MeekDuke Books

You Promised

Some doors should stay closed.

Timothy LaDuke

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Chapter 1

You Don't Take Care Of Your Things

Phoenix had been out seven days into an October that wouldn’t stop raining.

The city smelled like wet asphalt, fryer oil, and fallen leaves turning to rot in the gutters. Seven nights in the back seat of an old Civic behind the gas station on the north side. Windows fogged. Laundry damp no matter how long the dryer ran.

He’d learned the geography of the back seat as you learn a cell. Seat reclined two notches, three and the lever dug into his spine. Duffel wedged behind the driver’s seat for a pillow. Coat over his face against the gas station floods. The attendant on the night shift pretended not to see him. Phoenix pretended not to be grateful, and that was the whole economy of it.

Rain on the roof all night. Drip, drum, drip. He’d wake with his neck wrong and his breath fogging and the smell of wet upholstery and old french fries soaked into everything he owned.

The parole officer wanted an address by Friday.

Nobody rents to a man fresh out with forty bucks, a duffel bag, and a record.

Two days before Friday, he sat in the parole office waiting room with his hands on his knees.

The chairs were bolted to the floor. The air smelled like disinfectant and old coffee. A kid cried in the corner while his mother filled out forms with the pen chained to the clipboard. On the wall, a poster said REPORT CHANGE OF ADDRESS WITHIN 48 HOURS in letters big enough to read from the door.

The parole officer didn’t look up from the file when he walked in. “Address.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Friday, Phoenix.” A form slid across the desk. “Friday or we have a problem. You understand what a problem looks like.”

He understood. He’d lived inside what a problem looked like.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She made a note. The pen scratched. He watched her write and wondered what the file said about him in the short version, the version strangers got. He didn’t ask. He never asked.

He walked out into the rain with the form folded in his pocket. Friday. Two days. The word address beat in his head like a second heart.

The laundromat was the one warm place that didn’t ask questions. He’d been going three nights running. Drying his clothes, drying his bones, sitting in the plastic chair

until the attendant started looking at the clock. The dryers hummed their low, tired hum. The fluorescents buzzed. Rain drummed the roof.

He was refolding the same two shirts, fold, smooth, fold, when the woman spoke from two washers over.

“You don’t take care of your things, do you.”

Not a question. A nasal voice, nagging at the edges. But the words came out almost sweet, which made it worse.

He looked up.

She was big. Near three hundred pounds, squeezed into a housecoat, long greasy hair hanging down to her butt. Maybe forty. Looked fifty. Perfume by the gallon. And under it, the sour smell of somebody who hadn’t bathed in days. Her forehead was huge and tall. Crooked teeth. Glasses thick as coke bottles. When she

shifted her weight, it was a shuffle, shoulders hunched forward like her back hurt her.

She’d been watching him. A while, probably.

Her cart sat beside her, heaped with folded sheets done with terrible precision, corners square, edges sharp. Hospital corners. Whoever taught her had taught her right, or she’d taught herself out of spite. One of her fingers was stained blue at the tip. Ink.

“Excuse me?”

“Your shirts.” She nodded at his hands. “You keep folding the same two. They’ll wear through at the creases.”

Her eyes dropped to his forearms while she said it. The ink there, full sleeves, years of it, stories he didn’t tell anymore. She looked at the tattoos as a cashier looks at a bill, checking for the watermark. Like she was counting something.

Then back to his face.

He didn’t have an answer for that. He folded.

She fed four quarters into the dryer next to his. “For your shirts,” she said. “So they don’t wear through.”

It was a small kindness. He would think about that later. How small it was, and how exactly the right size to get through the door.

“I’m Bre,” she said. “I have a room.”

“Why me?” he said.

She looked at him, the coke-bottle glasses, the tall forehead, all of it, and smiled her crooked smile. “You take care,” she said. Like it was an answer.



Her car was an old sedan with a back seat full of folded laundry. It smelled like bleach and the perfume, the perfume winning. She drove through the rain without talking, both hands at ten and two, and he watched the north side go by. The closed storefronts, the bus stops, the gas station where his Civic sat with its fogged windows, getting smaller in the side mirror.

She didn’t ask where he was coming from. That should have bothered him. At the time, it felt like mercy.

She drove past the gas station without slowing. He hadn’t told her about the Civic. He hadn’t told her anything about a car. He watched it go by in the side mirror and said nothing. The rain drummed the roof, and her hands stayed at ten and two.

The house sat on the north side where the streetlights buzzed and never quite reached the porch.

412 was painted on the curb in fading white. The rain had turned the yard to mud and wet newspaper. A run-down box of a house. Paint peeling, one shutter hanging crooked, the kind of place the block had given up on.

She walked him through in the rain. The back room first. Narrow bed with a clean sheet, a closet with a door that stuck if you didn’t lift it, a small window facing the alley. The kitchen: a fridge the color of old teeth, a stove with one burner that worked. The bathroom: the tub ringed brown at the waterline, the mirror spotted with age. Upstairs she didn’t

take him. The stairs went up into perfume and dark, and that was enough.

She lived upstairs. He would be down.

Rules taped to the fridge in blue ink.

One. Shower, ten minutes. Two. No guests after nine. Three. Clean your things as you use them. Four. You promised.

He asked what four meant.

She smiled in the doorway with the rain behind her, crooked teeth and all. “Means you will take care.”

He signed the lease on her kitchen table. Cash on wood. No background check.

The lease was a sheet of notebook paper in her cramped hand, the room, the rent, the rules, copied over clean. He read it twice.

At the top of the page, in the blue ink, already written: his name.

PHOENIX.

He stared at it. He hadn’t said it. He hadn’t written it. It sat there in her cramped hand like it had always been there, waiting for the rest of the page to catch up.

She didn’t explain. She folded the cash into her housecoat pocket without counting it twice, without looking at it again, as you’d put away something that was never the point.

His hand shook from the cold. She watched his hand shake, watched him, really, a beat longer than the moment needed. Like she was reading something under his skin.

“You want to do good, right?”

“Yes,” Phoenix said.

He was trying to do good.

He spent what was left of the day making the room his, which didn’t take long. He hung his two shirts in the closet. The door stuck unless you lifted it, and he learned the lift by the second try. He put his duffel at the foot of the bed. He stood the mop in the corner though there was nothing to mop yet.

It wasn’t much.; it was an address. He sat on the narrow bed and said the word out loud to the empty room, address. It sounded like a door unlocking.

The first night, the heat came on too hot and wouldn’t turn down.

He twisted the radiator knob both ways. Nothing. The pipes knocked like someone walking in the walls. Slow, deliberate, from one end of the house to the other.

He opened the small window. Cold October air came in with the smell of wet leaves.

Three soft knocks at his door.

Bre in the hallway, arms folded, hunched in the doorway. “The house doesn’t like the cold.”

“It’s ninety degrees in here.”

“The house doesn’t like the cold,” she said again, and shuffled back upstairs.

He closed the window.

He lay in the heat and sweated through his shirt and listened. Upstairs, her shuffle, drag-step, drag-step, and then it stopped. And under the rain on the roof, very faint, a murmur. Like she was talking to someone.

He told himself she was on the phone. There was no phone sound. No second voice.

He got up and stood at the bottom of the stairs in his socks, listening. The murmur stopped the moment he got close, cut clean,

like a hand over a mouth. He stood there a long time. Nothing.

He went back to bed, but he didn’t sleep, not for a long time. Around two he gave up and went to the kitchen in his socks and stood at the fridge, reading the rules in the blue ink by the light through the window. One. Two. Three. Four. You promised.

The fridge hummed. The house ticked around him, cooling, settling. Upstairs, nothing now. Just the rain.

He went back to bed and lay in the heat and told himself he was lucky. A room. An address. Four rules he could keep with his eyes closed.

Lucky.

In the morning he drank from the tap. The water ran brown for a count of ten, then clear. He drank it anyway. It tasted like pennies.

The second night, he scrubbed the floor and washed the dishes.

His mama had taught him corners. You did the corners first, because anybody could do the middle. Corners square, edges clean, then the middle took care of itself. He’d been nine years old with a sponge too big for his hands. He could still hear her: anybody can do the middle, baby.

She came down after and checked the trash. Looked in the corners. Ran a finger along the stovetop.

“You don’t take care of your things.”

“I did,” he said. “I cleaned.”

She looked at him the way she’d looked at his shirts. “Trying isn’t done, Phoenix.”

He didn’t remember telling her his name.

He turned it over that night, lying in the heat. The laundromat, she’d said, “I’m Bre,” and he’d said… What

had he said? He couldn’t find it. The lease, a sheet of notebook paper. Had he written his name on it? He tried to picture it: her cramped hand, the rules copied clean, the cash on the wood. He couldn’t picture a signature line. He couldn’t picture his own handwriting anywhere on it.

He put it in the back of his mind, with the other things he wasn’t looking at straight.

Later, upstairs: the shuffle. Then a pause. Then a sound like something heavy being dragged a short distance, one pull, then nothing. He told himself it was furniture. Old women moved furniture at midnight. Sure they did.

In the morning his mop was standing in a different corner than where he’d left it. He stared at it. He’d stood it by the closet. Now it was by the door. He told himself he’d misremembered in the dark.

The third night, at 12:07, a thin crack of light showed in the back of the closet.

He’d been lying awake listening to the rain. The light was wrong, pale, thin as a wire, where no light should be. Cold air breathed out of the crack, smelling of wet earth.

A whisper. Sweet, in a way that turned his stomach.

“You promised.”

He got up and put tape over the crack. Two strips, pressed hard.

By morning, the tape was on the floor.

He picked it up and looked at it. The adhesive was still tacky. The strips were curled at the edges, peeled, not fallen. Like fingers had worked them loose, patient, in the dark.

He put the tape in his pocket. He didn’t tell her.

The fourth morning, the apartment smelled like wet earth and something old.

He woke to muddy footprints on his clean floor.

Not his boots. Bigger. Smeared at the edges, almost bare. Leading from the closet to the sink and back again.

The faucet dripped brown.

She knocked before nine. He opened the door and pointed. “Look. Those aren’t mine. I didn’t—”

She didn’t look. “You don’t take care of your things, do you.”

“Bre. Look at the floor.”

“Take care.” She set a mop against the doorframe. “The rule is clean your things as you use them. That includes the floor.”

The bucket water was already brown.

He mopped until his back burned. At noon, the footprints were back.

Dry.

He stood looking at them a long time. Then he mopped again. Wrung the mop till his hands ached, did the corners first as his mama taught him. He checked the closet. The crack was there, dark now, the tape gone from his pocket still in his pocket.

He thought about calling the parole officer. About saying what, that his closet was haunted? He laughed once, a short sound with nothing in it, and didn’t call anyone.

By evening the footprints were back. Dry as bone.

In the afternoon he walked to the gas station to check the Civic. It sat where he’d left it, fogged windows, rain beading on the roof. He sat in the back seat a minute. It

felt smaller than the room. He got out and walked back to 412.

He stopped mopping.

That night he stayed up to watch. He sat with his back to the wall and watched the crack, and at 12:07 nothing happened. No light. No voice. The crack was just a crack.

He didn’t know whether to be relieved or insulted. He lay down and slept the thin sleep of a man who’d been stood up by a ghost.

The fifth night, he didn’t sleep.

He sat with his back to the wall, duffel zipped tight between his knees, and watched the closet crack breathe.

12:07. The light came again, that thin wire of pale light.

And this time a voice came through the crack.

Not sweet. Wet.

“You promised her.”

His hand was on the closet knob before he knew he’d moved. Cold brass. His fingers closed around it. He wanted to know. God help him, he wanted to know what was on the other side of that light.

He took his hand off the knob.

The voice didn’t come again. The light stayed. He sat with his back to the wall and his duffel between his knees and understood, as you understood a locked door, that whatever was on the other side of that crack knew his name, knew her name. Knew exactly what it was doing. It wasn’t guessing. It had never been guessing.

He sat back down with his back to the wall. He watched the crack breathe until the gray came up, and he did not sleep.

He thought about the voice until morning, you promised her, turning it over like a stone in his pocket. Promised who? He hadn’t promised anybody anything. That was

the whole point of him. He didn’t make promises anymore.

In the gray morning he walked to the warehouse district with his duffel over his shoulder and asked the first man he saw where a man got hired. The man pointed down the row of gray boxes sweating in the rain.

Chapter 2

The Night Shift

The warehouse sat out by the interstate, a long gray box sweating in the rain.

The office was a prefab room with a space heater and a corkboard full of curling notices. Eddie was a wide man with forklift eyes, the kind that measured you once and never again. He looked at Phoenix’s hands, nodded at the boots.

“You ever drive a pallet jack?”

“No.”

“You will.”

“Got a record?” Eddie said.

“Yeah.”

Eddie nodded like he’d asked about the weather. “Everybody here does.”

That was the interview.

Eddie handed him a timecard. Phoenix wrote his name on it in block letters, PHOENIX, the first time he’d written it in years. It looked strange. It looked like somebody else’s name that he was borrowing.

He clipped it to his shirt and went out onto the dock. The rain was coming down, and the trucks were waiting. For the first time in seven days he had somewhere to be.

Eddie showed him once on the dock, the handle, the pump, the release. “Like this. Don’t be a hero.” Diesel hung in the air. Rain hammered the metal roof like static. Beyond the dock doors, the interstate hissed, endless.

Ten at night to six in the morning, unloading trucks. Boxes of paper towels, canned beans, off-brand cereal, the guts of every dollar store in the county. The work was simple, and it

hurt. By three his shoulders were on fire. By five his hands had stopped feeling like his.

The worst trailer was the beans. Forty cases, stacked wrong, the whole load leaning like a drunk. Phoenix restacked it case by case in the cold blow off the interstate, his breath fogging, his fingers going numb and coming back. When it was done he stood back and looked at the straight wall of cans and felt something he hadn’t felt in years: the quiet pride of a thing done right. Nobody saw it.; that was fine. He saw it.

The dock doors rolled up and the cold came in off the interstate, diesel and rain. The forklifts beeped and turned in the steam of their own exhaust. Phoenix learned the rhythm as you learned a song, lift, turn, stack, back. His body fought it the first night and joined it the second. By the third, his hands knew things his head didn’t.

The rain let up around four, and for a few minutes the clouds thinned and something like moonlight came through the dock doors, laying white bars across the

concrete. Phoenix stood in it with a case of paper towels on his shoulder and felt, absurdly, like he’d been let in on something.

He taped his fingers where the blisters were coming up. At two he sat on a pallet and drank vending-machine coffee and ate a sandwich like wet cardboard. Watched the other night men move through the steam of their own breath, and felt almost like one of them. Almost was plenty.

Take care of things today only.; that was the whole plan. One box, then the next one. One today. Don’t think about tomorrow.

He thought about tomorrow anyway. He always did.

The parole officer would get the address. The W-2 would get the address. The math of it ran in his head while he stacked cans: hours times nights times weeks, rent due on the first, cash on wood. It almost worked. It almost looked like a life.

The second night, the pallet jack stopped fighting him.

Eddie watched him run a double-stacked load the length of the dock without clipping a rack. Did the thing with his chin that meant all right. At two, Phoenix sat on his pallet with the vending-machine coffee. The old night man with the burned hands sat down next to him without asking.

“Where you living?” the old man said.

“North side. Got a room.”

The old man nodded like that explained everything, which on the north side it did. “Landlady?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re all crazy,” the old man said, and got up, and went back to work.

Phoenix laughed for the first time in days. It felt strange in his chest, like a muscle he hadn’t used.

The third night a trailer came in with a busted seal and a manifest that didn’t match the load. Eddie handed him the clipboard without a word, you count it. Phoenix counted, all four hundred cases, twice, and found the twelve missing. Eddie took the clipboard back and did the chin thing, and Phoenix felt ten feet tall in his wet boots.

On break he texted Faith from the dock door, rain at his back: got a room. job’s good. She wrote back in under a minute: proud of you. call sunday? He wrote sunday and put the phone away before his face could do anything.

That night, in his room, he texted her again: thursdays. eddie says i’m alright. She wrote back: told you. He read those two words three times, then turned the phone face-down and went to sleep in the gray daylight with the pipes knocking.

Gray morning. Rain still coming down.

The bus home smelled like wet wool and somebody else’s cigarettes. He nodded off against the fogged window and jerked awake at his stop. Walked the last blocks with his duffel over his shoulder and his boots filling slowly with water.

Across the aisle, a nurse in scrubs had slept sitting up, her head tipping with the turns, a hospital badge turned backward against her chest. He’d watched her the way you watched something you wanted to protect and couldn’t. Everybody on the 6am bus was coming from somewhere hard.; that was the whole congregation.

He watched the city wake through the fogged glass. The sun not rising so much as the rain getting lighter. He thought about the room: the heat, the rules in blue ink, the voice through the vent saying sleep tight like she was tucking him in. He thought about it as you thought about a toothache. Probing, and then quickly not.

He got off at his stop and walked the last blocks. The rain had eased to a mist. 412 Sat there with its peeling paint and its crooked shutter, and he was glad to see it.; that was the strangest part. He was glad.

He let himself in quiet, and Bre was sitting at the kitchen table waiting for him.

Housecoat. Hair hanging lank around her shoulders. The coke-bottle glasses caught the bare bulb over the table and threw it back at him in two white discs.

“You’re up early,” he said.

“I don’t sleep much.” She didn’t get up. “Sit.”

He sat. The chair creaked under him.

“Eddie work you hard?”

Phoenix looked at her. “I didn’t tell you his name.”

“You wrote it on your application.” She tapped the table. “On my table.”

He had filled out the warehouse paperwork in the break room. He was almost sure of it.

Almost.

He tried to picture it, the corkboard, the time clock, the application on a clipboard. He couldn’t picture writing Eddie’s name. Eddie had told him his name out loud, on the dock, in the rain. The application had asked for, what? He couldn’t remember what it had asked for.

