was no give. The three lock sounds came in their usual order. She checked the table-side latch and crossed to the bathroom latch. Then she came back to the chair and put her hands where they had been.

Two phones where she could reach. The new one dark. The white box centered, tape edge imperfect where she had lifted it and set it back down. She looked at the door bar and then at the new small shape on the table.

“Anna,” she said into the room, not loud. She didn’t look away when she said it. She said it and waited until the room was quiet again.

She stayed there until the knock from the dryer below came back and thumped in a steady pattern. Then she picked up the new phone and put it down again. She didn’t call him or hope. She kept her breathing steady and watched the door.

Chapter 10

The Protector

She pressed her thumb to the edge of the door bar until it stopped moving. Deadbolt. Chain. She checked the table-side latch with two fingers, crossed to the bathroom, and pushed that latch down until it clicked. The same order every night. It steadied her. Under the table, her shoes sat, toes toward the door. On the chair back, her jacket hung. Both phones face-up.

She turned the new small phone on for the first time.

The screen stayed dark. The lock screen appeared without sound. Two names, nothing else. She set the volume to one notch and turned the screen brightness down, then placed it to the right of her primary phone and slid the backup farther back on the table.

Rain moved across the front window in angled streaks. She stood behind the chair with her hands on the top rail and kept the door in view. The laundromat below was still open. A dryer thumped. Someone spoke in the hall and then a door closed. Normal. She watched the door and noted the time.

Her small phone buzzed once.

Here 01:12

She didn't go to the door. She didn't need to. This wasn't a knock. This was coverage. She set the phone face-down to block the light and went to the window. She kept to the side of the glass and looked out with one eye.

A plain sedan slid along the far side of the block and idled by the hydrant for half a minute. It moved forward two car lengths and paused again. No lights flashing. No one got out. No lingering under her awning where hands would disappear from her sight. It was there and then gone. It didn't stop or linger.

She exhaled. Not relief. Something closer to a pause.

She lay on the couch without taking off her jacket, pulled the throw over her thighs, and kept her head where she could lift it and see the door bar. Twenty minutes. She closed her eyes and counted the dryer hits until they became the only sound she could hear.

A car door slammed somewhere outside. She sat up, her breath went shallow; she swallowed once and listened. A second, softer close. Normal. She reached for the small phone and typed without thinking.

Clear

She watched the word appear; her shoulders lowered. She lifted the chain to feel the slack, then pressed the bar again. No give. She checked the front window latch and tested the bathroom window, then went back to the couch.

She closed her eyes and opened them every few minutes. Her muscles didn't release. She counted twenty breaths and then opened her eyes to check the door bar again. She dozed and woke to the same pattern. She kept ticking through it.

Near two, the small phone buzzed twice and lit the table.

Loiter 2 min at corner. Hood. Moved on.

Outside, slow steps moved on wet pavement: three, a pause, then more, and then quiet. Her hand went flat on the table. She stared at the words until they meant what they said. She thought: Not again. Her fingers hovered over the phone. She did not type Now. She didn't stand. She didn't move. She forced herself to stay still and listen. From below, washing machines thumped; above, a door closed.

She typed nothing back. The rules didn't require it.

The dryer thumped. A car rolled past on Pine, tires hissing in the wet. She found the line of the bar on the door and followed it with her eyes until the tightness eased.

The small phone stayed dark. She left it there. She turned her primary screen face-down and watched the door again. Five minutes. Ten. She stood and drank water at the sink without turning on the overhead light. The water tasted metallic. She set the glass on the counter and put her hand flat next to it until she felt her own weight.

Her neighbor opened his door and stepped into the hallway to check his mail. He was in a T-shirt and socks, hair flattened on one side. He glanced down the stairs and then up toward her end.

"You see that weird car last night?" he said, rubbing his neck. "Kept sliding up and back. Thought it was parking enforcement, but no chalk."

She didn't look surprised. She never looked surprised in the hall. "Construction's setting cones next week," she said. "Surveyors mark without chalk."

"Yeah?" he said. "Okay." He shuffled a bill from one hand to the other and went back inside. The lock clicked.

She walked back into her apartment, closed her door, and set the deadbolt, chain, and bar again. She pressed the bar and felt it seat. She stood there for a second, her palm on the cold metal.

She changed where she parked the next morning. Not by the laundromat. Not under any window another person at the watch could fix as hers if they were lazy or wrong. One block over, where she could still see her stairs if she leaned toward the passenger side to look across the street. She took the long approach from the far end so anyone watching the front entry had to pivot and adjust. Two extra corners. No straight lines.

A little before seven, her small phone buzzed.

Window closed. Coverage off.

She typed nothing. She didn't need to mark anything when there was nothing to mark. She put the new phone into the inner pocket of her jacket and moved her primary to the front pocket of her bag.

She left at seven. She took the stairs on the right side where the steps weren't slick. The laundromat gate came up as she reached the first landing. She could smell soap and hot lint. Outside, Pine held a steady rain. She checked left, then right. No one stood where she wouldn't expect them to be. She approached her car and scanned the long edges of the block for idling engines. None that didn't make sense for the time of day. She got in and locked the doors and started the engine.

At the corner, a sedan rolled through the cross street without stopping or slowing. Not the same one as last night. That was the point. She pulled out and joined the line heading toward the docks.

The heater ticked as she cut the engine at the shelter.

The shelter lights were already up. The awning dripped. Tiana had the inner key wound around one finger. Marla lifted a hand from the desk and then looked at the pass-through slot.

"Pickup," the voice on the intercom said. No name.

Elena moved to the desk. "Slot only," she said. She kept her left hand on the desk where Tiana could see it and unlocked the pass-through with her right. The white box she had centered on her table the night before was now in a paper bag she had set into a second bag to keep the bottom dry. She slid the box out and placed it on the inner plate. Tape was still seated. She slid it through.

Rhys's hands were visible by the slot outside. He took the box by the edges, placed it into a larger bag out of her view, and didn't open it. The

outer door hinge squeaked and then settled. He did not speak again. He left.

Elena closed the slot and turned the key. On the external calls/knocks log, she wrote 0901 pickup and initialed it. The pen went back in the groove.

"Back step for air," she said. "Lights up all day."

Tiana nodded once. "Always."

They moved into the day without touching the formal rules. Elena moved the door log to the left side of the blotter so the person on post had to shift their weight to write. She slid the pen to Marla's side. "Switch. No one signs twice." It made people look up between lines, which changed who they saw in the window. She told Tiana, "No one answers twice in a row," and got the same nod in return. It wasn't new. It was enforced.

The external camera monitor showed the slice of sidewalk, the drip line at the awning, the top of a bus rolling past. The screen had a fleck where the plastic had been nicked by a key. She turned the monitor off after one look, then angled the chair nearest the door two inches so anyone sitting in it wouldn't block the path to the inner door.

Marla brought the medication binder to her side and checked a page that kept flipping. She slid her thumb along the plastic sleeve until it lay flat. "Clinic called," she said. "Maya P. can come at thirteen hundred if she wants the refill consult."

"We'll ask her at eleven-thirty," Elena said. "Food with pills. Small first."

Jenna was at her door with the hood of her sweatshirt up. She stood there and didn't come out, then did. Her mouth set, holding in tears.

"You working with cops?" Jenna asked. She didn't look at Elena's face when she said it. She looked at Elena's hands.

"We have layers," Elena said. "You don't carry any of it." She softened her voice. "Clinic later if you want it."

Jenna tightened her sleeve around her hand. "He said he's sorry," she said. She said it flat, as a fact she didn't trust yet.

"Forty-eight," Elena said. The agreement remained in place. "We're still within it."

Jenna nodded. She went back to her door and held it two inches open with her heel.

A courier buzzed at the intercom with a box labeled DONATIONS in marker. No name. No reference. No email. "We'll pass," Elena said into the intercom. "Return to sender." She didn't wait for an argument. She logged the time and wrote box refused next to it.

At ten, the volunteer in the bright scarf came in late, hair damp, scarf brighter than the rest of the lobby. She took in the door angle and the monitor on the lower shelf and the phones sitting to the right of the blotter and the 'No tours during alert' sticky note still on the monitor frame.

"So, did the guy call again?" she asked in a casual tone. "Is the detective, "

"Stop," Elena said. "Shift's done for you today." Her voice came out clean and flat. She didn't explain. She didn't apologize.

"Seriously?" the volunteer said, low.

The volunteer's mouth opened and closed. She looked at Marla, expecting another answer. Marla didn't give her one. The woman set the tape roll from her hand on the edge of the desk and went to get her bag. The scarf brushed the door as she left. It caught and then slid free.

Marla's eyes went to the coat-drive stack. One less set of hands today.

"Thanks," Marla said when they were alone. She put the tape in the drawer and closed it. She reached for the phone when it rang and said, "Good morning, North Harbor," and wrote 'board liaison' in the log when the number came up. She took the call and stood with her back to the door, leaving Elena free to step into the back corridor for two minutes.

The floor lamp near Room Twelve hummed. Elena touched the switch until the hum went down and then up and then settled.

The intercom buzzed loud in the next minute. Jenna startled at the sound and pressed her hand to her ribs. "I can't, " she said, breathing fast. "I can't, "

"Elena?" she said.

Elena leaned against the lounge doorway so she didn't block the hall. "We can sit," she said. "We can count. We can put your hand on the table and feel the wood. We can get water. We can breathe." She kept her tone even and practical.

Jenna nodded in jerks. She put her hand on the lounge table edge and pressed. Her knuckles went white and then soft. Her breathing slowed. Elena handed her a paper cup half full of water and nodded at the couch that had been pulled back two inches so the door didn't catch.

"Forty-eight," Elena said again when Jenna looked ready to say she was leaving. "We're still inside it."

"Okay," Jenna said. She sat on the end of the couch and took a small sip of water, then another. She did not look toward the outer door.

Elena kept her body angled so if anyone came into the lounge they could see both her hands. She tipped her head toward the hall. "Two then one," she said so Jenna would know how the next check would sound.

Jenna's mouth flickered; a small smile at a time she didn't expect. "Two then one," she repeated, softer.

Elena went back to the desk. The chain on the inner door lay where it was supposed to. The pass-through latch was down. Marla had the binder back under her hand and the phones lined up with their cords not crossing. Maya P. came to the desk with her pharmacy bag and asked if she should eat first. "Small," Elena said again. "Then water."

The small phone vibrated once in Elena's pocket. She didn't take it out on the floor. When she stepped into the office, she pulled it out and

looked at the screen.

Briefing 20:30. I will be late.

Noted. Keep irregular. Avoid curb.

Texts came from a block over, not under her awning.

She put the phone back in her pocket. The office smelled of paper, dust, and coffee from earlier. She looked at the framed rules on the wall. No overnight visitors. No weapons. Quiet hours at ten. She held the edge of the desk and waited for her jaw to unclench.

She worked through small tasks. It was all she wanted from a day.

Near four, she stood in the back corridor for a minute and then walked to Room Twelve. The lamp buzzed a little and then quieted. Two knuckles, then one. A pause. "Okay?" she said through the open two inches.

"I'm here," Jenna said. The voice was steadier.

Elena logged the time. The ink skipped once in the pen and then wrote again. The square next to the time was small and neat and she filled it in.

Close to six, the board liaison called again. Marla let it ring and then sent a one-line email from the general inbox: No tours during alert. No donors in residential hours.

Elena kept her eyes on the slit in the front window. She could see only a slice of the sidewalk and part of the curb, enough to catch a pair of shoes or a dropped bag. She looked at the back exit chain once more before the shift changed. It was seated. The bar was down. The sound it made when pressed matched the sound in her head when she did it at home.

Ten minutes after close, Elena went to the parking lot. She took the long way through the alley so she had a wider view of the front door before she stepped into the open. She scanned the lot. One car by the far

corner pointed out toward the mouth of the alley. Staff. Keys in her right hand, left hand free. The car wasn't where she usually left it; she had moved it that morning. She walked to where it was now, unlocked it, and got in.

On the far curb across the street, a sedan slid through the line of parked cars at a steady speed and kept going without stopping or slowing. Not a pattern. She started the engine and pulled out.

Late evening back at the apartment.

At home she set the deadbolt, the chain, and the bar in the same order. She checked both window latches. She put the small phone and her primary side by side. The backup stayed dark and far.

Her muscles settled into the same position as always on the couch, eyes on the line of the door. She took her jacket off, then put it back within reach. She sat and then stood and pressed the bar again. The dull contact was the same as always. She looked at the clock on her primary and then turned it so the screen faced away. She didn't need the light.

The small phone buzzed. She let it buzz twice and then answered.

"Garvey," he said. His voice was the same as before when he kept it even.

"You're late tonight," she said. She didn't ask if he would be. He had already said it.

"I want to add a second car between twenty and twenty-two," he said. No fluff. "Short coverage. It's a blind spot."

"No," she said. "More presence makes a pattern." She stood at the window and kept to the side of the glass. The laundromat lights below were off now. The gate was down. "You know what happens if he calls it in."

"It's a short add," he said. "Different street. Not your curb." He asked again. His voice tightened.

Her grip on the small phone tightened.

She moved her hand along the window frame until her fingers found the screw that held the latch plate. She pressed the pad of her thumb there until it hurt. "Being watched feels the same as being tracked," she said. "Different person; same pressure. That's what you're asking me to live with." She kept her voice steady. No heat. Just the words.

He was quiet for a breath. "I hear it," he said. "I'm sorry for that feeling." He didn't tell her it was wrong. He didn't tell her to live with it. He let it be true and then made his next request smaller. "Trial a narrower window? Close and pre-dawn only. Irregular. No fixed minute."

She set her palm flat on the glass. It was cold. "Irregular," she said. "No awning. No sitting. No phones. No more than a minute near my stairs. Three nights. Then we stop and reassess."

"Yes," he said. "I'll take the first slot." She heard a small scratch on his end, a zipper moving. She imagined him standing somewhere that wasn't close to her building and looked away from the thought.

She swallowed; it stuck for a second. "Thank you," she said. It came out clipped.

"Text 'Pulled' if dispatch takes it," he said. "You get one word from me if they do."

"'Here' before you're near my stairs," she said. "Two knuckles. You wait until I move."

"Yes," he said.

