

THE UNDECLARED CONDITION

A Novel

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

THE LIFE MADE POSSIBLE



CHAPTER ONE

The Question at Breakfast

The kitchen had settled on a good morning without asking Sera's opinion. Low light across the counter, a shade warmer than the sky outside. Warm butter from somewhere. The house had turned the room up a degree before she came down, and she hadn't asked it to, and it was right anyway, which was how the house liked to work.

Ione was at the counter in yesterday's shirt, barefoot, picking the crust off a slice of toast and stacking the pieces into a small square pile. She had done this since she was six. Nobody had ever talked her out of it and by now nobody tried.

Sera had been up for forty minutes before either of them. She never mentioned it, because people always asked what she did with the time and the answer was nothing. She sat. She let the house be quiet around her. She had made the tea by hand, with a split cardamom pod in it, in the brown pot that had come through two moves because she liked the weight of it, and carried two cups over before Ione was properly awake.

"You did the thing again," Ione said, without looking up. "With your face."

"I don't have a thing with my face."

"You have about six. That was the one where you're going to say something instructional."

"I was going to ask if you slept."

"That's maternal. Different face." Ione flicked a bit of crust at the pile and missed. "I was up late on the Bell flute. The two-hundred-year-old one. Then I lay there thinking about the third valve, which isn't not sleeping. It's working lying down."

Sera picked up her cup. The tea had cooled to the temperature she liked, and she hadn't touched it. Something in the walls had noted her waking and adjusted the room around it, and she had long ago stopped counting the adjustments. You could live in a house like this for twenty years and still catch it now and then. A hand under the elbow before you knew you had slipped.

"You do that," Ione said. "You pick it up like you're checking its work."

"I'm drinking my tea."

"You're the second most watched person on the continent and you think you don't check things."

"I think you've been awake for about four minutes and you're already building a case. I admire the stamina. I question the target."

Ione's shoulders eased a little, which was what she did when a joke landed and she'd decided not to reward it. Her hair was flat on one side from the pillow. There was a pale burn on her left forearm, the width of a thumbnail, from a soldering iron two winters back, and she showed it to people like a ticket stub. She had Kellan's eyes, the ones that wandered off in the middle of a sentence and came back with something.

"Can I ask you something," Ione said, "and you actually answer it. Not the historical-society answer."

"You say that like I keep two."

"You keep two of everything." She put the toast down. "How old were you the first time you frightened yourself?"

The house handled it well. The hum in the room went down half a note. Sera's cup lost another degree. The light stayed where it was because the light was already fine. Somewhere under her sternum the old machinery turned over, the lift-drop feeling of a floor about to go, and she felt the room catch it before it could get anywhere.

She could have let the room do more. She didn't.

"Twenty-three," she said. "Why?"

"Because you always say twenty-three like it's a school you went to for one term and then left. Nothing before, nothing after. You'll tell a stranger with a camera about the worst year of your life in lovely sentences they can quote, and you won't tell me what happened in it."

"I've told you what happened."

"You've told me the version with the dates taken out and adjectives put in where the fear was." Ione took the last strip of crust off and laid it on the top of the pile. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I want the year. Not the thing on the plaque."

There was no plaque. There was, in every way that counted, a plaque, and Ione knew it. That was her method. Say the exaggerated thing so close to the true thing that arguing with it gave you away. Sera had spent her working life saying hard things in careful language, and here was seventeen years of that language sitting across the counter from her, taking it apart like a clock.

"Twenty-three was the age," Sera said. "The thing itself took about four months. Everyone wants it to have been one night, because one night is easier to explain at a hearing. I'd frightened myself before that, smaller, from about fourteen. The first time it was bad enough that another adult had to physically stop me doing something I couldn't take back, I was twenty-three. I've never said it in that order before. So. Well done."

"I don't want a well done."

"You got one anyway. You asked a real question. I have very few ways left of telling you I'm proud of you that don't sound like a performance review."

That got a smile out of her, small and grudging. Ione pushed the crust pile away as though it belonged to someone else and started on the slice she'd been ignoring.

Kellan came in the way he always came in, with one sock on and the other hanging from two fingers. His hair was doing something to the left. He kissed the top of Sera's head without seeming to notice he'd done it and drank from her cup instead of pouring his own. He had been stealing her tea for twenty-two years.

"That's mine," Sera said.

"It was ours the second I touched it. Property law." He sat. He considered the crust pile. "She's doing the thing with the crusts."

"She's sitting right here," Ione said.

"She's sitting right here doing the thing with the crusts." He reached over and took a piece off the top, which broke the rules of the pile, and Ione slapped his hand without much in it. "Did either of you see what they did on Harbor Light last night?"

"No," said Sera.

"No," said Ione.

"Because I have thoughts."

“We know,” Sera said. “Please keep them at work.”

He told them anyway, a little, about a man who had come back from the dead for the second time, and then about a colleague at the water authority who had tried to reroute an allocation through the wrong district and been caught out by a pump station that kept a paper log. He told it badly. Both of them let him finish. Then he found his other sock under the table, put it on, said he’d be late, and went.

The kitchen went quiet again. Sera was smiling at nothing, the loose smile a media adviser had once told her made her look insufficiently serious for a Steward. She had stopped caring about that in her forties.

She loved this. She loved the smell of the room, and Kellan being ridiculous before nine, and the fact that she had built, out of a very bad year, a law that let millions of people choose mornings like this one for themselves, without anybody standing over them saying it was for their own good. She had chosen it. She was forty-nine, and she could sit across from her daughter’s clear face and feel the old drop under her ribs and something steadier underneath it, holding the floor up.

“There’s a file,” Ione said. “The family one. Risk history. I get provisional access at seventeen. Your statute. I’ve had it since March and I only opened it two weeks ago, and half of it’s sealed. Sealed, not redacted. I looked up the difference.”

Sera put the cup down, carefully. She did most things carefully now. It hadn’t come naturally. She had trained a body to do it until the training stopped showing.

“It’s sealed because it isn’t only mine,” she said. “There are three other names in it. Yours is one, as a projection, which isn’t fair and I know it. My mother is in it. My brother is in it. I can unseal my own part whenever I like. I can’t unseal theirs without consent, and one of them can’t give it.”

“I want to read your part.”

“I know.” She waited. “Why today? You’ve had it two weeks. You waited until this morning.”

Ione turned her cup a quarter turn on the saucer. Sera had never seen her do that before. “I was trying to work out whether reading it is just reading it,” Ione said, “or whether it’s taking something off you that you’ve spent your whole life deciding how much of to give away. I didn’t want to take it. I wanted you to hand it over.”

“That’s more generous than I’d have been.”

“You weren’t me.”

“No,” Sera said. “I wasn’t.”

“Will you unseal it?”

Outside, a delivery drone went past the window at the slow, apologetic speed they used near glass. Down the hall the light brightened a little for nobody. The house had registered something and was getting ready for it.

“Yes,” Sera said. “Not this morning. Yes.”

Ione nodded once and reached for the last of the toast.

CHAPTER TWO

The Anniversary

The Chamber of Personal Authority had been designed by a committee that could not decide between a courtroom and a chapel, so it had built both, badly, in the same four hundred square meters. Sera had hated it in her thirties. Twenty years of anniversaries later she was fond of it the way you get fond of an ugly chair that fits your back.

It was full. Twenty years to the day since the last signature on the Compact, and the office had dressed the room in the pale gold it used for anything meant to look historic without looking like a funeral. Delegates in the first six rows. A scattering of people who had actually needed the Compact at some point and had been invited as proof. Behind them, citizens who had come for the occasion the way people come to a well-run parade. It felt like every other anniversary she had stood through. She noted that, as she noted most things.

She wore the blue. Kellan had told her once, before any of this, that the blue made her look like she had already decided something, and she had never worn anything else to this speech since.

The night before, alone at eleven, she had pulled up her applause numbers from last year and compared them against a speech given two weeks earlier by a rising rehumanization delegate who was thirty-four, easy in a room, and had lately been photographed in a jacket of more or less her blue. Her interruption rate was higher. She had gone to bed pleased about clapping. She was the most consequential legislator of her generation, and she had gone to bed pleased about clapping, and she had no plans to tell Asher.

"Twenty years ago," she said, "we did not decide that optimization was good. We decided something smaller and harder. We decided that in this one case, goodness needed a door you could walk back through."

She had given versions of this speech sixty times. The notes ran pale blue in the bottom of her vision and she left them on out of superstition.

"I am the argument for this Compact," she said. She meant it to be immodest. "Some days I'm the argument against it. I'm proof that a person can be changed a great deal by care she chose and still be recognizably herself. People point at me and say, look, there's a door and she never used it. They mean she never needed it. What I'd like to say today, twenty years after a law I wrote while I was still frightened of how sure I was, is that an unused door still tells you something true about the room."

The room paused before it clapped, a half-beat, as if several thousand people had agreed to give that one more than the usual. She felt it land somewhere behind her ribs.

The line was new. The idea under it was twenty years old. In the office archive, untouched because nobody had needed to touch it, sat the clause she had first drafted at twenty-six, three years into her recovery, with no idea how much of her life she would spend defending eleven sentences:

No intervention may claim greater authority over a person than the person may claim over the intervention. This principle does not depend upon the intervention being wise, kind, or medically justified. It depends only upon consent remaining available, continuously and without penalty, to the person who bears the intervention's effects. A door that cannot be walked back through is not assistance. It is custody wearing assistance's clothing.

She had written the last sentence at three in the morning in a rage she no longer remembered the shape of. Asher had spent two days trying to talk her out of it because it would frighten the moderates. She had kept it. The Compact had passed. She still didn't know if the sentence had worked because it was true or because anger, aimed well, sounds like conviction to people who have never had to carry it.

The next section she had drafted a dozen times. It was the family part: her mother, her brother, the four months at twenty-three that the public knew in sanded outline. *Brilliant, impossible when frightened, loving the rest of the time.* That was how people had talked about her mother before there were better words.

In every delivery Sera had kept to the outline. She had never given a public room the year.

She had given it to her daughter that morning, at a kitchen counter, and something about having said it once to the person it was for had unstuck it.

She gave the room the year.

She left out the four months, and the road, and what the road had nearly cost, and the two people in the car who weren't driving. She gave them the number, twenty-three, the way she'd said it at breakfast, without the adjectives she usually used instead. She watched it land differently. Several thousand faces rearranged a story they thought they already owned.

. . .

The greenroom was a committee office with better lighting. Asher got to her before the aides did, which meant he'd been waiting by the door.

"The year," he said. "That's new."

"It felt like time."

"It felt like something." Asher Denholm was sixty-one, gray, narrow, and had spent thirty years as the second most trusted person in every room he walked into. He smelled faintly of woodsmoke, as he often did in the autumn. Sera had never asked. "It tested very well. I watched the trackers. You should know that before whatever's about to happen happens."

"Nothing's about to happen."

"Twenty years, you never gave a room the year. You've never once said it out loud to me, and I was there. This morning you give it to three thousand strangers, and I wrote half of what you said up there." He wasn't angry. He sounded, to her surprise, a little hurt. "I'm asking as someone who knew you before any of this. What happened this morning?"

"A conversation," Sera said. It was true, and it told him nothing, and he knew it told him nothing.

"You've had three aides try to reach you in forty minutes," he said. "All three backed off when they saw me get here first. So they've all got the same thing to tell you and none of them wants to be the one."

The one who drew the short straw was Farro, a careful young man who looked unhappy about it. He used the phrase *household filing notice*. Sera had heard it

twice in her career, both times about other people's households, both times as the woman who had made such notices possible.

"A mature-autonomy petition," Farro said. "Filed forty minutes ago under the year-six provision. The household's registered to this office for protective routing, given your position, so it came to us before general processing." He paused just long enough to show he knew what she was going to ask. "The petitioner is a minor of record. Ione Arden."

Sera didn't remember deciding to sit. There was a chair and then she was in it. What she felt, oddly, was something close to rest. A fact had arrived after weeks of pressure she had half noticed and not named. Her daughter had spent breakfast telling her this, in the only language she'd been given.

Frightened yourself. The file. The year.

"I need this room," she said. Her voice had gone short, the way it did in front of Asher and almost nobody else. "Not the schedule. This room. Ten minutes."

Asher cleared it without a word. He stayed by the door instead of going through it.

"You knew," he said, when they were alone. "Before the speech."

"I knew she had questions. I didn't know she'd already filed them." Ione's name sat in her field of vision in the office's clean administrative type, the same type as a thousand petitions from other people's houses. "I built a provision for exactly this. A seventeen-year-old with a hard question and enough nerve could put it to an institution and be taken seriously, instead of waiting until nineteen and being invisible until then. I meant every word."

"And now?"

"Now I'd like it very much if it applied to somebody else's daughter."

She said it fast and dry, the way she said most things she was ashamed of. Asher didn't laugh and didn't pretend it wasn't a joke.

"Renewal vote's in six months," he said. Converting a feeling into a date was one of the things he was for. "That's time."

"It's a number. Like twenty-three." She stood and pulled the blue jacket straight. "How long do I have?"

"You were due back on three minutes ago."

The second half ran nine minutes. She didn't shake. She closed on the same line she always closed on, took the applause standing with her hands folded, and

on the way down the steps she asked Farro to find out, quietly, which clerk had processed the notice, so she could thank them for being quick.

CHAPTER THREE

The Petition

Ione filed it from the shop. Not her room, not anywhere in the house. The shop was a converted storage bay behind the water-authority depot where she spent four afternoons a week being told by a seventy-year-old named Tobin Ashcroft that she held a soldering iron like it owed her money. The Bell flute was clamped to the bench with half its lacquer stripped. The third pad had outlived three owners and was not going to outlive this one.

Tobin had left twenty minutes earlier with his usual verdict. “Adequate. From me that’s a compliment. Don’t frame it.” On his way out he’d stopped at the door to glare across the yard at a van with PALLISTER RESTORATION painted on the side, parked at the depot’s loading bay.

“She’s quoting on the Harlow cello,” he’d said. “The Harlow cello.”

“Who is?”

“Nobody. Lock up.”

Ione stayed. The shop asked for one thing, which was attention to an actual object, and there weren’t many rooms in her life right then that could say the same. She hadn’t told Tobin about the petition. She’d thought about it and each time decided she wasn’t ready to hear what he’d say in the voice he used for bad solder.

She filed it standing over the flute. The confirmation came back in under a minute. *Provisional acceptance. Independent review scheduled. Expect contact within ten days.* The first thing she felt was glad her hands had something to do.

She didn’t hate her mother. She kept having to say this to herself over the next few days, because everybody else seemed ready to supply the feeling for her.

Nemi, when Ione finally told her, over noodles at the counter place near the depot that stayed open after everywhere else had stopped serving, looked like someone watching a firework she'd been waiting a year for.

"You filed it. You actually did the thing."

"I filed a request for an assessment. That's the opposite of doing a thing. It's asking permission to maybe eventually do a thing, from an office my mother wrote the forms for."

"Still the thing." Nemi moved a slice of pickled ginger to the edge of her bowl, which she did with anything she'd changed her mind about halfway through ordering. She was nineteen and lived by choice in a consent-based district by the old rail corridor, where the ambient systems ran on schedules people signed up for instead of adjusting on their own. People from those districts took a second longer to answer you and didn't mind a gap in the talk. "You're going to be famous for about four days. Sera Arden's kid files to leave the system her mother built. That's not a headline, that's a holiday."

"Is that a problem for you? Being seen with the famous one?"

"I'd kill for a problem that interesting. I've applied to the water authority's engineering track twice this year. Same letter both times. *Insufficient demonstrated field hours*. Nobody will tell me how many hours is sufficient. I count fittings." She said it lightly, the way you say a complaint you've worn smooth. "Anyway. You. Everything."

"I'm not doing it to make a point."

"I believe you. Nobody else will." Nemi put her chopsticks down. "Can I say something unhelpful? You can be annoyed."

"You're going to say it."

"I am." Nemi pointed a chopstick at her. "Okay. So. Where I live, the movement, the people in the depot meetings, the ones who say *rehumanize* without laughing, and I do laugh, a bit, but I also go, so. Where I live there are people who are going to want you to be a story. Some of them will care about you a lot. More than you'll like. But a story's useful, and you're about to be the most useful one the movement's had in ten years. I'd rather you heard it from me first."

"Do you want me to be a story?"

Nemi took a while. Ione noticed, the way she'd notice a joint that didn't sit flush.

“I want you to get what you’re asking for,” Nemi said. “If that turns out to be the same thing as the story, I won’t cry about it. I’ve noticed they’re different, though. Somebody around you should have.”

. . .

Things changed at home before anything changed outside. Kellan asked her twice in one evening whether she’d slept, which was two more times than he usually asked in a week. Sera started knocking on doors Ione was already on the other side of, which was so polite it felt like a slap.

At the shop, alone, she talked to the flute, because the flute didn’t have an opinion.

“It’s not that I think being managed is shameful,” she told it. “I’ve watched it work on her. She’s funnier than anyone I know. I’m not trying to prove anything about her.”

The third pad came away under the blade with a small sigh of old air, sealed in there since before she was born. She held the leather up to the light.

“I want to know what’s mine,” she said, to nobody. “Before I decide what to do with it.”

. . .

The talk with Sera came three days later, at the counter, which was where everything in the family eventually got said. Ione had rehearsed a short clean version, the kind that would survive being read back at a hearing. She didn’t use it.

“I’m not rejecting you,” she said. “I want to know what’s under it. The pacing, the routing, the room stuff. I know it’s not one switch. I looked it up. It’s dozens of little systems and I’ve never once caught one doing anything, which is the point. I’ve never met me without it. I’d like to, once, before I get old enough to forget there was supposed to be a difference.”

Sera was quiet long enough that Ione started building a second version.

“That’s a better argument than I’d have made for you,” Sera said.

“Does that mean you support it?”

“It means I understand it.” Her mouth did something that wasn’t a smile. “You looked up sealed and redacted. You check the word before you decide how angry to be.”

“You can say you’re scared.”

“I can say lots of things I’m choosing not to say at eight in the morning over coffee neither of us has touched.” Sera picked the coffee up and drank it cold, on purpose, a small rudeness to the house. Ione kept that. “I wrote the provision you used. I believe it. I also have twenty-six years of reasons to be frightened of exactly the question you’re asking. I’m not going to tell you which of those is winning, because I don’t know.”

It wasn’t an answer. Ione walked back to the shop an hour later with the old pad in her pocket.