She pushed a mug across the table toward him. Coffee, instant, too sweet. Almost kind.

He drank it. Refusing felt dangerous, and he didn’t want to examine why.

She nodded at his forearms. “Where’d you get the ink?”

“Inside,” he said.

“Mm.” She looked at the sleeves like she was reading them. “They tell a story, then.”

“They tell time,” he said, and she smiled, crooked teeth, like he’d said something she already knew.

“Where you from?” she said.

“Here.”

“Mama still around?”

“Gone,” he said.

The silence after had weight. She nodded, slow, like she’d already known that too. He wondered, with a cold feeling low in his gut, what else she already knew.

“Water’s off at eight,” she said. “You shower before eight, or you don’t shower. Ten minutes. That’s the rule.”

“I remember the rules.”

“Rules only work if somebody keeps them.” She stood. The shuffle, the hunch, the smell of perfume over something sour rolling off her. “You want to do good, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then do good.”

“You saving?” she said, at the stairs.

“Trying,” he said.

“Mm.” She started up, then stopped. “Saving’s good. Men with something saved make better choices.”

He didn’t know what to do with that. He went to his room.



The hallway to his room felt longer than it had yesterday.

He told himself he was tired. Night shift did that. Played with distance, made everything a little wrong around the edges. Three doors on the left. Had there been three doors yesterday? He didn’t look too long. Looking too long was how you started seeing things.

He put his hand flat on the wall as he walked. The plaster was cool through his palm. His door. Inside.

His room was blazing again. Radiator hissing like a cat.

He stood there with his hand on the window latch and thought about last night. Three soft knocks, her hunched in the doorway: the house doesn’t like the cold.

He cracked the window an inch. Cold air came in with the smell of wet leaves.

The radiator hissed louder. The pipes knocked three times, slow, deliberate.

He shut the window. He didn’t do that again.

He stood at the shut window and looked at the alley. A cat picked through a tipped trash can, unhurried, the king of the wet dark. The rain came down. Phoenix watched until the cat left, and envied it the simplicity.

The shower ran brown for three seconds, then hot. He watched the brown go clear and thought about the pipes, the knocking, walking the walls. Old houses. Old pipes. Rust in the lines. He stood under the hot water and recited it like the rules, and almost believed it. He stepped in and stood under it and felt the night’s work start to come out of his shoulders. Nine minutes. He counted, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, as he’d counted everything since he was nineteen. At ten he turned it off standing in the cold drip, because rules only worked if somebody kept them. Somebody was going to be him.

He lay awake in the gray daylight listening to the pipes.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Slow, deliberate, walking the walls from one end of the house to the other.

He counted. Lost count. Started over.

Then all at once, nothing. Cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

The heating vent breathed. And through it, nasal and close, like she was kneeling right at the grate on the other side of the wall:

“Sleep tight, Phoenix.”

He was on his feet before he knew it. Down the hall, empty. Up the stairs, her door shut.

He stood there with his hand on the newel post. Very faint, through her door, the murmur. Low, steady, the cadence of someone talking. No second voice answered.

He didn’t knock. His hand didn’t even rise.

The house holding its breath.

He stood in the hallway a long time, listening to the rain.

Three doors on the left. He counted them twice.

He thought about asking her, tomorrow, about the murmur through the door. He rehearsed it: I heard you talking. Who were you talking to? It sounded insane in his head. Tomorrow, he decided, he'd ask.

Tomorrow, he didn't.

He went back to his room and cleaned it, nervous energy with nowhere to go. Refolded the shirts. Lined up his boots. Wiped the windowsill though he'd done it days ago. He stood in front of the closet a long time. Just a closet. His shirts hung there, patient. He closed the door, it stuck unless you lifted it, and didn't open it again.

He went back to his room and lay down. After a while the pipes started again, softer now. Almost like humming.

He got up at nine and walked to the dollar store for socks, his were wet through, two nights running. He stood in the aisle holding a six-pack of white socks and

laughed under his breath: he’d unloaded these exact socks, this exact brand, at three in the morning. The guts of every dollar store in the county, and now he was buying the guts.

On the porch, pulling the dry socks on, he thought about calling Faith. Her car was in the drive, the back seat still full of folded laundry. Sheets, mostly. Hospital corners. He wondered who all that laundry was for. Then he stopped wondering, fast, as you pulled your hand back from a hot stove. Sunday, he decided. He’d call Sunday, when he had something good to report. An address. A job. A man taking care.

He pushed his wire-frames up his nose, pulled his boots on, and walked to the bus with his duffel over his shoulder. A cruiser rolled past slow, the cop giving him the long look. Phoenix kept his eyes forward and his papers in order, address, job, compliance, and recited them in his head like a prayer. The cruiser moved on. He went to work.

Chapter 3

Take Care

The trucks ran on time for once, and Eddie clapped him on the shoulder at the end of shift, a real one, not the measuring kind.

“You’re all right, Phoenix.”

He rode it home through the rain. Six in the morning and he felt almost human. Take care of things today only. Today was a good today.

He dozed on the bus and dreamed of the Civic, the fogged windows, the rain on the roof. Woke with his face wet, unsure if it was rain or something else. The nurse from the other morning wasn’t there. Everybody on the 6am bus was coming from somewhere hard, and today he was just one of them, which felt like mercy.

The shift had been clean work. The pallet jack didn’t fight him anymore. He’d learned the pump and the release, the way you learned a

dance partner. He’d loaded a truck alone and gotten the manifest right the first time. The old night man with the burned hands had nodded at him like he belonged there. At three the old man showed him the trick for a wet dock, how to feather the release so the load didn’t slide. “Rain gets in everywhere,” the old man said. “You learn to work with it, or you work against it forever.” Phoenix thought about that for the rest of the shift. His shoulders still burned, but it was the honest kind now. The kind that meant something was getting built.

At four, Eddie stopped him by the dock doors. “Thursday,” Eddie said. “You want Thursday nights steady?”

It took Phoenix a second. Steady meant scheduled. Scheduled meant expected.

“Yeah,” he said. “I want that.”

Eddie did the chin thing and walked off. Phoenix stood in the diesel and the rain-blow and felt something unlock in his chest. Somebody expected him somewhere.; that was new.; that was everything.

Thursday came steady, like promised. The difference was small and enormous: his name on the schedule, penciled in Eddie’s block hand. PHOENIX, THU. He stared at it longer than he should have. Somebody’s handwriting, holding his name like it belonged there.

The Thursday shift ran long. Rain got under the dock doors and turned the concrete slick. The old man worked beside him without talking, the two of them moving in the beep and steam of the forklifts like they’d done it together for years. At break the old man said he’d been on nights twenty years. “Twenty years,” Phoenix repeated. The old man shrugged. “It’s a living.” Phoenix thought about twenty years of nights, twenty years of

rain on a metal roof. Couldn’t decide if it was a warning or a promise.

He cleaned the whole downstairs before eight. Scrubbed the stove, mopped the kitchen, folded the dish towels as his mama had taught him, corners square. Under the stove, wedged against the wall, he found a marble, glass, blue swirled with white, small as a thumbnail. He held it to the light. Somebody’s marble, from somebody’s long ago. He set it on the windowsill and didn’t think about it. In the bathroom drain he found a hair, long, gray-streaked, greasy. Not his. He held it between two fingers and dropped it in the trash and washed his hands twice. Anybody can do the middle, baby. He did the windowsills with a rag. The top of the fridge where the dust had been lying undisturbed since before he was born.

The bathroom took the longest. The tub was ringed brown at the waterline, and he went at it with the sponge until his arm ached. The ring faded. He stood back, satisfied, corners, edges, middle.

By evening, it was back. Same brown line, same height, like the water had never been touched.

He stared at it. Old pipes, he told himself. Rust in the lines. He didn’t scrub it again.

The place almost looked like somebody lived in it on purpose.

The water ran hot the full ten minutes of his shower. He stood in it grinning like an idiot, his beard dripping, the steam fogging everything.

Bre came down while he was folding towels.

She stopped in the doorway. For a second her face did something he hadn’t seen. Softened, the shitty attitude draining out of it like water off a roof.

“You take care,” she said quietly.

It didn’t sound like an accusation this time.

She crossed to the counter and ran one finger along the folded stack of towels. Just the one finger. Then she looked at him, and something in her face was almost, he didn’t have the word. It wasn’t kind. It was the shape where kind would go.

She sat at the kitchen table, uninvited into his morning, or maybe invited by the clean towels. Told him about the block, back when. The corner store had been a bakery. “Real bread,” she said, her voice going soft at the edges. “You could smell it three streets over.” The laundromat had been a theater, before that. She talked with her hands folded, and for a few minutes she was just an old woman remembering a better street. Phoenix felt something in his chest loosen.

Then she looked at the window, at the rain, and the softness went out of her face like a light switched off.

“Take care of your things,” she said, standing. Not unkind. Just, done. She shuffled upstairs, and the kitchen felt colder for her leaving it.

She made dinner that night. Something gray and steaming in a chipped bowl. It smelled like pepper and old meat. He ate it because she watched him eat it. Because the apartment was warm, and because for one evening it almost felt like somebody’s house.

She asked about the warehouse. He told her about the pallet jack, about Eddie’s forklift eyes. She asked about before, and he moved the spoon around in the bowl and didn’t answer, and she let it go. Which was its own small mercy, or its own small calculation. He couldn’t tell which. He was starting to understand that with her, he might never be able to tell which.

He asked about the house, how long she’d lived here, who’d lived here before him.

“The house has had many,” she said. “They come. They go.” She smiled her crooked smile. “You’re different, though.”

“Where’d they go?” he said.

“On.” She refolded her napkin, corners square. “People go on, Phoenix. That’s what people do.”

He didn’t ask what she meant. He was starting to learn: with her, you didn’t ask.

“How?”

She didn’t answer. She watched him eat.

He noticed, halfway through the bowl, that she wasn’t eating. Her spoon hadn’t moved. She just watched him eat, as you’d watch a plant take water.

“You not eating?” he said.

“I ate,” she said.

The lie sat between them, calm as a third person at the table.

“What’s in it?” he said.

“Pepper,” she said.

He didn’t ask again. He ate. The stew was pepper and old meat and something else he couldn’t name, something sweet underneath. He ate it all. The bowl was chipped on the rim, and he ran his thumb over the chip while she watched. Neither of them said anything.

“This house was something, once,” she said, out of nowhere.

“What was it?”

“A home.” The softness died out of her face like a light switched off. She went back to her bowl.

“Why are you good to me?” he said.

She looked up. “Somebody has to notice,” she said. “Somebody has to write it down.”

He didn’t know what that meant. He ate.

“You got family, Phoenix?”

The question came out of nowhere. Her voice nasal as ever, but smaller.

He should have deflected. He knew that even as he answered. But he was warm, and fed, and the rain was on the windows. For one evening it almost felt like somebody’s house.

“My sister,” he said. “Faith.”

Bre went still.

Not surprised-still. Gone-still. The spoon stopped halfway to her mouth. The glasses caught the kitchen light and went white, and

for a long moment there was nobody behind them at all.

“Faith,” she repeated.

“Yeah. She’s, she’s good. She visits when she can.”

It was the way she said the name that stayed with him later. Not like hearing it new. Like tasting something she’d already known the flavor of.

Bre set the spoon down very carefully, like the table might break.

“Family’s important,” she said, and stood, and shuffled upstairs without another word. The smell of her perfume hung in the stairwell long after she was gone.

He sat at the table with the gray stew going cold and told himself he’d imagined the stillness. People went quiet. It didn’t mean anything.

He washed the bowls, rule three, and dried them, and put them away. He stood at the bottom of the stairs with the clean bowls in his hands, listening to the shuffle fade overhead. Then the murmur started, low, steady, through the ceiling. He put the bowls away and went to his room. The stairwell still smelled like her perfume, thick, like she'd left it there on purpose. Like a dog marking a trail.

He went to his room and lay in the dark and listened to the house. Nothing. The pipes were silent. The radiator ticked as it cooled. He thought about Faith's voice on the phone, Sunday. He thought about the spoon stopping halfway to her mouth.

That night the knocking was louder.

Not the pipes this time, the walls themselves. Slow. Deliberate. Moving from the front of the house to the back like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time.

He lay in the dark and counted the knocks and told himself it was the house settling. Old houses made noises. Everybody knew that.

He got up and walked the hall while it knocked, trying to catch it. The sound stayed ahead of him. Always one turn away, always moving front to back, patient as weather. He gave up at the basement door and stood there with his hand on the jamb, listening to it go on without him. The jamb was cold under his palm. Colder than the hall air explained. He took his hand away.

It was his night off, Eddie ran the dock short. Phoenix had drawn the lucky straw, and the house knew it. That was the thought he had, lying there, and he didn’t like the shape of it.

He got up. Stood in the hall in his socks. The knocking moved around him, patient, unhurried, like it had all the time in the world. Like it knew he was listening.

At 3am he woke up, and she was standing in his doorway.

He didn’t know what woke him. No sound. Just the feeling, the particular weight of being watched.

Just standing there. Housecoat. Hair hanging. Glasses catching the hall light in two white discs. Watching him.

He sat up fast. “Bre—”

She shuffled backward into the hall. Didn’t speak. Didn’t hurry. Just went, the way smoke goes when you wave at it.

And her shuffle made no sound at all.

That was the part he carried with him into the gray morning. The drag-step, drag-step he’d heard a hundred times through the floorboards, silent. Like the house had lifted her up and carried her quiet, or like she’d never needed the shuffle in the first place.

He sat in the dark a long time after, listening to the house not make a sound.

He went to the kitchen and drank from the tap, the water brown for a count of ten, then clear. It tasted like pennies. He stood at the sink in the dark and listened to the house not make a sound. Then he went back to bed.

He got up once, in the gray before morning, and stood in the hall. Her door was shut. He raised his hand to knock, to ask, to demand, to do something. His hand hung there, and then it fell. He went back to bed and watched the window go from black to gray, and didn’t sleep.

When the gray was full morning he got up and went to the kitchen. The towels he’d folded corners-square were refolded, a different fold, precise, unfamiliar. He stood looking at them a long time. He hadn’t heard her come down. He never heard her come down.

He refolded them his way, corners square, and stood back. They looked right. They looked like his mama’s. He left them there and went to work, a Saturday pickup shift Eddie’d thrown him, and didn’t think about it.



Chapter 4

Lights Out

The new rule was taped to the fridge Saturday, in the blue ink.

Five. Lights out at ten.

He stared at it a long time. One through four he’d memorized. Five was new.

“Bre,” he called up the stairs. “What’s this?”

She shuffled down, housecoat, hair. She read the fridge like she’d never seen it.

“Lights out at ten,” she said.

“I work nights. I’m not even home at ten.”

“The house needs its rest.” She said it as you’d say grace. “You can be quiet in the dark.”

He wanted to argue. The words were right there, I pay rent, this is my home too. But her glasses had gone white in the kitchen light and her voice had that nasal edge that meant the conversation was already over.

“Okay,” he said.

“Good.” She patted his arm. Her hand was cold. “You’re a good man, Phoenix.”

He stood at the fridge after she’d gone up and read all five rules twice. The blue ink was fresh on number five, still a little shiny. He touched it with his fingertip, and it came away clean.

He made instant coffee in a chipped mug and drank it standing at the counter. The fridge hummed. Through the wall came the sound of her moving around upstairs, the shuffle, a drawer opening, the murmur. He’d started noticing the murmur as you noticed a dripping faucet: quiet, and it never quite stopped.

He rinsed the mug, rule three, and counted the rules on his fingers, standing at the fridge. One, two, three, four, five. He wondered what happened if you broke one. He didn’t wonder very hard. Some questions you didn’t ask out loud in a house like this.

He thought about breaking number five tonight, just to see, sitting up past ten with the light on, loud, defiant. The thought fizzled before it finished forming. He didn’t have it in him. That scared him more than the rule did.

There was a pen on the counter by the phone, blue ink. He picked it up, put it down. His fingertip came away with a blue dot. He wiped it on his jeans.

Five rules. He wondered, standing there, if they were for him, or for the house. If the house needed its rest, if the house didn’t like the cold, then maybe the rules weren’t about him at all. Maybe he was just the one who had to keep them.

He went out into the rain.

Fridays the warehouse ran a skeleton crew, and Eddie had given him the night. He spent the day as free men spent days they didn’t know what to do with, walking.

The block in the rain. Wet leaves plastered to the sidewalk. The church on the corner had a sign out front, the letters rain-warped: YOU ARE LOVED. He stood looking at it a long time. It didn’t feel true, and it didn’t feel false. It felt like something somebody had put there a long time ago and stopped checking on.

A bus went past, hissing on the wet street. He watched it go and thought about getting on, any bus, any direction. He stayed on the sidewalk. The sign stayed where it was. YOU ARE LOVED. The corner store with the barred windows, where he bought cigarettes he couldn’t afford and smoked one on the curb, watching the street go by.

He passed the laundromat without meaning to take that route. The fluorescents were on, the dryers humming their low hum. Through the window he could see the washers, two over from the folding table. Where she'd sat. Where she'd watched him fold the same two shirts.

He kept walking. He didn't know why his hands were cold.

He ended up at the library, because it was warm and free and nobody watched you. He sat by the tall windows and read a newspaper he didn't care about and watched the rain come down on the empty street. An old man slept in the periodicals, his head tipped back, mouth open. The quiet felt safe. Phoenix stayed until his neck hurt from not moving, because going back to the house felt like going back to something that was waiting.

He fell asleep in the chair. The librarian woke him at closing. Gentle, practiced, like she'd done it a hundred times for a hundred men.; it was dark out.

A stray dog with ribs like a xylophone trotted past and didn’t look at him. It fell in behind him for a block, tags jingling. Then stopped at the corner like it had hit a wall. It stood there watching him go. He didn’t look back. Kids weren’t out, too wet, too gray. The whole north side had the feel of a place holding its breath.