She ended the call first. She put the small phone down next to her primary, then moved it a half inch so the two weren't touching. She stood at the door and pressed the bar. She checked the table-side latch and then the bathroom latch. She walked the line she knew until the pulse behind her eyes settled.

Her couch made the same sound when she lay down as it had the night before. She kept her eyes on the bar and counted to twenty and then started over.

The small phone buzzed.

Here 00:51

Messages came from a block away, never under her awning.

She didn't stand. She looked at the window and then at the door. She pictured a jacket open so hands were visible and a head tipped forward so he wasn't looking up at her window. She let the buzz sit in the air and disappear. She lay with her hands on her thighs and her fingers spread so she could feel the fabric.

She must have slept because she woke and her neck was stiff, the way it gets after sleeping upright. The room was the same. The bar was there. The light from the street made a small rectangle on the floor and then moved away as a car went past.

A motorcycle revved too loud down the block. She sat up as the sound cut and waited. No second hit. Normal. She leaned forward and typed on the small phone without getting off the couch.

Clear

She hated that the breath came easier after she sent it. She set the phone down and watched the door. She waited until her breathing evened.

She slept again in pieces. She saw the sedan at the far cross street once in the window reflection in the black glass of the closed bakery and then didn't see it again because it moved. That was the point. It was there when she needed it and not there as a pattern she could be punished for.

A little after four, a text came without any other sound.

Pulled

She put the phone down and sat up and put her feet flat on the floor and stayed like that for a minute. Then she stood and pressed the bar and watched the door the way she always did until a thin band of light showed along the window frame.

She chose a different route to the shelter that morning. Not the river road. Not the main road in a straight line. She turned on a side street to look at a set of dumpsters she always looked at when she was the one setting her own path. She took extra turns that didn't add time but changed the view. Three extra turns; the blue mailbox at the corner as the pivot. She parked one block over again and walked the long side.

The laundromat gate was up. Two washers spun. No one sat in the plastic chair by the vending machine. The awning dripped. The building was exactly as it should be when she walked toward it.

She liked that it was still hers.

She went inside.

The heater rattled once in the lobby and then clicked quiet. Tiana stood at the window slit with the inner key, and Marla had the medication binder open to the page with the flipped corner.

Elena put her hand on the edge of the desk and took a breath she could count. She lifted her hand and set it down. Her jaw stayed tight. She left it alone.

The day started again.

The afternoon was quiet in the way of places that were busy but not loud. Elena's shoulders ached the way they usually did by that hour. She sat, stood, sat, and stood again. She kept her eyes on the outer door slit and on the back exit chain and on the angle of the chair she had moved earlier. She took two calls and handed two more to Marla, who took them

with steady calm.

The volunteer didn't come back. Elena didn't miss her.

Near five, Elena wrote down the time of a call that rang through without an answer and closed the log to keep the page from casual view. She noticed her hand was shaking and put it flat on the desk until it steadied. She didn't tell her body to stop. She let the weight of the desk hold her hand in place.

Jenna passed the lobby and paused. "The couch," she said, nodding toward the lounge. "I can't sleep in there right now. Can I sit out here?"

"Yes," Elena said. "End chair. Keep your feet under you. If anyone walks near you, say hello so they know you're awake."

Jenna sat. She pulled the blanket over her knees and held it in both hands. The TV showed a cooking show at low volume. Someone on the screen cut herbs with a small knife and didn't speak for five seconds. The silence was a relief.

Elena wrote 1708 Jenna in lobby in the post note she kept under the blotter and slid it back where no one could see it.

"Board liaison again," Marla said, rolling her eyes toward the phone. Elena tipped her head. Marla let it ring and later sent another one-line email. Elena didn't ask to see it. She trusted the tone would be right.

Outside, a car rolled past with a missing hubcap. Not the blue sedan she had seen earlier in the week. Another one. The missing hubcap made a sound against the curb when it hit a shallow hole and then kept going. She put her hand on the desk again and let herself be annoyed at the sound for half a second because it was normal to be annoyed by that.

At close, Elena reminded Tiana: "Two then one," and Tiana answered, "Always," in the same tone she had used that morning. The bar on the back exit stayed in place. The lamps stayed bright. The blinds stayed down.

Elena left through the alley again and made the long angle across the lot. She did not look for the sedan. She looked for people who didn't fit and did not see anyone who didn't fit.

She drove home. She parked one block over again. She climbed the stairs on the right side and could smell soap and damp wool. She unlocked her door, set the deadbolt, chain, and bar, checked both window latches, and stood behind the chair with her hands on the top rail. The small phone was on the table where she left it. She put it next to her primary. The backup stayed dark.

She knew the next steps and did them.

The phone buzzed once.

Here 00:39

She sent nothing. She lay down on the couch and watched the bar.

She woke after short stretches, minutes at a time, and listened to the building. Her throat tightened once and let go when she put her hand on the door bar and felt it hold.

The small phone lit the table and buzzed once more a little after one.

Briefing ran long. Window starts 01:20.

Approved. Irregular. Avoid curb.

She lay back down and rolled her shoulders against the couch until the edge dug into a muscle and made it release. She wanted to sleep. She hated that she wanted it now that someone else was watching her street. She closed her eyes and counted to twenty. She started over. The number didn't matter. The doing did.

The room stayed the same because she made it the same. The bar held. The locks held. Her phones lay where she could reach them without looking. She did not think about what any of it looked like from outside.

After two, the phone buzzed one word.

Pulled

She sat up and set her feet on the floor and put her hands on her thighs and waited. She didn't call. She didn't hope. She watched the door until the light outside thinned toward morning.

She got up when it made sense to. She put water into the kettle and lifted it before it clicked. She didn't drink it. She went through her lock sequence and then reversed it so she could leave. She checked the hall and took the stairs on the right. The laundromat gate wasn't up yet. She liked that she was earlier than it.

She drove to the shelter by the long way. She went inside. She started the day again.

Nothing was safe. She would make it safer anyway.

Chapter 11

The Gut-Punch

She pressed her palm to the door bar until the metal numbed her skin. The bar didn't give. Good. She lifted her hand and set it on the back of the chair, the same place every night, her fingers along the top rail, knuckles aligned, a habit that kept her hands steady. Everything was where she'd left it last night and the night before: couch angled so she could see the door without sitting up, shoes under the table toes toward the exit, jacket on the chair back within reach. Two phones on the table. Primary screen dark, volume up one notch. The small phone to its right, brightness down. The backup far back and off.

Rain hit the awning outside the laundromat. A dryer thumped below once, then again, then stopped. The hallway smelled like soap when footsteps moved past and faded.

Her small phone buzzed once against the wood and shifted a half inch. She didn't look down until it buzzed again. The word on the screen was not one of their codes.

Stand by.

She left the message open. The couch fabric pressed lines into the backs of her thighs where she stood too long without sitting. She moved to the window and kept to the side of the glass. The laundromat gate was down. The bakery two doors over was dark. A car idled at the far end of the block where she couldn't see the plate, a steady low idle that rose and fell as if the driver touched the gas to keep the engine warm.

She didn't text back. She didn't push a question through the line that would be on his phone at the wrong time. On the table, she set the small

phone face down and watched the slice of the street she could see without leaning into view. Her hand drifted to the screw head on the window latch. She pressed her thumb to it until it hurt, then lifted when the skin warmed.

From the hall, a soft knock, quick and low. A man's voice close to the wood: "You seeing the cops? Blue and white at the corner. No lights. You okay?" She didn't answer. She turned the primary so the screen faced away again.

She went back to the door bar and pressed, felt the solid seat. The metal was cold. The cold helped.

On the street, a marked cruiser slid into view three cars past the hydrant and stopped. No flash. Headlights pointed down the block. Two uniforms got out and walked the line. Their shoes made hard taps on wet asphalt. One stood by the rear quarter panel of the unmarked car idling near the hydrant at the far end, not her curb, the one that had not been under her awning these nights because she'd said don't do that. The other knocked two times on the driver's window of the unmarked and then stepped back to a space where they could see hands.

She didn't move closer to the window. She watched them from the angle that let her see outlines, not faces. A radio crackled in the quiet. She caught a piece of it as the sound bounced off the brick across from her: Supervisor to Pine. Another voice: Copy, caller reports officer asleep in vehicle. No siren. Just the radio and the sound of the engine from the marked car and the steady rain.

Her small phone buzzed again.

Stand by. Called in.

Her abdomen tightened.

Called in (someone dialed it into dispatch) meant no more pretending the quiet watch didn't exist. No more pretending the car sliding by was a neighbor who couldn't sleep. Called in meant names and

questions and paper where there hadn't been paper yet.

She stayed where she was. Distance and no patterns had been her rules. If she showed her face in the window now, it became a pattern. If she went to her door, it became a pattern. She reached for the door bar instead and pressed, then stepped back behind the chair.

Another quick knock. "They're talking to somebody in a sedan by the hydrant. I heard 'ID' and 'who assigned.' You want me to knock? I can pretend I need to borrow sugar or something."

She tapped the back of the phone with her thumbnail. "No," she said, through the door. A muffled "Okay," then, from the hall: "Weird they're so quiet. Trying not to wake anyone."

She put the phone down. Commentary wasn't useful. She needed the block to go quiet or to show its problem so she could deal with whichever it was. Waiting with nothing to do made her jaw ache. She kept her muscles tight, eyes on the door, listening for the next sound.

Voice outside, not loud enough for words, then a pause. The brake lights lit, then turned off. The driver side window lowered. Hands showed at the wheel. One of the uniforms nodded, then gestured toward the end of the block. The uniform's hand stayed low, palm visible. The unmarked's tires rolled forward and then stopped again when the second uniform pointed to the hydrant and then to the sign above it. Don't park here. Not here. Not tonight. Not like this. She watched the officer gesture to the sign and the driver nod.

The small phone buzzed.

Precinct now.

She swallowed and it stuck. She pressed her thumb along the edge of the small phone case until the plastic left a line on her skin. She set the phone on the table without letting it go all the way; her fingers stayed curled around it. She could have texted him not to say her name. She didn't. He knew that part. She could have texted stop everything, go

home, leave it alone. She didn't. He would follow orders or he wouldn't; whichever he did was his decision, not hers.

The unmarked car signaled and slid out from the hydrant, turned at the corner, and disappeared. The marked cruiser idled for one long count of ten while both uniforms stood by their doors and watched down the block. Then they got in and rolled off without lighting anything. Headlights passed across the awning once as they turned. The sound of the engine faded to nothing.

Only wet asphalt under dim lights and an empty sidewalk. Quiet. No watch. No marked car. No second set of eyes that belonged to him or to anyone he had picked. Her breaths shortened, then lengthened; she counted them. She didn't call that a relief. It was not one.

From the hall, low: "They left. Quiet, same way they came. You sure you're good?"

"Yes," she said. "Thanks." Her hand shook as she set the phone down.

At the door, she checked the chain slack. It lay the same as when she set it. The bar took her palm; no give. She checked the latch on the bathroom window with two fingers and then the latch by the table. Same clicks. She stood behind the chair again and put her hands on the rail and kept them there until her shoulders dropped.

Her small phone buzzed once. No sentence this time. A single dot. Then another line appeared.

No names.

She didn't reply. She didn't need to. He knew her rule and she knew his. He would say victim safety risk and nothing more, or he would sit there and keep his mouth closed and wait to be told what his problem was. Either way, she could not fix that part. She could only keep the table where it was, the bar in place, the phones where she could reach them without looking.

Rain hit the awning again with more force for a minute and then eased. A car two streets over took a corner too fast and the tires hissed. A door closed somewhere in her building. She didn't flinch at that one. Not tonight.

Her primary stayed dark. Her small phone went quiet. She watched the strip of the street she could see and saw nothing new. The street was still again. The patrol was gone. Quiet didn't mean safe.

She kept breathing because counting helped.

As the engine noise faded outside, the bar was cold in her palm.

She sat on the edge of the couch and pinched the skin between her thumb and first finger to stop the shake. It didn't work. She got up, walked to the sink without turning on the light, and filled a glass half full. The water tasted like metal. She swallowed anyway. She set the glass down by the sink and stood with one hand on the counter until her jaw loosened.

Her small phone buzzed. She picked it up and looked at the screen before she let herself feel anything about it.

At precinct.

Anonymous complaint w/ pics.

Her hand went to the door bar; the metal was colder than before. A tight ache started at the base of her neck.

She stared at the second line. She pictured a hand lifting a phone to take a photo and a thumb sending it to a number that would make someone else move. She pictured a voice she knew too well saying, There, see how sloppy you are? He'd said that to her. He'd said it to himself in the mirror and then to her when she didn't do what he wanted. He created the problem and then handed the solution in a way that made the

solution cost her something. That was his pattern. White box at the P.O. box; the pressed gardenia; "Supervisor to Pine" on the radio. Create, punish, pretend to save. Start over, he had said once, and he'd set a white flower on the table. She closed her eyes and opened them again.

A third line appeared on the small phone.

I said risk to victim. No details. No names.

Her shoulders dropped a fraction and then crept back up.

She typed: Not here. Not shelter. No approach. She didn't send it. Deleted it, then put the phone down.

She moved through the apartment again, not because she had to but because putting her hand on the metal and the wood kept her hands steady. Bar. Latch. Latch. Chair rail. Table edge. She pressed each thing until her breathing steadied.

A door latch clicked in the hall before his message lit the screen. The small phone buzzed one more time. Two words.

Suspended. Sorry.

The chair leg scraped as she shifted.

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. The case edge pressed into her palm. She set the phone on the table with care and stepped back. Suspended meant no paperwork on her terms. No quiet watch she could direct, even a little. No second set of eyes she could call "Now" and he would move. It meant his choices were his only, and if he chose to do anything next, it would be outside the thing that gave him a badge. If he chose to do nothing, a supervisor would call it discipline.

She pressed her palm to the door bar again until her fingers warmed against the cold. She used her forearm to brace the chair back and let the bone take the weight. She looked at the phones and then at the door again. She kept the sequence: bar, latch, latch, sit. Change nothing. Changing nothing was control. Changing nothing kept her routine intact.

She rechecked the window latch by the table and sat on the couch, facing the door.

From the hall later, the same voice: "That was strange. I'm up now. If you need someone to stand in the hall for ten, I can. I'll bring the mail key. Pretend reason."

"Thanks. No need. Sleep," she said. She didn't add a smile or a thank-you second time. She didn't owe him comfort. He had offered something human. That was enough.