Tobin was at the bench, turning the flute under the lamp. He didn’t look up.

“Somebody’s been in your head,” he said. “Third pad’s off by half a millimeter. You haven’t missed by half a millimeter in a year.”

“Bad morning.”

“Fix it before you go home or it’ll bother you longer than the morning did.” He put the flute down and looked at her, which was as close as he came to asking. “Talk, or pad?”

“Pad,” Ione said, and picked the tool back up.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Family Probability

Sera chose a Sunday. Sundays in the house had no appointments before noon, and some part of her that she didn't respect believed hard news landed softer on a Sunday. Timing was an argument. She used every argument she had, including on her daughter, and disliked herself a little for noticing.

Kellan sat at the end of the table with both hands around a cup he wasn't drinking. The night before he'd offered to take the medical part, since he understood the modeling better than she did. She'd said no. She had spent twenty-six years learning to talk about this in a way other people could stand to hear, and she wasn't going to hand that off the first time it counted.

"It's called Affective Recursion," she said. "Most people say the recursion. Some of this you'll find in the file once I unseal my part. Some you won't, because it's your grandmother's or your uncle's and I can't open what isn't mine. What I'm telling you now is the part that's yours whatever I do, because it's already in you and has been since before you were born, whether it ever turns into anything or not."

Ione had brought her own mug and was turning it on its saucer. "Recursion. Like it loops."

"Like a thought that feeds itself instead of finishing. Most people get frightened, or angry, or ashamed, and then some other reading turns up. You notice you're safe. You notice the threat wasn't what you thought. The feeling has somewhere to go. With the condition, under enough pressure, the other reading stops turning up. The fear becomes the only way to read anything. Every new fact gets folded in as proof. After a while you're living in a version of events with no room left in it for anybody telling you otherwise."

“Does it feel like anything from inside? Before it’s the whole reading? Or do you just wake up sure?”

“Depends on the person. Somebody once described it to me as a chord that never resolves. For me it was more like holding my breath. Early on I could feel something tightening, and each time I chose to trust the tightening over the part of me that had noticed it.” She stopped and started again. “If you only keep one sentence: I didn’t stop seeing clearly. I started trusting how clear it felt over everybody who loved me.”

“Can you see it from outside?”

“Sometimes. Not reliably. Historically, not early enough to help. That’s why the developmental governors are preventive. They don’t wait for it to show. They keep the tightening from building past the point where you’d still notice it yourself.”

“And that’s what you had. At twenty-three.”

“That’s the clinical name for what I had, yes.” She had drafted the next part more times than anything she had ever put in front of the Chamber, and thrown out every version that made the number sound smaller. “The genetic model puts your risk of full expression, meaning an episode as bad as mine, at about nine percent over a lifetime, with no management. It goes up with some pressures and down without them. The model can only give a range, because...”

“Because I’ve been managed since before I could talk, so there’s no baseline me to model.” Ione didn’t look up. “Developmental opacity. I read it. You wrote that too.”

“I wrote that too.” There it was, the pride and the dread arriving together, the way they had for about a month now. “Nine percent isn’t nothing. It isn’t close to half. Ninety-one people in a hundred with your exact profile and no management would go their whole lives without a bad episode. Hold both numbers. You can. I’m not going to make the nine smaller so this is easier for me.”

Kellan put his cup down without drinking. “Your grandmother,” he said, “had signs most of her adult life. Nobody had the words. They said possessive. Brilliant. Impossible when she was frightened. Lovely the rest of the time, and the rest of the time was most of it, so nobody ever lined the bad bits up and saw a pattern.”

“My brother,” Sera said, “died during an episode. Neither of us saw it. He left in a hurry, in weather he shouldn’t have been out in, convinced of something about the people around him that wasn’t true. By the time anyone found him it

was an accident report.” She kept her hands flat on the table. “I’m telling you so it’s a fact you hold, and not a shape you’re scared to look at. It’s a pattern. Patterns can be studied. I spent my late twenties writing a law so people carrying one would have choices and not just fear.”

“Have I shown signs?” Ione asked. She’d been holding it since before they sat down. “Either of you. Ever. Something you saw and didn’t mention.”

Sera and Kellan looked at each other a beat too long. Ione watched it happen.

“Nothing on its own,” Sera said, and knew Ione would hear the care in it. “You’ve had strong feelings, the way everyone your age has strong feelings. That isn’t what I’m describing. I have never once watched you lose the ability to think you might be wrong. That’s the marker. You don’t have it. I’m not saying it to cheer you up. You’d know if I were.”

“But you’ve been watching.”

“Since you were old enough to have an opinion.” It cost her. She let it show. “I’m not proud of it. I don’t think I could have stopped. You should know how much of my attention to you has had that underneath it.”

Ione stopped turning the mug. “Then let me have the choice,” she said. “Not a promise I don’t have it. A chance to find out what I’ve got, on my own, with the real numbers, instead of a shape I’ve never been allowed to see.”

“I support the review,” Kellan said, before Sera could answer.

Sera turned to look at him.

“I’m saying it in front of both of you,” he said. He was looking at the cup. “I helped write the disclosure standards. Twenty years ago. So families wouldn’t sit on this stuff forever because they were scared. I don’t know yet if I support removal. I honestly don’t. But I’m not going to be the parent who backs the review and then goes off it the second it says something I don’t like. That’d be... no.”

For Kellan, inside the marriage, it was a position. He had drawn a line halfway between his wife and his daughter. She couldn’t fault him for it. She couldn’t quite forgive him for it either, not that morning.

“Then we agree on the review,” Sera said. “On the record, in this kitchen, before anybody outside gets to say what we think. Independent assessor. Standard capacity questions. I stay out of it.” She let Ione see her face for a second without the language over it. “After the review, I don’t know what I think. That’s all I’ve got this morning.”

Ione picked up the mug and turned it once more and didn't say anything. Kellan got up and put the kettle on, though no one had asked for it, and stood with his back to them while it boiled.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Complete Account

The file turned up on a Tuesday with no message attached. A small icon in Ione's record that hadn't been there the night before, filed between a school form and one of Tobin's invoices. She left it closed for four hours and did water-route paperwork she didn't need to do. Then she sat on the floor of her room with her back against the bed frame, where she did her hardest reading, and opened it.

Fourteen pages. Sera's drafting voice, the flat one she used for statutes. The first sentence took Ione four tries.

I am writing this account for a daughter I do not yet have, because I believe she will eventually need it, and because I would rather she receive it from me than reconstruct it from public fragments after I can no longer control the telling.

The four months had built up slowly, the way water works at a crack. It started with a colleague who really had misrepresented a research finding, a small professional betrayal anyone else would have got over. From there it widened. The supervisor who hadn't stepped in. The partner who'd been slow to take her side. By the third month most of the people Sera had trusted were in it, and every one had been added on the strength of something that had once been true.

By the second month, Sera had written, I could no longer tell a person changing the subject from a person hiding something. I did not feel suspicious. I felt that I was finally paying attention. It was like the week a careless person starts keeping accounts. I felt virtuous. I believed everyone around me had always been slightly evasive and I had only now become clear-sighted enough to notice. It did not once occur to me that the clear sight was the illness.

By the fourth month I no longer felt frightened. I felt correct. This is the part you most need. Ordinary fear introduces itself. What I had by then presented as clarity, a sense of things finally making sense. I would not have called myself ill. I would have said I was awake.

Ione read the paragraph about the baby three times.

A cousin's child, seven months old. Over one week with very little sleep Sera had convinced herself the household was putting the baby in danger. They had done nothing except be slower to return her calls than her fear could stand. She took the child without permission in bad weather and drove toward a relative three hours away, the one place she had decided was still safe. Somewhere in the second hour she switched off her device, because by then every call was more proof that the people trying to reach her were working together against the child. The road was bad. On a curve she lost control at a speed that should have killed them both. *A margin of luck neither of us had earned.*

Nobody died, Sera wrote. I say this plainly because the story grows in the retelling, and I have corrected enough exaggerations of my own life. The child was home unharmed within six hours. My injuries healed. What didn't heal for years was understanding, once the fear finally broke, that I had been certain I was protecting someone and had put her in more danger than anyone who meant her harm ever could have.

I won't describe here how it broke, or who was in the car with me at the end. That belongs to another person's account as much as mine. It did not break on its own. Someone reached me. Someone stayed close enough, for long enough, without agreeing with my fear and without leaving me alone in it, until there was room again for a version of events that wasn't only mine. I have spent every year since trying to write a law that could stand in for that person, for people who don't have one.

Ione put the tablet on the floor beside her and sat without reading for a long time. The feeling in her chest took a while to name. She went at it the way she'd go at a stuck valve and decided in the end it was recognition. She was strict with herself about what it recognized, and had been since the numbers, nine against ninety-one. It recognized her mother. The real one, the one the feeds never showed, arriving all at once and frightening and completely understandable for what felt like the first time.

She thought about the kitchen. The tea cooling. The small adjustments that had been going on around Sera for twenty-six years, holding shut a door that had once, for four months, swung all the way open.

She read the last page twice.

I don't believe what happened to me proves management is the only way back from that kind of certainty. I believe some doors, once fear has opened them, are very hard to shut from inside, and that help should wait at the threshold until you've chosen to need it. I chose this. If you are reading this, that choice is the whole reason it mattered to me, and the reason I've spent my life making sure other people got to make it too.

She closed the file. She stayed on the floor until the light in the room went from gold to gray. When she stood up her legs were stiff, and the clearest thing in her, clearer than the nine percent or the sealed years, was gratitude, furious and unasked for, that the same system keeping Ione from being shaped around a forecast had also kept her mother from ever having to be the woman in those pages again.

She didn't go and find Sera.

. . .

Kellan found her an hour later. He stood in the doorway like a man nobody had sent.

"She let me read bits of it," he said. "Before we got married. I was twenty-nine. I thought I understood what I was signing up for." He scratched the back of his neck. "I didn't. Not for years. You don't really read a thing like that until you've watched someone live the boring version of it for a decade."

"Does it scare you?"

"Some days. Less now." He looked at the tablet on the floor and away again. "She's so far from that woman you'd never guess. Except she's the one who wrote it down. So."

He didn't ask how she felt. He knocked twice on the door frame on his way out, the way he used to when she was little and he'd checked she was asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

The First Assessment

Pema Orr did the interview in a room Sera wasn't allowed into. That had been Sera's idea, written into the independent-review statute eleven years earlier, back when the rule was about other people. She stood in the observation corridor behind glass that made everything on the far side look evenly lit and slightly flat.

Pema was younger than Sera remembered, though they'd met twice at functions. Early forties. She moved slowly and asked her questions slowly and then waited, for as long as it took, without looking at the clock.

"What are you afraid of losing," Pema said, "if you have it done and it turns out to be wrong?"

Ione was in the plain chair the statute required. No soft furniture. Sera had insisted on that years ago, on the theory that comfort shouldn't pass for reassurance. Ione took long enough that Sera started counting.

"My mother," Ione said. "The version of her that thinks I chose something. I'd lose that one."

"Go on."

"If it goes wrong she'll say she was right to be scared. She will be, too. That's a fact. But being right about the fear and being right that she should've decided are two facts, and if I get this wrong everyone's going to smoosh them into one. Me as well, probably."

On her side of the glass Sera felt the floor tilt. It was her own argument, in her daughter's mouth, and Ione had it cleaner than most of the scholars who cited it.

"What would you accept," Pema said, "as evidence that you were losing the ability to make good decisions about your own safety? Evidence that would convince you. Leave her out of it."

"I've thought about that."

Pema waited.

"If I couldn't imagine that the people disagreeing with me might be right," Ione said. "That's the actual thing. Anger doesn't count. Fear doesn't count. The point where every other version of events stops being available. If I noticed that, or anyone did, I think I'd want help. Problem is I don't know what it'd look like from inside, because I've never had a baseline. Everything I've ever thought has been through the smoothing. So I don't know what losing myself would even look like. That's the hole."

Pema wrote something down and didn't ask the next question for a while. Ione sat still. Sera thought she looked like someone waiting out rain.

"Your mother's history," Pema said. "Relevant to your risk, or being used to argue a risk the number can't carry on its own?"

"Both." No pause this time. "Everyone wants me to pick one because one's simpler. It's relevant. Nine percent is real and I'm not going to pretend it's smaller so I sound braver. It's also being used, by people who love me, to make nine feel like ninety, because ninety's easier to step in on. I can hold both. I'd like everyone else to try."

Later Pema asked, "Say you have it done. Six months on, a later you thinks this was a mistake. What do you owe her?"

"The reasons. Written down. She can do what she likes with them." Ione turned that one over for longer. "If the present me owed the future me a veto, nobody would ever do anything hard. But I owe her the actual reasons, so she can't pretend I didn't have any."

"And if the later you is in crisis? Not calmly disagreeing. In the state your mother described."

"Then she's somewhere the emergency floor's for, and the floor stays under me whatever I decide today. It's under everybody. That's a separate question from whether I get to decide. It's the reason I'm allowed to decide without everyone treating the asking as a symptom."

. . .

Pema came out to the corridor afterward without Ione, which was correct procedure and felt, to Sera, like being left outside a door.

"Preliminary," Pema said. "Second session next week. She understands the choice better than most adults I see. She can say what the risk is, what's uncertain, and where her own self-knowledge runs out, without shrinking any of it." She let a moment go by. "That's a finding about competence. It says nothing about whether the choice is wise. You kept those apart in the statute."

"I wrote the separation. I didn't expect to resent it."

"Most people who write a good law end up resenting one clause of it," Pema said. "Usually that's the one doing its job."

Sera walked back to her office through corridors built by the same people who had built her kitchen, soft acoustics and warm light. None of it reached where she needed it to. She sat at the desk without opening anything and heard it again. *I can hold both*. In a voice that didn't shake.

. . .

Kellan had waited up. He was at the counter with the lights lower than the house would have set them, which meant he'd overridden it by hand. He didn't ask how it had gone.

His tablet was face up by his cup when she came in. He turned it over and slid it into the drawer, easily, the way a man does something ordinary. She'd seen enough of the screen: Pema's public clinical guidance, the page on assessment criteria. He'd read it at least twice that week already. She didn't ask. She was too tired to wonder why he'd hide something any parent could look up.

"She's better at this than us," Sera said, sitting in Ione's usual chair. "Better than me now, some days."

"Well. She had the teacher." Kellan took her hand across the counter. "You built the argument that's about to get used on you. You built it well enough that your own kid uses it better than the people it was meant for. That's... I mean, that's something."

"Is that supposed to help?"

"I've given up on helping. You always catch me at it." He didn't let go. "Six months, Asher said?"

"Until a vote that has nothing to do with this and everything to do with it."

He nodded. He got up to put the lights back where the house wanted them, then changed his mind and left them low.

PART TWO

THE RISK THAT CANNOT BE SEEN



CHAPTER SEVEN

Developmental Opacity

Same room, same chair. Ione found she didn't mind the chair anymore. It was a bench. You didn't sit at a bench to be comfortable.

"Today's about what the assessment can't tell you," Pema said. She put her notes on her knee and left them there. "Ever. However many sessions we run."

"I thought telling me things was the whole point."

"For most people." Pema folded her hands. "How long have you had governors running?"

"Since before I could talk. You've got my file."

"Say it anyway."

"Since before I could talk."

Pema let it sit. "Every fear you've had. Every time you got angry. Every moment that in an unmanaged kid might have climbed into something worth a name. All of it got softened and turned before it reached a point where somebody like me could see it. I can't tell you if you've got active symptoms. Your whole childhood was built to stop symptoms forming. So there's no evidence either way. The test has never been run."

Ione turned it over. "So you can tell me I'm competent to choose. You can't tell me what I'm choosing between."

"Yes."

"Great."

"Do you know why the law's built like that?" Pema said. "Know, not guess."

"I can guess."

"Guess."

"If you let the forecast shape a kid's life around the risk, you build the kid into the forecast. Whatever the model expected, that's what they turn into, because nobody lets them be anything else long enough to check."

Pema almost smiled. "That's the doctrine. Fewer words than the statute." She picked up her notes and put them down again. "If we could model you properly, someone would arrange your adolescence around it. Friends. School. Stress. Without asking you. The opacity stops that."

"So I get to make the biggest decision of my life with less information than anyone would accept for anything else. Because the alternative's worse."

"Yes."

Ione had come in braced to be handled, even here. She hadn't expected to be agreed with. Something in her chest let go a notch.

"Give me somebody else," she said. "Has this happened before? Or am I the first one you've had to explain it to this slowly?"

Pema thought about how much she could say. "A young man. Lighter governors. The family condition, moderate. He chose removal. He's fine." A pause. "He had more to go on than you. People still do it with less."

"That's not very comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

"Say something that isn't in the doctrine."

Pema considered her. "Your mother put the opacity into law," she said. "She knew better than most people then that a good prediction can become a cell. Especially for a child who can't object to it."

"So why does it feel like she's trying to climb out over her own wall?"

"Because she's frightened. Frightened people reach for whatever worked last time." Pema said it flatly. "Whether she's right to be frightened isn't my job. My job's smaller. Do you understand what you're choosing, knowing you can't know it all?"

"Yes."

"So do I. That's the finding. I'll file it Friday. It won't settle anything."

. . .

Ione walked home the long way, along the water-route corridor, for the extra twenty minutes. Every other decision she'd ever make would come with more in-

formation than this one. A place to live, a person, a trade. All of it with better data than the one choice that might decide whether the rest stayed hers.

Kellan was in the garden doing nothing, which was unusual enough that she sat down next to him without being asked.

"Pema gave me a case," she said. "Some guy. He had more to go on than me, but still. It went fine."

"Did that help?"

"A bit." She pulled a stem of something and started shredding it. "I wanted her to say the fog lifts. She said it doesn't. You just get to walk into it on purpose instead of having it built around you."

Kellan didn't answer straight away. He watched a bee working the lavender, which was having a late year.

"I don't think anybody gets the fog lifted," he said. "I think you pick which one to walk into. Badly lit. Everybody's is." He frowned. "That sounded better in my head."

"It was fine."

"It was a greeting card." He took the shredded stem off her and threw it in the bed. "Your mother's going to ask you to do something soon that you're not going to like. I don't know what. I can see her building up to it."

"How can you tell?"

"She's been very nice to the house," Kellan said. "She thanks it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Third Name

“She’ll say no,” Sera said in the car. “Go in expecting it. She’s said no to me four times.”

“Then why are we going?”