He thought about calling Faith. He had the number memorized. He stood outside the corner store with his phone in his hand and almost did it. Almost told her about the house, the heat, the woman standing in his doorway at 3am making no sound.

He dialed. It rang twice. He hung up before she answered and stood there with his heart going, a coward with a phone in his hand.

He put the phone away. She’d worry.; that was the whole of it. She’d worry, and there was nothing she could do from across town except worry. He was trying to do good, and good

men didn’t hand their sisters things they couldn’t carry.

He walked home in the early dark. The streetlights buzzed. None of them quite reached the porch.

Inside, the house was dark and quiet. He hung his wet coat and walked the hall to his room. Passed the basement door, and stopped.

The padlock. In the light from the hall window it was almost cheerful. Bright steel, oiled, the hasp screwed into old wood with new screws. Nothing else in this house was new. He touched it with one finger. Cold, colder than the hall air explained.

He took his hand away and went to his room and didn’t think about it. He told himself he didn’t think about it.

He tried to remember the basement door before today. The hasp, the wood, whether the lock had been there all along. He couldn’t picture it. The door had been

background, scenery. Now it was the only thing in the hall.

He dreamed about it that afternoon, dozing in the heat of his room, the bright steel, the oiled shackle, opening like an eye. He woke with his heart going and told himself it was just a dream. Old houses. Old dreams.

He got up and splashed brown water on his face and looked at himself in the spotted mirror. His wire-frames were crooked. His beard needed trimming. He looked like a man who was being kept. The thought came uninvited, and he pushed it away, and straightened his glasses.

He’d seen the scratches, though. Pale lines in the old paint at the bottom of the door, at knee height, thin, close together, like fingernails. Or like wood splitting with age. He’d told himself wood. He was getting good at telling himself things.

He ate dinner standing up in the kitchen, a can of cold beans, eaten with a plastic fork. He’d unloaded forty cases of them on Wednesday.

His mama had made beans with salt pork and onion, slow all day, the whole house smelling like Sunday. He stood at the counter eating them cold from the can and thought about that kitchen. The corners-square dish towels, and her voice: anybody can do the middle, baby. He rinsed the can, rule three. The memory stayed where it was, behind his eyes, where he kept the things he couldn’t afford to look at straight. The irony wasn’t lost on him. Nothing was lost on him lately; that was the problem.

At nine he sat on the porch and smoked and watched the rain come down on the empty street. A car went past slow, headlights smearing on the wet asphalt. In the window across the street, a television flickered blue. Somebody’s whole life, right there, unwatched.

Behind him, from inside the walls: one knock. Single. Patient.

He went in. Lights out.

He lay in the dark and recited the rules to himself like a prayer. One, two, three, four, five. He was obeying number five right now, lying in the dark, being quiet, being good. The thought came uninvited: being good was what kept him here. Being good was the lock on the door. He pushed the thought away and listened to the rain.

He tried. He lay in the dark at ten and listened to the rain and told himself to sleep.

The ceiling was a gray he couldn’t quite see. The pipes were quiet, too quiet, the held-breath quiet. His body didn’t know what ten at night meant; his body thought ten at night was the middle of a shift, boxes, diesel. The

pallet jack’s pump-hiss. He lay there and counted his own heartbeats and got to two hundred and started over.

At 11:40 he heard the laughing.

Faint. Far away. Inside the walls. The way you’d hear a television through an apartment wall, except there was no television in this house. The laughing wasn’t coming from a show.

It was children.

He sat up. His heart was doing something loud in his chest.

The sound moved. Down the hall, toward the back of the house, toward the basement door. He got up and followed it in his socks, one hand on the wall, the laughing getting clearer with every step. Small voices. Two of them, maybe. Giggling like kids do when they’re hiding.

“Hello?” he said, quiet. Not loud enough to wake her, loud enough for the walls.

The laughing paused.

Then it started again, closer, from just beyond the turn in the hall. Like they’d been waiting for him to speak. Like it was a game, and he’d just agreed to play.

He followed.

The air got colder as he went. Step by step, the hall breathed cold against his face, though the radiator in his room was still blazing. Like the house had opened a window somewhere just for this walk. The cold smelled like wet earth. Like the closet.

The basement door was padlocked.

A new padlock. Bright steel, still oiled, nothing else in this house was new.

He touched it. Cold enough to ache.

He pressed his ear to the painted wood. On the other side: nothing. A dark so complete it had weight.

Then, very faint, his own heartbeat, coming back to him through the wood. He took his ear away.

The laughing stopped. Cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

“Some doors should stay closed, Phoenix.”

He spun. She was right behind him, no shuffle, no hunch, no sound at all. Just there, the perfume rolling off her in a wave.

“I, I heard—”

“The house settles,” she said. “Old houses talk. You don’t have to listen.”

She reached past him, her arm cold against his, and touched the padlock like you’d touch a sleeping dog. Almost tender. That was the worst of it, worse than the laughing, worse than the cold: the tenderness. Like the padlock was something she loved.

“Bed,” she said.

He went.

He lay in the dark until his shift would have ended, listening. And very late, or very early, he couldn’t tell anymore, very faint through the walls, he heard it: a small voice, humming. No tune he knew. It went on for a while, and then it stopped, cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

Upstairs, her shuffle. Her door. Then the murmur. Low, steady, the cadence of talking to someone who wasn’t there.

He lay there and fitted it together, the laughing, the humming, the padlock, the

murmur, the way you fitted boxes on a pallet. Neat. Stackable. Wrong. They didn’t fit, and he knew it, and he stayed.

The house didn’t knock. The walls didn’t laugh. The quiet was so complete it felt arranged, furniture moved into place around him.

He didn’t sleep.

At gray morning he got up and made instant coffee and drank it standing at the counter. The house was just a house. The fridge humming, the rain on the windows, the rules on the door in blue ink. He rinsed the mug. Rule three. Normal.



Chapter 5

The Cold Room

He started counting his steps on the fourth morning.

It was stupid. He knew it was stupid. But the hallway to his room kept feeling longer. Tired men imagined things, and counting was something a man could do instead of imagining.

Fourteen steps. He counted twice to be sure.

The day before it had been eleven.

He stood in the hall with his duffel over his shoulder and told himself he’d miscounted yesterday.; that was the whole of it. Miscounted.

He’d woken to the radiator blazing, the room like an oven, the window fogged. He’d showered counting to ten, the water hot the whole blessed time. Eaten half a gas-station sandwich standing at the counter, and told

himself it was a normal morning. Normal men ate breakfast. Normal men went to work. He was a normal man with a normal address.

Then he’d stepped into the hall, and the hall had been wrong.

He counted the doors on the left while he was at it. Three. The doors were the same, his room, the bathroom, the third one he never opened. It wasn’t the doors that were wrong. The distance between them. Like the hall had stretched in the night while he slept, as a cat stretched, thoughtless and slow.

He took his key and scratched a line on his doorframe, at shoulder height. Fourteen. He scratched it deep enough to last. Tomorrow he’d count again, and the scratch would tell him the truth one way or the other.

He didn’t know which answer he was afraid of.

He walked the hall again, counting. Fourteen. It held. He felt worse, not better. A held

number was a promise, and he was starting to understand what promises meant in this house.

Bre’s door was open.

It was never open. In a week he had never seen it open.

The house was quiet, her shuffle nowhere in it. The light was on upstairs, spilling out around the doorframe in a yellow wedge.

He didn’t mean to look. He told himself that later, that he didn’t mean to. But the door was open and the light was on inside, and his feet moved before he told them not to.

The walls were covered in photographs.

Him.

Bus stops. The Division line, the one that ran past the gas station. Him with his duffel, head down against the

rain. The warehouse gate. Him walking in for his first shift, lunch pail in his hand. The halfway house on Division. Him walking out with his duffel, the day he left, his face younger and harder than he remembered it being.

Him leaving the parole office, the old one, downtown, head down, hands in his pockets. Date-stamped four years back. She’d been across the street with a long lens, patient as a hunter. He’d walked right past her a hundred times without seeing.

The laundromat, through the window: him folding shirts. Beside the photo, in blue ink, a date from three weeks before he’d ever met her.

Him asleep in the Civic. Through the windshield, rain beading on the glass, his face slack and younger in sleep. He stared at that one the longest. Somebody had stood in the rain outside the gas station and watched him

sleep, close enough to see his face. He had never woken up.

The oldest was four years back. Him walking into the halfway house on Division, duffel over his shoulder, the day he arrived. Four years. She’d been there at the beginning of the whole long fall, camera steady, already writing dates in blue ink.

And one that didn’t have him in it at all: the house, years ago, paint fresher, the porch swept. And a young man on the steps, duffel over his shoulder, squinting into the sun. On the back, a date from six years ago, and a single word in blue ink: ready.

Phoenix put it back exactly where he’d found it, his hands shaking.

He looked for more like it. There were two. Different men, different years, same porch, same duffel, same squint into the sun. One from eight years back. One from eleven. He

put them back exactly where he’d found them, and his hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

Newspaper clippings about his case, yellowed at the edges, arranged in a fan like a shrine. He didn’t read the headlines. He couldn’t. His own younger face stared out of a mugshot. He looked away, and looked back, because not looking felt like lying.

Dozens of him. Years of him.

Every one of them taken from a distance, across streets, through windows, down the block. Never close. She’d never been close, not once in four years. Not until the laundromat, when she’d sat two washers over and spoken to him like a stranger.

Pinned up in rows, dated in the cramped blue hand. Three years back. Four. The ink faded on the oldest ones to the color of old bruises.

The dates clustered, he saw it without meaning to. More photos in October than any other month, every year, four years running. October was her busy month. He stood in her room in October and understood, as you

understood weather, that the month had a shape and he was inside it.

He wondered what she did with the months that weren’t October. Filed them. Waited. Sharpened whatever it was she sharpened. The thought made his hands cold, so he stopped thinking it.

On the dresser: a hairbrush thick with long hair, gray streaked through it. A perfume bottle, half empty. The closet door, shut. He didn’t open it. His restraint felt like the only clean thing he owned.

His mouth went dry. His hands had gone cold.

He backed out of the doorway and down the hall, fourteen steps, he counted without meaning to. Sat on his bed with his back to the wall until his breathing slowed.

He thought about calling the police. He held the thought up and looked at it: Officer, my landlady has photographs of me. Photographs

weren’t a crime. Watching wasn’t a crime. An old woman with a camera and too much time, what was the crime? He had nothing. He put the phone down without picking it up.

She’d been watching him for years. Before the laundromat. Before the room. Before any of it.

The laundromat hadn’t been chance. He’d sat down at those washers because his shirts were damp and the dryers were warm. She’d been two washers over with her hospital-corner sheets, waiting. The word sat in his chest like a stone. Waiting.

Had she been at the gas station? He tried to picture the night shift attendant’s lot, the floods, the dark between the pumps. He couldn’t picture her. That didn’t mean she hadn’t been there. That was the horror of it, he couldn’t verify a single thing. Three, four years of his life, and she’d been in the margins of all of it. He’d never once looked at the margins.

“Trying isn’t done, Phoenix,” she’d said, the second night.

He hadn’t told her his name. He’d turned it over for exactly one evening and then let it go, as you let go of things that scare you. Now it came back up with teeth. The lease. A sheet of notebook paper. Had he written his name on it? He tried to picture his own handwriting and couldn’t. He tried to picture saying it at the laundromat, I’m Phoenix, and couldn’t find that either. Just her voice, nasal and almost sweet: I’m Bre. I have a room.

Like she’d already known everything the introductions were for.

He thought about leaving the way you think about flying.

He stood in his room with the duffel in his hands and did the math out loud, quiet, to the empty air. The parole officer had the address, Friday, done, filed. The warehouse had the address for the W-2. If he ran, he ran without

forwarding anything. The PO would call it absconding, and the warehouse would call it quitting. He’d be back in the Civic behind the gas station with forty bucks gone to rent and October raining through the window seals.

He had nowhere.; that was the whole math. Nowhere was a place he’d already lived, and he was trying not to live there anymore.

He put the duffel down. He didn’t unpack it.

He opened the duffel and checked, though he didn’t know what he was checking for. Shirts. Papers. Nothing with his name on it, there never was. Men like him learned to travel light on identity.

The Civic was still behind the gas station, as far as he knew. Battery dead by now. Tires going soft. Nowhere to go, and nothing to go there in. The math held.

He unpacked the duffel instead. Hung the shirts, lift the door, he’d learned. Lined up the boots. Put the peeled

tape strips from the closet on the windowsill, next to nothing.

He was staying. That was the sentence under all the math: he was staying.

He went to the hall and looked at the scratch on his doorframe. Fourteen. Still there. Still true. It didn’t make him feel any better.

He went out into the day because the room had gotten too small for the thoughts in it. Walked the block in the rain. Stood across the street from the laundromat and looked at the window, the exact window, the exact washers. Tried to stand where the photograph had been taken from. A bus stop bench, half-sheltered. Somebody could sit there for hours and nobody would look twice. The thought made his hands cold again, and he kept walking.

At the corner store he bought coffee and drank it standing under the awning, watching the rain come

down on the empty street. The stray dog trotted past again, ribs like a xylophone. It looked at him this time. He didn’t know what that meant either.

He got back as the gray was going dark. Her key in the lock, he’d know that sound anywhere now, the shuffle, the smell of rain and perfume. “Phoenix?” she called up the stairs, sweet as pie. “You eat?”

“Yeah,” he lied from his doorway. “I’m good.”

His stomach growled, loud in the quiet hall. She heard it. Her smile went crooked and knowing.

“There’s oatmeal,” she said, “if you want.”

“I’m good,” he said again. The lie hung there, obvious to both of them, and neither of them touched it.

“Good,” she said. “You’re a good man.”

He heard her start up the stairs, then stop. A long moment. He could feel her standing there below him, looking up at his doorway, the whole house between them like something held in.

Then she went on up. Her door closed. The lock turned. A heavy sound, final, though he’d never heard her lock it before.

He stood in his room and acted normal at the walls until his face hurt.

Later, through the ceiling: the murmur. Low, steady, the cadence of talking. He lay on the bed and listened as you listened to a radio left on in another room. And then, clear as a bell through the plaster, one word:

“Phoenix.”

His name. In the murmur. Like punctuation.

The murmur went on.

That night his room was freezing.

He’d felt it come, before he woke fully. The cold moving through the room like a hand passed over everything. The radiator ticked once, a small lonely sound, and then nothing. Dead.

He woke with his breath fogging in the dark. The radiator was cold, dead cold, the first time since he’d moved in. He put his hand on it. Ice. The pipes were silent. The whole house was silent in a way it had never been, a held-breath silence, like something with its hand over its mouth.

The closet light was brighter than it had ever been. A bar of pale light across the floorboards, cold air breathing out of the crack, smelling of wet earth.

And through the crack, small as a moth:

“Is she gone?”

A child’s voice. Barely a whisper.

Phoenix stopped breathing.

He lay in the freezing dark with his breath fogging and his heart going like a drum. Every part of him that was trying to do good warred with every part of him that was afraid. The light. The cold. The small voice on the other side of the wood.

“Hello?” he whispered back.

Nothing. The light flickered, once, and went out, like somebody had closed a door on the other side.

He stood there with his hand on the closet door. The wood was cold, colder than the room, cold like the padlock had been. He could feel the crack under his palm, the faint pull of air, wet earth and something old.

He almost opened it. God help him, his fingers found the edge of the door. For one second the only thing in the world was the choice.

He took his hand away. He got back into bed with his coat on over the blanket. His breath fogged, and the radiator stayed dead, and the house held its breath around him.

He tried the radiator knob. Nothing. He piled the spare blanket over the coat and lay there with his breath fogging, watching the closet crack, dark now, just a crack. Thought about the small voice, and didn’t open the door.

He got up and stood at the window. The alley below, rain, trash cans, and the cat, picking through a tipped can, unhurried. The king of the wet dark. It looked up at his window like it knew he was there. Phoenix watched until it left, and got back into bed, and didn’t sleep.

He lay in the freezing dark until morning. He did not sleep, and he did not open the closet.

Sometime before gray, he heard her shuffle pass his door. Slow. It stopped outside, a long

moment, the perfume seeping under the door, and went on.

At gray morning he got up. The radiator was warm again, blazing, hissing like a cat, like nothing had happened. The closet crack was dark. He stood in the heat in his coat and laughed once, a short sound with nothing in it, and took the coat off.

In the kitchen she was waiting, sweet as anything, a bowl of gray oatmeal steaming on the table. “Sleep good?” she said.

“Like a rock,” he lied.

She smiled her crooked smile and watched him eat.

The oatmeal tasted like nothing, hot, gray, gluey. He ate it all because she watched him eat it. Because the apartment was warm, and because for one morning it almost felt like somebody cared whether he lived or died.

Almost.

He rinsed the bowl, rule three, and set it in the drainer. Went to his room, and counted his steps in the hall without meaning to. Fourteen. Still fourteen. He closed his door and sat on the bed and waited for whatever came next.



Chapter 6

Twenty Minutes Past

The truck broke down on the interstate and there was nothing to do about it.

One minute they were rolling, eighteen pallets of canned beans stacked tight, the straps humming. The next the cab shuddered, and the gauges went red. Eddie was easing it onto the shoulder with both hands on the wheel and his jaw set.

“Shop says an hour,” Eddie said, hanging up. He stood in the rain with his hood up and his boots in the slush and looked at the truck like it had personally insulted him. “Maybe two.”

Phoenix stood next to eighteen pallets of canned beans and watched his good day rot.

The rain came down in sheets off the overpass. Cars threw up walls of it. Phoenix’s jacket was soaked through in five minutes. He

thought about the ledger. He didn’t have the word for it yet. He thought about her kitchen table and the way she checked the trash for corners he’d missed. He felt the twenty minutes pile up like snow on a wire.

He’d been on time every day since the room. On time for the shift. On time for the water-off rule. On time for everything, because on time was the only currency he had, and she counted it all.

“Quit pacing,” Eddie said.