She pocketed the small phone in the inner pocket of her jacket and kept the jacket near her skin while she moved. The weight of the phone against her ribs was small and solid. She stood by the bathroom door and listened to the building. One toilet flushed two floors up. Someone coughed. Someone laughed on a TV in another unit and then turned it down. That was normal. Normal meant predictable. Predictable meant she could count.

Her hand went to the small phone in her pocket and then stopped halfway. She thought about his partner and shut the thought down. She wouldn't say the name out loud. She didn't trust her to keep it off the radio. She stood at the sink, ran water over her fingers until the skin ached, and let the idea go. She did not need another person anywhere near her tonight.

She went back to the chair. She put the small phone on the table next to the primary and adjusted them both so they made a straight line with the edge. She didn't turn the small phone face down. She left it so she could see the top of the screen if anything else came through. Nothing did.

The room was too quiet for sleep. She lay on the couch anyway. Jacket within reach. Shoes where they always were. Her hands on her thighs so her fingers didn't wander to the scar under her sleeve that didn't need her touch to exist. She watched the door bar. The light from the street made a dull gray shape on the wall and then shifted when a car two

blocks away took a corner.

She started to type: Do not come near my stairs. She didn't send it. That would be a reaction. She wouldn't change the pattern.

Her breath showed in the cool air by the door. She counted twenty and started again.

Sleep didn't come. She sat up after too many counts and let her hands drift to the table where the phones lay. She didn't pick them up. She traced the edge of the small phone with one finger. The plastic seam left a faint line on her skin and then faded. She thought about the order of things the last days: the white box in the P.O. box with tape laid flush and a printed label with her alias neat, meant to be read alone; the pressed gardenia between card stock pinned with a bead the size of a sesame seed; the call to him that broke the rules she built for herself because the thing on her lap in the car had rewritten the rulebook; the quiet watch that had slowed her breathing for a time and made her check the window more often; the car sliding past the curb you could see from her window; the radio tonight saying supervisor without saying why; the unmarked car leaving because someone said it needed to; his text with two words and a period in between. Suspended. Sorry.

They had followed, one after the other. The person who sent the flower had a plan. He was patient and he liked rules because they were his. He had changed what happened outside with a call that wasn't his voice. She knew that pattern. She had lived under it and kept herself quiet to get through. She stood straighter than before. It didn't make her safe.

She turned her head toward the bathroom and thought about the light over the sink and whether it would look like a signal if someone watched the front of the building and counted when the light came on and how long it stayed on. She didn't turn it on. She stood in the doorway

and washed her hands in the dark with water that was cooler than she wanted. She dried her hands on her jeans and went back to the chair.

She thought of Jenna. If he had found Elena through an alias and a box number and a habit she thought she kept invisible, then Jenna's man could find out where the back step was and which door had a chain and which window had a latch that stuck. She pictured Jenna's door with the two-inch gap and the wedge of light from the floor lamp and the way Jenna held her ribs with one hand because it hurt to breathe all the way in. She pictured the hall, the corner where you could block the exit if you didn't know what your body did when someone stood wrong. She pictured the house rules on the office wall and the quiet hours that were not quiet anymore when a different kind of safety mattered more.

She picked up her primary and hovered her thumb over Jenna's entry. She could call. She could say a sentence that would wake the room up and make Jenna sit straight and look at the door. She put the phone down. She was not going to wake Jenna and make her anxious. Morning. She could tighten things in the morning without spreading the tension to everyone before dawn.

She thought about running. It came up the way it always did when the worry pushed past what counting could slow: a bag, a car, a dark road. Change the locks on another door somewhere else. Learn new stairs. Build new rules. She noticed it and did not act on it. Running would take her away from the women who would come to her door tomorrow and ask for water and a place to sit and a chair angled so they could see the hallway. Running would be what he wanted: proof she was easy to move. She kept her feet on the floor and her body on the couch. Choosing to stay kept her in place.

She pulled the primary closer and typed a message to Marla from the primary with the words she used when she didn't want to put the whole thing on paper.

Neighborhood is lively tonight. Let's keep posture in the morning.

After a minute, her phone buzzed with Marla's reply.

Got it. Back step + lights up. I'll be in early.

Elena typed nothing else. She set the small phone down and lined it up with the primary again. She ran her thumb across the table's wood and found the small rough place where a cup had left a circle years ago. The roughness steadied her.

She put the small phone in her jacket pocket again and kept the jacket on. At the sink, she stood without lights and listened to the pipes. Back at the door, she pressed the bar. At the window, she checked the latch. She lay on the couch and stared at the door.

Outside was quiet. That wasn't safety. It meant no watch. It meant no uniform that would have to fill a box on a form if something happened twelve minutes from now. It meant someone else could decide what happened. 03:11 on the primary. She kept her eyes open.

Chapter 12

The Rupture

She pressed her thumb into the bar until her skin dulled. No give. She lifted her hand and laid it on the top rail of the chair, fingers aligned the way she trained them. Each object was where she had put it: couch angled to the door, shoes under the table with toes toward the exit, jacket hung over the chair back. Two phones on the table. Primary dark at one notch. Small one to its right with the brightness down. The older backup far back and off.

The small phone buzzed. One word lit the screen.

Here.

Two knuckles on wood. Controlled. The same way he did it before. Once. Then quiet.

She didn't move for a count. The dryer below started and stopped. A door in the hall eased back into its frame and set. Rain hit the awning over the laundromat and ran off.

Don't hope.

She lifted the bar. Chain stayed in. She turned the deadbolt with the part of her hand that didn't shake. She kept her body out of the line of the opening and pulled the door until it caught on the chain. Two inches. Not more. She didn't put her face in the gap. She looked at the wall and let the voice come through the space.

"I shouldn't be here," he said. The voice was lower than it had been on the phone. Less clipped. Tired.

"You're not," she said.

"I needed you to hear it from me." A breath. "The car is off your block. Permanently. I'm suspended pending review. No watch. No one official. I'm not sending anyone. I can't."

She watched the chain move a millimeter with the weight of the door in her hand. Her grip tightened on the edge.

"You said it already," she said. "You texted."

"I did." A short pause. "I'm sorry."

"I can't use sorry," she said. "Outcomes, not apology."

He stayed quiet. She could see his shoulder through the gap, jacket dark from the damp on the landing, hands low and open, not touching the door. He kept his weight off the hinge side like he had learned the first time.

"I broke the rule when I put a car where it could be called in," he said, voice even. "Or I let him manipulate it into the open. Both are true."

The muscles at the base of her skull tightened. She didn't put her hand there. She kept the pressure on the chain with the door and watched only the edge of his sleeve.

"There's no watch," she said, so she said it aloud in the room.

"No watch," he said.

The dryer below thumped into a new cycle. The building's old pipe knocked once and went quiet. Her chest was high and hard and then eased when she remembered to lower her shoulders.

"You have a choice now," he said. He lowered his voice. "I can stay away completely. Or I can keep a distance in my own car, not your curb, not your stairs, no approach, no texts unless you tell me Now. That is not a promise I can make as a cop. It's just me, on my time. You don't owe me an answer. If you tell me to go, I go."

She kept the chain set and her body out of the gap. She could taste metal from the water she hadn't finished. She thought about his "I

shouldn't be here" and how much of that sentence was true. He looked tired. No, worse than tired. It was in his voice more than his face.

"Go," she said. Her jaw clenched. She swallowed. "Tonight I need to breathe without looking for you."

He didn't argue.

"Okay." He took one step back. No scrape. No foot too fast. His hands stayed where she could see them near the edge of the opening.

"If it changes," he said, "text Now. Or don't text. I'll still answer if the phone rings. I'll keep it on the table. That's the last thing I'm saying tonight."

She did not answer. Her hand stayed firm on the edge. He took another step back, then another. She kept the door at its two inches until she heard the stair shift under his weight farther down. She slid the chain off, set the door into the jamb, turned the deadbolt, then dropped the bar. The bar met the brackets and seated. She pressed once more until her palm warmed.

The small phone buzzed where it lay.

Reachable.

Nothing after. She didn't reply. She put the phone face down. Her hand found the bar again. She listened. She could name the sounds: a cough, the wash cycle catching, the fan in the bathroom through the wall two apartments over. That was all.

She walked the apartment in her usual circuit. Bar. Chain slack check. Deadbolt feel. Window latch by the table. Window latch by the bathroom. She pressed each with two fingers and waited for the set. Shoes aligned under the table. Jacket where it always was. Keys in the dish by the door, end of rubber band tucked so it wouldn't catch. Two phones on the table

edge in a straight line. She adjusted them a quarter inch so the line was clean.

She picked up the small phone and turned it in her hand. Light case with a scuff at the corner. Two names inside it. No other noise. She could shut it down and put it in the drawer. That would be pride more than safety. She set it back where it went. One notch for volume. Brightness down. She left it awake and still.

She stood behind the chair and held the rail. The wood under the finish had a raised spot near the screw that had always been there. She pressed her thumb to it until the urge to move slowed.

She thought of the way he controlled conversations. The rule, the correction, the required tone. She tried out words. In her head first and then under her breath, just enough air to feel a shape against her teeth.

Not safe. I'm not meeting you. Any contact must be written.

She ran it again. He would ignore it. He would turn "No" into another question.

Wrong number. Hang up.

That was simple. It was honest enough for tonight. It gave her two rings to steady her hands. Seconds mattered. She pictured the phone ringing and her hands not shaking. She pictured ending the call without saying her name. She didn't owe him the sound of it.

She took her primary and typed to Marla.

Posture tight today. Lights up. Back step only. Rotate door every hour. No one answers twice. Route calls live to me.

The dots came and left a moment later.

Got it. I'm in early. Will post the rotation note.

She deleted the thread. If she needed it she could say it again. She lined the phones up again when the small one slid half an inch from the buzz.

She moved to the window and stayed to the side. She could see the awning, the puddle near the curb, the slice of the bakery two doors down. No unmarked car she recognized. No slow slide and pause. Nothing at the hydrant. Only one sedan with a plastic bag over a side mirror and a cracked hubcap that had been there last week too. Without the car, the curb looked open in daylight. She noted the empty spot where it had been last night. The skin under her jaw went tight. She let it be tight for a count of five, then let it go.

Call legal aid. Waitlist would be two weeks if she got through; faster for a TPO if she pushed, but that would be on paper where she didn't want her name yet. Move apartments. Money and time and exposure she couldn't afford. Relocate intake for a day. Not possible without opening new doors to people who didn't need to know where residents slept. Each option meant new exposure: legal aid waitlist two weeks at best; moving needed a deposit she didn't have; intake relocation meant new keys and more faces.

Stay. Hold the same line. Keep women alive now.

She put the small phone in her jacket pocket. She set the primary in her bag. Backup stayed on the table, dark and flat where it always waited. She went to the door. She lifted the bar, turned the deadbolt, opened the door, and checked the hall without leaning. Soap from the laundromat came through the floor. The hallway air was cool. No one out. She stepped out and locked behind her, the lock sequence in reverse without thinking. The sequence was automatic in her hands.

Right-hand stairs. She let her right shoulder lead because the left side of the step was slick with wear. The metal gate of the laundromat was still down; a minute later it would go up with the rattle she could recognize anywhere on the block. She didn't wait for it. Out the door, down the walk, keys in her right hand with the house key tucked under her index finger. Left hand empty. She crossed with a long angle so she could see the alley mouth and the lot.

Drive. Main road. Not the river.

At the shelter, the lights were up even though it was morning. The hum of the fluorescent fixtures was the same pitch as always. The heater in the lobby rattled for a second and went quiet. Tiana had the inner key looped around her finger and the desk phones were lined on the power strip, cords not crossing. Marla was at the desk.

"Back step only," Elena said.

"Always," Tiana said, reflex as steady as the key in her hand.

"Rotation on the door," Elena said.

"Switch on the hour. No one answers twice," Marla said, already moving the log and pen to the left side of the blotter so the person on post would have to shift to write their initials where she wanted them.

Elena angled the end chair at the lobby so the path to the inner door stayed clear by two inches. The TV stayed on with the volume low. The coat-drive poster stayed in the top-left corner of the board, not covering the evacuation map. The pass-through slot's latch was engaged. She pressed it, felt the catch, and let it go.

The external monitor showed the slice of the awning and the tops of passing cars until she turned it off. She did not need a live feed drawing her eyes every minute. She would look with her own eyes when she needed to. Not now.

The admin line lit with the board liaison's number. Marla let it ring out and later sent a one-line email: No tours during alert. No donors in residential hours. Elena watched her fingers on the keys and was glad not to have to say the line herself.

Jenna came down the hall with her hood up and a blanket over her shoulders, slower than she had gone last night. She stopped two steps

into the lobby and looked at the floor like she could choose where to put her feet in a way that wouldn't make her ribs hurt.

"End chair," Elena said, nodding to the one she'd angled. "Feet under. If someone passes, say hello so they know you're awake."

Jenna nodded once and sat. She tucked her feet and kept her hands open on her thighs. Elena watched her press the blanket down in her lap and then leave it. When the intercom buzzed, Jenna's shoulders went up and then down. She didn't stand.

"Two beats," Tiana said to herself, already in motion. Peephole. Intercom. "Pass-through only." A delivery bag slid onto the inner plate when the slot opened. Tiana set it in the bin without looking at the hands that passed it in. The slot latch engaged with a small, clean sound.

Elena drank a half cup of water from the paper cup she kept near the desk and put it down. Metallic again. She wrote the time on the call log and closed the cover so the page wasn't left where anyone could glance.

At 11:30, she stood in the back corridor where the lamp by Room Twelve hummed. She touched the switch until the hum settled. When the hum hit the higher pitch, she could feel her shoulders tense.

"Clinic at one for Maya P.," Marla called from the desk.

"Food first," Elena said.

"Small then water," Marla said without looking up.

A woman at the door used the buzzer for too long. Two beats, then three, then a fourth because some people did not listen or did not know how to listen. Tiana stood still, counted aloud to herself, then did it in the right order anyway. Peephole, intercom, pass-through only. The lights stayed up in the lobby and the blinds stayed down.

No incidents in the lobby. She stayed on checks. She counted her steps when she had to, not because counting meant anything but because it kept her pace steady.