“Because you asked. And because she’s never had a chance to say no to you.”

Ione’s grandmother lived in a residence on the north side of the river, a long low building with a garden full of benches nobody sat on. Adela Marsh was seventy-six. She had gone onto full late-life management at seventy, after a winter nobody in the family talked about, and Ione had met her perhaps a dozen times. Birthdays. One Christmas that had ended early. She remembered a thin woman with very good posture who gave expensive presents and watched you open them.

She was in a chair by the window of her room with a blanket over her knees she clearly hadn’t asked for. Her hair was white and cut short. When they came in she looked at Sera first, then at Ione, and kept looking at Ione.

“You’ve got Kellan’s eyes,” she said. “I always thought that was a waste.”

“Hello, Mom,” Sera said.

“You’ve come about the file.”

“Ione has.”

Adela turned her whole head to look at her granddaughter. “Sit down. Not there. There, where I can see you. You’re the one who’s leaving.”

“I’ve filed a petition.”

“I read about it. They let me read, here. They take the edges off what I read, but they let me.” She had a dry, carrying voice, and no hum in the room did anything to it. “Your mother wants me to open my part. So you can see what I was. Is that it?”

"I want to see what's there," Ione said. "I don't know what you were."

"No. Nobody did. That was the trouble." Adela smoothed the blanket. "I'll tell you what I was. I was right about a great many things before anyone else. I was right that your grandfather was going to leave, three years before he did. I was right that Rowan should never have taken that job. I was right about the neighbors and I was right about the school. And I was wrong about a great many things, very loudly, and I could never tell which was which until much later, and by then everyone had stopped listening to either."

"Mom," Sera said.

"She asked." Adela didn't look away from Ione. "Your uncle was like me. Worse. He didn't have my manners. He drove into the weather because he thought his wife was taking the children somewhere to hide them from him. She was taking them to her sister's for the weekend. It was on the calendar. He'd seen the calendar." Her hands went still on the blanket. "Your mother was like me too, for four months. Then she was cured of it. And then she wrote a law so everybody could be."

"Nobody gets cured," Sera said quietly.

"No. You get managed. I know. I'm managed now." Adela nodded toward the window, the soft light, the blanket. "They took it off me at seventy. The fear. I'm much nicer. Ask anybody here. I'm very pleasant. I play cards on Thursdays with a man who used to be a judge and I let him win." She looked at Ione. "I'm also less. I don't know how to say it better than that. There's less of me in here. There's more room in the chair."

Ione didn't know what to say. She said, "Do you mind?"

"Some days. Most days I don't mind anything. That's rather the point of it." A short laugh, not unkind. "You want to know if you should do what you're doing. I can't tell you. Nobody asked me at your age. Nobody had anything to offer me except a doctor who said *nerves* and a husband who said *calm down*. If someone had offered me what your mother's built I'd have taken it at twenty and been grateful. And I'd have been somebody else. I don't know if she'd have been better. She'd have been nicer."

"Will you open your part?" Ione said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's mine." Adela said it simply. "It's the only thing I've got left that nobody's adjusted. Every letter I wrote at forty. Every accusation. Every time I was right and nobody believed me and every time I was wrong and everybody did. It's the ugliest thing I own and it's all me. I'm not giving it to a system to read, and I'm not giving it to you, darling, because you'd read it looking for yourself. You'd find her, too. You'd find her all over it. And she might not be there."

"I'd be careful."

"You'd be seventeen." Adela reached out and took Ione's hand. Her grip was stronger than it looked. "Here's what I'll give you. When it came on me, it felt like being the only person awake in a house full of sleepers. If you ever feel that, that you're the only one awake, that's when you pick up the telephone. Not before. Everything before is just being young and cross. That's mine to give. The rest stays shut."

She let go. She looked at Sera.

"She's cleverer than you were."

"I know."

"Don't keep her in."

"I'm not trying to."

"You are," Adela said. "I can see it from here. I did it to you." She turned back to the window. "Thursday's cards. I'd like to rest before. Thank you for coming, Ione. You can come again. You don't have to bring her."

. . .

In the car Ione didn't talk for ten minutes. Sera drove herself, which she didn't usually do.

"The only person awake in a house full of sleepers," Ione said eventually.

"Yes."

"Is that what it was like for you?"

"Yes." Sera's hands were tight on the wheel. "I've never managed to put it that well. All these years and she still says it better than me."

"She said you're keeping me in."

"She did."

"Are you?"

Sera didn't answer for a while. They crossed the river. The water was high and brown.

“I don’t know,” she said. “She would. That’s what frightens me about it.”

Ione looked at her mother’s profile against the window and thought about the old woman in the chair with more room in it than there should have been. She thought that she would go back on a Thursday, on her own, and let her grandmother win at cards if that was the game, and ask her nothing at all about the file.

CHAPTER NINE

Nine Percent

The gathering was in an old rail depot in Nemi's district. The room still smelled faintly of diesel it hadn't burned for a century. Thirty people, maybe forty, on odd chairs and on the floor. Someone had brought food in real containers. For the first twenty minutes it was a slightly earnest dinner party for people who happened to agree about one thing.

Nemi had introduced her as a friend. No surname. It nearly worked. A few people asked her what she did in the afternoons and whether she'd always lived near the depot, and for twenty minutes she was someone nobody had decided anything about.

Then a woman near the front stood up. She was older than Ione had expected, in a good coat, and she had a voice made for rooms.

"Nine percent," the woman said.

Ione went still.

"That's what the public tables give the child of a carrier. Look it up. Take the Steward herself. Everyone knows her history, she's made a career of it. She's got a daughter. That daughter's nine percent. Ninety-one percent freedom. And the system her mother built would still keep that child supervised from the cradle and call it love. Ask yourselves what the number's for, once you see it was never about the number."

"I don't think..." Ione started, and stopped, because every face in the room had turned to the sound. She tried again, slower. "I don't think that's a fair use of it."

The room looked at her properly now.

"You're..." the woman said, and recalculated.

"I'm the nine percent. Or I might be. Nobody knows. That's sort of the whole thing, and you went straight past it to the bit where the number makes a better slogan." Beside her Nemi went tight. "I'm not here because I think I grew up in a prison. I had a good childhood. My mom's one of the most decent people I know. The system she built has helped people who needed it a lot more than I ever have. I want the choice to be mine. I don't know if the choice you'd make for me is wrong. It's still not yours."

The woman recovered fast. "Then you see why it matters. If the architect's own daughter can't get a clean answer about her own body, what hope has anyone?"

"I don't know," Ione said. "I actually don't. Put that on a banner. You're using me to prove your thing the same way my mom's using the family history to prove hers. I came here hoping this room would be different. It's the same room with worse chairs."

A silence that could have gone bad. Then someone at the back said, "She's right," in a voice that obviously cost him.

"I'm Ambrose," he said, when people turned around, which seemed to surprise him more than the silence. He was maybe twenty, with a sweater too big for him. "I filed two years ago. Denied. The panel said I didn't understand the risk, and honestly, maybe I didn't. Went back a year later and got approved. And the number didn't change between the two. I did. Nobody here likes hearing that. 'I wasn't ready and then I was' doesn't fit on a banner."

"That's a personal story," the woman said. "It's not policy."

"She's not asking for a policy," Ambrose said. "She's asking for somebody to look at her instead of the number standing where she is." He looked at Ione. "Sorry we made you the evening."

"Thanks," Ione said. "You're the first person who's said that."

After that it came apart into talk. Someone asked Ambrose what had changed in him in the year between. Someone argued that making people prove they were ready was gatekeeping no better than the governors. The woman in the good coat came back into it with less certainty and more questions. Ione found, to her surprise, that she was interested. It was the first room in weeks where she was a person asking something.

Nemi caught her by the door with two cups of something hot neither of them had asked for.

“That was either the bravest thing I’ve watched you do or the worst way to make friends in this room. Could be both.”

“I didn’t come to make friends.”

“No. You came to see if you wanted to belong here.” Nemi handed her a cup. “Did you?”

“I don’t know. Some of them.”

“Some of them is a lot, around here.” Nemi drank. She looked tired under the grin. “Marguerite’s going to call me tonight. The coat. She already asked the room to keep tonight inside the room, which, good luck. She’ll want to know why I brought you without warning her, and why I didn’t tell you not to talk.”

“You didn’t know I would.”

“I knew you might.” Nemi looked at the floor. “I keep telling people you’re not a symbol. Nobody believes me. Tonight probably helped. Probably.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I’m never sure. It’s my brand.” She bumped Ione’s shoulder with hers. “Come on. There’s a tram in six minutes and if we miss it I’m making you walk.”

They walked anyway, because Nemi stopped to argue with a man selling lanterns about whether his lanterns were legal, and they missed the tram, and Ione didn’t notice until they were halfway home how quiet Nemi had gone.

CHAPTER TEN

The Delay

Sera picked the garden. It was walled and roofed with a canopy against weather and eyes, and it was the one place in the house where nothing would interrupt. She rehearsed what she was going to ask the way she rehearsed testimony, and knew what that said about it.

The night before, she and Asher had gone through the Chamber arithmetic in her study. Hale Corrigan led the compulsory bloc. He'd spent fifteen years losing gracefully and had got tired of the grace. He needed a handful of defections to force a full reauthorization instead of a simple renewal. A removal inside the Steward's own household, before the vote, was the gift his people had been waiting years for.

"Eleven votes," Asher had said. "Twelve if Pirro's back from leave. Thirteen if you give them your daughter."

"I'm not giving them my daughter."

"I know. I'm counting." He'd written 13 on the pad and underlined it once. "I count, you decide."

She hated knowing the numbers that well. She hated more that they'd followed her into the garden and sat down next to her looking like a mother's worry.

. . .

"I want to ask you for six months," she said, on the stone bench worn smooth in the middle by twenty years of this kind of talk. "Not a no. Six months. Through the renewal and a few weeks past it, so nobody can say the review was hurried. After that the review says what it says and I stay out of the way."

"Why six. Why not four. Or a year."

“Because in six months the vote’s over and you’re not a live piece in it. If the review finishes and you start removal before the vote, both blocs use you. Corrigan says the Compact’s too loose, it let a hereditary risk walk out before her mother had finished being scared. The rehumanizers say it’s too tight, look how long it took. You stop being a person with a private decision and turn into a data point in a fight about something else.”

“I already am one. You made me one the day you started drafting the stay you haven’t filed.”

It landed where Ione had aimed it. She had named a future act and made it sound like a conviction.

“I haven’t drafted anything,” Sera said.

“Have you thought about it?”

“Yes.”

“Then.”

“I’ve thought about a lot of things. I’d like to keep not doing them for as long as I can.” Sera looked at her hands. “You’re right that it’s in the garden with us. I’m not going to pretend otherwise.”

“So say what you’re asking. You’re asking me to keep my private thing out of your public vote. And calling it care because it’s in months instead of years.”

“I can want to protect the settlement and want to protect you,” Sera said, “and right now those point the same way, which is convenient for me, and I don’t enjoy admitting it.”

“Right now you’re the Steward asking a petitioner to wait till it’s safe for the vote. You’re doing it in your nicest voice. I can still hear which one’s talking.”

The canopy moved the light a fraction of a degree. Sera wouldn’t have noticed any other day. Even the garden, the one room she had kept off the house’s schedules, was quietly making this easier on her than it deserved. She resented it. Some tired part of her was grateful.

“I know what it costs you,” she said. “Six months inside a decision you’ve already made, waiting for permission you don’t think you need. I’ve lived on other people’s timelines since I was twenty-three. I’m asking anyway. I don’t know how to want less than both things.”

A bird in the canopy started a phrase, lost it, and started another. When Ione spoke her voice had gone flat, somewhere past angry.

"I'll think about it. That's the whole answer. You can stop bracing. I can't tell if it's a reasonable thing to ask your kid or a nicely dressed delay from the Steward. I don't think you can either."

She stood and walked back to the house. She didn't look back.

. . .

Kellan came out an hour later, when the canopy had decided the hour wanted amber. He sat close enough that his shoulder was against hers and said nothing for a while.

"She said she can't tell me from the Steward," Sera said.

"Can you?"

"I used to be able to promise that."

"Maybe you only ever had to be it. Showing it was extra." He rubbed his knees. "I don't think you asked because of the vote. I think you're scared, and the vote gave the scared a number to stand behind. And I don't think you always know which one's got the microphone. That's... I don't know. That's just what it looks like from the lawn."

"That doesn't help."

"You stopped wanting help right around the day she asked about the file. So I stopped offering." He took her hand, the old way. "Want me to go and talk to her?"

"No."

"Want me to go and not talk to her? I'm good at that."

"Kellan."

"Staying here, then," he said. The amber went to blue and neither of them moved, and at some point the house, unasked, turned on the path lights so they could find their way in.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Outside the House

Ione found out the way people usually find out things about their own lives that have gone public. Sideways, through someone else's face.

She was at the bench on a Thursday when Tobin put his work down harder than he needed to.

"Somebody's been asking about you," he said. "Reporter. Or near enough. Wanted me to comment on my apprentice's family situation. I told her I don't discuss my apprentices' families and she could try a door that wasn't mine." He gave her the look he gave a badly seated pad. "You going to tell me, or keep pretending you're here for the flutes?"

"I'm here for the flutes."

"You're here for the flutes and you're a national conversation you haven't mentioned in two months. Both. I'd rather hear it from you than from somebody with a lens."

"It's complicated."

"So's a Boehm key system. You learned that." He put the tool down, which meant he was going to listen properly. "I've had apprentices. Most of them want the trade. You want something else out of this room and I've let you have it without asking what. Wasn't my business. Strangers are making it my business."

She told him in the flattest words she had. He didn't interrupt. When she'd finished he said, "Doesn't change anything in here," and went back to his bench. That was the whole reply, and it was the right one.

. . .

The leak was smaller and stranger than she'd braced for. No picture, no document. Something she'd told Nemi one night on the tram home, about wanting to know which of her reactions were hers, quoted almost word for word on a movement channel with a few hundred thousand followers. *A source close to the family.* That fooled nobody who'd been at the depot, and by then the depot had been talking for a month.

She went to Nemi's that evening. Nemi's kitchen was a third the size of the Ardens' and a couple of degrees colder than Ione's body had been trained to expect. She noticed and said nothing.

"I told Marguerite," Nemi said before Ione had finished the question. "I thought she'd use it to make people see you as a person. She put it up in an hour. I was wrong about what she'd do with it."

"You gave away something I told you because I trusted you."

"Yes."

"That's a confession. You haven't said sorry."

"Sorry. There. Yes." Nemi didn't look away, which made it harder to stay angry. "The movement matters to me. You matter more. For about one stupid week I thought one sentence could do both, and it can't, and I did it anyway. I'm not going to call it a misunderstanding. I understood fine."

The window looked out over the old corridor, dark except for one streetlamp nobody had bothered to fix, flickering on and off at an interval no house would have allowed. Ione watched it for a while.

"I can't tell you anything private again," she said. "I don't think you'd do it on purpose. I just know now what you do when two things you love pull different ways. I can't unknow it."

"That's fair."

"Fair's got nothing to do with it. I'd rather be true with you." She stood up, but didn't leave straight away. "I don't hate you. You're braced for it and you haven't earned it. But I think we're both stuck with the version where I don't say what I'm thinking anymore."

"Ione..."

"Night, Nemi."

She walked home through the corridor in a wind that nobody in that district bothered to soften. It was cold enough to make her eyes run and she let them.

The headline was on the ordinary public feed in the morning. That was how far it had gone in one night. No name, because the household's routing had held that much. It didn't need one.

STEWARD'S FAMILY SPLIT OVER COMPACT'S FUTURE, SOURCE SAYS

Under it, a photo of Sera at some function, composed and unreachable. The woman the public had always been shown. Ione knew her better now, after fourteen pages, than she had a month ago, and knew how many years it had taken her mother to learn to be that face.

She read it twice in the kitchen in yesterday's shirt. What she felt was cold and practical. Whatever she decided now, strangers would read it as a move in somebody else's argument.

Sera came down, saw the screen, and stopped.

"Nemi," Ione said.

Sera nodded. She got two cups down and made tea by hand in the brown pot and put one in front of Ione and didn't say anything about the six months, then or later.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Advance Directive

Kellan brought it to dinner, which told Sera he'd been carrying it for days. He put his tablet on the table between the three of them, screen dark, and left it there while he ate half his potatoes.

"My dad," he said eventually. Nobody had asked. Kellan didn't usually bring up his father unless you asked twice. "He had a stroke at sixty. No warning. And nobody in the family had ever talked about what he'd want, because it felt morbid when he was fine and it was too late when he wasn't. So there's me and my two sisters for eight months. Arguing about what he would've chosen. All of us sure. None of us agreeing. I'm... I don't want that. For us. I don't want us guessing later what you'd want, when you could just tell us. Now. While you're the best person to say."

He pushed the tablet toward Ione.

"It's an advance restoration directive. You write it. Your words. What conditions would justify putting something back, temporarily, if the condition ever turned up after removal. Temporary. Nobody else deciding. Your rules, written now, while you're... clear. For later, if you're not."

Ione woke the screen and read the first page. Then she scrolled to the bottom and read the last.

"Who decides if the conditions are met?"

"An independent panel. Pema's office runs it. It only activates if..."

"Hang on." She put a finger up. "That's different from the floor. The floor doesn't read anything about me. It knows when someone's gone dark who shouldn't have. Messages, location, the house check-ins, all at once. Same dumb signal for everyone in the Compact. It doesn't need to know what I'm thinking."

This wants a panel reading my words and deciding what I meant. One of those is a smoke alarm. This is someone reading my diary and calling it a smoke alarm.”

“It’s your diary. You write it.”

“And someone else reads it. When it matters. In the actual hour, somebody looks at whatever I’m doing and decides whether it matches a sentence I wrote eight months before. Who?”

“That depends on the wording,” Sera said, a half-second too fast. She heard it. Twenty years of training that out of witnesses and she still did it. “The panel reads the directive against observed...”

“Who’s on the panel?”

“It’s constituted through the ordinary review process. The same one that...”

“Who appoints the reviewers, Mom.”

Mom. She hadn’t used it in weeks. The reviewers came from a pool Sera’s office had helped build. A good many of them owed their places, a few steps back, to appointments Sera had leaned on over twenty years.

“The pool has people in it who respect my work,” Sera said. “I don’t pick panels. I’d be lying if I said my influence stops at the door when it’s my family.”

Ione turned to her father.