“Sorry.”

Eddie looked at him. “You got somewhere to be?”

“I got somebody counting.”

Eddie grunted. He didn’t ask what that meant. Men who’d done time recognized the shape of somebody counting.

The thought came to him standing in the slush: call her. Tell her first, before the twenty minutes became thirty. Get ahead of it. He pulled out his phone, the cheap one, the screen already badly spidered at the corner. Stood there in the rain with his thumb over her number.

He didn’t press it.

What would he say? The truck died. I’m trying. And she’d say I believe you, sweet as rot. Write down the exact minute he called, and the minute would go in the book with everything else. There was no version of the call that didn’t end up as ink.

He put the phone away.

The shop sent a truck. The mechanic was a thin kid with grease to the elbows who said “fuel pump” as a doctor says a diagnosis, quick, no comfort in it, and couldn’t fix it on the shoulder. They waited for the tow in the rain. Eddie smoked. Phoenix stood with his hands in his pockets and watched the interstate throw up walls of water and thought about the radiator hissing in his room and the three soft knocks and the way she’d stood in his doorway at 3am without a sound.

A state trooper rolled past slow, lights off, and for one cold second Phoenix felt the old flinch go through him. The record, the address he didn’t have yet, the PO waiting on paperwork. Then the trooper was gone, taillights bleeding red into the rain, and Phoenix breathed again.

Two hours. He counted them as he’d started counting his steps in the hallway. Because counting was something a man could do instead of imagining.

When the pallets were finally reloaded and the shift ended, the clock in the break room said 9:40. Eddie clapped him on the shoulder, the real kind, not the measuring kind, and said, “Tell her the truck died. She’ll understand.”

She wouldn’t. Phoenix already knew she wouldn’t.

The walk home took forty minutes through the rain.

The city was all wet neon and shuttered storefronts, the kind of block where the streetlights buzzed and never quite reached the porch. His shirt stuck to his back. His duffel hung heavy. With every step the dread got more specific, not a cloud anymore, a hand. He rehearsed what he’d say. Truck broke down. Eddie can tell you. Call him.

He said it three different ways, and they all sounded like excuses in his head, which is what she would call them, which is what she would write down.

Halfway home he stopped at the corner store, the one with the bulletproof glass and the lottery tickets. Bought a coffee he didn’t want, just to stand under the awning a minute. The clerk didn’t look up. The coffee was bitter and thin. On the little TV bolted over the counter, the weather man pointed at a green-yellow blob sitting right over the city like it lived there.

“Stuck,” the clerk said, without looking up. “Ain’t moving till Thursday.”

Phoenix drank the coffee in the rain and watched his breath fog. Twenty minutes late. Then thirty. The numbers ticked in his head like a meter running.

He thought about not going home. The thought came clean and simple, like a door opening: keep walking. He had forty bucks once, he had a duffel now, he could walk to the mission on Jefferson and sleep on a cot and never hear that nasal voice again.

He stood in the rain and held the thought as you'd hold a hot coal, just long enough to feel it.

Then he kept walking home. Because the parole officer wanted an address by Friday. Because the warehouse wanted an address for the W-2. Because a man trying to do good didn't run from a landlady with a book.

Because he was afraid of what she'd write down if he did.

The house was dark except the kitchen. The kitchen was never dark.

He came in quiet, and she was sitting at the table waiting for him.

She wasn’t angry. That was the worst of it, she was calm. Sitting at the table with her hands folded, housecoat neat, hair combed back for once. The perfume wasn’t as thick. She looked almost like somebody’s aunt.

“You’re late,” she said.

“Truck broke down. Eddie can tell you. Call him.”

“I believe you.” She smiled, crooked teeth, almost kind. She reached for the mug in front of her, cold coffee, a skin on it. Took a sip like they had all night. “Sit down, Phoenix.”

He sat. The chair creaked.

Outside, the rain had picked up again, drumming the porch roof. The kitchen bulb hummed. He noticed, as you notice things when you’re afraid, that the rule sheet on the fridge had been re-taped. The corners were fresh. Somebody had taken it down and put it back up straight. The thought of her standing there smoothing the tape with her thumb made his throat close.

She opened a book on the table. A ledger, bound in cracked green leather, the pages full of neat blue ink in her cramped hand.

She turned pages. Slow. Deliberate. The way a preacher turns to the verse.

“Tuesday,” she read. “Twelve minutes late from your shift.”

His stomach dropped.

“Thursday. Shower ran eleven minutes. The rule is ten.” She turned a page. “A mug in the sink, Friday. You left it. I found it.”

“Bre—”

“Sunday.” She didn’t look up. “Trash out at nine-fifteen. The rule is nine.” Another page, the paper whispering. “Last week, boots by the door, mud on the mat. You tracked it all the way to the stairs.”

Each one landed like a small stone in still water. None of them were anything. That was the worst of it, none of them were anything. Twelve minutes. One minute of hot water. A mug. And she read them the way a judge read charges, her cramped blue handwriting marching down the pages in neat, terrible rows.

“I keep track because I care.” She turned another page. Another. “This is what taking care looks like, Phoenix. Somebody has to notice. Somebody has to write it down.”

The dates went back.

Weeks. Then months. Page after page of blue ink, times, places, small failures, going back

to before the laundromat. Before the room. Before he’d ever heard her name.



His hands were shaking. He put them flat on the table to stop it.

“You’ve been—” His voice came out wrong. “How long have you—”

“You’re a good man, Phoenix.” She closed the ledger. The sound was soft, final. “Don’t make me be the one who has to say otherwise.”

She stood, shuffled to the stairs, and went up without looking back.

He sat at the kitchen table a long time, staring at the closed book, listening to the house.

The ledger sat between his hands. Cracked green leather, worn soft at the corners. All he had to do was open it. Flip back through the months, read the dates, find out how long. Find out how far back she went, what she knew, whose name was on the first page.

His hand moved. Stopped. Hovered.

It wasn’t his book.; that was the whole of it. It wasn’t his book, and a man trying to do good didn’t go through other people’s books. Even when the book was about him. Even when the dates went back to before.

He put his hands flat on the table instead. He left the ledger closed.

Later he would think about that moment, his hand hovering over the green leather, the choice. He would understand it had been a test. Not hers. His own. The first of many, and he’d passed it, and passing it hadn’t saved him from anything.

The pipes knocked. Slow, deliberate, walking the walls from one end to the other. The radiator in his room was hissing up through the floorboards. The house sounded awake. The house sounded like it was listening to him sit there.

He tried to do the math on the dates. He couldn’t. Every time he got close to a number his mind slid off it, as your hand slides off something wet. Months. Before the laundromat. She’d known his name before he’d told her. He kept coming back to that, the second night, “Trying isn’t done, Phoenix,” and he’d wondered about it for exactly one

evening and then let it go, as you let go of things that scare you.

He couldn’t let it go now. It sat in his chest like a stone.

He got up and did the dishes. There weren’t any dishes, she’d already done them. He mopped the kitchen floor anyway. He wrung the mop until his knuckles went white. He worked the corners, the baseboards, the place under the table where the chair legs had worn the linoleum thin. The bucket water went brown. He emptied it and filled it again and went over the floor a second time.

Trying wasn’t done. He knew that. But trying was all he had, and he was going to try until the floor shone or his back gave out, whichever came first.

The pipes knocked. Front to back. Slow.

He was rinsing the mop when he heard it, faint, through the vent over the sink. Her voice, upstairs. Not talking to him. Not talking to anyone he could name.

Just a low murmur, nasal, almost sweet. The cadence of somebody reading aloud.

Reading names, maybe. Reading dates.

He stood very still with his hands in the brown water and listened until it stopped.

He tried to read the dates on the way to bed.

He sat on the edge of the mattress with the notebook, his notebook, the small black one he’d taken from the break-room box at the warehouse, feeling like a thief though they were free for anybody, open on his knees. He wrote the day down as he’d started writing everything down.

Oct 14, truck died on the interstate. Home 20 min late. She has a book.

He stared at the line. Then, under it, in smaller letters:

The dates went back months. Before the laundromat.

He thought about the halfway house on Division. The day he walked out with his duffel. Had she been there? Had she been across the street, in a car, writing down the time? The thought made his skin go cold in the hot room.

He thought about his PO. Ms. Hart with her riot-act voice. What would she do with a landlady who kept a book? Probably nothing. Probably think it was sweet, a woman looking out for a man in his situation. The thought made him laugh, once, without any humor in it.

He put the notebook under the mattress. He checked the closet. The crack was dark now, the light gone, the tape he’d put over it weeks ago still on the floor where it had fallen. He left it there.

His room was blazing. The radiator hissed like a cat. He stood with his hand on the window latch a long time and thought about the cold air and the wet leaves and her hunched in the doorway: the house doesn’t like the cold.

He left the window shut.

He lay in the dark and the house knocked, front to back, slow, deliberate. At 12:07 the thin wire of pale light showed in the back of the closet, the cold air breathing out, smelling of wet earth.

He didn’t get up. He lay there with his eyes open and watched the light and listened to the knocking walk the walls. He thought about blue ink in a cramped hand, dates going back to before, and he understood, down, the way you understand rain, that the room wasn’t a room.

It was a page. And she was writing on it.

Take care of things today only.; that was the whole plan. One box, then the next one. One today.

He was trying to do good.

But tonight, for the first time since the laundromat, he lay in the dark and wondered who he was trying to be good for.

Chapter 7

The Tenant

Two weeks in, he learned there was another tenant.

It happened on a Thursday morning, gray light coming through the bathroom window, and the strange thing wasn’t the door. The strange thing was that he’d walked past it a hundred times without seeing it.

He stood in the hallway with his toothbrush in his mouth and stared.

End of the hall, past the bathroom. A door. Painted the same dead white as the walls, no knob plate, no light underneath, nothing to catch the eye. He’d gone past it every day for three weeks. To the bathroom. To the kitchen. A hundred times, maybe two.

He counted the doors as he’d started counting his steps. Three on the left. His room, the bathroom, the linen closet with the dead bulb.

And now this one, at the end, where the hall just, stopped.

His room was the back room. He’d assumed the hall ended at his door. It didn’t. It went past his door, around a jog he’d never noticed, and ended here.

He stood there with toothpaste going bitter on his tongue and felt the particular cold you get when the floor moves under you and you’re the only one who feels it.

He finished brushing. He went to breakfast.

But first he walked the hall.

He started at the bathroom door and counted, heel to toe, slow, past his own room, around the jog he’d never noticed. The jog was the strangest part. The hallway bent, just slightly, like a tired spine, and the bend hid the end of the hall from the rest of it. That was how he’d missed the door. It wasn’t hidden. It was just around the corner of the house’s posture.

Fourteen steps from the bathroom to the dead-white door. He walked it twice to be sure.

Then he stood in front of his own room and looked back as he'd come. He tried to fit the hallway inside the house. The house was a run-down box. He'd seen it from the street, paint peeling, one shutter hanging crooked. A box that size didn't have room for a hallway that bent and kept going past the back room.

But the hallway was there. Fourteen steps of it. With a door at the end that hadn't been there, that he'd never seen, for three weeks.

He went to breakfast. His hands were cold.

Bre was at the kitchen table with her bowl, housecoat, hair hanging lank. The radio was on low, some gospel station, the signal wobbling in and out.

"Bre," he said. "Who's in the end room?"

She didn’t look up from her bowl. “Mr. Abernathy keeps to himself.”

He waited for more. There wasn’t more. The spoon went up, came down.

“Three weeks and I never heard him.”

“He’s quiet.” She lifted her spoon. “Be grateful. Quiet is a blessing in a house like this.”

“How long’s he been here?”

“Longer than you.” She looked at him then, and the glasses caught the kitchen bulb and went white. He couldn’t see her eyes at all. “Some people rent a room, Phoenix. They don’t rent a neighbor. You remember that.”

It wasn’t an answer. It was a rule wearing an answer’s clothes.

He ate his toast. The gospel station wobbled. He thought about the door, the dead white paint, as it had hidden in plain sight. He thought about the laughing in

the walls, the children, the basement padlock, and he filed Mr. Abernathy in the same drawer as all of it: things in this house that didn’t add up, in a house that didn’t add up.

“Does he eat?” Phoenix said. “Should I, make extra, or—”

“He eats.” She stood, bowl in hand, and the shuffle took her to the sink. “You take care of your things, Phoenix. Let other people take care of theirs.”

That afternoon he knocked.

He told himself he was just being neighborly. New man in the house, introduce yourself, that’s what decent people did. A man trying to do good knocked on his neighbor’s door.

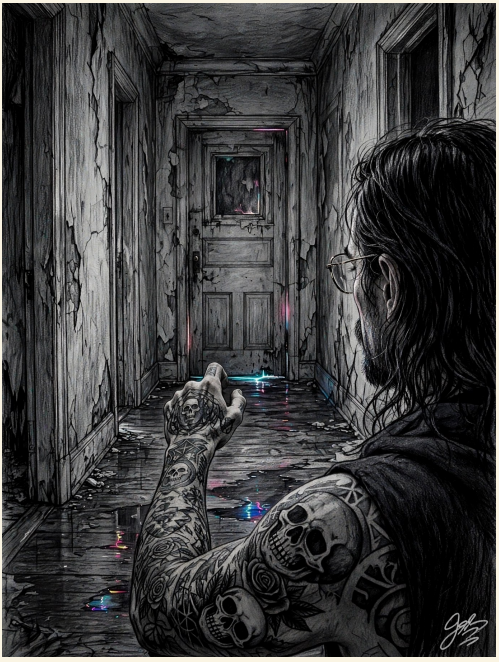
He knocked twice on the painted wood and waited.

The paint was cold under his knuckles. Colder than the hall. He put his palm flat against the door and the cold came through it like the door was a window onto winter.

Nothing. No shuffle, no voice, no movement. The house went very still around him, the way it did sometimes, like it was holding its breath.

“Mr. Abernathy?” he said to the door. “I’m Phoenix. Just moved in. Holler if you need anything.”

Silence. Then, from the walls, faint, far off, the children laughing.



He went back to his room and didn’t knock again.

He tried to read. He had a paperback from the halfway house, somebody’s left-behind thriller, the pages swollen with damp. He sat on the bed and tried to follow the words and couldn’t. Every few minutes his eyes went to his own door, the hall beyond it, the end of the hall.

Around two he gave up on the book and went back down the hall.

He told himself he was going to the bathroom. The bathroom was past his room, around the jog. The dead-white door was right there, and his feet just, stopped. He stood in front of it with his hands at his sides and listened.

Nothing. Then, maybe, something. A sound so faint he couldn’t have sworn to it in court: a breath. In. Out. Slow, as old men breathed in sleep.

He put his ear to the paint. The cold came through into his cheek.

Under the breathing, under it, or inside it, something else. A thin sound, high and far away, like a radio in another apartment. He held his breath to hear it better, and it resolved, for one second, into something his blood knew before his mind did.

Children. Laughing. Far off and underwater.

He jerked back from the door like it had shocked him. His heart was going like a drum.

“Mr. Abernathy?” he said, too loud in the empty hall.

The breathing stopped. The laughing stopped. The house went very still around him, that held-breath stillness. Stayed that way until he made himself walk back to his room, one step at a time, and close his door soft.

He didn’t go to the bathroom. He sat on the bed until his heart slowed down. He told himself he’d imagined the laughing, that the

house carried sound strange, that old houses were full of echoes.

He didn’t believe himself. Not even a little.

Around four he went out to the porch to smoke. The rain had stopped for once. The street was empty, no cars, no kids, nobody. A plastic bag moved down the middle of the road like something walking it.

He thought about the old man behind the dead-white door. He thought about the cold coming through the paint. He thought about three weeks of silence from a room at the end of a hall he’d never seen. He told himself the obvious thing: the room was empty. She’d made up a tenant as tired landladies made up stories. Mr. Abernathy was a name on nothing.

It didn’t help. The cold through the paint had been real. His palm still remembered it.

That night at dinner he watched her eat and wondered what else in the house was a name on nothing.

That night the shuffling started at 2am.

Not Bre’s shuffle. He knew hers by now. The drag-step, drag-step, the hunch in it, the perfume arriving a half-second before she did. This was different. This was a shuffle with something wrong in the rhythm, like the legs didn’t agree with each other. Drag, step, drag-drag, step.

It came from behind Mr. Abernathy’s door. Back and forth. Back and forth. For an hour.

Phoenix lay in the dark and counted the passes and told himself that old men had bad legs and bad nights. That a house this old carried sound strange.

Eleven passes. Then fourteen. He lost count somewhere after twenty and started over, because counting was something a man could do instead of imagining.

Drag, step, drag-drag, step.

He thought about knocking. He thought about the eye he might see, the voice he might hear. He thought about Bre’s white glasses at the breakfast table, some people rent a room, Phoenix, they don’t rent a neighbor. He stayed in bed.

The radiator hissed. The pipes knocked once, twice, then nothing. The shuffling went back and forth behind the dead-white door like somebody pacing a room exactly six steps wide.

At 3am it stopped. Cut clean.

And in the quiet after, from inside the walls, small as a moth:

“Is she gone?”

He didn’t answer. He pulled the blanket up and stared at the ceiling and waited for morning.

He didn’t sleep. Around four, when the shuffling had been gone an hour and the house was holding its breath, he got up.

He didn’t decide to. His feet were on the cold boards before the decision finished forming. He went down the hall in his socks, fourteen steps, he counted without meaning to, around the jog. Stood in front of the dead-white door.

He tried the handle.

Locked. The knob turned a quarter-inch and stopped hard, like it had hit something solid. He tried it again, gentle, then harder. Locked.

“Mr. Abernathy?” he whispered. “You okay in there?”

Silence. The deep kind. The kind with weight.

He put his palm flat on the paint. It was cold, dead cold, the winter kind, and for one second he felt it again: the breath. In. Out. Slow. The

door breathing under his hand like something asleep.