At close, she walked the lobby once more and pressed her hand to the inner door just to feel it push back. The bar at the back exit stayed seated. She touched it to be sure. She told Marla her usual line for the night. Ten minutes away. Call and I'm on my way. If she said ten minutes, she had to meet it.

She left by the alley and angled across the lot so she could see the mouth of the street and the back step. She didn't look for an unmarked car. She looked for people who didn't fit. She didn't see anyone who didn't fit.

After close, she took the main road home with two extra turns. The hall was quiet. She parked one block over again. She climbed the stairs on the right side and touched the wall where she knew the plaster had a chip, not because she needed to but because the rough spot steadied her hands. She unlocked her door and set the deadbolt, chain, and bar. She checked both window latches. She took the small phone from her jacket and set it on the table.

The bar was under her hand when she moved to the window and kept to the side. Her stove clock read 10:42.

Down the block, at the far corner, a car idled with no lights on. It wasn't under her awning. It wasn't even on her part of the street. The angle was different. She recognized the posture anyway. The way the driver sat back from the wheel. The small tilt of the rearview.

Not on my curb, she thought. Not at my stairs.

She didn't text. She didn't lift the phone. She stood where she was and watched the slice of the block she could see. A bus went past at the far end and pushed a wave of wet toward the curb. The idling car did not move. No uniform. No paperwork. No form to fill. No point of leverage for anyone but him. He had made the choice and she had told him not to and now here it was, the choice still made.

She went back to the chair and put her hands on the rail. The rail showed a small shine where her hands had been. She pressed again. She

didn't think about forever. She thought about the next minute and the one after it.

She tracked minutes by sounds. The laundromat gate stuttered half a foot down and back up again when the latch caught and the clerk pulled too hard before pushing it the right way. A bike chain rattled on the sidewalk as someone rolled past in the wet. A neighbor locked his door, unlocked it to check the knob, then locked it again. She knew which door it was by the sound and the timing.

She looked again. The car at the corner was still there. She kept to the side of the window. Two kids came out of the late-night place with a paper bag and ran, laughing, heads down against the rain that hit their cheeks. They didn't look at the idling car. They didn't look up.

Her thumb hovered over the small phone on the table. She thought about typing Go. She put the phone face down and stepped back from the window.

She sat on the couch and set her heels together on the floor, toes pointed toward the door. She pressed her knees with her palms until the need to stand up passed. She counted four in and four out twice, then let it return to two and two. Her shoulders dropped from the chair rail by a finger's width.

Another look later showed the car had shifted by inches to tuck behind a different parked van and avoid the hydrant sign. No one stood under her awning. No shape at her stairs. He was where he said he would keep himself, wrong by her rule but not breaking it on her curb.

A man with a hood up tapped on a window down the block where the car was. He cupped his hands around his face to peer in and then knocked with the side of his hand and said something Elena couldn't hear at this distance. The driver lifted a hand, palm up. The gesture didn't tell her anything she could use. The man with the hood lifted his shoulders, turned, and kept walking. The car's engine kept its same quiet idle. No attention drawn. No name called out. Nothing to report.

Her jaw, which had been hard all day, clicked once when she opened it and then didn't click the next time. The ache at the base of her neck was still there. It wasn't worse. It wasn't better.

She stood and went to the sink without turning on the light. She opened the tap and let the water run a second because the first part had a taste she didn't like. She drank. The metal edge was still there, but less. She set the cup down and touched the counter. The laminate was cool. She counted to eight and turned back to the table.

The small phone lit a dull square on the wood. She didn't touch it. She checked the bar. She pressed the window latch with two fingers. She sat again and let her hands rest where they had been.

She took one more look out the window later and saw the car still there. The rain had picked up and eased twice. The corner light cycled again. The driver hadn't moved from that posture she recognized. No "Here" on her screen. No knock. Just the car where it was, out of her sightline unless she went looking.

She turned away from the window. The door bar was in front of her. The chair back touched the front of her thighs when she stood too close and she let it. She put her hand on the metal. It was colder than the air. It steadied her anyway.

She was not alone. She was not going to name what that meant. She stayed where she was and watched the door.

Later, when she lay down and the room darkened more, she kept one hand outside of the blanket on the couch and rested it on her thigh to stop it from moving. Her eyes stayed on the bar. Nothing happened. Nothing was safe. She would make it safer anyway.

Chapter 13

The Call

She pressed her palm to the bar and felt metal against skin. No give. Her hand stayed there until the beat in her wrist slowed. The jacket she'd left on the chair held its shape. It always did after a long day. The small phone sat to the right of her primary, both screens dark. The backup was where she kept it, farther back, off. The laundromat gate below was down; the block was quiet. She kept to the side of the window when she checked, then came back to the table and the bar.

Her primary lit on the table. No Caller ID. The ringtone was loud. It kept going. She let it run to the second ring. Third. She picked up.

"Wrong number," she said.

He didn't stop. "There you are."

Her fingers held the phone without moving. The voice hadn't changed. Smooth, almost soft. She stood by the chair and put her free hand on the rail to keep it from moving.

"You're quiet tonight," he said. "Better. No car on your corner. No lights on the corner. I like you this way."

He kept talking, slow. She didn't answer.

"You moved your car," he said. "One block over. Smart. I watched you come back in. Right side of the stairs like always. Old habit."

She watched the door and the bar. She kept her voice flat. "What do you want."

He laughed once, a small sound. "Everything's a rule with you. Time. Place. But you already know what I want." A beat. "I'm going to make this

easy. Be good for me and I'll make it easy."

Her jaw clicked and then held. She kept counting in her head. Four in. Four out. "One minute," she said. "Then I end this call."

"You don't have to be hard with me," he said. "You sound tired. I can fix that. Come home. We'll start over. We can keep it clean this time." He left space between the words. The cadence was the same as it had been the first time he'd said it. Start over. Keep it clean. His voice had always gone low on the word clean.

"Where are you," she said.

"Close," he said. "Close enough. I see you learned to keep your blinds down. I see you learned some things." He paused as if he wanted her to answer. She didn't. "You were brave at that place you run," he added. "The girl with the hood. You always did like to tell people what to do."

Elena shifted her grip on the phone so the case pressed into the pad of her thumb. "This line isn't safe for you," she said. "Any contact you want should be written."

"Cute," he said. "You thinking if it's written it doesn't count the same? You've got no one watching anymore. I made a call; the car left. They don't last. They never do." His tone flattened. "He left you alone. Like they always do when it's work or risk."

She didn't look out at the street. She kept her eyes on the bar. She said nothing.

"You know what I liked about you," he said. "You do the hard thing and then you tell yourself you didn't need it. Like that little car on your corner. You liked it. Didn't say it. Still looked up at the right time, though."

Elena ran her tongue once against the back of her teeth and tasted metal from the water she hadn't finished earlier. "You have thirty seconds," she said.

He lowered his voice, new softness. It was the tone he used after he made a rule. "Listen. I'm going to be generous. You come home before the weekend and we don't have to involve anyone. Say you understand."

She didn't say anything. He waited. Her hand stayed on the chair rail. The skin across her fingers tightened; blood left her grip and came back.

"Don't punish me," he said when she didn't answer. He let out a breath. "Anna, don't."

She spoke over him. "No." She lowered the phone, pressed the red, and set it on the table face down.

The room didn't change. The bar was where it was, solid. She pressed it again anyway, palm flat until it warmed under her hand. She moved to the sink without lights, turned the tap, let it run a second, and drank. The taste was still there. She put the cup down, came back to the table, and aligned the phones by the edge.

Steady. Don't replay every word. Don't call him back.

She stood with both hands on the chair rail and named what she could keep: the bar, the latches, the jacket on the chair back, the shoes under the table toes toward the door, two phones lined up. The older backup stayed dark. The small one was a square of plastic and light. She picked it up, opened a message thread, and typed three words: We talk. Call your partner. She looked at the door again and held still.

She sat. The chair was hard and that helped. She could still hear his voice in her head where it always was. Start over. Keep it clean. Be good for me. He used the same words because he needed the words to be true more than he needed to hide them.

He needed to be seen, and to hear her repeat things back so it sounded right in the air. When she pictured the gardenia, her chest

tightened and her hand went still. I am here. See me. She'd learned to survive him by using the same need against him. Praise had kept him talking long enough that she could move keys into her pocket or step sideways in a hallway he thought was blocked. It had let her extend an argument when she needed the extra minute to find the door.

She didn't like the part of her that knew how to do that. She didn't have to like it to use it.

He had set a deadline. Before the weekend. He would count down whether she spoke or not. Not speaking had been the right move on the phone. It wasn't enough now. Give him a public place and he would come because it would feel like control. The task was making the place hers.

Private was wrong. Private meant he could say it was a misunderstanding. He would adjust his voice to sound sympathetic and call it an argument between partners and say she asked him to come. He would push the volume just enough for a neighbor to say it sounded like a couple arguing, not what it was. She wasn't going to give him that.

Public but controlled. Bright lights. The smell of bleach. The hum she could regulate with her finger on a switch. Chairs she had moved two inches and paths she had cleared herself. A door she could close in a second with a bar she trusted. The lobby.

She pictured the lobby: lights up, blinds down, pass-through latched. The desk in the center. She would stand behind it. She would angle the end chair to keep the path to the inner door open. Tiana at the inner key, or Marla if Tiana wasn't on. Phones on the power strip with cords straight. A maintenance notice on the board to keep people from walking through. Back step only. No smoke breaks during the window. Door rotation paused because no one would answer the door then. If anyone came to the buzzer, intercom first, pass-through only, slot latched after. She pictured clicking the slot latch, then nudging the end chair two inches.

He would want to walk in as if he controlled it. She would give him only the space she decided ahead of time. She would stand where the path to the inner door was clear and wait two seconds before answering. Then she would say his name once and a sentence he wanted to hear so he would keep talking. She would not explain anything or argue. She would point to the chair and hold still; if he stood, she would step back. Her voice would stay steady.

You need clear words that stay true after night turned into morning, and a case report would need each step in order. Gloves; chain-of-custody logged to take those words from the room to wherever they had to go next. You can't hand them to someone who was suspended and hope a hearing didn't throw them out on a technicality. You can't ask him to be what the department wouldn't let him be right now.

It had to be lawful. It had to be tight. It had to be someone who knew where to put their hands so no one would be able to say later that the recording was unclear.

Sloane. The partner who liked clean evidence. The one she had not called when she was tempted because she didn't trust radio chatter. She didn't need to like Sloane yet. She needed Sloane's discipline.

She held the small phone. She shaped the plan into one line. After close, bright lobby. Controlled entry. Keep him talking. Capture what mattered. Deliver it to hands that knew what to do. No names on the intercom. No uniforms near the curb. I'll need a kit for clean audio. Sloane brings it. Gloves on the evidence.

She couldn't move residents out tonight, but she could clear the space tomorrow under a pretext with time to settle the building so no one panicked. She would make it maintenance and use the word like she always did when she needed quiet without telling anyone why.

She looked at the words on the screen and added one more. Trust me.

Her thumb hovered. She lowered her shoulders first, then sent it. The phone sat warm in her palm; her grip steadied.

Don't second-guess. Don't rewrite. Don't wait for him to save you. You asked for what you need. That's the rule now.

She set the small phone down, aligned it with the primary again, and checked the window from the side. The corner car down the block was still there, parked behind the van, dark. No movement. No knock. The block was the same.

The small phone buzzed once. She picked it up.

Here.

She stayed seated. She typed. Tomorrow night. After close. Lobby. Lights up.

A short pause. Then: Copy.

She typed again. Your partner is point. Keep the circle small. No radio until it has to be on. Your partner brings the kit.

Another pause. On it.

She watched the letters until they stopped. She set the phone down. The bar under her palm helped.

She picked up the small phone again. The car at the corner stayed dark. She typed to him. Tomorrow 21:30 window. He will come. We set controls.

Rhys: Are you sure.

Her throat was tight; she swallowed. She typed. No more hiding. He comes to the shelter lobby.

He sent two words. I'll wait.

She opened Marla's thread and typed:

Maintenance 21:00, 22:30. Back step only. Door rotation paused. I'll post the notice.

In the morning, she would call him. Public, not private. The lobby, not her stairs.

She placed the small phone on the table and let her hands rest, one on the table's edge, one on the bar. The stove clock showed 03:19.

Chapter 14

The Plan

She pressed her thumb into the edge of the counter until it hurt. The small phone was on the table beside the primary, brightness down, volume at one notch. The door bar held under her palm when she checked it, a familiar weight. Deadbolt. Chain. Window latches, table side first, then the bathroom. She moved through the sequence without thinking and then did it again because today could not slip.

Her jacket hung on the chair. She kept it there to see it. Shoes sat under the table, toes pointed toward the door the way she liked. The laundromat below was quiet. The gate would lift in a few minutes with the rattle she knew. She didn't wait for it. The stove clock read 12:06. A minute later it read 12:07. Nothing changed between them except her breath.

The small phone buzzed once against the wood and showed a single word.

Here.

She didn't ask where. He had said off-site and she had agreed. She had told him he would not walk into her building or the shelter without a text first, and he had kept that rule when it mattered most. She put two fingers on the edge of the phone until the urge to move passed.

Another line appeared.

With S now. Your rules hold.

She stood behind the chair and placed both hands on the rail. She held there until her hands steadied. He would be in a parking lot or at the

diner or in a hallway he trusted. Sloane would be there with her neat bun and gold band and the look that said she was weighing risk against what a judge would allow. Elena could picture the posture without ever seeing it.

She typed: Empty building during window. Back step only before. No cruisers. No uniforms. Slot latched. Lights up. I sit behind the desk.

He didn't respond for one minute. Two. Three. The laundromat gate below shook and rose. She watched the door. She didn't watch the window. She kept to the side when she checked.

Rhys: S says conditions ok only if building is empty, entry controlled. Single door in use. She needs wire consent recorded. Minimal team (two). No radio until it has to be on.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed once. She typed: Agreed. My consent on tape. Two only. Chain-of-custody clean.

A minute later: S: She wants detail on the room. Photo?

She picked up her keys. She tucked the small phone into her jacket pocket and left the primary on the table face down. Bar up, deadbolt, chain. She opened the door without leaning and checked the hall. Quiet. She stepped out and locked behind her, her hand knowing the sequence without looking. Right-hand stairs. She let her right shoulder lead because the left side was slick from years of feet.