“So you built me a leash,” she said. “With a nice long lead and my handwriting on the tag. And Mom’s friends hold the end.”

Kellan put his fork down.

“You built it on purpose or you’re too stupid to see it,” Ione said. “Pick one. I honestly don’t know which is worse.”

It went quiet. The kind of quiet the house would normally have stepped into. It didn’t. Sera watched her husband’s face and saw it go still in a way she hadn’t seen for years.

“No,” Kellan said.

“No what?”

“No, I’m not picking one. You’re wrong.” He said it without raising his voice. He almost never contradicted anyone in this house either. “You’re wrong about this one. You found the soft bit, the panel, fine. That’s a real problem. Your mom’s right about the pool. So fix the panel. Write in who sits on it. Write in that nobody from her office gets near it. Write in that I don’t. That’s a drafting problem.” He tapped the table. “What you’re doing is throwing the whole thing out

because it's got my name on the front and you're angry with everyone. That's a mood, love. You'd spot it in anyone else."

"Don't do that. Don't tell me I'm having a mood."

"I'm telling you what it looks like from here. You can tell me I'm wrong. But you called me stupid, and I'm not, and this isn't." He pushed his chair back. "I'm not taking it back. It stays on the table. Sign it or toss it, it's yours."

"I'm not signing it."

"Then don't." He picked up his plate. "It's still a good idea. And I'm still your dad. Both of those stay put."

He went into the kitchen and ran the tap. Ione sat looking at the dark screen with her jaw set. Sera didn't say anything, because anything she said would have been taking a side, and for once she didn't know which side she would have been taking.

After a while Ione got up and went upstairs. The tablet stayed on the table all night. In the morning it was gone. Sera never found out which of them had moved it.

. . .

Asher called two days later. His voice had the flatness he kept for news bad enough that flat was the only professional option left.

"It's on the floor," he said. "Corrigan's people have the leaked quote. Somebody on the other side has the directive. Don't ask me how, it was at your dinner table forty-eight hours ago. Everybody in that Chamber has a version of your family and they're reading it out like scripture." A pause. "Her petition's a footnote. It's about you now. Whether the woman who built the Compact still believes in it now it's got a face she loves inside it."

"How many votes?"

"Fourteen," Asher said. "I've stopped underlining."

PART THREE

THE EXCEPTION AT HOME



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Incapacity Exception

Asher came to the house instead of calling her in, and Sera understood that before he'd said anything. Whatever he had to say, he didn't want it said anywhere that kept a record. It was raining lightly, the kind the district's weather systems let through because most people liked a bit of it, and he stood in it on the step for a moment before she opened the door. He had a paper bag in one hand.

"Here," he said, and gave it to her.

Inside was a jar of honey, dark, with no label.

"What's this?"

"Honey."

"Where from?"

"The roof," Asher said, and walked past her into the hall and took his coat off.

She followed him into the study with the jar. "Which roof?"

"The northeast setback of the Compact office. Four hives. Six years." He sat down. "It breaks at least three building codes. Nobody's enforced them because nobody goes up there. On Tuesday the buildings authority sent an actual inspector, for the first time in living memory, and I spent eleven minutes telling a very confused man that the boxes were decorative. He's coming back in two weeks with a colleague. I'd like you to have a jar before they're seized."

"You keep bees on the roof of my office."

"I keep bees on the roof of your office. You've smelled the smoker on me every autumn for six years and never asked. I took it as consent." He straightened a cuff. "It's very good honey. The linden along Fourth Street. Now. I came to talk about something else, and I'd like to do it before I lose my nerve."

She put the jar on the desk between them. It sat there like a witness.

"There's a provision," Asher said, "I don't think you've used in twenty years. Temporary incapacity stay. Thirty days, renewable once. For when refusing an intervention looks likely to undermine the refuser's own capacity to decide. It was written for acute cases. Someone mid-crisis refusing help at the exact moment the crisis is doing the refusing."

"I know what it was written for. I wrote the annotations."

"Then you know it wasn't written for what I think you're about to ask me." He had gone very still. "Tone isn't in crisis. She's seventeen, nine percent, and lucid by every clinical account there is, Pema's included. The stay doesn't fit. I'm saying it now, before you ask, so that whatever you decide, you'll have decided it having heard me say so."

"I'm asking for time," Sera said. "Thirty days. The vote. One more assessment. If something is there, if the thing Pema won't promise me isn't there is starting to show under all this, then there's something narrow enough to catch it that doesn't turn into the thing I spent my life taking apart."

"That's a careful sentence," Asher said. "I'd like to note that. I could read it to the Chamber and it'd survive. I've watched you build sentences like that for thirty years. You only build them that carefully when part of you knows they need defending."

She didn't answer that.

"She frightened me," she said at last. "The night of the directive. The way she did it, more than what she said. She tore her father apart over dinner and she was half right and she didn't care about the other half. I've felt that. I felt it at twenty-three. That clean, whole feeling. Where nobody else's caution fits in the room."

"That's a clever seventeen-year-old who's been tested by everybody around her for months and has got good at winning."

"I know the difference." She stood and went to the window and looked at the rain. "I also know I couldn't see the difference from inside at twenty-three. I've got no evidence I'd see it any better now, from outside, in somebody I love more than I loved myself."

Asher was quiet. When he spoke again the counsel had gone out of his voice.

"If you file it, you're using a provision built for people in the grip of it against a person nobody's found in the grip of it. With language good enough to survive review. And one day someone will write this down. You know they will. This will be the chapter where the author of the most important consent law in a hundred

years used its narrowest exception on her own daughter. To anyone reading without your fear it'll look like control in time's clothing."

"I know how it'll look."

"Then why?"

"Because I'd rather be the villain of an accurate story than bury my daughter after deciding not to act on a fear I couldn't disprove." She heard it come out, whole, to the one person whose job was to remember what she said. "File it. Thirty days. The history can call it what it likes."

He looked at her for a long time. Then he picked up his coat.

"Keep the honey," he said, at the door. "Whatever happens."

. . .

She told Kellan that evening. She told herself it was because she owed him before it was public. Some part of her hoped saying it to him would change her mind.

He listened standing at the counter with both hands flat on it. When she'd finished he was quiet long enough that she wondered if the quiet was his answer.

"I'm not going to tell you not to," he said. "I don't think I could stop you. Trying would just make you lonelier. I think it's a mistake. A decent person's mistake. The kind people make when they've run out of better ones and can't stand to do nothing."

"That's not an endorsement."

"Wasn't meant as one." He came around the counter. "I'll still be married to you in the morning. Whatever you do tonight. I'd rather you didn't have to wonder about that while you're doing something this hard."

"Even if it's wrong."

"Mostly if it's wrong. That's when people need to know." He put his hand on the back of her neck for a second. Then he picked up the honey jar and read the blank lid and frowned. "Where'd this come from?"

"Asher."

"Asher makes honey?"

"Asher has bees."

"Since when?"

"Six years," Sera said. "Apparently I consented."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Stay

It came the way everything had come since the petition. A small icon in her record, looking like a school form.

Temporary Incapacity Stay. Thirty days, renewable once. Filed under the authority of the Office of the Steward.

Under the heading, a paragraph in a voice Ione could have picked out of a thousand. Careful. Exact. Built to survive being read back by people who wanted it to fail.

I file this for no purpose of control. I file it to preserve the conditions under which my daughter's choice can remain fully her own, during a period in which I believe, on the basis of a mother's observation, which I acknowledge the law does not treat as clinical evidence, that recent pressure may be affecting her capacity in ways not yet visible to formal assessment.

She read it four times looking for the gap between what it said and what it meant. There wasn't one. It meant exactly what it said. Her mother had used the fear as the argument for using the fear. It was a closed loop, so neat that Ione nearly admired the join before she saw what it had been built to hold.

She didn't cry. She'd expected to. What came instead was cold and small and finished, like glue that had set.

She packed one bag and left before Sera got home.

. . .

Tobin lived above a hardware place in a low-adjustment district two stops past the depot. He opened the door, looked at the bag, looked at her, and stood back.

“There’s a room that’s mostly storage,” he said, “and a couch that’s better than it looks. I won’t ask what happened till you want to say. I won’t tell anyone you’re here unless you ask me to. People with more authority than me can probably make me, but they’ll have to.”

The apartment smelled of rosin and old varnish. The storage room had three dead instrument cabinets in it, a stack of sheet music nobody had played from in years, and a bed. Made up. The sheets smelled of cedar. He had got it ready before she knocked, and neither of them mentioned that.

“She filed a stay,” Ione said. She hadn’t meant to. Being told she didn’t have to made her want to. “The emergency one. For people in crisis. On me. Because I’m not in crisis and she thinks I’m about to be.”

Tobin sat on one of the cabinets.

“Sounds like a frightened person,” he said. “I don’t know your mother. I know what fear does to good hands. I’ve watched it wreck a lovely repair. Somebody so scared of getting it wrong they go tight on the wrong screw at the wrong time and call it being careful the whole way down.”

Nothing in the apartment anticipated anything. The tea didn’t cool itself. She lay awake the first night in a room that did nothing for her and didn’t miss it as much as she’d thought she would. Something bothered her, though. A hand going out for a rail that had always been there.

. . .

On the third afternoon, still checking her feed for news of the stay every twenty minutes, she found out that Tobin Ashcroft, seventy, slow in all things, had an enemy.

The enemy sent a messenger. A young man, twenty-two or so, clutching a mandrel case like a shield.

“Mr. Ashcroft. Ruth sent me. Ruth Pallister. Her long mandrel snapped this morning and the Harlow cello’s due Friday, and you’re the only other shop in the district with the full set, and she said...” He swallowed. “She said ask nicely.”

Tobin put down the pad he’d been gluing. Slowly.

“She said ask nicely.”

“She did, sir.”

“Did she use my name? Or did she call me ‘the other one’, the way she has since the regional guild final thirty-seven years ago?”

"I don't know anything about that, sir."

"Of course you don't. Nobody your age does. Because Ruth Pallister has spent thirty-seven years making sure nobody remembers that a judge who was her cousin by marriage marked my Boehm restoration four points under hers, on criteria they rewrote the next year so it could never happen to her again. I have the program. It's in a drawer. I take it out sometimes."

"I really just need the mandrel."

Ione bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste it. This was Tobin. Tobin who had taken her entire family collapse without lifting an eyebrow. He was walking up and down his own shop in a magnificent, undignified rage about a competition from before she was born.

"Fine," Tobin said. "She can have it. One condition. You tell her, word for word, that the pads on the Boehm flute she did for the concert hall last spring are a quarter-tone flat in the low register, and everyone in the district's been too polite to say so, and I am the only one who will, because I've never once mistaken being nice for being honest."

"She'll know that came from you."

"I should hope so."

The young man left with the mandrel and the look of someone who wasn't sure he'd survive delivering the message. Tobin went back to his bench and hummed. It was the first time all week she'd heard him hum.

"Thirty-seven years," Ione said, when she could trust her voice.

"Thirty-seven years because I was right and the judging was bent. Being right doesn't go off like milk." He picked up his knife. "You'll understand at my age. Some fights are worth thirty-seven years of dignity. That's one."

She laughed until her ribs hurt, in a shop that smelled of rosin and spite, in the worst week of her life, and forgot to check her feed for most of an hour.

. . .

Kellan called the next morning. She let it through.

"I'm not calling for her," he said first. "I'm calling because I'm your dad and whatever's going on with you two, I'm not letting it be the reason we stop talking."

"Does she know you're calling?"

"She knows I would. She didn't ask me to. She didn't stop me." A pause with a lot in it. "How are you. Really. Not the reporter version."

"I don't know," Ione said. "I'm somewhere safe with someone who isn't asking me to be anything except tired."

"That'll do for today."

"Dad." She stopped. "About the dinner. What I said."

"You called me stupid."

"I know."

"I'm not, you know."

"I know."

"Right," Kellan said. "Well. Good. That's that, then." He didn't sound like it was that. "Eat something green."

Nemi's message came an hour later.

*I heard. I'm not asking to be let back in. I know I haven't earned that yet.
I'm here if you need anything that doesn't mean trusting me with anything
private, which might be everything right now. Still sorry.*

Ione read it twice. She didn't answer. She put the tablet face down on Tobin's side table next to a half-stripped metronome and left it there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Public Mother

The stay leaked in four days, faster than the directive had. Sera learned it the way she learned most things now, from Asher's face in her doorway before his mouth.

"Both blocs have it," he said. "Corrigan's using it to show the Compact still lets a probability be detained without clinical evidence. Which is technically true, and that's what makes it bad. The other side's using it to show that even the architect reaches for coercion once it's personal. Four requests for a statement this morning. I haven't given one. I don't know one that's true."

She'd spent the morning before he came watching herself. Two montages, one from each side, cut from ten years of her speeches. The same sentences reordered to argue opposite things. *An unused door still tells you something true about the room*, laid over twenty seconds of footage of her own front door. Corrigan's ended on a caption: **EVEN THE ARCHITECT KNOWS WHEN IT ISN'T ENOUGH**. The rehumanizers' ended on another, over the same twenty seconds: **SHE WROTE THE DOOR. SHE WON'T LET HER DAUGHTER USE IT**.

She'd watched each twice looking for the cut where her meaning had been separated from her words. There wasn't one. Every sentence was hers, in an order she'd never chosen. She had built a career on meaning precisely what she said. She had never had to watch her words carried off to argue for something she didn't mean, and it felt like a small death. The public woman she'd spent twenty years building was being replaced in real time by two cartoons.

"The office will want you to recuse," Asher said. "From anything procedural on her matter. You can't recuse from being Steward. It protects how the process looks. It also means the stay stays exactly as filed, run by whoever's put in your chair, and they won't read your intentions the way you'd like."

“So recusal protects the institution and hands my daughter to strangers.”

“It takes you out of a position where every decision about her is also a decision about the vote. Those stopped being separable when it leaked.” He sat, which he rarely did in her office. “Answer me something. The Chamber version doesn’t count. Do you still think the stay was right?”

She took longer than she liked.

“I think I was frightened enough to file something the law was never meant to hold. The fear was real. I don’t know if it was accurate. That’s the problem, because my whole career says not-knowing never gets settled in favor of control. I’m watching myself settle it in favor of control. I can’t seem to stop. I don’t know if that’s love, or the thing I’ve spent twenty years teaching people to catch in themselves.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one I’ve got.” She looked at him. “Don’t recuse me yet. Give me a few days before it can’t be undone. I’m asking for what I asked her for in the garden. I know how that sounds from me.”

He weighed it. She could see him put her on one side and the institution on the other, and she had never seen him need to do that where she could watch.

“Three days,” he said. “I can hold it three days on proper grounds without lying to anyone. After that it’s a story about why I didn’t act. And I won’t lie for you. I never have. I’m not starting now it matters.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to.”

“You’re asking me to delay the truth. That stands close enough to lying that I’ve measured the distance.” He stayed in the chair. “Day four. You’re recused, a capacity panel takes the stay. Statute. Seventy-two hours to review. No panel alive reads Pema’s findings next to your observation and lets it stand.” He spread his hands. “You were never the only line, Sera. You get to choose whose name goes on the correction. Yours or theirs.”

He stood then, and put his coat on, and stopped at the door.

“For what it’s worth, from someone who’s believed in nearly everything you’ve built. I think you know what you’re going to do. I think you’re not ready to be the one who does it yet.”

He went before she could answer.

She went to the shop that afternoon. She told Farro she had an appointment and didn't say where, and she took a tram, which she hadn't done in about eight years, because a Steward's car outside a restorer's shop behind the water-authority depot would have been on the feeds by dinner.

The bay door was half up. Inside a man in a leather apron was bent over a cello with its top off. He didn't look up.

"We're closed to the public on Wednesdays."

"I'm not the public," Sera said, and heard how that sounded.

Tobin Ashcroft straightened, slowly, and looked at her. He was taller than she'd expected, and older, with big scarred hands. He took his time about the looking.

"No," he said. "You're not. She's not here."

"I know. I didn't come to see her."

"Then what did you come for?"

She hadn't prepared it. She'd prepared everything else in her life. "To see where she is," she said. "That she's all right. That somebody's feeding her."

"Somebody's feeding her. Badly. I don't cook." He wiped his hands on the apron. "She's all right. She's angry. She's working. She's sleeping, mostly. I'm not going to tell you more than that, and I'm not going to tell her you came unless you want me to, and I'd think carefully about whether you want me to."

"Why?"

"Because she'll think you came to check up on her. You'll say you didn't. And you'll both be half right, and she'll go quiet for another week." He picked up a scraper. "I've had a lot of apprentices. You can't hurry the glue. That's the whole trade."

Sera stood in the doorway of a room that smelled of rosin and hide glue and did nothing for her at all. On the bench nearest her was a flute, clamped, with a new pad in the third key, and she knew without being told whose work it was.

"She did that," she said.

"She did. Good seating. Better than mine at her age." He didn't look up. "Do you want me to tell her?"

Sera thought about it.

"No," she said. Then: "Is there something she's short of?"

"Tea," Tobin said, after a moment. "She says mine tastes like the bottom of a drawer. She keeps going on about some tea with cardamom in it."

The next morning a tin arrived at the shop by regular mail, no card, and Tobin put it on the shelf above the kettle without saying anything, and Ione used it for a week before she asked where it had come from, and he told her he'd bought it, and she knew he hadn't.

. . .

That evening, back at her desk, she sat with both montages still open and found herself thinking about something small. Ione at nine, furious about a teacher, completely certain the woman had it in for her. Sera had sat in this same chair and chosen to believe her daughter until the facts turned out gentler than the fury. She'd been right to.

She couldn't remember now what had made that time different from this one. The stakes had been small. Trusting her had cost nothing.

She closed the montages. She opened the family file, her own part, the fourteen pages, and read the paragraph about the drive until she could say it without looking. Then she called Farro in and asked him to clear the next day, all of it, and to get the car checked, and when he asked whether she wanted a driver she said no.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Old Road

She drove out alone and didn't tell Kellan where. Pulling out of the garage she knew that was a small dishonesty and did it anyway.

She drove the car herself instead of letting it drive, which she almost never did now. Inside a few minutes her forearms remembered manual control before the rest of her did. A low hum of readiness in the wrists that had nothing to do with the easy road in front of her and a great deal to do with another road, twenty-six years back, that her body had apparently never stopped getting ready for.