He pulled back. He went to his room. He lay down and stared at the ceiling until the gray came up. He told himself that doors didn’t breathe, that he’d imagined it, that tired men imagined things.

The ceiling didn’t argue. The ceiling never argued.

Morning came gray and raining again.

He was at the kitchen table with his coffee when she shuffled in. She looked at him, just looked, a beat longer than the moment needed. He had the sudden cold certainty that she knew he hadn’t slept.

“Mr. Abernathy was up late,” Phoenix said. “Heard him pacing.”

The coffee pot gurgled. The gospel station wobbled.

“He paces,” Bre said. “Old legs. Old nights.” She poured her cup and sat, and the chair sighed under her. “You leave him be, Phoenix. That’s kindness. That’s taking care.”

He nodded. He drank his coffee. He didn’t say that the pacing had gone back and forth for an hour in a rhythm like legs disagreeing, or that after it stopped something small had whispered through the walls.

He didn’t say any of that.

But that afternoon, walking past the end of the hall, he stopped, he couldn’t help it. Put his palm flat against the dead-white door.

It was warm.

Warm as skin.

He pulled his hand back like he’d been burned and went to his room and sat on the bed with his back to the wall until his breathing slowed. He told himself it was the

pipes. The pipes ran behind the walls. The pipes got warm.

The pipes didn’t breathe, though. And for one second, with his palm on that door, he’d felt it —

a breath. In. Out. Slow.

He didn’t touch the door again.

At dinner he tried once more. She was at the stove, her back to him, the gray stew steaming.

“Bre. That door was warm today. Abernathy’s door.”

The spoon stopped moving. Just for a second.

“Old houses,” she said, without turning around. “Pipes run behind that wall. You know that.”

“It felt like—” He stopped. He heard how it sounded. “It felt warm. Like skin.”

She turned. The glasses caught the kitchen light and went white, and her voice came out with the nasal edge honed to a point.

“Mr. Abernathy is an old man who keeps to himself, Phoenix. He doesn’t need you putting your hands on his door. He doesn’t need you listening at it, neither.” A beat. “I know you knocked. I know you went back. This house tells me things.”

His mouth went dry. “I was being neighborly.”

“Be neighborly somewhere else.” She turned back to the stove. The spoon started moving again. “You take care of your things. Let other people take care of theirs.”

He ate the stew. He didn’t taste it.

That night he lay in the dark and listened for the shuffling. It came at 2am, right on time, drag, step, drag-drag, step, back and forth behind the dead-white door.

He didn’t get up. He didn’t knock. He lay in the dark with his hands folded on his chest like a man in a coffin. He counted the passes, and at 3am it stopped, cut clean. The small voice came through the walls:

“Is she gone?”

He still didn’t answer.

But this time, lying in the dark, he answered it in his head.

No, he thought. She’s right upstairs. She’s always right upstairs.

Chapter 8

Somebody's Watching

Faith came on a Saturday, as she always did, unannounced, arms full, talking before she was through the door.

“There’s my brother.” She hugged him hard on the porch, rain in her hair. “You look thin. Are you eating?”

“I’m eating.”

“You’re lying.” She held his face in both hands and looked at him, the way she’d done since they were kids. Like she could see through to the back of his skull. “Groceries. I brought the good bread. Don’t argue.”

She had two bags. Good bread, like she said, and soup cans. A little plastic container of the potato salad he liked. She did this every few weeks. Showed up with food and fuss and the particular noise of somebody who loved you out loud.

“You didn’t have to,” he said.

“I know I didn’t have to. That’s why I did.” She kicked off her wet shoes in the hall, the old habit, shoes off at the door, mama’s rule. Padded into the kitchen in her socks. “How’s the job? Eddie treating you right?”

“He’s all right.”

“Ms. Hart?”

“She’s, she’s Ms. Hart.” He leaned in the kitchen doorway and watched his sister put his groceries away. “I’m taking care of things.”

“Today only,” she said, without looking at him. It was what he’d told her on the phone a hundred times, back when the days were measured in meetings and check-ins. She said it as you’d repeat somebody’s prayer back to them, gently, like it might break.

Phoenix felt something in his chest unclench for the first time in weeks.

It was fast, most people wouldn't have caught it. But Phoenix caught it: as her smile stayed on her face and her eyes went somewhere else. Up the stairs. Down the hall. Into the corners.

"This place feels wrong, Phoenix," she said quietly.

"It's old."

"It's not the old." She squeezed his arm. Her fingers were cold from the rain. "You sure you're okay here?"

"I'm good. It's cheap. She's, she's all right."

Faith looked at him. That look again, through to the back of his skull.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She put the groceries away like she'd lived there. She always did that. Made herself at home in his places, no

matter how small or strange. The halfway house on Division, she’d done the same: wiped the counter, hung her coat, made the room hers for an hour so it felt like his.

He loved her for it. He’d never told her.

Bre came down the stairs then, all sugar, housecoat smoothed, hair pinned, smile showing the crooked teeth.

Phoenix stared. He’d never seen her like this. The hunch was still there, the shuffle, the perfume. But the shitty attitude was gone, tucked away somewhere, and what was left was almost grandmotherly.

“Well, who’s this pretty thing?” she cooed.

“Faith. My sister.” Phoenix’s voice came out too fast. “Faith, this is Bre. My landlady.”

Faith was polite. Faith was always polite. She shook Bre’s hand and said the room was lovely and the house

had character. Phoenix watched his sister lie through her teeth for his sake and loved her for it.

“Stay for coffee, pretty thing,” Bre said. “I insist.”

They had coffee at the kitchen table. Bre told stories. The neighborhood back when, the house back when, the corner store that used to give kids free pickles on Fridays. Her voice stayed sweet the whole time. Not once did the nasal edge come out.

“Mr. Abernathy upstairs remembers the pickles,” Bre said, pouring Faith’s cup full. “Don’t you wish they’d bring that back? A pickle for a smile.”

Faith laughed. “There is no upstairs tenant, is there? Phoenix, is there?”

“End of the hall,” Phoenix said. “Keeps to himself.”

“Huh.” Faith glanced toward the stairs. “Quiet house for three people.”

“Quiet is a blessing,” Bre said, and patted Faith’s hand, and Phoenix watched his sister’s smile stay exactly where it was while her eyes went flat for one-tenth of a second.

Faith asked about the house, when was it built, who lived here before, and Bre answered everything smooth as poured cream. Nineteen-ten, she said. Her people had it since the seventies. The radiators were original. The floors were original. Everything original, everything kept.

Under the table, Faith’s foot found Phoenix’s ankle and pressed. Once. Hard.

Play along, it said. We’ll talk later.

They talked about nothing for an hour. The rain came down outside. The radiator ticked. The gospel station wobbled low from Bre’s room upstairs. Phoenix realized he’d never

heard it play down here before, she'd turned it on for company. The thought was almost sad.

Almost.

Bre told the pickle story twice. The second time she added details. The store owner's name, the barrel the pickles came in, the exact green of them. Phoenix had the feeling she was reciting, not remembering. The details were too neat. They lined up like dates in a ledger.

When Faith left, Bre stood in the doorway and waved until the car was gone.

Phoenix walked his sister to the car. The rain had thinned to mist. Faith unlocked the door and stood there with her hand on the roof, not getting in.

"Phoenix." Her voice was low. "That woman is not right."

“She’s just, she’s old, she’s—”

“Don’t.” Faith’s eyes were on the house windows. On the kitchen window, where the curtain had moved, or hadn’t. “I’ve met a lot of landladies. I’ve met a lot of people. That woman looks at you like you’re hers.”

The words landed cold in his stomach.

“She’s fine, Faith.”

“No.” Faith got in the car. She rolled the window down. “She’s not. And this house—” She shook her head. “You call me. Every day. You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Every day.” She started the engine. “I love you. Take care of things.”

“Today only,” he said.

She drove off into the rain. Phoenix stood on the porch and watched the taillights go red at the corner and disappear.

Bre was still in the doorway, waving. She kept it up a full ten seconds after there was nothing left to wave at.

Then she turned around, and the sugar was gone like it had never been there.

She was cold for days after. Cold in a way the house couldn’t match. Passing him in the hall without a word, leaving his dinner plate empty, the perfume thickening in the stairwell like a warning.

The mornings were the worst. He’d come into the kitchen and she’d be at the table with her bowl. The air would go thin, not angry-thin, nothing so honest as angry. Just absent. Like he’d stopped being a person and started being a smudge on the glass.

“Morning,” he tried, the second day.

She turned a page of the newspaper. The gospel station wobbled.

“Bre. Did I, is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Phoenix.” Sweet as rot. She didn’t look up. “Eat your toast.”

He ate his toast. The crust stuck in his throat. He thought about the pickle stories, the sugar performance, as she’d waved at Faith’s car ten seconds too long. And he understood, sitting at that table in the thin air, that the cold wasn’t about anything he’d done.

About Faith. About the visit. About the fact that somebody loved him out loud, in her kitchen, where she could see it.

On the third morning he found his shoes lined up by the door, laces tucked, toes pointed at the wall, exact as soldiers. He hadn’t left them that way. He stood looking at them a long time. Then he put them on without rearranging them, because rearranging them felt like arguing, and he didn’t know what the argument was about.

He tried, the first night. He knocked on her door, soft, the way you’d knock on something that might bite.

“Bre? You want me to heat something up?”

Silence. Then, through the wood, the gospel station, turned up just loud enough to be an answer.

He ate toast standing at the counter. He washed his plate and hers, hers was still in the cabinet, clean, untouched, and he put it back.

The second day he came home from the warehouse and his laundry was done. Folded on his bed, corners square. He hadn’t asked her to do it. He stood looking at the neat stacks and felt his throat close, because it was kind, it was a kind thing. He couldn’t tell if it was kindness or a message.

I was in your room, it said. While you were gone.

A tray sat outside Abernathy’s door, soup bowl, spoon, a napkin folded square. He hadn’t seen her carry it down. By evening it was gone.

The third day the cold got specific. He found the rule sheet on the fridge re-taped again, the corners fresh, smoothed with a thumb. He stood in the kitchen and read the five rules and had the sudden feeling they weren’t rules at all.

They were a list of ways to disappoint her.

That night at the warehouse he almost got hurt.

He was running the pallet jack down the main aisle, eighteen hundred pounds of canned beans behind him. His mind was on the photo wall upstairs, his face repeated, years of him, and he took the corner too wide. The load shifted. The jack kicked. Eddie’s hand shot out and caught the stack before it went over. The

cans settled with a sound like a held breath let out.

Eddie looked at him. Forklift eyes. Measuring once.

“You somewhere else tonight?”

“Sorry. I’m here.”

“Be here.” Eddie walked off. At the end of the aisle he stopped. “You got trouble at home, Phoenix?”

The question was kind.; that was the worst of it. It was kind, and Phoenix couldn’t answer it, because what would he say? My landlady is cold to me. She re-tapes the rules. I think she’s watching my sister.

“I’m good,” Phoenix said. “Taking care of things.”

Eddie grunted. He didn’t believe him. Men who’d done time knew a man lying about home when they saw one.

That night he lay awake and listened to the house. The pipes knocked. The radiator hissed. Somewhere in the walls, very faint, the children laughed. One short burst, cut clean, like somebody had covered a mouth.

He thought about Faith’s foot on his ankle under the table. Play along. We’ll talk later.

They hadn’t talked later. She’d hugged him on the porch, quick, her eyes on the windows, and she’d said “call me” in a voice that meant soon, and she’d driven off into the rain.

He should call her. He would call her tomorrow.

On the fourth day he found the photograph.

He came home from the warehouse at six in the morning, gray light, rain still coming down, and it was on his pillow. Just lying there, face up.

Faith. That morning. Through the laundromat window, folding shirts, laughing at something, rain on the glass.

His hands went numb before his mind caught up.

She’d been at the laundromat that morning, before she came to him, she’d stopped to wash the good bread bag or a shirt or something, laughing at something, rain on the glass. Somebody had been outside in the rain with a camera.

He went to the window. The latch was locked, he’d locked it himself, he always locked it. He checked the back door. Locked. He stood in the middle of his room and turned in a slow circle, looking at the walls, the vent, the closet, trying to figure out how she’d gotten in to leave it.

The closet. The crack of pale light at the back, thin as a wire.

He didn’t open it. He stood there with the photograph in his numb hands, and he didn’t open it.

He turned it over with hands that had gone numb.

In the blue ink, in the cramped hand:

“pretty girl.”



He stood in his room a long time, holding it.

The radiator hissed. The pipes knocked, slow, deliberate, walking the walls. He thought about the photo wall upstairs, the one he’d seen through her open door, his face repeated, years of him. He understood that there was room on that wall. There was always room.

She wasn’t just watching him anymore.

She was watching Faith.

He put the photograph in the notebook, under the mattress, with the blue-ink dates. He sat on the bed with his back to the wall. He thought about calling his sister, and he thought about what he would say.

Stay away from my house. Stay away from my street. There’s a woman,

What woman? His landlady, who made coffee and told pickle stories? Who would believe him?

He picked up the phone. He put it down.

He picked it up again and called, and when she answered, bright, mid-laugh, mid-morning, he said, “Hey,” and his voice came out wrong, and she heard it, because she was Faith.

“Phoenix? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He looked at the walls. At the vent over the door. “Just, don’t come by for a while. Okay? I’m, work’s got me on doubles. I’ll call you.”

A beat. He could hear her thinking.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Okay. You call me.”

“I will.”

He hung up and sat in the gray daylight with the phone in his hand. The house knocked, front to back, slow, deliberate, and he understood, down, that the trap had gotten bigger.

It wasn’t just his anymore.

Chapter 9

Salt

He bought the salt on his lunch break. A big blue canister, the kind with the girl in the yellow dress.

The corner store by the warehouse sold everything, lottery tickets, loose cigarettes, phone chargers still in the plastic. Phoenix stood in the aisle a long time looking at the blue canister like it was medicine.

It was stupid. He knew it was stupid. Grown man, full sleeves, wire-frame glasses, buying salt like his grandma.

A kid was restocking the shelf beside him, sixteen, earbuds in, moving cans without looking. Phoenix watched the blue canister with the girl in the yellow dress and thought about white lines on worn boards. About small voices in the walls, and about a padlocked basement door. He put the canister in his basket like a man filling a prescription.

At the register the clerk, old man, eyes like wet stones, rang it up without comment. People bought salt. It was the most normal thing in the world.

Walking back to the warehouse with the canister in his duffel, Phoenix felt like he was carrying contraband. Like he’d bought a gun.

But his grandma had kept a line of it across her back door. He remembered the white line on the worn boards, remembered her sweeping it up every spring and laying it fresh, remembered asking her why when he was small enough to ask why about everything.

“Things walk at night, baby,” she’d said, not looking up from her sweeping. “Salt tells them this ain’t their house.”

“What things, Grandma?”

“The kind you don’t invite in.” She’d tapped his nose with one flour-white finger. “You remember that.”

He remembered the kitchen, too. The smell of greens on the stove, the linoleum worn white in front of the sink, her humming low under the gospel station. He remembered the back door with its white line. How she’d re-lay it every spring like clockwork, kneeling with the canister tipped, her hands steady as a surgeon’s.

“Does it work?” he’d asked once, older, twelve, too old for stories, asking anyway.

She’d looked at him then. Really looked. “Baby, I’ve lived in this house forty years, and I ain’t never had to find out what happens without it.” She’d gone back to her sweeping. “Some questions you don’t ask twice.”

He remembered.

He put the canister in his duffel. Eddie watched him do it, forklift eyes, measuring once.

“You cooking something?”

“Something like that,” Phoenix said.

Eddie grunted. He didn’t ask what. Men who’d done time could tell when a man was holding something he couldn’t say out loud.

That night he poured a line across his doorway, thick as his thumb, the white grains bright against the worn boards.

He did it careful. He knelt in the hall with the canister tipped and moved slow, as his grandma had moved slow, not a ritual, she’d said, just respect. The line came out clean and white. He went back over the thin spots. He stood in his room and looked at it and felt something he hadn’t felt in weeks.

Ridiculous. And safer.

He didn’t know why he was doing it. Some old story his grandma used to tell, salt kept things out. Things that walked in the night.

He slept the first full night in weeks.

No knocking. No laughing. No shuffling. No thin wire of light in the closet, no cold air breathing out, no small voice whispering through the crack. Just rain on the windows and his own breathing, deep and even. The radiator hissing low like a cat asleep instead of angry.

He dreamed about the warehouse. Boxes, pallets, the rhythm of the work, one box, then the next one. In the dream Eddie clapped his shoulder and said “you’re all right,” and Phoenix believed him.

He woke up grateful. He woke up stupid with relief.

The salt was scattered.

Not swept, scattered, like something had walked through it without caring.

He sat up in the gray morning light and stared at his doorway. The white line was broken in the middle, the grains kicked and spread across the boards in a wide fan, like something had come through in a hurry. Or like something had come through and not bothered to step over.

And in the white spill across the floorboards, clear as print:

Footprints. Small. Bare. Child-sized.

Leading INTO his room.

He stared at them a long time. His hands were shaking. He got out of bed in his socks and knelt by the doorway and looked close. The way you’d look at something you needed to be wrong about.

They weren’t wrong. Five small toes on the clearest one. The ball of the foot. The heel, light, like whoever made them hadn’t weighed enough to press deep.

A child’s feet. Bare. Walking through his salt like it was nothing.

His phone was on the crate by the bed. He picked it up with shaking hands and took a photograph. The flash going off white in the gray morning, the small prints stark against the scattered salt. Proof. Blue ink in the notebook was one thing; this was something he could hold up to the light.

He took three more, from different angles. Then he sat back on his heels and looked at the little glowing screen, at the footprints frozen there. He felt the particular relief of a man who’d just proven to himself that he wasn’t crazy. Followed immediately by the particular terror of a man who’d just proven to himself that he wasn’t crazy.

He followed them with his eyes across the floor, past his bed, past the duffel zipped tight in the corner, to the closet.