The block smelled of soap and wet metal. The bakery two doors down was on lunch prep. No line. She crossed at a long angle that let her see the alley and the lot. Main road. Not the river. 12:12. She took Pine to the main road on foot.

Cold air off the river hit her at the back step as she reached in for her keys. The door log would be waiting on the desk.

At the shelter, lights were already up. They had stayed that way. Marla had the desk and the phones sat in a straight line with cords not crossing. The pass-through latch was engaged. Elena pressed it and felt the catch before she let it go.

“Back step only,” she said out of habit.

“Always,” Marla said, voice low, eyes on a list.

Elena moved to the lobby window and took a photo that caught the desk, the end chair she always angled, the slice of the inner door, and the narrow corridor. She did not include faces. She drew two arrows on the photo with her finger: her planned position behind the desk and the clear path to the inner door.

She sent it to the small phone’s thread labeled with a single initial.

Me here. Path clear here. Slot latched.

A text came fast.

Sloane: Received.

She hadn’t saved Sloane’s number. Rhys had sent it a minute ago with one line: S will text you direct re consent + layout. She had saved it as a letter, not a name.

Rhys: She’s asking if you can clear everyone out for the window. No one in rooms.

Rhys: I’ll be on-site but out of the line. Two officers with Sloane. I don’t move unless you say Now.

Elena looked at the board on the wall. Her schedule had gaps she could use. “Marla,” she said, “we’re closing the building for maintenance between twenty-one hundred and twenty-two thirty tomorrow.”

Marla lifted her head. “Planned?”

“Yes,” Elena said. “We’ll stagger. Church basement has room for the sort. Maya’s clinic consult can slide. Laundry slots open after eight.” She paused. “We’re not leaving anyone outside.”

Marla nodded. “I’ll start rides.”

Elena typed back: Yes. Window will be empty. Single entry. I’ll control.

Rhys: S says ok. She wants your consent recorded on arrival. She brings kit. Two officers only. Back door entry pre-window, then hold.

Elena typed: I want the wire. I will wear it. No cameras. Clean audio.

Rhys: Copy. She will handle it.

The small phone buzzed again with a call request. Unknown number, but it matched prior messages. She recognized it. She stepped into the office where the framed house rules hung: No overnight visitors. No weapons. Quiet hours at ten. She closed the door until it clicked, not shut, just enough for her to hear herself.

She accepted.

“Sloane Ibarra,” the woman said. Her voice was clear, steady. Not warm. Not cold. Just exact.

“Elena,” she said.

“Not your legal,” Sloane said. “We don’t need that now.” A beat. “I need two things from you before we move: on-tape consent and a guarantee that the space is clear of non-involved persons. If I don’t have both, I cancel the operation.”

“You’ll have both,” Elena said. “You’ll record my consent on arrival, then place the wire. The building will be empty. I’ll be behind the desk. Lights up. Slot latched. Inner door locked.”

“At the desk, I’ll record your consent before placement and test the recorder once so the click is on tape,” Sloane said.

“Entry,” Sloane said.

“Front,” Elena said. “He presses the buzzer. I use the intercom. I keep the chain on until I see his hands. No one else at the door. Back step not in use during the window.”

“Hold,” Sloane said. A pen clicked once. Then: “Good.” She didn’t say nice. Elena liked that. “Two officers only. They’ll enter early through the back step and hold in the hall. No uniforms. No radio chatter unless we’re

moving. After, we formalize. Do not repeat what we are doing to anyone else, including your board.”

“I won’t,” Elena said.

“And if he touches you,” Sloane said, “we move on my call or on your code.”

“My code is Now,” Elena said. “You will hear it.”

“Then we’re set,” Sloane said. “Tomorrow at twenty-one thirty.” A pause. “Get sleep.”

Elena exhaled through her nose, short. “You tell him that,” she said, and ended the call.

A minute later, the small phone buzzed with a line from Rhys.

S: Tell him to sleep.

She didn’t answer that. He wouldn’t either.

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She came out of the office and moved through the lobby, checking points she already knew were right. The desk phones sat square to the edge of the blotter. The power strip showed three green dots. The evacuation map stayed visible. The coat-drive poster was still in the top-left corner where it didn’t cover anything essential. The end chair at the lobby had drifted half an inch. She nudged it two inches to keep the path to the inner door clean. Two inches mattered.

“Maintenance,” Marla said without looking up, then lifted her eyes. “The line?”

“City electrician and fire sensor test. No guests,” Elena said. “If anyone asks.”

“Back step only,” Marla said.

“Back step only,” Elena said.

She took another photo from the front edge of the desk, lower, the way someone standing there would see. She drew a box where her hands would rest and sent it to Sloane.

Sloane: Clear. Team will arrive early and stage in the hall. You will not see them until we move. Consent first.

Elena put the small phone facedown on the desk and pressed her palm to the wood until her hand warmed. The fixtures buzzed at a constant pitch. The heater rattled once and went quiet.

She had given him the time in her head already. He would like that she had chosen a number and held it. Before the weekend, he had said. She would make his deadline mean something he didn't control.

She went back out to the hall where the lamp by Room Twelve hummed. She touched the switch until the hum settled to a lower line that didn't get into her jaw. She stood with her hand on the switch and counted to five. There was nothing to fix there. There was everything to fix outside the door tomorrow night.

She returned to the desk and started the work of emptying a building without saying why.

"Church basement can take four," Marla said, reading from her screen. "Seven to ten. We have to have them out by ten-fifteen. The kitchen's open."

"Tiana can ride with the first group," Elena said. "Khadija with the second. We'll do cabs for Maya and the mother with the toddler. They go first so they're not in the lobby at the end."

"Cab vouchers?" Marla said.

"Drawer," Elena said. "Under the tape."

Marla slid the drawer and pulled the stack. "Two sheets."

"Do it," Elena said.

She wrote in the door log in her own hand: 20:45 Begin clearing. 20:55 Back step closed. 21:00 Doors locked. No one inside. She closed the cover so the page wasn't open to anyone who sat down without thinking.

She called the church and spoke to a woman who knew her cadence and didn't ask questions she couldn't answer. "We can give them hot chocolate," the woman said. "I'll put out crayons."

"Thank you," Elena said. She didn't let her voice change.

In the back corridor, she wrote a small sign in thick black letters: Maintenance 21:00, 22:30. No entry. Back step closed. She taped it at eye level by the inner door so no one would miss it if they tried to pass through. A resident paused at the sign. "Lights off?" she asked. "No," Elena said. "Just the window." The woman nodded and kept moving.

She returned to the desk and put her hand on the pass-through latch. Engaged. She pressed and let it click again. Engaged.

At four, she stood in the lounge and moved the couch two inches so the door wouldn't catch. The woven toy basket sat where the toddler could see it when they came back. She filled a paper cup halfway with water and set it at the edge of the sink. She did each of those things because later she wouldn't be able to.

Her small phone buzzed with two words.

21:30 set.

She replied: Copy. Empty. Lights up. No gifts.

She didn't like the word gifts in her own text. She sent it anyway. He needed to see the word. He needed to know she was thinking about the thing he called a gift so he could bring himself to the right door.

She moved through the next hours steadying people where they leaned. Maya P. held her pharmacy bag against her knees and asked if she should eat. "Small then water," Elena said. She had said it enough times that Maya's hands relaxed on the paper bag without being told why.

At six, she told Jenna about the maintenance and gave her a choice of where to sit during the evening gap before they left. Jenna chose the end chair. “Feet under,” Elena said. “Greet passers so they know you’re awake.”

Jenna nodded and tucked her feet. When the intercom buzzed, her shoulders lifted and then lowered. She kept her seat. Tiana said “Two beats” to herself, did the peephole, the intercom, and “Pass-through only,” then relatched the slot when the delivery bag slid in. The latch engaged. A single click.

At seven-thirty, Elena started lining people up for tomorrow’s rides. She set the buddy pairs and wrote the times in the log for the window. She checked that the power strip had three green dots and that the desk phones’ cords didn’t cross. She set the dimmers to full and taped a small note next to them: Do not adjust. Maintenance.

She walked to the back exit and pressed the bar down to feel it seat. It did. The metal was colder than the air in the corridor. She held her hand there an extra second because she needed something that wouldn’t move under her.

The last group would leave at 20:43 with Khadija at their shoulder. Tiana would stand at the inner door with the key looped around her finger. “Back step closed in two,” she would say.

“Close it now,” Elena would answer.

The latch would engage. A clean click.

By 20:55 the building would be empty except for the two of them. Elena did a last walk-through she had done a hundred times and felt the same: hands on known surfaces, a rhythm she trusted. She pressed the inner door with her palm, checked the chain slack at the front, then ran her fingers under the pass-through to feel for grit that might catch. There was nothing there.

“Go,” she said to Tiana. “I’ll lock behind you.”

Tiana hesitated in the doorway. “You want me across the street?”

“No,” Elena said. “Home. Sleep.”

Tiana nodded once and left. Elena locked the door and set the chain. She dropped the bar and pressed until her palm warmed.

The lobby was bright and empty. The TV was off. The fixtures buzzed at a constant pitch. The maintenance sign looked official enough to stop anyone who wandered. The path to the inner door was clean by two inches.

She stood behind the desk and set both hands on the edge where the varnish was worn and the wood rough under her fingers. She didn’t move. She let her weight settle. The lobby lights stayed bright. This was the spot.

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Her small phone buzzed with a new text.

Sloane: Two officers staged at 20:30 tomorrow. We will record consent on arrival. Do not move the chair or desk between now and then.

Elena typed: I won’t.

She turned off the exterior monitor so the slice of awning and sidewalk wouldn’t distract her. She knew the door’s frame.

She locked the building and left by the alley. She angled across the lot so she could see the mouth of the street and the back step. No one stood where they shouldn’t. The rain came down steady, not hard, not soft. Just steady. She didn’t look for a car with a familiar rearview tilt. She crossed the street at a long angle and went home.

She climbed the right side of the stairs and touched the rough patch in the plaster without looking. In her apartment she set the deadbolt, the chain, the bar. She checked both window latches. She put the small phone on the table and aligned it with the primary by the edge.

The stove clock read 21:34.

She had meant to call him in the morning. She waited until the lobby was set and the texts were in place.

She took the primary, opened the last number, and dialed. One click, then his voice.

“You called,” he said, pleased. “Go ahead.”

Her jaw clicked. She pressed her free hand to the chair rail. “I’m done moving,” she said. “You want to talk, you come to me. After hours.”

“You’re learning,” he said. “Time and place, you want them. That’s sweet.”

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Twenty-one thirty. The lobby.”

“You think I don’t know that place,” he said. “I’ve watched your lights for weeks. I know the way your people move.”

“Then you know where to go,” she said. “No interruptions. You’ll talk. I’ll listen.”

“You’ll listen,” he repeated, pleased. “Why there?”

“It’s where I don’t have to look over my shoulder,” she said. She paused. He liked being the person who could take that away. He always had.

“That’s the point,” he said. “You’ll look at me.” A beat. “You’ll sit where I tell you or I’ll move you.”

“No,” she said. “You sit. We talk. No flowers. No notes. No gifts.”

He exhaled through the line. The sound was familiar. “You liked the last one,” he said. “You kept it.”

She didn’t answer.

He shifted his tone to the one he used when he wanted her to think he was reasonable. “You’re being difficult,” he said. “Don’t punish me. Say it.”

“No,” she said. “Twenty-one thirty. You have the address.”

“I’m going to see you,” he said. “Really see you. Don’t flinch when I put my hand on you.”

Her jaw tightened. She eased it.

She didn’t let the pause get long. “You have the time,” she said, and ended the call.

The room did not change. The bar sat where it always sat. The jacket held its shape on the chair. She touched the bar and held there until her hand warmed it.

She texted the thread labeled G: Set. 21:30. Lobby. Lights up. No gifts.

Copy, Rhys wrote back.

She sent the same to the letter that stood for Sloane.

Copy, Sloane returned.

Elena set the small phone beside the primary and aligned the bottom edges by touch. She moved to the sink without turning on the light, ran the tap, and drank. The water had that slight metal edge she knew from this time of night. She put the cup down and came back to the table.

The laundromat gate below rattled. Someone inside had leaned on it wrong. It settled again. A car hissed through water on Pine and kept going. Nothing else moved.

She stood with both hands on the chair rail. Her shoulders dropped.

Don’t call him back. Don’t replay every word. Don’t explain to yourself why you said what you said.

She watched the stove clock advance toward twenty-two hundred and kept her hands steady.

Chapter 15

The Trap

She placed both hands on the desk edge to feel the varnish worn smooth where a hundred hands had rested. The lights were at full. The blinds were down. The pass-through latch was engaged with the click she trusted. The sign in the back corridor read what it had to read. Maintenance 21:00, 22:30. No entry. Back step closed.

Sloane came in through the inner hall as they had agreed. No radio. No uniform. Dark jacket, hair tight, gold band catching a strip of light. Two other plainclothes moved past behind her without words and took the corner out of sight. Elena saw only a sleeve and a watch move into the hall gap where the tile changed color.

"We'll do consent here," Sloane said. Her voice stayed low. Exact. A small black recorder sat in her hand with a folded evidence bag under it.

Elena nodded once. She did not reach for it. She kept her hands where they were. Palms on the desk, fingers spread to steady.

Sloane looked at her watch.

"Twenty-one twenty-four," Sloane said for the device. "North Harbor Women's Shelter lobby. This is Detective Sloane Ibarra. We are at the location agreed. Elena, will you state your consent to wear an audio recorder for a planned contact?"

Elena swallowed. Her mouth was dry. She did not clear her throat.

"Yes," she said.

"Say your name as used here," Sloane said.

"Elena Cruz," she said.

"And you understand this recording captures your words and his words," Sloane said, "for evidence."

"Yes."

"Audio only. No cameras." Sloane kept her tone even. "You set the place, time, and entry controls. You can end the recording by saying the word End. Say yes if that's accurate."

"Yes."

"All right." Sloane clicked something small. The sound was a clean tick. "Placement."

Elena lifted the edge of her dark blouse at the collar enough to let Sloane slide the recorder's clip against the fabric under the fold. Sloane's fingers were quick and steady. She stepped back a half step and looked at Elena's throat, then at the edge of the blouse and the tiny dot where the microphone sat.

"Say one line," Sloane said.

Elena kept her eyes on the door and said, "North Harbor lobby. Consent on."