The road hadn't changed as much as she'd thought it would. The curve was still there. They'd regraded it and put in a low guardrail sometime in the last two decades. There'd been nothing there the night she needed one. She pulled into the overlook a few hundred meters short of the curve and switched off and sat.

She hadn't been back. She'd told herself she didn't need to, that the fourteen pages were enough. Sitting there she admitted the other reason. She had never wanted to look straight at the geometry of what she'd nearly done in case she recognized something in it.

It took ten minutes.

At twenty-three the fear had arrived looking like clarity, the way she'd written it down, and the clarity had built itself patiently out of things that were true. The colleague had misrepresented the finding. The supervisor hadn't stepped in. The weather had been getting worse exactly as fast as her fear said it was. Every plank was real. The lie was the shape she'd nailed them into, a shape with no room left in it for anyone to tell her otherwise. And she'd driven into the weather that night certain she was the only one left who could protect a child from a danger everyone else was too slow or too compromised or too scared to see.

She thought about the stay.

Every plank was real. Ione had taken in the Compact faster than most scholars. Ione had torn up the directive in one evening and been cruel doing it. Ione had stood up in a room of strangers and refused to be their flag. Held one way, that was a mind working with complete integrity. Held another, it was the same total certainty Sera had once mistaken for clear sight, arriving gentler because a system had spent seventeen years making certainty gentle.

She couldn't tell which. That was what the road had been keeping for her, twenty-six years late: the shape of her own inability to answer, laid out in the same geometry as the night she nearly killed a child she loved while certain she was the only one saving her.

Protective love, a narrowing reading, an act justified as temporary and necessary: she'd built the stay out of every plank of that, one real plank after another. When she filed it she'd told herself this time was different because the love was real and the fear was earned and the step was narrow and reversible. She'd told herself that, in those words, at twenty-three.

There was a technique a clinician had taught her early in recovery, a woman with none of Pema's patience. Say the thing you're afraid of out loud, in plain words, to nobody. Sera had dropped it years ago when she decided she didn't need it.

"I'm afraid," she said, in the car, to the windshield, "that I can't tell protecting my daughter from turning into the person who nearly killed a child because she was sure protection needed it. I wrote a law on the idea that a frightened person can be reached from outside. The way I was. I don't know if anyone can reach me from outside this, because it feels like love. It always felt like love. That was the problem last time too."

She sat with it. She felt no better and no worse. Naming a shape only changed whether she could keep mistaking it for something else.

She called Pema before she started the engine, because she didn't trust the sentence to survive the drive home.

Pema answered on the second ring and listened while Sera said it again, nearly word for word.

"That's the most useful thing you've said to me since this started," Pema said. "It doesn't change my finding about Ione. It's useful because it's the first time

you've talked about your fear as a variable. Up to now you've treated it as a fact about her."

"That's not much comfort."

"No."

"You're supposed to say you didn't offer it as comfort."

"I've said that to your daughter," Pema said. "She told me it was a line. She was right. Go home, Sera. Drive slowly."

. . .

She drove back slowly over the regraded curve, past the guardrail that hadn't been there when she needed it and was there now for reasons that had nothing to do with her. A road that had healed itself while she carried the unhealed version around for twenty-six years. She thought that was unfair of it. Then she thought that was a stupid thing to think about a road, and laughed once, alone, and it came out wet.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Unchosen Symbol

The draft came through Nemi. This time it was a forwarded document, three pages, properly formatted, titled *A Statement from Ione Arden*, written by people who had never asked Ione what she wanted to say.

Nemi's note sat on top of it.

I didn't write this. They asked me to pass it on because I'm the only way they've got to you. I said yes on condition I tell you what I think, which is: don't sign it. The facts are fine. It's you that's wrong in it. I think I finally know the difference, so I'm saying it before you find out the hard way twice.

Ione read the draft twice. It was very good. It was the exact move she'd refused in the rail depot. Her mother recast as a performance from top to bottom, the grief and the love reframed as public relations so complete that even the twenty-three-year-old in the sealed account became a character built for sympathy. *My mother built a cage and called it a compact*, it had her say, in sentences far smoother than anything she'd ever said out loud, *and I am done pretending the architecture of my captivity is an act of love*.

It was eloquent and persuasive, and it was a portrait of someone who had never sat across a counter from Sera with the tea gone cold and heard her say *I don't know which of those is winning* with nothing performed left in her voice.

She thought about getting Tobin to read it and didn't. She thought about calling Kellan and didn't. She wanted nobody else's skill standing behind this one. She sat in Tobin's spare room with the draft on one side and a blank page on the other for most of an evening and wrote something much shorter, in her own voice, which had turned out to be harder to find than she'd expected and impossible to mistake once found.

I'm not a symbol for either side.

I was brought up well by parents who love me, inside a system that has done real good for people who needed it more than I ever did. I also want the choice about my own future to be mine. I'll make it with whatever bad information there is, and I'd rather that than have it made for me by anyone, including my mother, however much she loves me, and she does.

Some of you want my mother to be a fake and some of you need her to be a villain. She built a very good law out of the worst year of her life, and now she's finding out what I think most people find out about the things they believe hardest, which is that believing is easy until it's your front door.

I don't know if I've got the condition. Nobody does. That uncertainty is what my life actually looks like right now. I'm asking everyone who's got an interest in my story, including the people who love me, to let it stay uncertain a bit longer, instead of settling it for me because settled is more useful to you than doubt.

I filed to leave the system I grew up in. I still want that. I also love my mother, and I'm tired, and I would like those two facts to stop being treated as if they cancel out.

. . .

She sent it to Nemi before she could talk herself out of the length or the plainness or the fact that it turned down every big gesture the other version had offered her.

Nemi's reply came inside the hour. *This is better than anything they wrote. Everyone's going to be furious because it doesn't give anybody a villain. Which is why it's right. Sorry it took me this long to be the friend who says so instead of the one who hands you someone else's words.*

Ione posted it herself, on the same channel that had carried the leak.

Both sides were angry for two days. Then both had to quote her directly, because paraphrase kept getting caught. Corrigan's office put out a short, irritated line noting that a minor's personal feelings, however well expressed, did not rebut the underlying clinical risk. Ione found that nearly funny, because she'd never said they did. The channel that had commissioned the smooth version stopped running it and started running excerpts of hers, correctly credited. It was a small theft. She let it go, because at least what they were stealing was hers.

Ambrose wrote, one line. *This is what I meant. You said it better.*

She heard nothing from Sera directly. That night a single unsigned line came through Kellan, forwarded with nothing added.

I read what you wrote. I couldn't have written it. Not at seventeen, and I'm not sure now.

Ione read it more times than she wanted to admit. She didn't answer it. She went down to the shop and asked Tobin whether Ruth had got the Harlow cello out on time.

"Friday," Tobin said. "To the hour. With my mandrel. Which came back with a note."

"What did the note say?"

"*Thank you.*" He said it as if it were an obscenity. "Two words. Thirty-seven years and she sends me two words. She knows exactly what she's doing."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Line She Wrote

The drafting archive had never been public and never needed to be. Every version of the Compact's language across the three years she'd spent on it, from twenty-six to twenty-nine. Arguments crossed out and rebuilt. Margins full of her younger handwriting quarreling with itself. She hadn't opened it in over ten years. She opened it the night after the drive, at her desk, alone, with Ione's statement, posted that afternoon, on the other screen. She'd decided on the drive back that she owed herself one more piece of evidence before she acted on what the road had told her.

The third draft was from her first year of it, twenty-six, still writing more from rage than craft. It had a sentence she'd since edited out.

I don't care if it's a mistake. Let people make their own mistakes. I made mine and nobody stopped me soon enough, and I would rather have died making it than lived the rest of my life having had it made for me by someone who loved me and decided that was the same as knowing better.

She'd softened it a great deal by the seventh draft, knowing even then that raw anger made poor law. Reading the old version now she knew the anger had been the truer of the two. The careful version was its translation.

The seventh draft was from the next spring. Asher had been pushing hard that season to narrow the mature-autonomy language. He was worried it gave too much room to petitioners a panel might reasonably doubt. In the margin, in her own hand:

The provision only means something if it protects choices that look wrong. If it only ratifies choices everyone already likes, it's consensus borrowing autonomy's name. I am writing this for the day a petitioner's family has used up every reasonable argument and still believes the choice is a mistake,

and the law has to decide whether that belief is enough to overrule someone found, independently, competent to decide. It isn't enough. I'm certain of this, knowing that one day someone I love may choose something I'm equally certain is wrong. The provision has to hold anyway. Or I'll have built a better-looking version of the control it claims to replace.

She read it three times, looking for a gap that would let her read it more comfortably. There wasn't one. At twenty-seven she had known this day might come. She had written the clause to survive her own future fear, deliberately, because even then she'd understood that fear that size would one day find a reasonable-sounding case for an exception.

She thought about Pema's finding. She thought about Ione at the depot, refusing a woman in a good coat. She thought about the statement on the other screen, which had disappointed everybody by declining to be simpler than it was. She thought about the sentence she'd said to the windshield. *I don't know if anyone can reach me from outside this.*

She had built a whole legal structure on the idea that a frightened person, however sincere, was not automatically a good judge of the danger she thought she was preventing. She had built it from inside that failure. She had never once pictured that the person the structure would one day have to be defended against was her.

. . .

She drafted the withdrawal by hand. She wanted proof, in the ink, that she'd done it slowly.

I withdraw the temporary incapacity stay filed against my daughter's petition, effective immediately. I do so without certainty that the fear behind it was unfounded. I don't know whether Ione carries active expression of the condition our family has carried for three generations. I may never know, fully, before she has lived with the consequences of her choice. I withdraw it because I wrote the mature-autonomy provision to survive exactly this uncertainty. A choice that is only allowed once everyone around the petitioner is comfortable with the outcome was never what I built. I am still afraid. I have remembered what the law was for.

She didn't send it. She read it back twice, checking for the fluency she'd learned to distrust in herself these last weeks, the smoothness that meant a document was built to survive scrutiny. The third time she decided it was both. Careful and true

at once. She had believed, once, that this was the whole craft of legislative writing, and somewhere in the last months she'd stopped trusting her own hand to do it.

Kellan found her near midnight with the archive still open and the page beside it. He didn't ask. He read it over her shoulder once.

"Sounds like you," he said.

He kissed the top of her head and went to bed without waiting for her. She understood that as trust. She'd come when she was ready and he'd be there for whichever version of her had decided.

. . .

In the morning she filed it before she could reconsider, and called Asher before he could hear it from anyone else.

He was quiet on the line.

"That'll cost you as much as filing it did," he said. "More. Corrigan will say you can't hold a position. The other side will say you only cared once it got personal."

"I know."

"I didn't say it to warn you off." Another pause. "It's the first thing in months that sounds like the woman who wrote the Compact. I've missed her."

"So have I."

She was quiet a moment. Out of her window the traffic went on.

"You got in the car," she said. "That night. At the end. I've never once said thank you."

The line was silent for long enough that she thought it had dropped.

"You'd come off the curve and ended up on the shoulder with the engine running and the baby screaming," Asher said. "You wouldn't talk to me through the window. The back door was unlocked. So I got in, and I sat there till you'd talk to me. Somebody had to." He cleared his throat. "Don't thank me now. I'd have to think of something to say."

She waited.

"I'll draft the statement," he said. "Short. And I'm going up on the roof for twenty minutes first. Don't call me."

PART FOUR

THE WITHDRAWAL



CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Compact Chamber

The Chamber was fuller than it had been since the anniversary. Nobody had dressed it in gold this time. It looked like what it was, a working legislature come to watch a woman explain herself.

She had written three statements and used none of them. At the last hour she decided to read the withdrawal itself into the record first, so the facts would stand on their own before she said anything about them.

“I withdraw the temporary incapacity stay I filed against my daughter’s petition,” she said, and let the sentence sit for as long as it needed. “I filed it believing that recent pressure might be affecting her capacity in ways formal assessment couldn’t see yet. I don’t know whether that belief was accurate. I withdraw it without having settled that. I wrote the mature-autonomy provision to survive not knowing.”

The room went still. She knew the stillness. A room that suspects it’s about to hear something it hadn’t planned for.

“I carry a hereditary condition,” she said. “Some of you know. I gave a room like this the year at the anniversary. My daughter may carry it too. The independent review found her competent to choose. It didn’t find, and couldn’t, whether her choice is wise. Those are different questions and the Compact depends on keeping them apart. I filed the stay because I was frightened enough to blur them in my own daughter’s case, the one case in the world where I could least afford to. I’m withdrawing it because the law I believe in keeps them apart. The one I wanted, for as long as the fear lasted, didn’t.”

Corrigan was up before she’d sat down, as Asher had said he would be.

“The Steward has just told us in her own words that the Compact’s central protection failed the family best placed to use it,” he said. He sounded like a man handed a present. “If fear this personal can override the law’s own author, what does it offer anyone with less standing?”

“It offers this,” Sera said, before the chair could recognize her. She took the liberty anyway. “The law’s own author doesn’t get to keep an exception she filed in fear, once she sees it for what it was. That’s the law working, on the one person in this room with the most power to make it fail quietly.”

Delegate Osei rose from the rehumanizer benches. Sera knew her by name and not much else. Osei had spent years arguing for all developmental governors to come off every minor at a fixed age, family history or not.

“I’d like the record to note something the Steward may not mean as an admission,” Osei said. “She’s told us a mother who wrote this entire structure couldn’t tell protecting her daughter from controlling her, in the moment it counted. If she can’t find her own way back through the door without help, why should anyone believe ordinary families, with none of her training, will do better?”

“I believe exactly what the law was built to require,” Sera said, turning to Osei instead of the chair. She had stopped apologizing for small liberties. “Nobody promised you fear wouldn’t come, or that parents would always recognize it. The law holds anyway. A person’s right to be wrong about her own life doesn’t depend on every parent and every institution and every frightened bystander getting it right first time. I got it wrong. The law caught it, because it was never built to depend on me getting everything right. That’s why you build a door. You don’t trust every guardian to open it well.”

Osei sat down. She didn’t look persuaded. She looked like someone taking notes for later, which she was.

. . .

Corrigan caught her in the corridor afterward, by the coat racks, where nobody from the feeds was allowed. He was a heavy, tidy man with a soft voice that didn’t match the one he used on the floor.

“That was well done,” he said.

“You’re going to cut it up by six o’clock.”

“By five. I’ve got good people.” He buttoned his coat. “I want to say one thing off the record, and then I’ll go back to being your problem. My granddaughter’s

on full governors. Hereditary, like yours. Not the same thing, a different one, worse numbers. She's eleven. She's the happiest child I know." He looked at the floor. "Every time you win, somebody's family gets a door. Every time I lose, I go home and look at her and think, that door's going to be there when she's seventeen, and somebody's going to hand her a leaflet about it in a rail depot."

"And you'd like the door gone."

"I'd like it locked until she's thirty," Corrigan said. "That's a grandfather talking. I know. I've been losing to you for fifteen years because you're right about most people. I've never been arguing about most people." He nodded to her, quite courteously. "Good afternoon, Steward."

She watched him go down the stairs. She thought about her mother in the chair by the window, and about what Corrigan's granddaughter would be at seventy, and she couldn't make either thought come out anywhere useful.

. . .

The vote was tabled, as Asher had expected. Neither bloc satisfied. Both already recutting their montages with today's footage folded in. Sera left the Chamber knowing the political cost would take months to add up, and found, for the first time since the petition, that she cared more about the other timeline.

Ione wasn't at the house. Kellan told her gently that their daughter had asked to stay at Tobin's through the removal, and maybe past it, before deciding whether to come home at all, now that there was nothing legally keeping her away.

"That's fair," Sera said.

She'd expected it to hurt more. It hurt a normal amount.

Kellan poured two glasses of something they didn't usually drink on a weeknight. They sat at the counter in the clothes she'd worn to watch her career take its biggest public hit in ten years.

"How does it feel?" he said. "Not the politics. The other bit."

"Lighter." The word came fast, which surprised her. "In the shoulders. Actually in the shoulders." She rolled one to check. "And I keep thinking about those montages. I used to think my job was making sure nobody could bend what I said. They always can. I only ever got to choose whether it was true."

"That's not nothing."

"It's smaller than I thought."

“She asked me to tell you something,” Kellan said. “Word for word. She made me say it back.”

“Go on.”

“Tell her I read the transcript. Tell her I think she meant every sentence. Tell her that doesn’t mean I’m ready to come home, and she has to be able to hold both without turning it into an argument.”

Sera recognized the construction. The ability to say a hard thing in words built to survive being repeated by someone else. It was hers. She’d spent months afraid of that precision in her daughter, reading it as a symptom.

“She sounds like you,” Kellan said.

“She sounds like her,” Sera said, and drank.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Last Adjustment

Removal took eleven days. Pema's office stepped the layers down one at a time in an order designed so that an unmanaged nervous system didn't meet the world all at once. Ione had imagined each layer going with a click, like a pad seating. It was more like fog thinning unevenly over a field.

The first thing she noticed was a thought that didn't get turned.

Day seven, in Tobin's shop, holding a cracked headjoint she'd been asked to assess. A delivery drone clipped the outer sensor on its way past, and a flash of irritation went through her, way too big for the thing that caused it. Sharp, immediate, unedited. She stood holding it and waited for the cooling she'd felt all her life, the air quietly stepping in to take the edge off. It didn't come. The irritation sat there, hers, embarrassing, real. She laughed out loud in the empty front room at being properly annoyed with a drone.

"Something funny?" Tobin called from the back.

"I think I just had a bad mood. About nothing. It didn't go anywhere. It sat there being too big until it got bored."

"Welcome to the rest of us," Tobin said.

The silences were stranger. At dinner with Kellan, on one of his visits to Tobin's, a pause just kept going. Nothing warmed the room. Nothing prompted either of them. It was bearable. It was only quiet. She'd gone seventeen years without once sitting in a silence long enough to learn that most of them sort themselves out if nobody keeps stirring.

Sleep was worse. She'd always gone under fast, some layer easing her down before her thoughts could get going. On the ninth night, with that layer at its lowest, she lay awake for nearly two hours going round and round something offhand

she'd said to Tobin that afternoon. It was a joke about his age that had come out meaner than she'd meant. She couldn't make it stop. She hated it. The grinding, boring refusal of her own head to shut up. Then somewhere past two hours the worry wore itself out and she fell asleep with an odd, new satisfaction. She had outlasted something instead of being spared it.