Where they stopped at the crack of the door, like whoever made them had gone inside.

The closet was shut. The crack of pale light showed at the back, thin as a wire. Cold air breathed out of it, smelling of wet earth.

“Hello?” Phoenix whispered.

Nothing.

He took one step toward the closet. The floorboard creaked under his sock.

The light flickered, once, and went out, like somebody had closed a door on the other side.

He stood in the middle of his room with the photographs glowing on his phone screen and the dark closet in front of him. He said it

again, louder this time, his voice cracking on the word:

“Hello?”

Nothing. The radiator ticked. The house held its breath.

He thought about opening the closet door. His hand actually rose, halfway, fingers spread, and then he looked down at the floorboards, at the small bare footprints ending at the crack. He understood with a clarity that made his scalp prickle: whatever had made those prints had gone in there.; it was in there now. Behind the thin wood. Listening to him as he’d been listening to it.

He lowered his hand.

“Phoenix?”

Bre was in the hallway. She must have come up silent, no shuffle, no warning. Just there.

He looked at her. He looked at the footprints. He couldn’t make his mouth work.

She stepped into the doorway. She looked at the salt, the broken line, the scattered white. She looked at the footprints, the small bare prints leading in from the hall, across his floor, to the closet.

Her face did something complicated, and for one second, one unguarded second, she looked afraid.

Not annoyed. Not performing. Afraid. The real thing, raw and naked, the glasses catching nothing, the shitty attitude gone like it had never been there. The face of somebody who’d opened a door and found something behind it she hadn’t put there.

Then the shutters came down.



“You shouldn’t play games with this house, Phoenix,” she said quietly.

Her voice was low. No nasal edge. He’d never heard her sound like that, not sweet, not nagging, just flat. Tired.

“Those aren’t mine,” he managed. “Bre, those, those are a child’s—”

“I know what they are.” She didn’t look at him. She was looking at the closet, at the dark crack where the light had been. “Clean it up.”

“What?”

“The salt. Clean it up.” She finally looked at him, and the shutters were down now. The white discs, the hunch settling back onto her shoulders like a coat. “Salt doesn’t do what you think it does in this house.”

“What does it do?”

A beat. The radiator ticked.

“It marks where they’ve been,” she said. “That’s all. It marks.”

“They.” Phoenix’s voice came out rough. “You said they. Who’s they, Bre?”

She didn’t answer. She was looking past him, at the closet, at the dark crack where the light had been.

“Those are children’s feet,” he said. “In my room. In the salt. You saw them.”

“I saw them.”

“Then tell me—”

“Clean it up, Phoenix.” The nasal edge was back, honed to a point. “That’s the end of it.”

It wasn’t the end of it. They both knew it wasn’t the end of it. She stood in his hallway with her hands folded and her glasses gone white. He saw, for the second time that morning, quick as a camera flash, the fear move behind the shutters. Not gone. Just hidden.

“What are you afraid of?” he said quietly.

She looked at him. A long moment. The house knocked, once, somewhere deep in the walls, and she flinched. Actually flinched.

“Clean it up,” she said, and shuffled away. Down the hall. He heard her on the stairs, drag-step, drag-step, and then her door, upstairs, closing soft.

He stood in the salt and the footprints until his legs remembered how to move.

He swept it up. He did what she said. He got the dustpan from under the sink. He swept the scattered salt into it, the white grains, the small prints disappearing under the broom. It felt like destroying evidence. It felt like obedience. He couldn’t tell which scared him more.

Halfway through he stopped. The footprints were half-gone under the broom. He stood there in his socks with the dustpan in his hand and thought about the photographs on his phone, the small prints stark against the white. Proof. He had proof. Whatever she made him sweep up, he had proof.

He finished sweeping. He emptied the dustpan into the trash. He washed his hands. The water ran brown for three seconds before it ran clear.

He got the notebook from under the mattress and wrote it down, the blue ink steady for once:

Oct 19, salt held one night. Footprints in the morning. Child-sized. Into my room. She saw them. She was afraid.

He stared at the last line. Then he underlined it. Twice.

That night he lay in the dark and listened.

The house knocked. Front to back, slow, deliberate, like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time. The closet breathed cold air that smelled of wet earth. At 12:07 the thin wire of light came back, pale and steady.

He thought about her face in the doorway. The one unguarded second.

She’d been afraid. He kept coming back to that. Bre, who kept a ledger going back months, who’d watched him for years, who stood in his doorway at 3am without a sound, had looked at small bare footprints and been afraid.

Afraid of what was in the house.

Or afraid of what he’d seen.

He didn’t know which. He lay in the dark until the gray came up, and he told himself the obvious thing. That she’d faked it, that it was another performance, another page in the book.

But his grandma’s voice was in his head, flour-white finger tapping his nose:

The kind you don’t invite in. You remember that.

He remembered.

And for the first time since the laundromat, he wondered if the salt hadn’t been for the house at all.

Maybe it had been for him. A line to show him, clear as print, white on the worn boards, exactly what was walking past his bed at night.

He got up before his shift and bought another canister on the way to work. He didn’t tell Eddie what it was for. He poured the line fresh that evening, thick as his thumb. He sat on the bed and looked at it and thought about small bare feet. The closet crack, and the word the children whispered through the walls:

Is she gone?

He was starting to think the question wasn’t as simple as it sounded.

That night he didn’t sleep. He lay in the dark with his eyes open and watched the white line across his doorway, bright against the worn boards, his grandma’s line, her forty years of never finding out. He listened to the house do what the house did.

The pipes knocked. Front to back. Slow, deliberate, like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time. The radiator

hissed. From the end of the hall, through the plaster: a cough. Wet. Just the one. Then nothing. Somewhere in the walls, very faint, the children laughed, one short burst, cut clean.

At 12:07 the thin wire of light showed in the back of the closet. Pale. Steady. Cold air breathing out, smelling of wet earth.

Phoenix watched it from his bed and didn’t move. His grandma’s voice was in his head, flour-white finger tapping his nose:

The kind you don’t invite in. You remember that.

He remembered.

The light stayed. The house knocked. The white line held across his doorway, bright, clean, and unbroken.

Whatever walked at night, it didn’t walk through his door. Not tonight.

But in the morning, he knew, as you knew rain, in the morning he would look at the salt. The salt would tell him exactly where they’d been.

Chapter 10

The Ledger

He couldn’t sleep, so he sat on the porch.

It was twenty minutes past lights-out. The rule said ten. He told himself the porch wasn’t the house, the porch was outside, the porch didn’t count. He sat on the top step and smoked and watched the rain come down on the empty street.

It was his night off, the first in two weeks, and his body didn’t know what to do with it. The street was empty the way it always was after ten. No cars. No people. Just the rain and the streetlight two houses down, buzzing, throwing a cone of yellow that never quite reached the porch. Behind him 412 sat dark, the vent by the door breathing warm air against his back, smelling of dust and old heat.

He’d worked the shift. He’d done the boxes. Take care of things today only. Today was done, and done right, and it hadn’t been enough. That was the part nobody told you about trying to do good. It didn’t quiet the rest of it. The ledger sat in him like a stone, had sat in him since the night she’d opened it on the kitchen table and read his small failures back to him in her cramped blue ink. The dates going back weeks. Months. Before the laundromat. Before he’d ever heard her name. A mug in the sink, written down like it mattered. Like it was evidence.

He smoked. The rain came down. A car went past on the cross street, tires hissing, the taillights smearing red on the wet blacktop, the only color on the whole block.

He looked at his hands in the dark. The sleeve tattoos ran wrist to shoulder on both arms, the ink gone soft with age, rain beading on the lines. He’d gotten most of them inside. They’d meant things once. Now they were just a record, same as her ledger. A history written on skin instead of paper, and no more erasable.

Across the street, somebody’s dog barked once and quit. A porch light flickered on two houses down and flickered off again. The block was holding its breath as it always did after ten, waiting for morning. Phoenix sat in the middle of it with his cigarette and his stone and thought about Faith.

She’d called that afternoon. Quick, bright, as she always was, groceries, the baby, Auntie’s bad knee. She hadn’t asked about the house. She never asked about the house anymore. He knew why: the last time she’d been here she’d gone quiet in the doorway, her smile staying on her face while her eyes went somewhere else. This place feels wrong, Phoenix. He’d told her it was old. She’d let him lie to her because she loved him.

He should have told her the truth. He didn’t know what the truth was.; that was the hell of it. He was a man keeping a notebook of impossible things. His sister’s voice on the phone was the one real thing he had, and he

couldn’t bring the two together without one of them breaking.

Through the vent by the door, he heard her pick up the phone.

Heard his name.

He went very still. The cigarette burned down to his fingers, and he didn’t feel it.

He didn’t move. He didn’t breathe. The vent breathed for him. Warm air, dust, old heat, her voice coming through it like it was coming up out of the house itself. He sat on the top step with his back to the door and listened to his landlady sell him down the river in a voice like syrup. He understood that this was how it happened. Not with a shout. With a phone call. With worry.

Her voice was low, nasal, sweet as rot: “…yes, that’s right. Phoenix.... No, nothing, well. I just thought you

should know he’s been restless. Out on the porch at all hours.... Oh, I worry. A man in his situation...”

He didn’t hear the rest. He heard the soft click of her hanging up. Her shuffle moving away from the vent, drag-step, drag-step, going back upstairs. He sat on the top step with the dead cigarette between his fingers and the rain coming down. He understood that she’d wanted him to hear. The vent was right by the door. She knew where he sat. She knew everything. The call hadn’t been the weapon. Him overhearing it was.

He went inside quiet and lay in the dark and stared at the ceiling until the gray came up.

The house talked around him all night. The pipes knocked. Slow, deliberate, front to back, like somebody walking the long way around the walls. The closet breathed cold through the taped crack, wet-earth air sighing out into

the room. Twice the floorboards in the hall went tick, tick, tick, like something testing its weight.

He lay there and did the math he couldn’t stop doing. Restless. Out on the porch at all hours. A man in his situation. He knew what those words sounded like in a parole officer’s ear. He knew what a file looked like with a landlady’s worry paper-clipped to it. He’d been trying to do good, the shifts, the boxes, the towels folded corners-square as his mama had taught him. One phone call could turn all of it into a story about a man who couldn’t follow rules.

One phone call.

Around three he got up and checked the salt. The white line lay unbroken across his doorway, thick as his thumb, clean. Nothing had walked through it tonight. He stood there in his socks looking at the unbroken line, and it didn’t comfort him. It felt like the house was saving its strength. Like it was waiting for a better night.

He lay back down. The gray came up. He hadn’t slept.

Ms. Hart jumped his ass the next day.

The parole office smelled like bleach and old coffee. The waiting room had plastic chairs bolted to the floor in rows. Men sat in them not looking at each other, every one of them doing the same math Phoenix was doing. Don’t fidget. Don’t look guilty. Sit still. He sat still for forty minutes with his hands on his knees and watched the clock chew through the hour.

Two chairs down, a kid barely twenty kept bouncing his knee. Bounce, bounce, bounce. An older man, sixty, gray stubble, hands like rope, reached over without looking and put one heavy hand on the kid’s knee. The bouncing stopped. The older man didn’t say a word. Phoenix watched it and felt something turn over in his chest. Somebody’s father. Somebody’s son. Everybody in this room was somebody’s something, and everybody

in this room had a file with their name on it. A phone number that could end them.

His name called. Her office. The desk with the file on it, his file, thick already, and his intake photo paper-clipped to the corner. Younger. Harder. A man who looked like he didn’t take care of his things.

He was standing in her office with his hands at his sides while she read him like a riot act, curfew, compliance, the conditions he’d signed. An address. A job. A curfew. These aren’t suggestions, Phoenix. Your landlady called. She’s worried about you. A good placement doesn’t grow on trees, you understand me?

“Yes, ma’am.”

“She says you’re restless. Out at all hours.” Hart’s pen tapped the file. Tap. Tap. “You know what restless looks like on paper, Phoenix? It looks like a man getting ready to run.”

“I’m not running. I work nights, I’m home, I’m __”

“You’re on her porch at ten-twenty at night.” The pen stopped tapping. “That’s what she says. That’s what goes in the file.”

He stood there with his hands at his sides and felt the room tilt. Ten-twenty. She’d given her the time. She’d written it down first, of course she had, it was in the ledger, everything was in the ledger. Then she’d given it to Hart like a gift.

“Because I can arrange it. One phone call.” She said it the way she’d said it before, as she always said it, and it never got smaller. “You want to go back, Phoenix? Because I can arrange it. One phone call.”

One phone call. The words sat in his chest like a stone.

“I’m trying to do good,” he said.

“Then do good.”

She let him stand there a minute longer. That was the worst of it, the minute. The file on the desk. The photo. The quiet that said I am deciding about you right now.

“You’re dismissed.”

He rode the bus home through the rain with the stone in his chest. The windows fogged. A kid across the aisle had his shoes off and his mother didn’t care. Phoenix watched the street go past, the laundromats, the check-cashing places, the rain coming down on all of it. Thought about the vent by the door, and her voice coming through it sweet as rot, and understood that the trap had never been the rules.

The trap was the phone. It had always been the phone. The rules were just the reason to pick it up.

He got off two stops early and walked the rest in the rain. His boots filled. The water ran in the gutters, brown and fast, carrying leaves, a crushed cup, and somebody’s lost glove. He walked past the laundromat

where he’d met her, the windows fogged, the dryers humming, somebody else’s shirts going around. He didn’t slow down. He’d been folding the same two shirts that night. She’d watched him fold them. She’d been watching him for years before that night. He’d sat there folding, and thought he was alone.

Bre was waiting at the kitchen table when he got home. The ledger was open.

“Rough day?” she said sweetly.

He didn’t answer.

The kitchen was warm, too warm, the radiator hissing like a cat. The bare bulb threw her shadow big on the wall behind her. The ledger lay open on the oilcloth in its cracked green leather, the blue ink marching down the pages in her cramped hand. It smelled like old paper and her perfume. His hands were already fists. He put them flat on the table to stop it, and they wouldn’t stop.

She didn’t read the old ones this time. Just turned past them, pages of blue ink going under her hand.

“I keep track because I care.” She turned another page. Another. “This is what taking care looks like, Phoenix. Somebody has to notice. Somebody has to write it down.”

He looked at the pages going past under her hand. The ink was always the same blue, the hand always the same cramp, but the dates, God, the dates. September. August. July. A Tuesday in June: late from shift, 9 min. A Thursday in May: shower 12 min. Small failures, written down like scripture. He’d been a free man exactly as long as he’d been her project. He was only now understanding those were the same length of time.

The dates went back. Weeks. Then months. Page after page of blue ink, times, places, small failures, going back to before the laundromat. Before the room. Before

he’d ever heard her name. His whole trying, written down and weighed and found thin.

She turned to the last page. The ink there was still shiny. Fresh.

Oct 20, porch. 20 min past lights-out. Called.

His mouth went dry.

She set her phone on the table and turned it toward him.

A still from the doorbell camera. Him on the porch last night. The cigarette ember bright in the dark, the rain all around him, caught mid-frame. And behind him, at the edge of the picture, half-lost in the rain, something. Too tall. Wrong in the shoulders. The rain blurred it to a smear, but it was there.; it was there.

He stared. He could not have said what it was. He could not unsee it.

She watched his face. “You see it too,” she said. Almost gentle.

He didn’t answer. There was no answer. The thing in the rain sat at the edge of the picture and the edge of his head. Every time he tried to look straight at it in his memory it slid sideways, as the hallway did when he counted the steps.

“Ms. Hart called me back, you know. She’s very concerned about you.” Bre smiled her crooked smile. “I told her you’re a good man. Trying so hard.”

Trying so hard. The words she’d used since the laundromat. You want to do good, right? He heard them now as you heard a song you’d liked before you learned what it was about.

Phoenix’s hands were fists on the table.

“I was kind this time, sweetheart.” She closed the ledger. The sound was soft, final. “I only gave her the one.”

The rest of it sat between them on the oilcloth. The twelve minutes. The eleven minutes. The mug. All the blue-ink pages she hadn’t read out loud, the ones she was saving. He felt the teeth of it the way you’d feel a dog’s teeth when it only meant to show you it had them. She’d made the one call. She could make the others. He believed her as you believed weather.

He thought about asking her why. Why the porch was worth a phone call. Why any of it was worth writing down. But he knew why. The why was sitting across from him with her hands folded, watching him do the math. The rules weren’t rules. They were a loaded gun, and she’d just shown him it was loaded. The showing was the point. You didn’t fire a loaded gun you wanted to keep. You just let the man see it.

“I can make one call, Phoenix.” She stood. “Or I can make none. Depends on how the week goes.”

She shuffled to the stairs, and went up, and didn’t look back.

He sat at the kitchen table a long time. The ledger sat closed on the oilcloth, the cracked green leather catching the bare bulb. He didn’t touch it. His hand had hovered over it once, the night she’d first opened it, close enough to feel the warmth coming off the leather. Warm like skin. Warm like it was alive. He didn’t touch it now.

The radiator hissed. The house ticked. Upstairs, her floorboards went drag-step, drag-step. Then her door closed, and then there was only the rain.

He thought about the still on her phone. The thing at the edge of the frame. He tried to make it into something ordinary. A neighbor, a trash can, a trick of the rain on the lens. It wouldn’t go ordinary. It sat in his head as the

footprints had sat in the salt: clear, and wrong, and his.

He thought about Ms. Hart’s pen, tapping the file. That’s what goes in the file. Everything went in a file. Hers, Hart’s, the cabinet upstairs he hadn’t seen yet. The world was files down, and he was the thing being filed.

Then he went to his room, and he poured the salt fresh across the doorway. He lay in the dark and listened to the house.



Chapter 11

The Blue Ink

He stole the notebook from the warehouse.

It wasn’t really stealing. They had a box of them in the break room, free for anybody, but he took it feeling like a thief anyway. Small and black, the pages lined. He told himself it was for lists. Groceries. Shifts.