"Level is clean," Sloane said, checking her device. "No adjustment." She nodded once at Elena's hands. "You're set."

Elena lowered her blouse edge and put her fingers back on the desk.

The room sounded the way it did when the TV was off and the fixtures were working. A low line of buzz from the lights. A faint rattle from the heater. No voices. The desk phones were lined up with their cords straight. The power strip showed three green dots. The dimmer tape said Do not adjust. Maintenance. The end chair sat exactly where she had nudged it earlier, keeping the path to the inner door clear by two inches.

"Officers in place," Sloane said without turning. The two in the hall didn't answer with words. Something shifted once in the corridor. Then

nothing.

Rhys showed at the threshold as he had said he would. He stayed in the line of the doorway, just inside the inner hall, not in the lobby proper. Dark jacket. Jaw rough. Hands low and open. He kept his eyes level with hers even from where he stood.

"You want me closer?" he asked.

"No," she said.

He gave the smallest nod and stayed where he was. He looked tired. No, worse than tired. His jaw muscles were tight. His mouth was a thin line. He didn't cross the line.

Elena checked the door chain with her eyes. She had set it before they opened and kept it ready to slide aside with one hand. She would not move the desk or the chair. She would not change anything she had marked with arrows on the photo.

"If he touches you, we move on my call or yours," Sloane said from her right.

"My code is Now," Elena said.

"I will hear it," Sloane said.

Elena breathed in for four and out for four, not because counting fixed anything but because it gave her body something to do that wasn't shaking. She could feel the pressed spot of wood under her fingers. She could feel where the varnish had worn down to a rougher grain.

The wire under her collar was small enough to ignore until her attention caught on it; then it pressed at her collarbone. She didn't touch it.

"Positions set," Sloane said, not loud. Her eyes moved to the door and back.

Elena nodded once and kept her face toward the outer door. Her hands didn't move.

Her small phone buzzed once in her pocket. Unknown number: Parking. She didn't answer. She looked at the door.

The buzzer sounded. One short press. Then nothing.

She did not stand. She didn't need to stand to control this door. She kept one hand on the desk and reached for the intercom with the other.

"North Harbor," she said.

A male voice came through the small speaker, even and low.

"Anna," he said.

Her jaw clicked once. She held it and then let it go. Her knuckles went white against the wood.

"Hands up where I can see them," she said into the intercom.

Through the narrow window slit she saw two hands lift, palms facing her. No bag. No box. No paper. She took two breaths she could count. She kept the chain on and opened to a narrow gap. She unlocked the deadbolt and pulled the door back the inch, then two inches, the way she had practiced without thinking. She kept her body out of the line. She looked at his hands and then his face and then back at his hands.

"No gifts," she said.

He smiled. A practiced smile. Fitness jacket. Clean-shaven. Hair easy. He wore a color that meant nothing. It would be nothing in a crowd.

"You look good," he said. "Better this way." He lifted his hands a fraction higher. "May I?"

She slid the chain free, opened to the stop, kept her body out of the gap.

She opened the door the rest of the way without stepping aside more than she had to. He matched her distance. He did not try to come in fast. He moved under the bright lights at an unhurried pace. He stopped where the tile changed to the rug in front of the desk and smiled again.

"Anna," he said with more air in his voice this time, pleased.

"No," she said.

He tipped his head and paused.

"Elena, then," he said.

He looked around. The bright lights. The taped dimmer. The phones straight in their line. He took it all in. He kept his hands up and then lowered them slowly.

"It's clean in here," he said. "I like it." He looked back at her. "You called me."

She had set that up. That was her choice.

"You said before the weekend," she said, her voice flat.

"I did," he said.

She nodded toward the chair she had moved last. The one that kept her path to the inner door clean.

"Sit," she said.

He didn't sit right away, studying her face, eyes moving from eyes to mouth, then back. After deciding he could turn the act of sitting into something he allowed, he sat. He sat with his hands open on his thighs.

"You punished me for a long time," he said. "That's not you."

"Who put a box in my P.O. box," she said.

He smiled, small, no teeth.

"You got it."

"What did you send."

"You know what I sent," he said, and his tone softened on the last word.

"Say it," she said.

He looked at her eyes, then at her mouth, then at her shoulder where the blouse edge sat smooth. He liked to take his time. He always had.

"A gardenia," he said. "Pressed. Pinned. Ours."

She kept her jaw steady. She did not look down. She didn't look at the space where the recorder sat under her collar.

"And you put the note on my car," she said.

He tilted his head the other way. That pleased look again.

"You keep it neat, Elena," he said. "No gum wrappers. I like that about you. I like that you handled it by the corners. You always know where to put your hands."

"Who called the shelter line," she said.

"Which one," he said, and he almost laughed.

"The one with no words," she said.

He made a small sound in his throat.

"I asked for your attention. You were busy."

"Who called in the car on Pine," she said.

He sat up a fraction. He liked this part.

"You let them hold the corner for you," he said. "That's not fair. You know how that goes. One photo and they're on you. Say the word asleep and they jump. It was easy."

"You did it," she said.

"I did," he said.

"Why," she said.

"Because you're mine," he said. He kept his voice even. "Because I wanted you back in the way that doesn't blur anything. We do better when it's just us. Keep it clean. You know this." He touched his own chest with two fingers. "I told you that the night we started over."

Her palms pressed into the desk. Her fingers steadied. The wood didn't move.

"Which night," she said.

He blinked.

"You were loud that night," he said. "You were cruel. You kept telling me no, treating me as nothing. You went for the door. You put your hand on me to shove me. You don't remember the way you looked at me?" He shook his head, slow.

"I remember," she said.

"I lost my temper," he said.

"When. Month. Where," she said.

"March," he said. "Your apartment."

"I taught you. I always teach you. You knew better after." He looked at her left arm, gaze fixed on the sleeve.

"What did you do after," she said.

"I put the card where you would see it," he said. "Pressed it myself so it would stay nice. I pinned it right through, that little black bead. I said what I had to say." He leaned forward, elbows to his thighs, hands hanging between his knees.

"What did you say," she said.

"We're starting over. Clean." He looked at her again. "You kept it then. Don't pretend you didn't."

She didn't move. He was watching for a flinch, and she wasn't going to give it to him. Her jaw locked. She kept every verb in the present.

"How long have you been here," she said.

"How many nights," she said.

"Long enough to see when you went from the front to the back," he said. "Long enough to know your buddies are all the way by the door now. You see everything. I see everything you see." He kept his eyes on her while he said it.

"How did you put the box in my box," she said.

He smiled at that and leaned back in the chair, posture loose.

"You almost got me there," he said. "Doesn't matter." He gestured with his fingers, a small dismissive flick.

"You sent the gardenia to my P.O. box," she said.

"I did," he said, soft and pleased again.

"Why a gardenia," she said.

"Because it's ours," he said. "Because you understand what it means. Because it is clean. White. You're not sorry for that one. Don't punish me by pretending you are."

He looked down at his own hands and lifted his right hand, reaching toward the desk, slow, fingers open. He didn't go for her face; instead, his hand went for her forearm where the fabric lay smooth, and his eyes stayed there.

"I miss that mark," he said. His voice changed on the word miss.

"Now," she said, steady.

Michael's hand stopped. Air filled the space between his fingers and her sleeve. He kept his hand there, waiting for her to close the gap.

Something moved in the hall, fast. A sleeve, a hand, a shoulder. One officer took his right wrist, not harsh, not slow. Another came from the left, elbow control, knee steady against the chair leg so it didn't kick back. Sloane's shoulder came into Elena's line only as much as it had to.

"Hands behind," one said in a voice that didn't rise.

Michael turned his head fast toward the voice and then toward Elena. Surprise first, then anger. He made a sound. It wasn't a word. He didn't go for his belt or his pocket; he saw the hands and understood the grip. He dropped his weight for half a second; the grip held. The cuffs went on with a single click and then another click. Not loud.

"We were talking," he said. "She invited me." He looked back at Elena, searching for a signal that this was a mistake.

"You said you 'lost your temper,'" Sloane said, close enough that her plain band caught the overhead light. "You said you 'taught her.' You said you put a gardenia on a card the same night and told her you were starting over clean." She didn't raise her voice. "You said you watched her stairs and called in a car, and you called it easy. You said you sent the gardenia to her P.O. box. You're under arrest."

"This is a misunderstanding," he said quickly, trying to turn his shoulder even with the cuffs on. He looked at Elena again, not at Sloane. "Tell them."

Elena kept her hands on the desk. She didn't look away from his face. She didn't speak.

Rhys stayed where he was, a step inside the hall, visible to her, not moving. He didn't do anything with his hands. He didn't need to. He stayed where she had told him to stay.

Sloane read it to him there. The rights. Each line in the same even tone.

"You have the right to remain silent."

He tried to cut in. She did not pause.

"Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law."

His jaw moved. She kept going.

"You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you."

"I want to fix this," he said, looking at Elena again, unblinking. "We can talk after they finish their little thing. You know how they are."

"Do you understand your rights as I've read them to you?" Sloane asked.

He didn't answer. He was still looking at Elena. He smiled again, smaller. His focus stayed on Elena.

"Do you understand your rights?" Sloane asked again.

He cut his eyes toward her and let the smile go.

"I understand," he said.

"Good," Sloane said.

Sloane looked to Elena and gave a small nod. Elena straightened, slow, no rush. Rhys stayed at the threshold.

They stood him up. There was no pulling. One hand stayed at the elbow and one at the cuffs. He didn't drag his heels. He moved because two bodies moved him and there was nothing to push against that would give. He went toward the door he had walked in.

He looked at Elena one more time at the edge of the rug. She was still behind the desk. Hands on the wood. Her body held where she had chosen to hold it.

"Don't flinch," he said, almost a whisper, the last instruction he had left, delivered from memory.

She didn't move.

The outer door clicked when the latch caught. The lights didn't change. The recorder sat where it sat under her collar. It picked up air and nothing else. From the hall came a quiet, "We're clear." No one spoke for a long breath. The heaters rattled once and went quiet again.

Rhys stayed at the threshold a moment longer. She looked over at him. He didn't step in. He didn't raise his hands. She nodded once. He

nodded back. He moved away from the line and out of her sight.

Sloane stood a foot to Elena's right and looked at the desk phones, the power strip, the tape on the dimmer. She noted the details and fixed them in memory.

"You did that," Sloane said, still looking at the desk. The words weren't praise. They were a fact.

Elena's hands were numb and then they weren't. Blood came back into them with a slow ache. She didn't pull them back yet. She stayed exactly where she was and let the light from above make the small bone at the base of her thumb stand out.

"We'll end the recording after we clear the door," Sloane said.

Elena nodded once. She let out a breath that didn't sound like anything. It was just air leaving her body the way it had to.

"End will be on your voice," Sloane said.

"End," Elena said. She felt her mouth shape the word and then close.

Sloane waited. She didn't reach for Elena's collar. Not yet. The wire sat where it sat. The room stayed the same.

"We'll bag it behind the desk," Sloane said.

Elena lifted her hands off the wood for the first time since she had put them there. She sat. She set them in her lap and looked at the pass-through latch. It was still engaged. The note on the dimmer still held. The chair still sat where she had nudged it to keep the path to the inner door clear. The path was clear.

"You want someone else in before we clear out," Sloane asked, not as a suggestion, not as a need. As an option.

"No," Elena said.

"All right," Sloane said. She took one step closer and reached for the edge of Elena's blouse the same way she had earlier, careful, steady.

The recorder came free with a soft sliding sound. Sloane held it pinched in two fingers and brought the evidence bag up with her other hand. The bag's seal made a soft, final sound when she pressed it down.

Elena watched her hands. They were steady. Sloane's nails were cut short. Her ring was plain. Elena thought for one small second about what the word clean meant when it was not someone's rule. When it was a thing you did. You wiped a desk. You checked a latch. You made a plan that kept a person from touching you in a room you had made safe.

She didn't move. She watched the latch. The lights stayed up. The lobby stayed bright. The place she ran was the place she had used to end something. She stayed where she had put herself.

Sloane held the sealed bag for a second. Then she set it on the desk without letting it tip. She didn't say good job. She didn't offer water. She didn't try to fill the air. She followed the line Elena had set and let the room be what it was.

Elena looked at the door. It was closed.

She thought: Back step closed. Latch engaged. Path clear. Phones aligned. Lights up.

She let her hands go to the desk one more time, palms down, and found the same worn part of the wood.

"We'll formalize after," Sloane said.

"I know," Elena said.

The heaters rattled once. The buzz from the fixtures held at the same low pitch. Someone in the hall wrote something with a pen. That sound scratched once and then stopped.

They stayed there for a minute that felt like a minute. It didn't have to be anything else.

No one touched her. No one told her how to feel. The desk was where it had been. Her hands were where she had put them. The room she

worked in was the room she had used to trap him.

She watched the door. It stayed shut.

Chapter 16

The End

She pressed her palm flat on the desk edge and felt the shallow dip where the varnish had worn. She straightened the phones, traced the cords so they stayed uncrossed, and checked the three green dots on the power strip. Her jaw ached; she rolled her shoulders once. The maintenance sign was still taped at eye level in the back corridor, the tape corners pressed down smooth.

The lobby smelled like bleach gone dull. The lights hummed. Her watch read 14:08. She had slept less than two hours, but her hands were steady. She adjusted the end chair two inches toward the wall to keep the path to the inner door clear. Two inches mattered.

The office door clicked when it met the frame. Not closed all the way. Enough for a draft.

Her phone buzzed on the desk and lit with an unmarked number she knew.

She stepped into the office and nudged the door until it touched. Not shut. The click was enough to block sound.

"Ibarra," Sloane said.

Elena didn't sit. She stayed at the desk and set her hand on the top drawer so it wouldn't shake. "Here."

"Just out of court," Sloane said. Her voice was steady. Paper rustled once on the other end. "Bail denied."

Elena kept still. Her face warmed, then cooled in the draft. "On what grounds."

"Risk to the complainant. Evidence of access. Recorded admissions to past violence and recent surveillance." She didn't add anything. "Judge cited that he described calling in the ghost car and watched your stairs. Audio was clean."

Elena exhaled once, small. She looked at the wall where the house rules hung in the frame. No overnight visitors. No weapons. Quiet hours at ten. She pressed her thumb into the edge of the desk until it hurt and let it go.