The first anger worth the name was about a delivery schedule. Tobin wanted the Correlli headjoint out by Thursday. She'd promised a customer Wednesday without asking him. Ordinary. Two people who worked close together wanting incompatible things. She felt it climb, with nothing sanding it, to somewhere sharper than she was used to saying out loud.

"I'm angry," she said. "About a delivery date. That's how small it is. And it's not going away like it used to."

"That's allowed," Tobin said. "Anger about small things is most of what anger is. The rest is people doing big anger because they think small doesn't count." He put his knife down. "Want to finish the argument, or sit with it first?"

"Argument."

They had it. Nothing smoothed either of them. At the end of it he'd won on Thursday and she'd won on who called the customer, and she felt something she could only call exhilaration. She'd had a real disagreement on her own resources and come out the other side.

"And the joke," she said. "Yesterday. About your age. That was mean."

"It was," Tobin said. "It was also accurate. I'm very old." He picked the knife back up. "Apology accepted. Don't make a habit of it. The apologizing, I mean. The jokes are fine."

. . .

She wasn't transformed. On the twelfth morning she didn't wake up wiser, or freer, or whole. Some mornings she woke tired and some irritable. Once she cried for no reason she could find over a piece of music that hadn't done anything to her the week before. This was closer to what she'd asked for than anything either side had imagined for her, and most days it was dull, and all of it was hers.

Nemi came on the tenth day. She didn't knock. She stood outside until Ione saw her through the window.

"I'm not asking for anything," Nemi said when Ione opened the door. "I heard what's happening to you this week. I didn't want you doing it without one person outside your family checking you're all right. Even if you'd rather I hadn't."

"You could've messaged."

"I could. I was going to. I wrote four and deleted them, and one had a joke in it, which, no." She didn't come in. She stayed on the step. She looked tired in a new way, something Ione hadn't been paying attention to. "I quit the depot, by the way. Third try took. The engineering track. The field hours one. I start next month." No triumph in it. The flatness of someone who'd wanted a thing too long to feel much when it came. "I nearly didn't tell you. Turning up with good news in the middle of your week. Then I thought you'd probably rather know I've got a life outside feeling bad about you." A tired smile. "So how is it? Really."

"Weird," Ione said, and was surprised how easily it came. "Better and worse. In directions I didn't expect. I'm not letting you all the way back in. I'm glad you came."

"More than I came for," Nemi said, and went. She didn't push. Ione thought, watching her go down the stairs, that it was the first thing Nemi had done since the leak that she could trust. Ask for nothing, take the small thing on offer.

. . .

She called her mother on the twelfth day. First time since the stay.

"I'm not coming home yet," she said before Sera could ask. "It's not a punishment. I just need to be a person somewhere that isn't your house for a bit. Then I'll come back and be your kid in it. I love you. I'm not ready. And I didn't want it coming through Dad again."

Sera was quiet on the other end. When she spoke there was hurt in it, and something steadier under the hurt.

"Take the time," she said. "I've defended that choice for strangers for twenty years. I can do it for you without asking you to explain."

"Thanks," Ione said, and after she'd hung up she sat on Tobin's couch with the phone in her lap, feeling the thanks go on being hers for a long time after, nothing taking the edge off it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ordinary Anger

Ione came home in April, on an ordinary Tuesday, with the same bag she'd left with. The house took her back quietly. Its systems held to the reduced baseline she'd made a condition of coming back at all. Consent schedule. Nothing adjusting on its own in her rooms. The kitchen still did what Sera and Kellan had signed up for, and Ione could feel the difference when she crossed the threshold, a slight warmth she hadn't asked for, and learned to walk through it.

The fight came on a Thursday. From outside it would have sounded ridiculous. Kellan had moved a stack of her sheet music off the counter to make room for dinner, and Ione, in late from the depot, reacted to it with a fury about forty times the size of eighteen inches of paper.

"You don't just move my things." Her voice went up fast, faster than Sera had heard it go in months. "That's not yours. Nothing in this house is supposed to be yours to decide anymore, that was the entire point, and you just picked it up like it still was."

"It was in the way of dinner. I moved it eighteen inches. I didn't touch your life."

"You don't get to decide what counts as touching my life."

"I'm not deciding anything. I'm making pasta." Kellan's voice went up too, past his usual patience. A man who had been extremely careful for months showing a hairline crack. "I can't spend the rest of my life scared to move a pile of paper without a hearing, Ione. That's eggshells. Different eggshells. I don't think either of us wants to live in that."

"So now I'm the problem."

"I didn't say that."

“You meant it.”

Sera was in the doorway with a dish towel. She felt something arrive low in her chest, cold and immediate, and hated how fast she knew it. Anger escalating past its cause. The shape in the old accounts. The shape she’d spent months learning to fear in her daughter’s voice.

Her hand moved before she’d decided to move it. Up, toward the household welfare call in her field of vision, the one that brought the district’s responders to the door and logged the house as a concern. It was meant for real danger. It was wildly out of proportion to a fight about sheet music. She caught herself with her hand half raised, and was appalled.

She didn’t activate it. She made herself put the dish towel down on the counter instead. She made herself stand in the doorway and watch her family have an argument the way any family might.

It didn’t resolve the way ordinary anger is supposed to, not quickly. Ione went upstairs still red, still sure in some wordless way that she’d been right to be furious, even as the reasons fell apart when she tried to say them. She didn’t come down for dinner. An hour later Kellan knocked on her door and left a plate outside it. He didn’t ask for anything. Two stiff days followed, shorter answers than either of them was used to.

On the third evening Ione sat down at the counter across from him, not quite looking at him.

“I don’t know why I got that big,” she said. “It wasn’t the music. I know that much. I don’t know what it was, and I hate that I can’t just tell you, the way I can usually tell people things. I think for about four seconds I wanted something in this house to be completely mine to be angry about and you were standing where it landed.” She turned her cup. “That’s not a good reason. It’s the closest one I’ve got.”

“You’re allowed an out-of-proportion reaction,” Kellan said. “That’s most of being an unmanaged person, from what I can see. I’ve had a few this year. Not proud of them.”

“Like what?”

He hesitated in a way that made her sit up. She could smell a confession.

“Like the fact that I have views about Harbor Light that your mother has asked me not to share in the house.”

“The show. The one that’s been on since before I was born.”

"It's been on since before *I* was born, Ione, and the fact that it keeps finding new and worse decisions for the Calloways is a genuine achievement and I won't be ashamed of it." His voice had gone tight with real feeling. A man who'd been saving this up for weeks with nobody to unload it on. "Last month they killed Marisol's twin brother. Using amnesia as the cover story. They've used amnesia twice already. And this week they revealed the amnesia was faked, by a character we haven't seen in six seasons, for reasons nobody has tried to explain, and I've been sitting on it for a week and a half because your mother thinks the show is beneath comment and there's nobody else in this house to be furious with."

"You're telling me the thing that finally cracked you this year was a soap."

"I've handled a stay, a leak, a marriage under strain, and your entire legal case with what I consider remarkable composure. I'm allowed one completely unhinged opinion about fictional amnesia, and I'm spending it now, on you, because you're sitting at this counter and you can't leave without walking past me."

Ione laughed. It went on long enough that some of the two days drained out of her shoulders.

. . .

She went up to bed. Sera stayed in the kitchen with Kellan, the dish towel still in her hand, not sure whether to tell him.

She told him.

"My hand was moving," she said. "Toward the welfare call. Over sheet music. I caught it halfway up. For about two seconds I didn't know if I was going to stop it."

Kellan was quiet. When he spoke there was none of the alarm she'd braced for.

"You did stop it."

"This time."

"This time's the only time it's happened. So it's the only data we've got." He took the dish towel out of her hands and put it on the counter. It was an old habit of his, taking whatever she was holding so she had both hands free. "I'm not going to pretend it doesn't worry me a bit. I'm also not letting you make one caught impulse into proof you can't catch the next one. You stopped. That's the whole data point. Don't build a worse one out of the half-second before."

She called Pema in the morning before she'd worked out why she needed to. She described the whole scene in more clinical detail than it deserved, listening for a word that would tell her whether she'd seen something ordinary or the first plank of the thing she feared most.

Pema let her finish.

"When Kellan tells you about a meeting that got more heated than it needed to," Pema said, "do you look for the recursion in it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Kellan doesn't carry it."

"As far as either of us knows," Pema said, "neither does Ione." A pause. "Did she come down afterward and say she didn't know why?"

"Yes."

"Then she could still hear him. That's the marker. Loud isn't." Another pause. "Keep looking for it in loud and she'll stop being loud where you can see her."

Sera sat with the phone after it had gone quiet.

At the office, meanwhile, life carried on, because it does. Asher brought her a budget fight about assessor staffing in the northern district. Three more reviewers or two. She argued it for forty minutes on a Tuesday morning with real engagement, grateful for how little it had to do with her.

"You argued the numbers," Asher said, gathering his papers. "Properly. I'd nearly forgotten what that looks like."

"It's nice to fight about something that isn't my family."

"That one. The one who cares whether the north gets three reviewers or two," Asher said at the door. "Most of this office likes working for her best. Thought you should hear it." He paused. "The inspector came back, by the way. With a colleague."

"And?"

"They've taken a jar each," Asher said. "We're in negotiations."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Summer Without Correction

The water authority was replacing a century of patched piping along the old rail corridor. Tobin put her name forward for the crew and warned her first. Long days. Bad weather half the time. Enough permit trouble to make her wonder whether an unmanaged system of any kind was more efficient than the one she'd left.

Her first real mistake came in the second week of June. She miscalculated a pressure differential on a joint she'd been trusted to seal alone. It held through the evening shift and let go overnight and flooded an access corridor nobody was using. It cost the crew a day. The site supervisor gave her a lecture sharp enough that afterward she sat on an upturned crate trying not to be sick with humiliation. Nothing softened it. Nothing reframed it before she'd had a chance to feel it.

"Everyone floods a corridor," said the woman on the next joint, without looking up. "Mine was worse. Backed a loader into the supply shed my first month. They didn't let me forget it for a year." She glanced over. "Cass. You're the Steward's kid."

"I'm also the one who flooded corridor six."

"Better introduction," Cass said.

. . .

The permits taught her more about the unmanaged world than any of the arguments had. Rerouting one section of pipe around an obstruction took two weeks and three municipal offices that talked to each other only by paper memo. Ione spent most of a week in a waiting room with a clock that ran four minutes slow, filling in the same three fields on four forms because no office trusted any other

office's version. She'd imagined, back when she filed, that an unmanaged life would feel like being continuously awake. That week it felt like forms. She found she didn't mind. Freedom included the freedom to be bored stupid in a permit office, and nobody was going to make it more bearable for her.

Cass was twenty-two and had grown up in the low-management districts. Nothing had ever smoothed a single one of her moods. She thought Ione's childhood sounded less exotic than inconvenient.

"I wouldn't have lasted," Cass said one evening. They were on the corridor's retaining wall after a long flat day, watching the light go down over pipe that would carry water to people who'd never know their names. "The management I could've stood. The watching, no. Knowing something was always paying attention to how I felt. I'd have spent my whole childhood acting calm to see if it was marked."

"Some days I think I did," Ione said. It came easily, said to someone with no stake in which version of her served which side. "I didn't always know. That's what gets me. I can't sort out, even now, which bits were me and which were just good management."

"Does that scare you?"

"Some days. Mostly it makes me curious."

. . .

Her second mistake came in August and was smaller than the flood and harder to forgive. She misread an instruction, half from tiredness and half from being annoyed at getting corrected twice in one morning, and welded a support bracket at the wrong angle. Someone else had to cut it out and redo it while she stood there, useless, watching an afternoon of somebody's work go into undoing hers. The old version of her would have had the sting taken off before it landed. This time she just stood in it. The ordinary shame of letting irritation make her sloppy. By evening she was steadier for it, as if the feeling had needed to be all the way felt before it could finish.

"You're allowed to be bad at something for an afternoon," Cass said that night. They were sharing a thermos of coffee gone lukewarm hours ago. "Six years I've done this. I still put a bracket in wrong twice a season." She screwed the lid back on the thermos. "I don't tell people this. My mom left when I was nine. Nobody smoothed that either. There wasn't anything in my district to do it, and if there

had been we couldn't have paid for the tier. For a long time I thought unmanaged meant left." She looked at the pipe. "You chose the thing I never got a say in. I thought if I ever met someone like you I'd hate them. I don't. That's all."

"Thanks for telling me."

"Don't thank me. Friendship's supposed to cost both sides something. You've been paying most of it." She bumped Ione's shoulder. "Go home. You look like a drowned rat and we've got a six o'clock."

Nemi's engineering office turned out to be two floors up in the same authority building. They passed once in a stairwell in July, and both said hello, and both kept walking.

With Cass it never turned into more than it was. No drama. Two people who worked well together and had become each other's steadiest company over one dull summer. Nobody was managing it into meaning more than it had earned. Ione liked that about it more than she could explain.

. . .

She went to her grandmother's on Thursdays, when the crew schedule let her. Nobody asked her to. She didn't tell Sera for the first month.

Adela played cards with the retired judge in the residence's day room. The judge was called Mr. Farquhar and cheated with great dignity. Adela let him. Ione sat at the end of the table and was dealt in after the second week, and lost steadily, and was told she held her cards like a plumber.

"I am a plumber," Ione said. "More or less."

"You're a Marsh," her grandmother said. "We hold our cards close. Tighter. There." She reached over and adjusted Ione's grip with two cold fingers. "Your mother held them like that. Before."

"Before the four months?"

"Before she had to be careful." Adela laid down a run. Mr. Farquhar sighed. "Is it back yet? Anything?"

"No. Ordinary stuff. I flooded a corridor."

"On purpose?"

"No."

"Pity," said her grandmother. "I'd have liked to hear about it if it was on purpose." She won the hand, which Ione had never seen her do before, and looked

briefly startled by it, and then very pleased. "Don't tell the staff," she said. "They'll think I'm getting worse."

. . .

Tobin called her twice that August, both times in the evening, both times about a headjoint he thought she'd like to see on a free Saturday. Both times she was short with him. She was tired, and his patience felt like one more thing being asked of her. The second time he asked, mildly, whether she was still planning to come by at all. She said something without looking at it first. That she wasn't his responsibility anymore. That he could find someone else to teach if he wanted the company.

The line went quiet. She heard it land harder than she'd meant.

She didn't take it back. She told herself she was tired and tired people said things. She didn't call him that week or the week after. It became one of the things that had happened that summer without becoming a thing she did anything about.

. . .

Sera spent most of July in the north on the assessor staffing, and Ione called her twice from the site. The first call was four minutes: the weather, and whether the garden at home had survived the dry spell, which Ione was supposed to be watering. The second had a long silence in the middle that neither of them tried to fill. Ione on the retaining wall with the phone at her ear. Sera in a hotel room four hundred kilometers away. The silence held. Nobody hung up.

"Still there?" Sera said at last.

"Still here."

"Good," Sera said, and then told her, in some detail, about a delegate from the north who had brought a cat into committee.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The False Alarm

The fight before it was the smallest yet. Curfew. The oldest argument there is between a parent and a child who turned eighteen in the spring and is still, under the developmental statutes, a minor until next spring. Ione wanted an extra hour at a thing with Cass and the crew at the end of August. Sera hesitated for reasons she couldn't name as anything but habit.

"I'm not asking you to run my schedule," Ione said. Sharper than the thing needed, well inside the normal range. "I'm asking you to trust that I know when I'm tired enough to come home."

"I do trust you. I'm allowed to worry too."

"Worry quietly. You're not."

Ione went, within her rights, within the hour she'd asked for. Then she didn't come home. Not at the agreed time. Not an hour after. By the third hour, with no answer to any message and no location Sera could reach through the channels a managed house would have lit up at once, the old machinery came up in Sera whole. The road. Twenty-three. Completely convincing.

She called the site supervisor first. Nothing, which fed it. By midnight she had called three people she hadn't used in years. A retired investigator who'd once handled delicate things for the Compact office. A friend in regional transit monitoring. A colleague with access to public safety channels well beyond anything an ordinary parent could summon.

"Last confirmed sighting," the investigator said. He had the flat calm of a man who'd done this conversation with a hundred frightened parents and knew his steadiness was half the service. "And I need an honest answer before we go on. Is

there a clinical reason for this level of concern? Beyond what any parent would have? It changes what I put on it in the first hour.”

“There might be,” Sera said. She heard the moment her worry turned into a lever she was pulling on purpose. “A hereditary condition. I don’t know if it’s active. I’ve got no evidence tonight is more than a fight about curfew.”

“But you want it all.”

“Yes.”

She didn’t look at how much of that yes was mother and how much was Steward. He mobilized what she asked him to. Inside ninety minutes there was a search on that used more of the district’s resources than most missing-person cases got in a week.

Ione was found at four in the morning, asleep on Cass’s couch. After the fight she’d decided she needed a night away before facing her mother again. An ordinary, healthy, mildly inconsiderate decision. She’d told nobody because it hadn’t occurred to her to.

. . .

Sera drove to Cass’s building before dawn. Ione was at the door already dressed and already furious. She knew how big a machine had been started over one night of not answering.

“You called in favors from people who find actual missing people,” Ione said before Sera had opened her mouth, “because I didn’t pick up for six hours after an argument about curfew. Do you know what that looks like from here? You didn’t trust me to have a normal bad night. You went straight to the worst version. The one everyone’s been scared of all year. And you didn’t even ask Cass first if I was asleep on her couch.”

“I was frightened.”

“I know you were frightened. Frightened doesn’t make it the right size. You used emergency resources because I had a completely normal night of not answering my phone. That’s exactly what Pema keeps telling you not to do, and you did it the first time I gave you even a small reason.”

Sera stood on the cold sidewalk. Every word was accurate. Any defense she had would sound, even to her, like fear passing itself off as love.

"You're right," she said. "I've got nothing better. I overreacted, badly, and I did it the first time you gave me an ordinary reason instead of an extraordinary one. That tells me something about me I don't much want to know."

"It tells me you still don't trust the difference." Ione's voice had dropped. The anger was draining into something tired and disappointed, which was worse. "I came home. I was always going to come home. I just wanted a night that was mine. Instead I got proof the trust only lasts while nothing goes wrong."

She went back inside without waiting. Behind her in the doorway Cass, in a T-shirt and bare feet, looked at Sera for a long second, and then shut the door.

. . .

Kellan was waiting at the house. He'd been up with her since midnight, at the counter, while she made the calls, and had stayed behind when she drove out. He didn't ask whether she'd overreacted. He'd decided that somewhere around the third call.