The box sat on the break room counter next to the coffee maker that never got cleaned. He’d walked past it a hundred times. That night he stopped, and stood there with his duffel over his shoulder. Took one off the top like it might bite him. The cover was soft with handling. Somebody had left a thumbprint in the dust on the box.

His hand hovered.; it was a free notebook. Free for anybody. And his hand hovered like it was a wallet on a counter, like taking it would prove something about him he’d been trying to disprove since the day he walked

out. Seven days out of prison and he'd been sleeping in his Civic. He'd taken nothing that wasn't his, and he was standing in a break room at three in the morning afraid of a notebook.

Eddie came in while he had it in his hand. Forklift eyes. One look, and Phoenix felt the old heat climb up his neck, the being-caught heat, the intake-photo heat.

Eddie grunted at the coffee maker. "Take two. They're free."

"Just the one."

"Suit yourself." Eddie poured the burnt coffee and didn't look at him again, and Phoenix understood he'd been given something, not the notebook. The not-looking. The benefit of the doubt. Men who'd done time recognized the look in other men, and sometimes they covered for it without a word.

Phoenix slipped the notebook into his duffel, down between the folded shirts. It sat there all

shift, a small weight against his back while he worked the pallet jack. Every time he felt it he thought about the box on the counter, free for anybody, and about how the freeness of it hadn’t mattered. What mattered was the taking. He was trying to do good, and even the free things felt stolen now. That was what the house had done to him. Made a thief out of a man holding a free notebook.

He rode the bus home with the notebook in his duffel and felt like he’d gotten away with something.; that was the sickness of it. A free notebook, and he felt like a thief. He was trying to do good, and the trying had made him honest in places that didn’t matter, while the places that mattered, the house, the ledger, the phone, kept getting darker around him.

He told himself it was for lists. Groceries. Shifts.

He wrote the truth in it instead.

He wrote at the kitchen table after his shift, the house quiet around him, the pen scratching in the dark. Upstairs, her floorboards ticked once, her weight, shifting, and went still. He kept writing. The letters came out straighter than he expected. His hand knew what it was doing even if the rest of him didn’t.

Oct 14, knocking, front to back, 2am. Counted 40.

The night of the 14th he’d lain in the dark and counted the knocks as a man counts change, carefully, like it mattered. Forty. Front to back. Slow. Deliberate. Like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time. He’d told himself it was the pipes. Pipes didn’t walk.

Oct 15, laughing in the walls. Basement door padlocked. New padlock.

That one he wrote slower. The laughing had been faint, far away, the way you’d hear a television through an apartment wall, except there was no television in this house. Children’s voices. Two of them. He’d followed the sound in his socks down the hall with one hand on the wall. It had led him to the basement door, and the padlock had been bright steel, still oiled, nothing else in the house new. The laughing had stopped cut clean, like a hand over a mouth. He wrote new padlock and underlined it twice. Then he sat there looking at the underlined words and thought about the fact that somebody had bought that padlock. Somebody had gone to a store, picked it up, paid for it, brought it home. The horror wasn’t just the locked door.; it was the errand.

Oct 16, hallway 14 steps. Was 11.

He’d counted twice to be sure. Fourteen steps from his door to the bathroom, heel to toe, and the day before it had been eleven. He wrote the numbers down and stared at them. Numbers didn’t lie. Men miscounted. That was the whole of it, miscounted, tired men imagined things. He wrote Was 11 and didn’t underline anything.

Oct 17, photo wall. She’s been watching me for years.

His hand shook on that one. The open door. The light on inside. His face repeated across the wall. Bus stops, the warehouse gate, the halfway house on Division, him walking out with his duffel. The laundromat, through the window, him folding shirts. Beside it a date in blue ink from three weeks before he’d ever met her. Newspaper clippings about his case, yellowed, fanned like a shrine. Dozens of him.

Years of him. He wrote years and the pen dug into the paper.

He remembered the smell of that room. Her perfume, thick, and under it something else. Old paper, old dust, the sour-sweet of a place that never got air. He remembered standing in the doorway with fourteen steps behind him and his mouth dry, doing the math he couldn’t stop doing: if she’d been watching him three years, she’d watched him inside. She’d watched the man he’d been. She’d chosen him anyway, or because. He didn’t know which was worse.

The act of writing steadied him. Blue ink on lined paper, proof, in his own hand, that he wasn’t imagining it. That the house was doing what it was doing and he was seeing it straight. The letters were his. The hand was his. Nobody could take that away from him, not her, not the house, not Ms. Hart with her file and her one phone call.

He wrote with the kitchen dark around him and the pen moving like it had somewhere to be. Twice the pipes

knocked while he wrote, slow, deliberate. Twice he stopped with the pen hovering and listened, and twice the house went quiet, like it was listening back. He wrote anyway.; that was the thing about ink. You couldn’t unwitness what you’d written down.

He kept it under his mattress. He checked it every night before he slept, as other men checked locks.

Oct 20, Faith’s photo on my pillow. “pretty girl.” She’s watching Faith now.

That one he wrote standing up, the notebook braced against the wall, because sitting still felt wrong. The photograph had been face up on his pillow. Faith that morning, through the laundromat window, folding shirts, laughing at something, rain on the glass. And on the back, in the cramped blue hand: pretty girl. He’d stood in his room a long time holding it. The fear he’d felt hadn’t been for himself.; that was new.; that was worse.

Oct 19, salt held one night. Footprints in the morning. Child-sized. Into my room.

The salt had scattered, not swept, scattered, like something had walked through it without caring. And in the white spill, clear as print: small bare footprints, child-sized, leading into his room. Past his bed. To the closet. Stopping at the crack of the door, like whoever made them had gone inside. He wrote Into my room and his hand wouldn’t stop shaking until he set the pen down.

He’d followed those footprints with his eyes that morning, across the floorboards, past his bed, to the closet. And he’d stood there looking at the crack of light, the tape he’d put over it lying on the floor. He’d understood that the salt hadn’t been a wall. It had been a page. And something had written on it.

Oct 20, Bre called Ms. Hart.

That one took the longest. The stone in his chest. Her voice through the vent, sweet as rot.

He almost wrote about the still. He got as far as Oct 21 and the pen hovered, and he understood he couldn’t write it down. Hart’s office, the file, the intake photo. The ledger’s fresh ink, Called, and her Depends on how the week goes, sweet as rot. The doorbell still on her phone, and the thing at the edge of the frame in the rain that he could not unsee and could not name. Writing it would make it real. Some things you kept in your head, unwritten, because ink was permanent and his hand was shaking. Because if he wrote something in the rain behind me and she read it. She would read it, she read everything, then it would be in the notebook and in her head, twice real, and he couldn’t stand that.

He was writing the date for the 21st when the floorboard creaked.

Bre was in his doorway. He didn’t know how long she’d been standing there.

The notebook was open in his hands. The blue ink. Seven days of truth in his own handwriting. Her standing there looking at it with the hall light behind her, the coke-bottle glasses catching it in two white discs.

She looked at the notebook in his hands. At the blue ink. Her face did something he couldn’t read, and then she smiled, small and almost sad.

“You write things down too,” she said.

She shuffled away. He sat on the bed with the notebook in his lap and his heart hammering. He understood, all at once, that hiding it under the mattress had never mattered.

She’d always known.

He opened the notebook. His handwriting looked back at him, the dates, the counts, the underlined padlock, seven days of truth in blue ink. He turned the pages slowly, and a new fear came up in him, cold and clean: that one night he'd open it and find more ink on the pages. Her cramped blue hand, under his. Corrections. Additions. You missed one, Phoenix.

He closed it.

That night he put the notebook under the mattress anyway. He smoothed the blanket over it. He lay in the dark with his hands folded on his chest like a man in a coffin and listened to the house, the pipes, the ticking boards, the closet breathing cold through the taped crack. He thought about her face in the doorway. Not angry. Not afraid.

Almost sad.

Like a woman watching a man write down the shape of a trap he’d already walked into, knowing the writing wouldn’t save him. Being sorry about it in whatever place in her was still capable of sorry.

Or like a woman who kept ledgers as other people kept photo albums. Had just found a new one to add to the collection.

He didn’t sleep. He counted his breaths instead of the knocks. At some point the house went quiet, the held-breath quiet. He lay there in it, and he kept his hands folded, and he waited for morning.

When the gray came up he reached under the mattress. The notebook was there. He pulled it out and opened it to the last page. Oct 21 in his own hand, the entry half-written where the floorboard had creaked. His ink. His hand. Nobody else’s.

For now, that had to be enough.



Chapter 12

Mr. Abernathy

The coughing started on a Tuesday.

Wet. Terrible. The kind of cough that sounded like something tearing. It came from behind Mr. Abernathy’s door in fits, long ragged bouts, then quiet, then again.

Phoenix heard it through the wall while he was making coffee. He stood at the counter with the mug in his hand and listened to an old man cough himself inside out on the other side of the plaster. He did the thing he’d been trained by two weeks in this house to do, he told himself it wasn’t his business.

The coughing went on. It didn’t sound like business. It sounded like drowning.

He poured the coffee and didn’t drink it. The mug sat on the counter going cold while the fits came and went, long ragged bouts, then

quiet, then again. He thought about the winter he’d done inside, the man in the next bunk who’d coughed like that for a month before they moved him. He’d never learned that man’s name. He’d never asked. That was the kind of man he’d been. He was trying to be a different kind now. The trying had a sound to it, and the sound was his boots on the hallway boards.

He’d never seen Mr. Abernathy. Not really. Two weeks in the house and the man was a door at the end of the hall, a shuffle in the night with something wrong in the rhythm, drag, step, drag-drag, step. A voice through wood, once, saying his name like a neighbor.; that was the whole of him. But Phoenix had lain awake listening to that shuffle go back and forth for an hour at a time. You didn’t listen to a man’s nights for two weeks without him becoming, in some small way, yours to worry about.

He knew the shuffle’s hours. It started at two. It ran the length of the hall behind

Abernathy’s door, back, forth, back, forth. Phoenix had counted the passes one night as he’d counted the knocks, the way he counted everything now. Twenty-six passes. Then quiet. Then morning. An old man with bad legs and bad nights, walking it off behind a closed door. That was the story Phoenix had told himself. It had been a good story. It had let him sleep.

He was trying to do good.; that was the whole plan. One today. Don’t think about tomorrow.

The coughing tore through another fit. Phoenix set the mug down.

Phoenix stood in the hall with his hand half-raised and listened to an old man drowning on dry land.

The hall was cold. The radiator at the end ticked and gave nothing. Mr. Abernathy’s door was shut as it always was, painted wood, no

light under it, nothing. Just a door. Phoenix stood there with his fist half up and felt stupid and young and like the kind of man who knocked on doors that didn’t want knocking.

He knocked. “Mr. Abernathy? You all right in there?”

The coughing stopped.

Not faded. Stopped, cut clean, like a hand over a mouth. The hall went so quiet he could hear the rain on the roof three floors up, the buzz of the streetlight through the walls.

“Mr. Abernathy?”

Nothing. Then the lock, no. Then the door opened an inch.

An eye. Clouded, yellowed, wet at the corner. An old man’s eye in a sliver of dark.

Phoenix’s breath caught. Behind the eye there was nothing. No lamplight, no room, just dark, like the room

behind the door had no light in it at all, like the dark went down.

“Don’t,” the old man whispered.

“What?”

“Don’t let her—”

The door slammed. The lock turned, a heavy sound, final.

Phoenix stood in the hall with his heart going like a drum.

Don’t let her. Don’t let her what. The words sat in him wrong, like a stone in a shoe. He stood there with his hand still half-raised and the eye still burned into him, clouded, yellowed, wet. The dark behind it, and he understood that whatever was wrong with Mr. Abernathy, it wasn’t the coughing. The coughing was just the part you could hear.

He thought about the warning down the hall. Don’t let her. Not don’t let her in, she’d been

in, she had a key, she brought soup. Not don’t let her call. Who would she call about an old man who kept to himself? The words had the shape of something bigger, and he couldn’t see the edges of it.; that was the worst part. He could feel the size of it without seeing it, as you could feel a room behind a door.

“Phoenix?”

Bre was behind him. Silent as ever, no shuffle, no warning. Just there, the perfume rolling off her.

He spun. She stood in the hall in her housecoat, hair hanging lank, the coke-bottle glasses catching the dim light. How long had she been standing there? The hall was twenty feet long. There was no way to cross it silent. She’d done it anyway. She always did it anyway.

“He’s sick,” she said. “He doesn’t like visitors.”

“He needs a doctor.”

“He needs rest.” Her glasses had gone white. “You’re a good man to worry. But some things aren’t yours to fix.”

She touched his arm, her hand cold through his sleeve, and steered him gently back down the hall.

Her hand stayed on his arm to his door. Cold through the flannel. He could feel each finger. At his door she let go, and patted his arm once, as you’d pat a dog that had finally stopped barking. Shuffled upstairs without another word.

He stood in his room and looked at his sleeve where her hand had been. He didn’t know why he was looking. There was nothing to see.

He went to work. He stacked boxes. He tried not to think about the eye.

Eddie caught him staring at nothing by the pallet jack. “You sick?”

“No.”

“You look sick.”

“I’m fine.” Phoenix hefted a box of canned beans and his arms did the work while his head went back to the hall. Don’t let her. Don’t let her what, call? Come in? The door had slammed like the old man was afraid of being heard. Afraid of her hearing. A sick old man, coughing himself apart, and what he spent his breath on was a warning.

At the end of shift Eddie clapped his shoulder, the real kind, not the measuring kind, and said, “Go home, Phoenix. Sleep.” And Phoenix nodded, and didn’t say that home was the place he was trying not to think about. Rode the bus through the rain with the old man’s eye burned into the back of his own.

At lunch he sat in the break room and didn’t eat. The box of notebooks sat on the counter by the coffee maker. He thought about his own notebook under his mattress, the blue ink, the seven days of truth. He thought about adding a line, Oct, Abernathy. “Don’t let her—”. And he knew, the way he’d known about the doorbell still, that he wouldn’t write it. Some things you kept in your head.

That morning he heard her at Abernathy’s door.

He was coming down the hall with his duffel, back from the shift, gray morning coming up outside. She was at the end of the hall with a tray, a bowl, a spoon, steam coming off it. Soup. The smell of pepper and old meat reached him where he stood.

She knocked soft. “Mr. Abernathy? I brought soup.”

No answer. No coughing. The hall held its breath.

She set the tray down outside the door. She stood there a moment with her hands folded, her head bowed. For a second she looked like what she wanted everybody to think she was, a kind old landlady with soup for a sick tenant. Then she turned, and saw him, and the sugar came over her face like a curtain dropping.

“He’ll eat when he’s ready,” she said.

Phoenix nodded. He didn’t say: he hasn’t coughed since morning. He didn’t say: his door’s been silent all day. He went into his room and put his duffel down and stood at his own door listening.

Late, he didn’t know how late, the gray had gone full dark, he heard her key in Abernathy’s lock.

It was a soft sound. Deliberate. He lay in his bed with his eyes open and listened to the door open. Her shuffle go in, drag-step, drag-step, and the door close, and then her voice. Low, not sweet now, not nasal-nagging,

something else underneath it. Words he couldn’t make out. A rhythm like reading. Or counting.

He held his breath to hear better. The words stayed under the floorboards, under the plaster, a murmur, a cadence, up and down like prayer. Or like the terms of something being recited. Then quiet. A long quiet. Then her shuffle coming back out, and the lock turning, the heavy sound, final.

He lay in the dark a long time after. He did not get up, and he did not knock, because some things aren’t yours to fix. He was trying to be the kind of man who knew the difference. But he wrote it in his head as he wrote things in the notebook now, night: her key in his lock. Reading, or counting. Couldn’t make out words. And the writing-it-in-his-head didn’t steady him as the ink did. It just gave the fear a shape.

In the morning the tray was gone. The bowl, the spoon, the soup, gone. The hall outside

Abernathy’s door was clean. No coughing. No shuffle. Nothing.

He knocked once, light. “Mr. Abernathy?”

Nothing. The house held its breath around him.

He pressed his ear to the painted wood. Cold came through it. Deep cold, colder than an unheated hall. The kind that lived in the closet crack, the kind that didn’t belong to weather. He stood there listening until his neck ached, and there was nothing. No breathing. No bedsprings. No old man turning in his sleep.

He went to work. He stacked boxes. The day dragged like a chain.

At dinner she was all sugar. The gray stew, the stories about the neighborhood back when, her voice sweet the whole time. He watched her eat and thought about the tray outside Abernathy’s door, gone by morning. The key turning soft in the lock at night.

“Mr. Abernathy eat his soup?” he asked.

She didn’t look up from her bowl. “Every bite.”

“He coughing any better?”

“He’s resting.” She lifted her spoon. “You worry too much, Phoenix. It’s sweet. But some things aren’t yours to fix.”

Every bite. He turned the words over. The tray had sat outside that door all evening, and in the morning it was gone, bowl, spoon, all of it. Every bite. Or every trace.

He ate the stew and didn’t taste it. Across the table, her glasses caught the kitchen light and went white, and for a second there was nobody behind them at all.

That night there was no shuffling.

He lay awake until 2, until 3, listening for the drag-step, drag-drag-step. Nothing. The house was silent in a way it had never been, a held-breath silence, waiting.

He got up once and stood in the hall in his socks. The cold came up through the boards

into his feet. Abernathy’s door was shut. No light under it. No sound behind it. Just a door at the end of the hall, and the whole house balanced on the silence behind it like a held breath.

He thought about knocking again. His hand half-raised, as it had that morning. But there was nobody to knock for anymore. That was the feeling, sudden and certain as the cold in his feet. The hall had the shape of an after. He’d stood in rooms like that before, after. You knew.

He went back to bed. He lay there until the gray came up.