"Transport?" she asked.

"Holding. He'll be moved later. A no-contact order is attached to the case file." Sloane's tone didn't change. "We'll push that to serve as part of the conditions either way."

"All right," Elena said. Her mouth was dry. She didn't reach for water.

"We'll need to tighten the statement order," Sloane said. "You said the resident might be willing." She didn't say Jenna's name.

"I'll ask," Elena said.

"Consent, controlled space. Lobby only."

"Yes."

Sloane paused. A breath moved. "You did what you said you'd do."

Elena looked down at her fingers. They were flat and pale where they pressed the drawer. "I know."

"Call me when she's ready," Sloane said.

"I will," Elena said.

The line went quiet. She stood in place and counted four breaths in, four out, then opened the office door and stepped back into the lobby.

Marla looked up from the desk binder. There was a soft line between her eyebrows today. The cardigan had a pilld place at the cuff where she held the inner key looped around two fingers. The power strip dots were

green in the corner of Elena's eye. The dimmer tape held.

"We're steady," Marla said, low.

Elena nodded. "Thank you for last night."

Marla's mouth moved, almost a smile. "Flexing people and rides is the job."

"I know," Elena said. She kept her voice even. "Thank you."

"You want tea?" Marla asked, already half up.

"No," Elena said. She looked at the door log. She closed the cover. "I'm going to talk to Jenna."

Marla gave a small nod and settled. The inner key stayed in her hand.

Elena walked the back corridor. The lamp near Room Twelve hummed high. She touched the switch and waited. It dropped to a duller hum. The vent rattled once and went quiet.

Jenna sat in the end chair where Elena had started sitting her when the lobby was too much. Feet under, hood up, blanket over her thighs. Her hands were on the fabric, fingers spread to keep from clenching. Her jaw looked less swollen. The skin along her wrist was more yellow today. The purple had faded at the edges.

Elena stopped where Jenna could see her before she spoke. "You want here or the office."

"Here," Jenna said. Her voice was soft. She didn't look at the window. She was getting used to lights up.

Elena stayed standing so Jenna didn't have to move. "Court said he stays in."

Jenna's mouth opened and closed once. She nodded, quick; her throat worked once.

"I want your consent to say this part," Elena said. "You can say no."

Jenna watched Elena's hands more than her face. Elena kept them still on the back of the chair that wasn't in use.

"A detective may ask to speak to you," Elena said. "In the lobby. Lights up. In sight of the desk. You can say as little as you want. You can stop at any point. No one walks you anywhere after without you saying yes. It can happen today or not."

Jenna pulled the blanket tighter over her knees and nodded. She pressed her thumb against the woven edge of the knit and rubbed it back and forth. "You'll be there."

"Yes," Elena said.

Jenna nodded again. She took a breath that hitched halfway and then finished. "Okay."

Elena let the breath she'd been holding go out slow. "If the phone rings and it's her, I'll tell you. You can say not today."

Jenna's eyes watered, but no tears fell. She blinked it back. She looked at the blanket. "Forty-eight," she said. The word was small.

She remembered the night: Jenna at the door with the bag, saying forty-eight. "You made it through," Elena said.

Jenna's mouth shook once and settled. "I did."

"Okay," Elena said.

She stood a second longer until Jenna's shoulders dropped a fraction. Then she moved back to the desk.

The small phone buzzed. It was in her inner pocket. She didn't pull it out right away. She took another step, then took it.

On my way to review. They're weighing the off-book against the arrest. No decision.

G.

She read it once, kept her thumb on the side of the phone, not the screen, and didn't type. Then she set the phone back in her pocket and rolled her shoulders once. The muscles in her neck eased.

She could go stand in the back corridor and press her hand into the wall until the pressure in her chest moved somewhere else. She didn't. Instead, she took the door log and slid it to the left of the blotter so the person on post had to shift to sign. She wrote Switch on the hour. No one answers twice and underlined the last word.

A woman in flannel pants paused near the desk and ran a hand over her eyes. "Do we have to keep it so bright," she asked, not sour, not sweet, just tired.

"Earplugs are on the left," Elena said. She kept her voice level. "Tonight is quieter."

The woman nodded and moved to the basket. She took one packet and put it in a hoodie pocket and went to the lounge. The couch in there still sat two inches from the frame so the door didn't catch.

Elena's shoulders dropped another fraction. She looked at Marla and didn't say the thing that sat there. You held that with me. You held it without being told.

The phone on the desk rang. The admin line. Marla lifted it and said, "North Harbor," with her usual even tone. She listened for a second and said, "We don't talk about residents," and then, "No tours during alert," and hung up. She wrote the time in the log without adding a name and slid the cover closed.

Elena stood beside her and pressed the corner of the paper down. It had curled up where the air from the vent hit it. "I'm going to the office to make a call."

"I'll take the door," Marla said.

In the office, Elena stood at the desk and called the number Sloane had used earlier. It went to a ring and then picked up.

"Ibarra."

"She said yes," Elena said. "Lobby. Lights up. Short."

"I can be there at sixteen-thirty," Sloane said.

"Back step only for residents," Elena said. "Single entry. You use the front. We keep the front controlled."

"Copy," Sloane said. "Front entry. Controlled."

Elena nodded even though Sloane couldn't see it. "No radios until you move."

"Understood," Sloane said. "Any change with your block?"

Elena looked down at the desk and the house rules behind glass. "No."

They ended. Elena went back out and told Marla, "Visitor in an hour. Back step only for residents until then."

"Always," Marla said.

Jenna sat where she'd been. Elena walked over and gave her a paper cup with a quarter of water in it because too much at once would make her stomach tight. "Small then water," Elena said softly.

Jenna nodded and took the cup.

An hour passed. Tiana came for the shift switch with the inner key looped around her finger. Elena said, "Two beats," and Tiana said, "Two beats," under her breath and did them at the door for a courier who'd come too early and then left when told Back step only.

At sixteen-thirty, a shadow crossed the inner hall door line and stopped. Plain jacket. Hair tight. No radio. No other bodies visible. Sloane kept her hands low and open.

"Detective," Elena said. She stood behind the desk with a hand on the wood.

Sloane nodded. "We can do this fast." She kept her gaze on Elena's face, then flicked to the end chair. "Consent?"

Elena looked to Jenna. Jenna's hand tightened on the blanket edge. She nodded and said, "Okay."

Elena repeated for the record. "Resident consents to a brief lobby interview."

Sloane looked to Jenna. "You can stop whenever you want."

Jenna nodded again. She didn't look at Sloane; she looked at Elena and then down at her hands. The questions were simple. What he said when he said Be good for me. Where he put his hands. If he wore the ring then. If she had told anyone right after. Jenna said, "No," and "My jaw," and "He said it when he wanted me to agree." Her voice shook once and held. Sloane did not push past any no.

When Jenna said, "I'm done," Sloane put her pen down. "That's enough," she said, flat. She stepped back to the hall line. "Thank you."

Jenna leaned back into the chair and put her feet further under the seat like Elena had taught her. Elena said, "One knock then two if you want the office," and Jenna shook her head. "I'll sit."

Sloane didn't linger. She gave Elena a small nod that meant I heard enough and went out the front as instructed.

Chairs stopped moving as voices dropped; the TV stayed low; a page turned. The back corridor light hummed and then dropped when someone touched the switch. Elena kept to the desk. She moved the phones half an inch so the cords stayed straight. It mattered to her to keep them straight.

Her small phone buzzed again in her pocket; she took it out and unlocked it with her thumb.

Under review. They're looking at the watch, the complaint, the arrest, all of it. I don't know.

G.

Elena typed: Copy, erased it, then wrote:

Text S to keep radios off inside.

She sent it and put the phone back. She kept her hands on the desk so she wouldn't text again.

A woman in a sweater with threads pulled at the sleeve came to the desk with a question about the laundry cart. Elena answered with the cart with the good wheel and said, "Take a buddy," and the woman rolled the cart out with a small nod.

At close, she left the lobby clean, the desk stocked, the calls log closed. Elena told Marla, "Ten minutes away. Call and I'm on my way," and meant it. Marla hooked the inner key on the clip and pressed it with a finger to make sure it seated.

Elena left by the alley, angled across the lot, looked at the mouth of the street and the back step, and saw no one who didn't fit. She got in her car and drove the main road. Rain came down steady, loud on the windshield. Tires hissed. A barge horn sounded once, low and far. The wipers worked a steady path across the glass. Her grip on the wheel stayed tight.

At home, she parked one block over and watched her stairwell and the laundromat door. No one stood at her awning, and no car idled at the corner. After a minute, then another, she took the route she had worked out: right side of the stairs, the side with the better grip.

The hall smelled like soap and hot lint. A dryer thumped below every few seconds. She opened her door and stepped in fast. She set the deadbolt. The chain. She checked the table-side and bathroom window latches, set the door bar into its brackets, and pressed it down until there was no give. She pressed her palm to it and kept it there until the skin warmed the metal.

The table was bare except for the two phones lined up by the edge and the older backup farther back and off. The corner of the paper bag she had used the night of the note stuck out from the second chair. The jacket was on the chair back. The shoes were under the table, toes toward the door.

She opened the second chair's seat and took out the white box. The tape sat smoothed where she had pressed it back down with a clean envelope the day it came. The envelope lay under it.

She took a quart zipper bag from the drawer, slid the box in, sealed the bag, and set it in the middle of the table.

Her small phone was face down next to the primary; she picked it up, opened the thread saved as Sloane, and typed:

One item for evidence. White box with pressed flower. Sealed. Pass-through tomorrow 09:01. Slot only.

A bubble appeared and then a line:

Copy.

Elena set the phone down and aligned it with the primary by the edge of the table. She stood a moment with her hands on the back of the chair and breathed in for four and out for four.

She slid the bag to the center and left it there.

The laundromat gate rattled below and went still. She walked to the sink without turning on the light, turned the tap, and drank from a cup. The water had the faint metal taste it had at this hour. She set the cup down on the counter where she could find it if she woke later and needed it.

She looked at the stove clock. 21:12. Rain hit the awning in light, regular beats and struck the metal stair rail. Nothing was out of place. The bar was down. The chain was set. The latches were in. The jacket was on the chair. The shoes were lined under the table. The phones were aligned, and the older backup was off.

She watched the door for one more breath, then let her shoulders drop.

She sat at the table with the small phone in her hand and opened a blank message. The cursor blinked in the white field. She stared at it until the field blurred and then cleared.

Are you okay, she typed.

She almost erased it. She didn't. She hit send.

The reply came fast. No. You?

She looked at the words. They were simple. Honest in a way people didn't allow themselves to be when they were supposed to be fine. Her thumb hovered.

Come over, she typed.

She watched the words sit there. She sent them.

On my way, came back. No questions. No meaning layered on top. No are you sure. No where will I park. Only those lines on the screen.

She set the phone down without lining it with the primary this time. She didn't touch anything else: no stacking the mail, no picking a stray thread off the jacket, no smoothing the couch cushion. She left the cup on the counter, stayed dressed, and sat on the floor with her back to the couch the way she did on nights she couldn't settle. She tucked her feet under her and set her hands on her thighs. She breathed.

The hallway light beyond her door changed once when someone walked past and then went back to the usual. The dryer below thumped every few seconds. The rain hit the metal out front at a steady pace.

Her small phone buzzed with a single word:

Here.

Two knuckles hit the door. The same knock. Controlled. Two beats. Not loud. Not soft. The routine they used and kept.

She stood and moved to the door. She kept her body out of the line when she lifted the chain and opened the door two inches. The landing smelled like wet wool. He kept his weight off the hinge side and his hands low and open where she could see them.

"You can come in," she said, and stepped back.

He didn't move fast. He never did when she set these rules and kept them. He walked in, stopped just inside, and waited for her to close and lock. She set the deadbolt, then the chain, then dropped the bar again and pressed it with her palm until it seated. She checked the table-side and bathroom window latches because that was the order and orders steadied her.

He stood by the couch with his jacket still on. He didn't take it off. He didn't look at the kitchen or the bedroom or the coat hooks. He looked at the door and then at her face and then at her hands.

"You want the couch," she said. Not a question. He could say no if he wanted the chair.

"Here is good," he said. He sat on the couch, not the middle, not the corner, leaving enough space that she could sit on the floor and lean back without touching him.

She sat and leaned her shoulder blades against the cushion. The fabric pressed through her blouse. Her hair tugged at her scalp where the bun sat tight; she almost loosened it and decided not to. The tightness was a familiar ache.

He put his elbow on his knee and set one hand over the other, fingers flat. He angled his body toward the door. He sat on the couch and faced the door.

"Water?" he asked.

"Cup on the counter," she said. She didn't move. He didn't either. The offer more than the act.

They didn't talk past that. There was too much to say. There would be time to say it. Or there wouldn't. Not tonight.

They coexisted in the small room. The only sound was the dryer thump below and the rain hitting the metal, striking the stair rail and the awning in a steady pattern. It stayed steady outside the room.

Her shoulders were high at first. Her jaw was tight where it always got tight when she had done what she had done and the room was quiet afterward. She counted one breath, then another, and didn't try to name what she was doing.

He kept his eyes on the door and then on her hands and then back to the door. Not a jitter, not a scan.

She took a breath that went in all the way without catching and let her back settle more fully into the cushion. It was small but noticeable.

"I'm here," he said, quiet.

She nodded. "I know."

Minutes passed. She didn't check the clock. The ache in her jaw eased. The ache behind her eyes that came when she hadn't slept eased. The place in her chest that had sat high for weeks came down a little.

She didn't ask him about the review. She would hear the word when it came through a phone or at a door. Not now.

He didn't ask her what she had felt when Sloane said bail denied. Her breathing stayed even.

Her head tipped to the side against the cushion, not far. She let it be heavy there. Her breath stayed even. She listened as rain hit and ran off. The dryer below cut off and the next set of thumps took over as someone started another load. All of it ordinary. She wanted the room to stay ordinary. Her throat was dry.

She closed her eyes. Her hands stayed where they were, flat on her thighs, fingers relaxed. She didn't start when a car moved on Pine outside and hissed by. She didn't open her eyes when a door on the floor above opened and closed. She didn't jolt when someone coughed in the hall.

He kept his body turned toward the door. He kept his eyes open and watched the door bar and the deadbolt and the chain.