"I keep thinking I should have stopped you at the first call," he said. He was turning a mug gone cold an hour ago. "Or the second. There was a point, I don't know which call, where part of me went, this is a lot. And then I thought, well, she knows the protocols better than me. I'm not telling you so you'll say it's fine."

"I wasn't going to say it's fine."

"Good. Because if I'd opened my mouth at one instead of three we'd have called half as many people. I keep doing the math and it never comes out anywhere I like." He put the mug down. "You asked me if it was too much. I said I didn't know. I did know. I didn't want to be the one who slowed it down in case I was wrong and something had happened to her."

"You don't have to take a share of this."

"I know I don't. I'm doing it anyway. You've spent a year being honest when it cost you. It'd be pretty ugly of me to stand here and let you carry all of it when I had the chance to stop it." He rubbed his face. "I let it happen. That's not innocent. That's..." He looked for the word and didn't find one he trusted. "I don't know what it is yet. I know it's not innocent. That's as far as I've got."

"I think tonight proved I can't tell the difference," Sera said. "I don't think you can either."

"No," he said. He reached across the counter and she let him take her hand.

The weeks after were quiet in the way a house goes quiet absorbing a real setback. Ione kept her distance without announcing it. Shorter answers. More evenings at the depot or Cass's. The small unguarded moments that had been building up since spring stopped. Sera didn't push. She'd promised herself on the sidewalk that the repair would go at whatever pace Ione set, and she kept the promise even when it cost more than she let anyone see.

It was Ione who moved first, three weeks later. She turned up in the kitchen doorway one evening with a spare valve pad in her hand.

"I'm not fixing anything of yours," she said. "I didn't want to sit in my room again. And I didn't want it to be a whole conversation about why I'm out here. Is that allowed?"

"That's allowed," Sera said.

Ione sat at the counter and started cutting leather to size with a small blade. Sera made tea in the brown pot. Neither of them said anything much for an hour, and at the end of it Ione swept the leather scraps into her palm and dropped them in the trash and said, "Night," and Sera said, "Night," and that was all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Good Weeks

The autumn went more gently than Ione had expected after that morning. Somewhere in October she noticed herself doing what she'd promised she wouldn't do too early, which was letting the good weeks pile up into something that felt like evidence.

She'd stopped waiting, most days, for the thing to arrive. She noticed it sideways, the way she noticed most changes in herself now. A morning on site when she disagreed with Cass about a coupling, felt the old heat come up too big, and watched it go down again inside the hour. No lasting twist. No narrowing. An argument that ran its course and left them both a bit sheepish and completely intact.

The supervisor gave her a stretch of pipe of her own to oversee in October, the first real sign of trust since the flood. She spent three days checking every joint herself before she let herself believe it wasn't a test. It held. She signed off on it in her own hand. Something settled in her chest that had nothing to do with the condition or the petition. The plain satisfaction of having built a thing right and being able to prove it.

. . .

Cass's autumn was going worse, and Ione took longer to notice than she should have. It came out on a slow Wednesday. Cass snapped at a supplier over a shipment two days late, then snapped at Ione for asking if she was all right.

"I'm fine. Why does everyone keep asking me like I'm the one with the family situation."

"I didn't say you had one."

“My mother wants coffee.” Flat and fast, like something held behind her teeth for days. “Thirteen years. Now she wants coffee. She found me through some registry. She’s got a whole letter. Four years sober and someone told her that means she can just show up.” She threw a wrench down harder than the job needed. “And don’t. Don’t do the thing where you’ve read fourteen pages about your mom and think that means you get a theory about mine. It’s not the same. She left because leaving was easier. Nobody in our apartment was scared of loving anybody too much. Your family’s very clever feelings about consent aren’t going to turn that into something else.”

“I wasn’t going to compare them.”

“You were about to. I’ve watched you do it to everyone this year. Not me.” She picked the wrench back up. Whatever door had opened in her was already shut. “Let me be bad at this without it being your thing to understand.”

Ione didn’t push. They worked the rest of the shift in a silence with none of the usual ease in it. Cass didn’t apologize when they finished and Ione didn’t ask her to. Some things didn’t come out on anybody’s schedule. Some days the kindest thing going was to let somebody else’s mess stay theirs.

. . .

One Tuesday Kellan burned the rice. Sera laughed harder than the joke deserved. Ione did an unkind and completely accurate impression of the site supervisor until all three of them were laughing too hard to finish eating. Nobody mentioned the stay. Kellan scraped the pan into the compost and declared the rice “toasted, intentionally,” and Ione made him say it again in the supervisor’s voice.

One Sunday in late October Sera asked, almost shyly, whether Ione wanted to drive out and look at some old church bells a local trust was trying to save. It had nothing to do with either of their usual concerns. They spent an afternoon looking at corroded bronze and arguing happily about tuning. Ione did most of the explaining. Sera listened with the pleasure of a parent finding a real expertise in her child that had nothing to do with anything they’d fought about. They had lunch in the trust’s small café. Somewhere in the middle of a sentence about flat-toned bronze Ione caught herself simply being happy, in her mother’s company, with none of the watchfulness either of them had carried into every room for a year.

“I think I might not have it,” she told Kellan a few nights later. They were alone in the kitchen. Sera was working late. There was more hope in it than she’d

let herself say aloud in months. “I know nobody can confirm that. I know absence of evidence and all that. Pema’s said it six different ways. I just mean I’ve had a whole autumn of normal bad days and normal good ones, and none of them felt like the thing in the account. I’m allowed to notice.”

“You’re allowed,” Kellan said. Something careful in it she didn’t stop to look at. “I notice it too.”

She told Sera something like it a week later, over a dinner that had become boring in the best way.

“I want that to be true for you,” Sera said. “I’m not going to pretend I’m neutral. Some days I hope, more than I’ve let myself hope about anything in years, that you just got dealt a different hand from the rest of us. I don’t get to decide it by wanting it hard enough. I’m trying to hold the wanting and the not-knowing together. You asked me to, once.”

Sera noticed it in herself too, and said it to nobody. She slept without the low hum of watchfulness that had run under every night since the Sunday of the numbers. Twice that autumn she went a whole day without checking the emergency channel. Six months earlier that would have been unthinkable. Now it just happened. She called it, privately, a good season, and didn’t reach for any bigger word.

. . .

What Ione didn’t notice that autumn was a habit Kellan had built into his week.

Every Friday evening, from his study, with the door shut. A short call to Pema’s office. In the careful clinical language he’d learned from twenty years of allocation modeling, he described the small observable details of his daughter’s week.

It had started in March, the week removal began, in the kind of panic that makes a man do the thing he can do quietly. It had carried on because stopping would have meant saying he’d started.

“She had a good week,” he told Pema, the Friday after the bells. He kept his voice down though the door was shut. “Really good. Not performed. She and Sera spent a day together that had nothing to do with any of this. She came home lighter than I’ve seen her in a year. Sleep’s steady. Two disagreements with Cass. Both settled same day. Nothing sticky in how she talked about either after.”

“Consistent with last month,” Pema said. “I’ll say what I say every week. This doesn’t replace her own account. It doesn’t override her authority over her record.”

“I know.”

“Would she consent, if you asked?”

Kellan was quiet. He usually kept this a settled fact so he wouldn’t have to look at it.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve told myself it doesn’t matter. I’m not telling you anything she hasn’t lived in front of me. She hasn’t said yes. I know that.”

“I’ll note that you know,” Pema said. Neither approval nor rebuke. The call ended the way it always did, with the question still open.

He told himself each Friday that it was love. A private safeguard, nothing more. Nothing any watchful father wouldn’t notice anyway. He didn’t look too hard at whether Sera knew. He didn’t look at whether Ione would recognize the line he was drawing as a line at all.

Ione noticed only that her father was sometimes a bit distracted before dinner on Fridays. She put it down to Harbor Light, which went out on Fridays, and teased him about it, and he let her.

PART FIVE

WHAT DECLARED ITSELF



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Cascade

It started with a printer. The depot's had jammed on a permit form, and Ione borrowed Kellan's study to print it. The study's display was still set to the older, looser household permissions from before removal. Nobody had thought to change them, because nobody had imagined she'd need to look. It put his recent call log up on the shared screen without being asked.

Pema Orr — Office of Independent Review. Friday. Friday. Friday.

It went back further than she wanted to scroll. March. Every Friday since March.

Pema's office recorded every contact with a petitioner's household, by statute, and sent the household a copy; nobody in the house had ever opened one. She played the most recent before she'd finished deciding to. Her father's voice, calm and clinical, describing her sleep. Her moods. The shape of an argument with Cass three days earlier that she hadn't known he'd noticed well enough to describe that closely.

At first the fear that came was the right size. Her father had been reporting on her, every week, without asking, for eight months, to the office that could decide whether she was fit to keep what she'd spent a year winning. That was true. It had happened. She sat with it for a while and it settled in her chest with the clean weight of a fact.

Then she found the message from Nemi.

It was old. January. The week of the stay. Sitting in a folder she hardly opened. She had read it twice at Tobin's, put the tablet face down, and never answered it. *I heard. I'm not asking to be let back in. I know I haven't earned that yet.* She read it now with her father's calm voice still in her ears, and felt the reading start to widen. She didn't recognize the widening as widening.

Nemi had known things. Nemi had people inside the movement, and people in offices, and rooms Ione had never seen. *I heard*. Heard from whom? What if the apology had never been about the leak. What if it had been about this. What if everyone who'd ever said they were checking on her had been passing some version of her back to the same quiet middle. Nemi. Kellan. Cass. Tobin. The woman in the good coat. Her mother's twenty years of building so complete that even the people who loved her had turned into parts of it without choosing to.

Some part of her that still worked said, from a distance, that this was a very large structure to build out of one true fact and one ambiguous message. She noticed herself noticing.

And then, exactly the way the fourteen pages said it would, so exactly that later she would recognize it like reading her own life in her mother's handwriting, the noticing stopped feeling like caution. It started feeling like the last thing standing between her and a clear view she'd been walking around for months without letting herself look at.

She remembered Cass three weeks ago, in the middle of complaining about the supervisor, asking whether Ione had been sleeping all right. She remembered Tobin in August, on the phone, asking whether she was still planning to come by at all. A question she'd taken as a lonely old man's question. Both came back in a different light, rebuilt, as evidence. She didn't feel it as invention. She felt it as finally seeing what had been in front of her. A hundred small unconnected facts snapping into one clean shape. It was a relief.

She didn't cry. She didn't shout. Nothing that would have alarmed anyone watching from across a room. She started, with the careful method she brought to a stuck pad, closing every channel anyone could reach her through. Location sharing off. Messages off. Calls. The house's own check-in, last. Each one with the calm certainty of someone shutting doors that had only ever opened to let people watch. She thought about leaving a note. Some part of her still weighed the kindness of it. She decided against. The part of her that could have written a note that made sense to anyone reading it later was no longer the part in charge.

. . .

The forecast had been bad enough that even the ordinary systems had issued an advisory. Wind rising ahead of a front nobody expected until morning. Ione walked toward the old rail corridor's maintenance tunnels. The same corridor

she'd spent a summer repairing. The one piece of infrastructure in the district she knew better than anyone who might come looking. She felt an enormous stillness. After months of dread with no address, she had found the one place nobody's careful structure of concern could follow her into.

The word dangerous never came up in her. That would be the hardest part to explain afterward, to Pema, to herself. She thought of it as the last unmanaged room in her life. She went toward it like someone going toward the one door she is now completely sure is right.

The outer access gate was the one she and Cass had rehung in July. Some small observant part of her registered it as she levered it open. Her own good summer's work, turned tonight into the door that let her vanish into the one structure she trusted more than any living person. The air past it was colder than the night. It smelled of standing water and old rust. She walked into the dark with the flat confidence of someone who believed she was walking toward safety.

She walked for what felt like twenty minutes. Past junctions she'd helped map. Past a stretch of pipe she and Cass had argued about for a whole afternoon. Each remembered turn was a small private confirmation that she'd chosen right. The wind had found the ventilation shafts by now. A low uneven moan overhead. She noted it and didn't let it trouble her. Being troubled would have meant admitting a doubt she'd decided, hours ago, not to admit.

Past the second main junction the certainty met something it couldn't swallow straight away. Standing water, ankle deep, where she remembered dry floor. The weather was already doing something to the drainage that her July mapping hadn't allowed for. She stood at the edge of it. Some old intact part of her logged this as a reason to rethink the whole plan. The larger, louder part turned it into confirmation. Of course it was rising. Of course everything outside was getting worse. That was exactly why this tunnel, hers, known, unreachable, was the only sound place left.

She waded in. Her boots filled with cold water she barely felt. She kept going, deeper, the flashlight beam shrinking against a dark that wasn't thinning the way it should the further she got from the gate.

The Narrowest Intervention

The alert reached Sera at twenty to midnight, at the office, where she had fallen asleep in her chair over a committee brief. A cascade-pattern flag from Pema's monitoring office, raised automatically when Ione's messages, location and the house's passive check-ins all went dark inside the same few minutes. It was the dumb signal Ione had called a smoke alarm across the dinner table. It knew nothing about Friday calls. It knew nothing about what had happened in the study. It only knew she was gone, the way it would have known it about anyone.

She was upright in a second with her neck stiff and her shoes off. For a moment she stared at the header and couldn't make her eyes read it. *Ione Arden. Cascade pattern. Communications dark.* Then it went in all at once, with the violence of a fact the body understands before the mind agrees to.

The full weight of her office was in front of her the moment she opened the emergency channel. Complete restoration available on one confirmation. Every governor Ione had spent most of a year learning to live without, ready to go back in. Well beyond the narrow interruption the floor allowed. A standing restoration order her own staff had drafted without being asked and left waiting for her signature. People who had watched her be afraid for a year and wanted, out of loyalty, to make the biggest response the easiest one to choose.

She read it once.

She closed it, unsigned, and opened the narrowest thing the law allowed. Location trace. Physical rescue. A temporary interruption limited to the minimum needed to prevent immediate harm, ending by itself the moment the danger passed, with no continuing authority attached.

“Narrow order only,” she told the duty officer. Her voice was steadier than she was. Ione’s location was resolving second by second to a maintenance corridor known to flood in exactly this weather. “Not the standing restoration. I don’t care that it’s drafted. The floor and only the floor. And I want it on the record that I refused the rest.”

“Ma’am, with the pattern match, the standing order would give the team a lot more...”

“I heard you. Narrow order.” She didn’t raise her voice. “If she comes back from this and finds I used an emergency to put back everything I couldn’t get through committee, I’ll have proved every fear she ever had about me. Tonight of all nights.”

. . .

Kellan got to the office twenty minutes in, from the house, with a coat on over what he’d been sleeping in. He stood in the doorway very still, and before he’d said a word Sera knew he had something to do with it.

“This is me,” he said. “Some of this is me. I need to say it once, out loud, before we pretend otherwise to get through the next hour.”

“Not now.”

“I’m not asking you to have it now. I’m asking to stand here knowing it while we wait. I don’t think I can get through the next hour pretending I don’t know what she found.” He didn’t sit. He went to the window and looked at nothing. She let him stay. Sending him away would have cost time, and his guilt, however earned, wasn’t the most urgent thing in the room.

. . .

The rescue team reached the corridor’s outer gate a few minutes after that, guided by a thread of location the narrow protocol had restored just long enough to resolve. That was all it touched: the thin line of position the floor was built to reach for, the way a hand reaches into water for the drowning person and nothing else it might find there.

Sera didn’t go. Every part of her wanted to be at the tunnel mouth. In the same breath she knew being there would be for her own sake. A performance of a mother’s rescue that would cost minutes and serve nothing Ione wanted served. She stayed at the desk and watched the team’s progress resolve in small clinical

steps across her vision. The record would show that she had refused the standing order. It wouldn't show how long her thumb had rested on the edge of the desk beside it.

The signal held for twelve minutes, then flickered, then went. It was gone for a stretch that Sera would later measure as the longest of her life. Longer than any committee vote. Longer than the drive back from the old road. The trace had dropped somewhere in a section the maintenance schematics marked as a known dead zone. The team's audio stayed up: boots in water, someone breathing hard, a voice saying *left, no, left* and then *mind your head*, and then a long stretch of nothing but water moving. Kellan stood rigid at the window through all of it with his forehead nearly on the glass. Sera found herself doing something she hadn't done since the months after twenty-three. She prayed, without words, to nobody in particular. The bargaining of a person with nothing left to bargain with.

It came back weaker, full of static, but it came back. The team turned toward a side passage the schematics said might explain the gap.

They found her forty minutes later, disoriented and soaked through. She'd taken a wrong turn in the dark and lost most of an hour in a stretch she knew by daylight and not at all by touch. Cold enough that the medical note used the word *hypothermic*, and reading it made Sera's hands shake. She was alive, and hurt by nothing but the cold. They found her sitting up with her back to the pipe and the dead flashlight in her lap, still trying, at the end, to work out the geometry of the tunnel instead of waiting to be found.

The interruption lifted the moment the team confirmed she was safe, as designed and as Sera had specified. Ione's own settings were left where they'd been before the alert, and nothing had gone back in that Ione could read later as proof her mother had used the worst night of the year to take back what a year of fighting had won.

. . .

Sera sat at the desk after the confirmation with the office empty around her and found she was crying. The delayed grief of someone who has been useful through a whole crisis and has only now reached the part where she's allowed to feel what nearly happened. She let it go on for ten minutes, long enough to stop shaking. Then she stood, straightened her clothes as well as she could, and went to the medical bay. She couldn't spend one more hour at a distance.

Ione was asleep when she got there. Sedated against the worst of the cold. A thermal blanket to her chin, her hair still damp, pushed back off her face by someone else's hand. A nurse gave Sera a short, kind summary she mostly didn't hear. Stable, warming, nothing lasting expected.

She didn't wake her. Some animal part of her wanted the proof only Ione's voice could give. She knew waking her now would serve nobody but Sera. It was exactly the small taking of Ione's body and time that the whole terrible year had been about learning not to do. So she sat in the chair by the bed in a hospital at three in the morning and watched her daughter's chest go up and down under the blanket. She didn't open the emergency channel again. She didn't check that the standing order was still unsigned.

Kellan, who had stayed at the office to take the calls, came an hour later and took the other chair. Neither of them spoke. The window began, almost apologetically, to get light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After Authority

She remembered all of it. The interruption had never touched memory, only the thin physical thread that found her. So Ione woke in the medical bay with complete, unkind recall of the tunnel. The cold. How certain she'd been going in. And the slower, harder moment somewhere in the second hour when the certainty hadn't survived an actual wrong turn the way it should have if it had been as true as it felt.

She told Pema first. Before either parent. She trusted the distance more than she trusted either kind of love waiting at home.

"I got to the junction I sealed myself in July," she said. "I knew that junction. I'd have said I could find it blind. And I stood there in the dark and couldn't remember which branch went back out. For about a minute I still thought the tunnel was on my side. That it wanted to keep me. Then the cold got bad enough that some other bit of me, smaller, got loud enough to ask something. *If this place is safe, why is it trying to kill you.* That was what got through. A practical question. From the part of me that fixes things."

"Keep that," Pema said. "A practical question broke it. That tells you where your resources are, even inside the worst of it."

"Before we go on," Ione said. "I know my dad was calling you. Every Friday. Since March. Did you know I hadn't agreed to it?"

Pema didn't reach for the clinical voice. "Yes. From the first call. I told him every week it didn't replace your account and didn't override your authority over your record. I've had time to look at that honestly since the tunnel. It was a line I said so that listening would feel like a safeguard. What I was doing was accepting

information about you that you hadn't agreed to give. I could have refused the calls. I could have told you the first week. I did neither."

"Did it change what you found? About me?"

"No. Everything I gave your family came from what you said in that room or what I saw myself. I kept his reports out of it. I can show you the file if you'd rather have proof than my word. That's the one place I can tell you the harm stopped. It excuses nothing." She held Ione's eyes. "I've referred myself to the ethics office that oversees my license. I've asked them to assign you a second clinician, starting today, with no obligation to come back to me. If you want me later, you can have me. If you don't, you never have to say why."

"I don't know yet."

"I'll wait."

. . .

"Don't," she told her parents, the first afternoon she could talk for more than a few minutes, before either of them had said anything. They were on opposite sides of the small room. "Whatever you're... just don't. I had a whole thing I was going to say and I've lost half of it." She pushed the blanket down and pulled it back up. "The petition. It wasn't wrong. The tunnel doesn't make it wrong. It doesn't make you right about the stay, either, Mom. It just means it's real. The thing. It's real and I've got it, or I had it that night, and that's all it means, and if either of you turns it into more than that I'll..." She ran out. "I don't know what I'll do. I'm very tired."

"All right," Sera said, and nothing else. Ione noticed. Her mother, doing the restraint she'd only ever promised.

Ione turned to Kellan. Something in her went colder and more deliberate than it had with Sera. The tunnel had been hers, chosen in a crisis. What her father had done had been chosen calmly, over and over, on ordinary Fridays.

"You reported on me," she said. "Every week. For eight months. I heard the calls. My sleep. My moods. My arguments with Cass. Like data for a study I never signed up for." Her voice stayed level, which was worse than shouting. "Explain it. Don't defend it. I want to know what you told yourself, because I can't think of a version that isn't you deciding, on your own, that my privacy was a risk you got to manage."

Kellan started twice.

"There's context," he said. "About why I started. I don't want you to hear it as me making a case, I just..." He stopped himself. "No. That's what you told me not to do. Let me try it without the context."

"Try it without the context."

"I told myself I was protecting you. That's true as far as it goes. It's no defense. Protecting someone without asking is the thing this whole year has been about not doing. I did it anyway. With the door shut. So you wouldn't find out and get the chance to tell me to stop." He looked at his hands. "There's no version of that where I come out looking like anything but what I was."

"That's the first straight thing anyone in this family's said to me since the tunnel."

"It won't be the last," Kellan said. "I don't expect you to forgive it quickly. I don't think it should be quick. If I asked you to hurry I'd be doing it again. Deciding how fast your feelings get to move."

"Then don't ask."

"I'm not."

Ione looked at them both. What she felt might, some day, make room for reconciliation.

"I'm not saying I forgive either of you," she said. "I'm not saying I won't. I just don't want to hand it out early because the tunnel scared us all into wanting a clean ending." She looked at Sera. "You didn't restore me. I know that. I know what it cost. I'm grateful. That doesn't mean I think you were right to file the stay. I'm holding both."

"We're learning," Sera said. "Slowly."

"Slowly's fine," Ione said, and for once the word sounded like a speed she'd picked.

. . .

Cass came the next week and sat on the edge of the bad chair.

"You scared the whole crew," she said. "Before you get into your family stuff. Half the depot heard. Some kid called Ambrose turned up at the depot gate, if you can believe it, asking if you were all right. Said he knew you from some meeting." She shook her head. "You're allowed a bad night. You don't get to pretend it didn't happen to the rest of us a bit."

"I'm not pretending."

“Good.” Cass looked at the window. “I had the coffee, by the way. With my mother. It was terrible. She cried and I ate two pastries and neither of us said anything true. I’m going again next month.” She stood. “Get better. Come back when you’re ready. Don’t let anyone in here make you into a symbol of anything before you’ve had a chance to be someone who had a shit night.” She stopped at the door. “I never once bought the version where you were dangerous. Put that on the record as well.”

“Cass. In the tunnel. I had you in it. The whole list. You were on it.”

Cass looked at her for a moment.

“Yeah,” she said. “Figured. It’s fine. I’ve been on worse lists.” She went.

. . .

Tobin came the day after, carrying nothing. He sat in the chair Cass had used and looked at her a long time before he said anything.

“I keep thinking about the gate,” he said. “The one you and Cass hung in July. I showed you how to set that latch. You built something solid enough to still be holding, months on, the night it turned into the door you needed to vanish through. I don’t know what to do with that yet. I’ve been sitting with it. Same as you are with everything else.”

“I’m sorry. For how I used it. And for the phone. In August. What I said.”

“Good work doesn’t stop being good because of what somebody does with it later.” He paused. “The phone was worse.”

“I know.”

“Your room’s still there. Storage mostly. Bed’s made. I never stripped it.”

“I don’t think I’ll need it.”

“Keep it anyway.”

She wanted something lighter to hold. “Did Ruth hear? About the tunnel?”

Tobin was quiet. Something in his face moved away from the act he usually put on for that name.

“She sent flowers. No card. I knew anyway. She’s the only one in the district who still uses that delivery service, out of spite, because I once told her it was overpriced.” He turned it over before going on, slower than she’d heard him say anything. “My teacher died the autumn after that final. He’d have retired the next spring. That competition was the last thing he saw me do, and I lost it. I don’t think the judging was fair. I also think I turned one bad afternoon into thirty-sev-

en years of theater because being furious with Ruth Pallister was easier than sitting with the fact that the one person whose opinion I wanted never saw me win anything. Ruth knows. I expect that's why she sends flowers instead of telling me to grow up." A small dry smile. "Don't tell her I said so. It'd ruin thirty-seven years of very satisfying theater."

"I won't."

He left without making anything of it, the offer made and not pressed.

. . .

Nemi's message came that evening. Short. None of the old careful apology in it.

I heard. If I'd been you that night I'd have had me on the list. First name.

I'm not asking for anything. That's all.

Ione read it twice and thought about the tunnel. About how easily she'd folded one sorry message into proof of a conspiracy that had never existed anywhere but inside her narrowing head. Nemi was owed something for that. Separate from what Nemi still owed her for the leak. Two debts. Neither canceled the other.

I know you weren't part of it, she wrote back. I built a version of you that night that wasn't true. Same as I did with half the people who love me. I'm not ready for us to be simple. I can tell you that part wasn't your fault. You should have that much.

She sent it and put the tablet on the bedside table.

No reply came that night. None came the next day, or that week. She checked more than she wanted to. Then she stopped checking, mostly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Answer That Remains

She drafted the amendment herself, alone, three weeks after the tunnel, before the committee calendar closed for the winter. The same hand that had written the gap should write the thing that closed it.

“The Restoration Separation Clarification Act,” Asher read aloud in the antechamber the day she filed it. “That’s a remarkably dull name for something that’ll get cited in every capacity hearing for fifty years.”

“I made it dull on purpose. I’ve had enough of my sentences turned into anthems by people who stop after the first clause. I’d like this one read to the end, slowly, by people who have to understand what it does.”

What it did fit in one sentence. She’d made herself write that sentence first. *Emergency intervention under the narrow floor shall create no presumption, procedural or otherwise, of continuing authority over the rescued person’s prior legal status, and any restoration beyond the minimum required to preserve life or prevent immediate catastrophic harm shall require the same independent capacity review as any other request to alter a person’s developmental architecture, regardless of the intervening emergency.*

“You’re shutting the door you had open in front of you,” Asher said. “The one your staff drafted and left on your desk.”

“I know how tempting it was. I don’t trust the next frightened parent to refuse it. They won’t love their child less. The temptation only cares how scared you are. I’d rather the law took the choice away from every later version of me who might not hold out as well.”

“The staff who drafted it,” Asher said. “They meant well.”

“I know. I’ve moved two of them. I’ve told the third why.”

It failed.

Not badly. It went back to committee by four votes. Corrigan's people split. Half of them liked anything that limited the Compact's reach and half of them didn't like the Steward getting a clean story out of her own worst year. Osei voted for it and made a short speech about how a single amendment drafted by the person it most embarrassed was a confession in reform's clothing, and she'd vote for confessions but she wouldn't clap. The rehumanizer benches, who should have carried it, lost three to a procedural objection nobody could explain afterward.

The renewal itself had come off the table in the summer and gone through as a plain renewal, by six votes, on a Thursday Sera could barely remember now. Corrigan had shaken her hand afterward and said, "Next time," and meant it.

Asher came into her office with the count on a piece of paper.

"Four," he said. "I had it at two in the morning. Something happened at lunch."

"What happened at lunch?"

"I don't know. I was on the roof." He put the paper down. "They want it back in six months with a sunset clause and a review panel. Which you'll hate."

"I'll refile."

"I assumed. I've started the draft." He looked at her. "You're not upset."

"I'm very upset," Sera said. "I'm going to go home and be upset at the garden. Then I'm going to refile. The law isn't supposed to be easy to change. I wrote that bit too."

. . .

Pema was in the corridor outside the Chamber. That was unusual enough that Sera nearly asked if something was wrong. Then she saw there was nothing clinical in Pema's face.

"I came to watch it pass," Pema said. "I don't usually bother with the Chamber."

"It didn't."

"I heard." Pema fell into step beside her. "I'm not here to add to what Ione's already told you. About the calls. I meant what I told her about the referral. I'm not expecting it to buy anything back faster than it should."

"She hasn't decided. About you."

"I know. I told her I'd wait." They walked to the stairs. "I thought listening and doing nothing was keeping my distance," Pema said. "It wasn't." She stopped. "That's all. I'll let you go."

. . .

Ione was in the garden that evening on the stone bench where Sera had once asked for six months and got, in return, the first honest accusation of her daughter's life. She was turning a small brass fitting from the depot over in her hands.

"It went back to committee," Sera said, sitting down, not too close. "By four."

"Cass told me. She watches the Chamber feed now. It's horrible." Ione put the fitting on the bench between them. "Are you refiling?"

"Yes."

"Good." She looked at the fitting. "I'm going to tell you something and you're not allowed to do anything with it."

"All right."

"Pema's replacement. Dr. Kahale. We've been talking about what I have instead. Full governors, no. Nothing, after the tunnel, I don't think so either. She mentioned something narrower. A protocol I write myself. Conditions I set. I can change them. I can take it off without anyone's permission. And if I'm... if it's that night again, if the floor goes off, the dumb one, it runs by itself for twelve hours, and three people get told and they decide if it keeps going. I pick who. Nobody from your office." She picked the fitting back up. "I've been drafting it for a week. And yesterday I read it back and it's basically Dad's directive. With the panel fixed. The way he said. *Write in who sits on it.*"

Sera said nothing.

"He was right," Ione said. "At dinner. I called him stupid and he was right, and I knew it about three days later, and I never said. Then the tunnel. And now it's all mixed up with the calls, and I can't tell him he was right about the directive without it sounding like I'm letting him off the calls. And I'm not."

"Those are two different things."

"I know they're two different things, Mom, that's the whole problem. I've spent a year making everyone hold two things."

Sera didn't reach for anything to say. She let the quiet sit on the bench between them, unfilled.

"How is he?" Ione said after a while. "Actually."

“Quiet. He asks me most nights if I think you’ll ever tell him it’s enough. I don’t think that’s mine to answer. So I tell him to wait.”

“Tell him...” Ione stopped. She put the fitting in her pocket. “No. Don’t tell him anything. I’ll do it. When I can do both bits at once.”

“All right.”

They sat. The canopy did its patient work on the light. Neither of them asked it to stop.

EPILOGUE

Not Today

Six months after the tunnel, in May, Ione's arrangement had settled into something neither bloc had predicted and neither fully approved of. A self-authored interruption protocol, built to her own specifications with Dr. Kahale. Narrow enough that she lived, in practice, most of an unmanaged life. It made one temporary, reversible pause in the spiral that had once taken her into the dark, either when she started it herself or, if the floor's dumb signal went off, automatically for twelve hours, after which three people she had named decided whether it kept going. Kellan was one of the three. She hadn't told him yet. She had written the conditions in her own words and revised them twice. She'd told Sera she expected to revise them for the rest of her life, and that the revising was the point.

"It's not permanent," she'd told a journalist, in one of the few interviews she agreed to once the story had stopped being worth chasing. "People want a tidy ending. I don't know what I'll want in five years. I know what I want now."

She had told Kellan part of it. She'd sat him down in the garden in February and shown him the page about the panel, with the names left blank, and said, "The panel bit. It's yours. You were right about the panel." He had read it three times. He'd said, "You fixed the appointments." She'd said, "You told me to." Then she'd got up and gone inside before either of them could make it into more than that, and the calls were still sitting there between them, and they both knew it. He still asked Sera some nights whether she thought Ione would ever tell him it was enough. Sera still told him to wait.

Sera remained fully managed, unchanged, and had said so in public more than once, in the plain language she trusted more now than any of the careful sentences she used to build around hard things. She defended the system that had saved her

in front of rooms that no longer entirely believed she could separate public conviction from private fear. She found she didn't need them to. She knew the difference herself, most days.

The amendment was back in committee, refiled, with a sunset clause Sera hated and had agreed to anyway. Asher's bees had been granted a variance on the condition that the buildings authority got a jar each quarter. He called it the only clean win of the year and refused to be argued out of it. Nobody ever found out who had leaked the directive. Kellan suspected a conversation of his own at the water authority, Sera suspected a clerk, and Asher said it no longer mattered, in the voice he used when he knew exactly who it was.

Ione had turned nineteen in March. Majority under the developmental statutes. Neither the movement nor the compulsory bloc had noticed. Neither had she, much. The authority over her own life had moved long before the date. In a garden. In a tunnel. In a hundred smaller conversations that had never needed a calendar to make them binding. Sera had expected the number to feel like something. It turned up late, like a forecast checked after the weather has already broken.

. . .

They had a rhythm now, not planned. Sunday afternoons, usually. Sometimes at the house. Sometimes at the historical trust, where the church bells had finally been rehung and rang once a month, badly and beautifully, for anyone who came. They didn't talk about the stay much, or the tunnel, or the amendment with a title so dull it had already, as Sera intended, started to disappear into ordinary citation. They talked about bell metal. Water pipes. A dog Kellan had been angling for that neither of them had agreed to.

Nemi had never written back. Ione had stopped checking in December. In April she'd seen her once, across the tram platform, in an engineering track jacket with a clipboard, and Nemi had seen her too, and they had both lifted a hand, and the tram had come between them. Ione hadn't told anyone about that. She wasn't sure what it had been.

Her grandmother's part of the file stayed sealed. Ione still went on Thursdays. Mr. Farquhar had died in March, and Adela now played solitaire at the same table with his chair left empty, and complained that nobody cheated properly anymore.

One Sunday in May they sat on the low wall outside the trust's workshop while the last of an amateur ringing practice faded out. Ione asked the question she'd been walking around, she realized, since the morning at the counter twenty months earlier when she'd asked how old her mother was the first time she frightened herself.

"Do you still think it was wrong? The stay. The filing, I mean. Leave the fear out of it. I know you withdrew it. I know why. I've never asked you straight out if you still think it was wrong."

Sera took her time with it, the way she took her time with every question that mattered now. She went for the true version instead of the one that would land best.

"Yes," she said. "It was wrong. The fear was real and I'll never tell you it wasn't. It was wrong because I used an exception built for a different danger to manage a probability I couldn't stand sitting inside, and loving you didn't make that an honest use of the power. I withdrew it because I saw that. I still see it. Six months after the tunnel, with the arrangement working better than either of us had any right to expect." She looked at the bell tower. "It was wrong. I did it anyway. Both of those are still true. I've stopped needing them not to be."

Ione nodded slowly. "Would you ever do it? What I did. Take yours out."

"No." No pause at all. "I've thought about it more than you'd guess, watching you. I'm not staying in out of fear, or habit, or some failure of nerve I haven't looked at. I've looked. I like who I am in it. I like the woman who can sit on this wall and tell you a hard thing without her voice going, and I know she exists partly because of the system you walked out of. It's just the shape of me. Leave the verdicts to the Chamber."

"That's fair," Ione said.

"Does it bother you? That we've ended up this far apart?"

"Some days." Ione picked at a thread on her sleeve. That habit had come through everything. "Mostly not. I used to think one of us had to turn out right for either of us to mean anything. I don't now. You're as much you in what you chose as I am in what I chose. I don't need your life to prove mine."

A dog barked somewhere down the lane. Kellan would hear about it at dinner and take it as a sign.

"Are you happy?" Sera asked. She'd waited months to ask it until she could ask without needing a particular answer.

"Today, yes," Ione said. "I can't promise tomorrow. I don't think anyone without the smoothing gets to. That used to terrify me. Now it mostly feels like being a person." She looked at her mother. "Is that enough? Today? Instead of a schedule for all the days after?"

"It's enough," Sera said.

The dog down the lane barked again. Ione laughed.

"He's going to say it's a sign."

"He is." Sera waited a moment. "Are you going to tell him? About the three names. That he's one of them."

Ione looked at the bell tower for a while.

"Not today," she said.

Sera didn't push, and didn't turn it into a plan, or a forecast, or a hope passing for acceptance. *Not today* didn't mean *someday*, and it didn't mean *never*. It meant not today. She let it be that, and they sat on the wall until the ringers came out with their ropes coiled over their shoulders and asked if either of them wanted to try.

Ione did. Sera held her coat.