Her breath lengthened. That was the first sign. The second sign was the small sound that left her throat when a muscle in her shoulder let go. The third was the lack of movement when the dryer below hit a bad patch in its spin. She had slept in pieces for years. She slept without stirring. Her breathing was slow and even. She hadn't slept like this since the year she left.

He didn't move. Her back sank into the cushion; he stayed awake.

Rain kept hitting metal and glass at the same pace. Around them, familiar sounds continued: the upstairs neighbor flushed; someone's TV murmured then went off; the laundromat gate below rattled, then stilled.

Her mouth parted a little. Her breath was slow. Her hands stayed soft.

He looked at her and then at the door again and then down at his own hands. He glanced at the phone screen and looked away.

She slept.

He stayed awake and watched the door.

The rain on the awning stayed steady. Their breathing did too.

Chapter 17

The Breath

She woke just enough to shift her cheek against the cushion and let it settle again. The fabric was rough under her skin in a way that helped. Her mouth was dry. She didn't open her eyes.

The room was the same as when she had gone under. The door bar, the deadbolt, the chain. His jacket on his shoulders. His hands stacked on his knees. He sat on the couch, angled toward the door, not leaning back. Not slumped. Still.

Rain hit the metal over the stairs off and on. Tires hissed on Pine. A dryer down below thumped through a last spin, then stopped. A click, then quiet. From somewhere in the building a pipe knocked once, the sound dull and far.

She let herself listen and did not move. He didn't either.

Her breath went in and out in the way it almost never did anymore when she wasn't counting. Even. Not the kind that stays high and fast. She let her jaw loosen and waited for the catch that always came. It didn't come. Her back eased further into the cushion, the line of the couch base steady under her shoulder blades, a known line she could lean into.

He looked at the door one time. His eyes went from the bar to the chain and back to the deadbolt. He didn't get up. His hands stayed where they were. He didn't adjust the light. He didn't reach for her.

Eyes closed, she let her body read his posture. There was nothing to answer. He was here because she had said come, and he was staying because she had said stay with nothing more than the way she had sat down and leaned back. She didn't have to make a sound to keep it that

way.

The hallway outside shifted once with a step and a door that didn't close clean at first and then did. He didn't react. He kept his weight forward, elbows on his thighs, hands together. He sat forward between her and the door and left space for her to pass if she needed to.

She thought: Don't get up. He didn't.

Her ribs had been tight all week. She noticed the slack now. Not all the way. Enough. Her fingers lay open on her thighs. She didn't curl them into her palms. She didn't press them into her skin to find the edge of the pain there. She let them be.

At the kitchen sink, the drip started. It hadn't been there earlier. Or she hadn't noticed it. A single drop every few seconds. It landed and then paused and then landed again. She counted to seven without deciding to count and stopped when it kept going exactly the same way. That was a problem she could have later. Not a crisis. A washer. A gasket. A wrench from the drawer.

Her scalp ached where the bun was tight. She didn't lift her hands to fix it. She kept still and breathed. If she moved now, the night would be over. Not because anything would happen. Because she would make it happen.

When she opened her eyes, nothing had changed. The jacket. The hands. His face toward the door. His chest moved under the fabric. He didn't look at her first. He kept his focus on the door. He stayed with the door. She had asked him for that without words.

She closed her eyes again.

A car rolled past and slowed at the corner. Brakes hissed. It went on. Rain hit the rail, light and steady and then not. The building's heat clicked and a thin run of warm air moved along the floor and reached the bare skin at her ankles where her pants had ridden up while she slept. She didn't shiver. Her jaw didn't clench to hold against it. She let the

warmth on her ankles stay and didn't chase it.

The last time she had fallen asleep in a room without watching the door had been years ago. Even then she had told herself it would be fine. By morning it wasn't. Tonight wasn't a trick. It was not safe. It was safer than last night. Those were different things, and she understood the price of both.

His phone vibrated once. A single short buzz. Not the code. Not anything they used. She drifted toward waking and saw the line of light from the lock screen at the edge of his palm. She saw SLOANE in thin letters. He didn't open it. He pressed the side button and the screen went dark. He stayed still. He kept his eyes where they had been. He wasn't going to read about court or complaints or the watch while she was here breathing.

Her mouth pulled at the corner and then smoothed. She let herself go down again.

The drip hit the sink at a steady interval. The sound was soft and didn't interrupt her rest. She could fix it later with a rag under the faucet until she could do it right.

The heat cycle ended and the small fan sound stopped. The air stayed warm. Her toes bent inside her socks and then relaxed. She had told him no declarations. He had given her nothing but what she'd asked for. He had not asked her to say she believed in anything. He had not told her that tonight meant something more than what it was. He didn't move toward her. If he did, she wouldn't be here. He knew it. He stayed where she could see him and where she didn't have to see him to know he was there.

Her breath lengthened. She found herself matching the drip without trying to match it and then stopped and let her breathing set its own pace. She didn't need a monitor. She needed the bar in the door and a person who took up space the way she asked him to take it up and not more.

Her body did the rest.

When she surfaced again, there was a faint pull of warm, sweet air from below: clean shirts, cotton, cheap detergent. Someone had started a load early. Warm air from below carried the clean-laundry smell. It stayed in the room. Her throat tightened for a second. She held still until it eased. She stayed where she was and breathed.

She slid her right hand until it met the wooden line at the base of the couch and let her fingers curl there. Not seeking. Not bracing. There. Her wrist wasn't tight. Her palm stayed soft. She didn't need to hold anything.

He moved just enough to roll weight from one leg to the other. It was careful. He didn't make the couch shift. He didn't let the cushion bounce her spine. His face looked different when she opened her eyes a slit: less drawn, the lines around his mouth not as hard. He wasn't smiling. He didn't do that here. His shoulders were lower by a fraction. He saw her eyes and then looked at the window where the glass showed more gray than black. He didn't say morning. He didn't say her name. He looked back to the door.

"Do you want water," he said, quiet.

"The cup's on the counter," she said without opening her eyes. It was the answer from last night. He didn't move. That was the point. The offer mattered. The water would be there later.

He set his hands back the same way. Stack, flat, steady. The habit of someone trying not to twitch.

Her head tipped to the side again until the bun pulled. She left it. She would take it down when he left, not before. She still needed the tightness to hold the rest together. She could loosen one thing at a time. Hair later. Door after that. She had time now to choose the order.

Her phone and the small phone were on the table in her line. Last night she had put the small one down crooked because she hadn't had the strength to make it straight. That would have eaten at her any other night. It hadn't mattered then. She kept her eyes half closed and looked at them now without moving her head. The edges were off by a finger's width. She

didn't fix them. The older backup sat farther back, dark. She didn't reach for it.

Another door on her floor opened. Soft steps passed. A key turned somewhere and a bolt seated. Those were the sounds she had trained herself to catch and weigh. She heard them and let them go.

She rolled one ankle until the tightness there eased. It didn't crack. It didn't need to. She didn't catalogue the exact place the stiffness sat. Not tonight.

The light at the window shifted from black to the first gray that wasn't a trick of the eye. She didn't look at the clock on the stove. She could tell from the way the building sounded and didn't sound.

"Coffee?" he asked, still low.

She breathed in and out. "Not yet."

"All right." He didn't get up.

She kept her eyes closed and pictured the check-in at nine-oh-one. Call only. No names. She pictured the time on the screen. She pictured the small click after she ended it. The picture didn't make her pulse pick up. It didn't drop either. The picture held and then faded. It would happen or it wouldn't. If it didn't, she would live another plan. Either way, the room right now was enough.

She let the picture fade. She went back to the wood under her fingers and his jacket in the corner of her eye.

"You should sleep," she said, the words barely formed.

He shook his head once. "I'm fine."

She didn't argue. He could count his own costs. It was his choice. He was making it with his eyes open.

Her chest rose and fell and then settled into a slower pattern than before. She didn't know when the slip into sleep happened. One breath was aware. The next wasn't. She went under and stayed there.

There were noises: tires in the wet, a low voice in the hall, a faucet somewhere turning on and off, the drip at her sink keeping its own count. They didn't break the surface.

He stayed.

When she woke again the window was gray and faint light drew a thin line on the table edge. The rain outside went light, then stopped, then started again. The building smelled like soap and warm air from below. Her jaw didn't ache the way it had last week. Her eyes weren't burning. She didn't know how long it had been. The clock on the stove could have told her. She didn't look.

She opened her eyes. He was there. The jacket was still on. He had not taken it off and hung it on the chair because he knew what that would mean to her: the sign of someone settling in like they lived there. He didn't live there. He was here. There was a difference.

She lifted her head an inch. He saw the movement and the way she had to swallow first. He didn't move toward her. He kept his hands to himself. He waited.

"Morning," he said finally.

"Morning," she said.

Her throat was dry. She swallowed once. She pushed her hand to the floor and sat up slow, giving her head a second to steady. The couch cushion gave under her shoulder and then came back. The room didn't tilt. She stayed where she was.

He angled his body away half an inch, making the space he always created when she was upright. It showed he saw her and wasn't going to crowd her.

"Sink still dripping," he said. "You want me to..."

"No," she said. "Later." The sound of it was tolerable in her mouth now that she'd heard it for an hour. It would be there when she wanted to fix it. It could wait.

He nodded once. "Okay."

She looked at the table. The small phone was crooked. The primary on the edge was straight. The older backup was dark and farther back. Her jacket hung over the chair back where she'd left it. Her shoes were under the table with the toes toward the door. The entryway dish by the door held her keys and two paperclips and the rubber band tucked so the end wouldn't catch. Everything was where it had been. She needed that.

"Do you need to go," she said, not with a push, not a test. An opening.

He breathed out through his nose. "I can take you to the block and sit two streets off until you're inside. Or I can go now and call in when you're done with the call." He didn't say precinct or review. He didn't say the word that mattered about his job. Those would come later if they came at all.

"No car at my curb," she said.

"I know."

"No waiting at the mouth of the alley."

"I know."

"No approach," she added, even though he had never approached when she said don't.

"I know," he said again. "You don't have to say it." He didn't sound hurt. He sounded practiced. Not bored.

She made herself look at him head-on for a second. He looked tired. No, worse than tired. But the tired was different today. Not sharp with something he was fighting alone. Worn. Honest.

"Coffee later," she said.

He nodded. "Okay."

She slid her palms over the top of her thighs to find her knees and then pushed herself the rest of the way upright. She stood. Her knees

didn't shake. That surprised her more than it should have. She stayed in place until the blood moved the way it needed to move.

She walked to the sink and turned the tap enough to change the drip for a second. It didn't stop. She lifted the cup she'd left on the counter and filled it a quarter. She drank with her eyes on the door bar. The water tasted like metal, same as last night. It was fine. She set the cup down where she had set it before and left it there.

She put her hand on the door bar where it crossed the door. She didn't lift it. She pressed. The bar didn't move. She pressed the chain. It held. She put her finger against the deadbolt and felt the edge of the metal. It was seated. She didn't look through the peephole. Pattern was safety until pattern became visibility. She didn't need a line in the window. She had a list.

"Do you need the bathroom," she asked without turning.

"I'm okay," he said. "You go first." The corner of his mouth moved; he didn't make the joke.

She washed her hands at the sink instead and didn't look at her face in the reflection of the dark window or the shine of the faucet. She dried them on the edge of a towel and came back to the living room.

He had not moved. He would not move until she told him what moving was allowed.

"You can take off the jacket," she said, hearing the contradiction even as she gave the permission. He didn't do it.

"I'm good," he said, staying in the posture he'd held all night.

Her mouth tightened and then eased. She swallowed past the pressure in her throat. She wasn't going to name it out loud. She didn't need a word for it.

Her phone on the table had no new banners. The small one stayed dark. She picked it up and looked at the thread with the single letter. 09:01. Call only. Copy. Their last exchange from last night stayed at the

top of the thread. She put the phone down and lined it with the primary, just this once, because she had time now to make the small thing straight.

“Bail,” she said.

“Denied,” he said. “Sloane said last night.”

“I know,” she said. The knowing didn’t match what she had thought it might. One option was gone; there were others.

“After the call,” he said, “I’ll get out of your way.”

She looked at him for a long second. “You already are.”

He nodded once. He didn’t flinch.

The building heat clicked on again and the radiator ticked once and then went quiet. The air stayed warm. She touched the edge of the couch on her way back to the floor and sat where she had been. She leaned her shoulder blades against the cushion again. The position fit her body now that she had been in it long enough. Her hand went back to the wood at the base. It found the same spot without looking. She didn’t sleep this time. She breathed and watched the door.

He watched it, too. Sometimes they both needed the same thing.

He turned his head a fraction and looked at the window. More light gathered at the glass; it showed more gray than black. He looked at the kitchen. He didn’t stand. He said, “Say when.”

She nodded. She would say when. Not yet.

The laundromat below started another load. Warm air from below carried it again. It stayed in the room. She swallowed past it. The tightness eased. It meant more people than them were staying alive this morning.

She glanced at his hands where they rested. Big hands, scar at one knuckle, dry skin at another split. She had seen them move fast with a door key and slow with a recorder clip. She had seen them held out from his sides when she told him to keep them in view. She had seen them not

touch her when they could have. Her jaw stayed loose. Her hand didn't brace. Her breath stayed even.

He looked at her and then away, back to the bar. His face had shifted again, a small change in the set of his jaw and his brows. Relief, she thought, and something stubborn behind it. Not a demand. He would keep doing this the way she needed it done even if it cost him. He had sat like this before and accepted what it took from him.

He stayed.

Rain on the railing turned to a lighter sound, not gone, not loud. A bus somewhere took a corner slow. Above them, a TV shut off. Down the hall, a phone rang once and stopped. The hallway stayed quiet.

She breathed and counted four and then didn't. She didn't need numbers to hold her in the chair. She had a room. She had a closed door. He kept his distance. He didn't reach for her.

It would be time to move soon. Stairs. Bar down. Keys. Car. Main road. Call at 09:01. It wasn't going to save anyone by itself. It wasn't supposed to. It was what came next.

She let her head rest back until the bun pulled again. She didn't adjust it. She kept her eyes on the door bar and breathed in and out.

The light at the window edged brighter. The rain outside eased to a thin mist that dotted the metal rail and left it damp. Her chest didn't jump at the sound of the downstairs door. The heat hummed low and steady. The sink kept dripping, regular.

He stayed.