At 3am he got up and poured the salt fresh across his doorway, thick as his thumb. He didn’t know why. The salt hadn’t kept anything out, the footprints had walked through it like it wasn’t there. But his hands needed something to do, and the white line was something he could make, a small clean thing in a house full of unclean ones.

He lay back down. The salt sat white across the boards. The house said nothing.

He never heard Mr. Abernathy shuffle again.



Chapter 13

The Dossiers

Bre left on Sunday morning in a coat he’d never seen, hair pinned up.

“Church,” she said, like it explained anything.

She said it at the door with her bag over her arm, a black handbag, scuffed, the clasp held shut with a safety pin. She didn’t look back, and Phoenix stood at the front window and watched her go down the walk. The coat was dark green, too small across the shoulders, the hem flapping. Her hair was pinned up in a knot that pulled her face tight. She moved down the walk with the shuffle, drag-step, drag-step. Got into an old sedan at the curb, gray, rust along the wheel wells, and sat there a moment before she started it, like she was listening to something.

The engine turned over rough. She pulled away from the curb without looking at the house. He watched the gray sedan go down the block, brake lights flaring once at the stop sign. Then it turned the corner and was gone.

He counted to sixty. Then he counted to sixty again. The house ticked around him. The radiator knocked once, like it was clearing its throat.

He’d been in her room once before, no. He’d looked in once before, through the open door, and seen the wall. This was different. This was going up the stairs on purpose, with her gone, to open what she’d left unlocked. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and had the argument with himself, and lost it, and went.

The house was quiet without her.; that was the first thing. The quiet had a different shape when she wasn’t in it. The radiators ticked. The rain hit the windows. But the held-breath feeling was gone, like the house had exhaled. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and

listened to the empty house, and it sounded like any old house. That scared him more than the knocking ever had.

Her door was unlocked. He told himself that meant something. That she wanted him to look, or that she didn’t care if he did. He told himself a lot of things on the stairs. None of them helped.

The stairs creaked under his boots. He counted them without meaning to, thirteen. At the top, the hall was dim, the wallpaper peeling in long strips, the air thick with her smell. Perfume over the sour of unwashed skin, stronger up here, lived-in. Her door stood ajar, the light on inside, spilling a yellow bar across the floorboards.

He pushed it open.

The room was small and neat and wrong. The bed made with hospital corners. A chair by the window. A lamp with a crooked shade. A

bureau with a hairbrush on it, the bristles full of long gray-blonde hair. Everything in its place, everything clean, and the cleanliness felt like part of the performance. The kind landlady, the good woman, the room to prove it.

And the wall, the whole wall, floor to ceiling, corner to corner.

The photo wall was bigger.

It had grown past the photographs into maps, the city, with his routes marked in blue ink. The warehouse, circled twice. The laundromat, with a date beside it in her cramped hand. The night they'd met, and under it, an earlier date, three weeks before, with a question mark. The halfway house on Division. His whole life, pinned up like a hunting trophy.

He stepped closer. The blue ink ran everywhere, arrows, dates, times. His bus route, traced stop by stop, with the times he'd

ridden written in the margins. A photograph of the Civic behind the gas station, him asleep in the back seat, the windows fogged. And he stared at it, because that had been his most alone place, the place nobody knew. She’d been there with a camera.

There were photographs he didn’t remember being taken. Him at his mother’s grave in the rain, kneeling, his head down. Him at the warehouse gate, duffel over his shoulder, first day. Him laughing once, actually laughing, outside the diner on 9th, a morning he barely remembered, a good morning. She’d caught it through glass.

One map stopped him cold. The whole city, and his life drawn on it in blue. Where he’d been, and the order too. Numbered. 1: the county gate, release day. 2: the Civic, the gas station lot. 3: the laundromat. Each number dated. It read like directions. Like a recipe.

Dozens of him. Years of him. The wall went corner to corner, floor to ceiling, and the blue ink tied it all together like veins.

His mouth was dry. His hands had gone cold before he even saw the cabinet.

The filing cabinet was new. Gray steel, four drawers, the kind offices threw out. It stood against the wall under the window. The top drawer was labeled in her cramped hand on a strip of masking tape.

He read the labels.

PHOENIX. Fat as a phone book.

FAITH. Thin. New.

His stomach dropped through the floor. He touched the FAITH folder with one finger, like it might burn him. Thin, a dozen pages, maybe. New. The masking tape was still white at the edges, not yellowed. She’d started it the day Faith visited. Or the day after. The photograph on his pillow, pretty girl, that had been the first page, probably. Filed away like everything else.

He opened it. He couldn’t not.

Faith through the laundromat window, laughing, rain on the glass. The photograph from his pillow, paper-clipped to the first page. Under it, in the blue ink: pretty girl. Then more, Faith’s building, the street, the bus she rode. Dates. Times. His sister’s life, reduced to surveillance, twelve pages deep and growing. His hands shook. He closed it. He put it back exactly the way he’d found it, the tab lined up with the others. He stood there breathing through his mouth so he wouldn’t be sick on her floor.

MR. ABERNATHY. Thinner than it should have been.

He stared at that one. Thinner than it should have been. For a man who’d lived here years, who shuffled the hall at 2am for an hour at a time, there should have been weight to it. There wasn’t. A few pages. An ending, filed. The coughing. The silence. The tray gone by morning. He didn’t open it. He couldn’t open it.

And others, a dozen folders, names he didn’t know. Men and women. Dates going back years.

He pulled one halfway out before he could stop himself. A man’s face, smiling, sun in his eyes, a driver’s license photo, blown up. The name on the tab meant nothing to him. The dates inside went back to 2019. Bus tickets, a work schedule, photographs of a rooming house three blocks over. A whole life, filed. He slid it back. Another, thin as an envelope. A woman, young, the folder nearly empty, like she’d barely gotten started. Or like it had ended fast.

Twelve folders. Twelve lives. His was the fattest by triple. He stood there doing that math, and the math did him.

He put his hands flat on top of the cabinet to stop the shaking. The steel was cold.

The other drawers had labels too. The second: 2019–2021. The third: 2016–2018. The fourth had no label at all, just bare masking tape,

waiting. He stared at the blank tape a long time. Then he opened the top drawer, and then he opened his.

The folder was fat as a phone book. It fell open in his hands like it wanted to be read. Three years of him, and the first page was the oldest, a photograph he didn’t know existed. Him, twenty-nine, walking out of the county gate with a duffel bag, squinting into the sun. Release day. Somebody had been across the street with a long lens. Somebody had waited for that day as you waited for a birthday.

Every day. Three years of every day, where he’d been, who he’d talked to, what he’d eaten. Bus tickets stubbed and saved, paper-clipped by month, fanned like a hand of cards. A receipt from a diner he’d forgotten. 2:14Am, coffee, toast, the night he’d walked out of the county with forty bucks and nowhere to go. Photographs of his mother’s grave, him kneeling in the rain, the stone, the dead flowers.

A page in her hand, copied from somewhere: his warehouse schedule. His shift times. Eddie’s name, underlined. Beside it, his parole conditions, copied out word for word in the cramped blue, curfew, compliance, with Ms. Hart’s office number at the bottom. She’d had the number before she’d ever called it. Of course she had.

Pages of his halfway house months. Who he’d talked to. What he’d eaten. A note: reads at night, the chair by the window. Another: calls sister Sundays. His life, inventoried like stock.

A page headed with a date from three years ago. His intake photo paper-clipped to the corner, younger, harder. And under it, in the blue ink, underlined twice:

not like the others.

His hands were shaking so hard the pages rattled. Not like the others. The twelve folders, the men and women, the dates going back years. He was not like them. He didn’t know what that meant, and the not-knowing was worse than any meaning he could put to it. Special. The

word came up out of nowhere, and he pushed it back down. He didn’t want the word.

He turned more pages. A photograph of the house itself, 412, the sagging porch, the peeling paint, dated two years before he’d moved in. She’d owned the trap before she’d chosen the man for it. Or the trap had been waiting, and he’d been the one who finally fit. He looked at the dated photograph and understood that the laundromat hadn’t been chance. The room hadn’t been luck, and the forty bucks, the duffel bag. The record hadn’t been a story. They’d been bait, and he’d been the fish. The hook had been set three years before he’d ever felt it. He turned them, day after day, week after week, the blue ink marching through three years of his life like an army. He understood, as you understood a thing all at once and then spent the rest of

your life catching up to it, that she hadn’t found him at the laundromat.

She’d been waiting at the laundromat.

The last page was in fresh ink. Still shiny.

“He is almost ready.”

He read it three times. The ink caught the light. Almost ready. Ready for what. The ledger, the phone calls, the rules tightening like a rope? Ready as livestock was ready? He thought about the photo wall, the veins of blue ink, the three years. The words sat in him like a stone next to the other stone, the one Ms. Hart had put there.

He heard the front door open downstairs.

His body moved before his head did. He put the folder back, shoved it, too fast, the pages catching, and straightened the stack with

hands that wouldn’t stop shaking. The PHOENIX tab had to line up. The drawer had to look untouched. He closed it. The steel drawer slid shut with a sound like a gunshot in the quiet house. He froze, one hand still on the handle, listening.

Downstairs, nothing. Then her key in the lock, turning. The front door, the inner door, opening.

He was down the stairs and in his room before her key turned in the lock. He sat on his bed with the notebook under the mattress and his heart going like a drum. He didn’t move until he heard her shuffle past his door.

He’d left the salt line. He’d stepped over it going out, he remembered the white grains scattering under his boot. Coming back in he’d stepped over it again, careful. Now he sat on the bed looking at the broken line, the gap where his boot had gone through. He thought about how everything in this house was a line

you stepped over. The rules. The salt. The stairs to her room.

His hands wouldn’t stop shaking. He put them flat on his knees, and they shook against the denim. Three years. She’d watched him for three years, the county gate, the Civic, the grave. Chosen the laundromat night the way you’d choose a checkout line. And Faith’s folder, twelve pages deep. And the twelve others, the men and women, the dates going back years, his the fattest by triple.

Not like the others. The words sat in him wrong. He didn’t want to know what they meant. He was afraid he already did.

Drag-step. Drag-step. Past his door. Up the stairs. Her door closing.

He sat there with his hands on his knees and his heart hammering against his ribs, and he thought about the last page. He is almost ready. The ink still shiny. She’d

written it this morning, maybe, before church, the coat, the pinned hair. Written it and gone to sit in a pew somewhere, and pray to something, and come home.

And Faith’s folder. Twelve pages deep and growing. Pretty girl. His sister’s building, her bus, her street. He thought about calling her. He thought about what he’d say. There’s a woman watching you. And Faith saying this place feels wrong, Phoenix, and him with no answer that didn’t sound insane.

“Phoenix?” Her voice came up the stairs, sweet as rot. “I’m home. You want lunch?”

He opened his mouth. His voice came out steady. He was proud of that, steady.

“Be right down.”

He sat on the bed a moment longer, looking at the floorboards, at the white line of salt across his doorway with his boot-print through it.

Then he got up, and stepped over the salt, and went to have lunch with her.



Chapter 14

Almost Ready

He didn’t sleep for three days after the filing cabinet.

The first night he lay in the dark and listened to the house as you’d listen to a man breathing in the next cell, waiting to see what it would do. The radiators ticked. The pipes knocked once, slow, from the front of the house to the back, like somebody walking the long way around. He counted the knocks. He counted his breaths. He did not sleep.

The second night he got up and checked the notebook. It was still under the mattress where he’d left it. He told himself that meant something. It didn’t mean anything. She’d stood in his doorway and seen the blue ink in his hands and smiled that small sad smile. Hiding it under the mattress had never mattered. She’d always known.

He stood at his window that night and watched the rain.

The street was empty. The streetlights buzzed. Across the way, the dark house sat with its missing-teeth windows. For a minute, just a minute, he thought he saw a light move in one of them. A pale thin light, like a wire.

He told himself it was a reflection. He told himself a lot of things.

Behind him, the radiator ticked. The pipes knocked once, slow, deliberate, front to back, and then the house went quiet in that held-breath way it had. He stood at the window until his breath fogged the glass. He thought about the folder, and the maps with his routes marked in blue ink. The photographs of his mother’s grave.

Somebody had stood at his mother’s grave and taken a picture. While he was inside. While he couldn’t go.

He put his forehead against the cold glass and closed his eyes.

The third night he gave up on sleep entirely and sat at the kitchen table with a mug gone cold in his hands. Watched the dark press against the windows, and thought about the folder.

PHOENIX. Fat as a phone book.

Three years of every day, where he’d been, who he’d talked to, what he’d eaten. Bus tickets stubbed and saved. A receipt from a diner he’d forgotten. Photographs of his mother’s grave. And the last page in fresh ink, still shiny.

He is almost ready.

He wrote in the notebook because writing steadied him. Blue ink on lined paper, proof in his own hand that he was seeing it straight.

Oct 24, dreamed about the folder. Woke up with my hands in fists. Oct 25, she made stew. I watched her hands the whole time. The

spoon going up and down. Oct 26, the photo of Faith still on my dresser. I can’t throw it away. I can’t keep looking at it.

On the second night he called her.

He used the kitchen phone, the cord stretched around the corner so Bre wouldn’t hear. Except Bre heard everything in that house, and he knew it, and he called anyway. Faith picked up on the third ring, breathless, laughing at something in the background.

“Phoenix! Hey, stranger.”

“Hey.” His voice sounded thin. He cleared his throat. “You good?”

“I’m good. What’s wrong? You sound weird.”

“Nothing. Just, you noticed anything strange lately? Around your building? Anybody hanging around?”

A pause. “Like what?”

“Like anybody. Just, anybody you don’t know.”

“Phoenix.” Her voice went serious, as it did. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired. Not sleeping great.”

“You sound like hell.” A softening. “Are you eating? That woman feeding you?”

“She feeds me.”

“Good. Eat. Sleep.” A beat. “You sure you’re okay there? That place, I don’t know. It felt wrong.”

“It’s old,” he said. “It’s just old.”

He hung up and stood in the dark kitchen with the dial tone buzzing in his ear. Upstairs, on his dresser, Faith laughed through the laundromat window, rain on the glass.

Pretty girl.

He stood there until the dial tone went to the angry beep-beep-beep. Then he hung up the phone, and he went upstairs, and he turned the photograph face-down. He couldn’t throw it away. He couldn’t keep looking at it. Face-down was the best he could do.

The photograph had been burning a hole in him since he’d found it on his pillow. Faith through the laundromat window that Saturday morning. Laughing at something he’d said, rain on the glass between her and whoever had taken the picture. And on the back, in the cramped blue ink: pretty girl.

She wasn’t just watching him anymore. She was watching Faith.

He wasn’t ready to confront her about the dossiers. He’d thought about it, lying awake, running the scene a hundred ways. Every version ended the same: her face doing something he couldn’t read. The house going cold, and him understanding, too late, what

he’d started. If she knew he’d seen them, if she knew he knew, he didn’t know what she’d do.

And he wasn’t ready to know.

But Faith was different. Faith was his sister.

The warehouse shift ran long. A truck late out of Gary, eighteen pallets backed up on the dock, Eddie riding everybody with his forklift eyes.

Phoenix worked the line on autopilot. Box, stack, wrap. Box, stack, wrap. The work was simple, and it hurt. The hurt was almost a relief, something honest, something with a reason.

“You look like hell,” Eddie said at the dock door, catching him by the sleeve. “You sick?”

“Didn’t sleep.”

“Three days, by the look of you.” Eddie’s eyes did their one measurement. “Whatever it is, today’s today. Leave it at the gate.”

Phoenix nodded. Take care of things today only.; that was the whole plan. One box, then the next one. He’d been saying it so long the words had worn smooth as river stones.

He rode the bus home through sideways rain. His boots were soaked through, the left sole flapping a little more every day. He counted the stops. He rehearsed the words.

Stay away from my sister. Simple. True. One thing.

It wasn’t a decision so much as a settling, as sediment settled. Three days of no sleep, and the folder, and the photograph on his dresser. He couldn’t take on the dossiers. He couldn’t take on the photo wall, or the three years, or the thing that had looked out of her eyes. He didn’t even know what those things were.

But Faith was his sister. That he understood.

He would say it once, under his breath, watching the rain run down the bus windows. And then whatever happened would happen.

He would keep his voice steady. He was proud of that word. Steady.

Dinner was at six.; it was always at six now. That had become a rule without ever being taped to the fridge.

She was humming when he came down. Nasal, off-key, something that might have been a hymn. The stew was already on. Gray meat, pepper by the handful, the pot too big for two people. The kitchen window had fogged from the steam.

“There’s my boy,” she said, all sugar, ladling. “You’re too thin. Sit.”

He sat. The chair creaked. The chipped bowls went down, the spoons, the napkins folded wrong the way she always folded them.

She talked while they ate. The neighborhood back when. The corner store that used to be a bakery, the block party in ’98, rain like they’d never seen. Her voice stayed sweet the whole time. Not once did the nasal edge come out.

He waited until she’d sat down. Until the spoon was in her hand. Until the humming stopped.

“Stay away from my sister.”

Bre looked up from her bowl. The spoon stopped halfway.

“I’m sorry?”

“The photo. On my pillow.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady. “Faith’s got nothing to do with this house. You leave her alone.”

The kitchen went very quiet. The radiator ticked.

His hands were flat on the table. He could feel the wood grain under his palms, the old scars in the varnish. He kept his eyes on her face and didn’t let them move, because if he looked away he might not look back. This was the one thing he was going to say, the one true thing.

Then Bre’s face changed.

It wasn’t dramatic. Nothing movie-like. The shitty attitude just, drained out of her, like water off a roof. The nasal edge left her voice. The hunch eased, her shoulders coming back like something uncoiling after a long time folded. And for one second, one unguarded second, something old looked out of her eyes. Something that had been alive a long, long time before Bre.

The room went cold.

Not the draft-from-the-window kind. The kind that came up through the floorboards and settled on his skin like a hand. His arms went to gooseflesh under his sleeves. The stew stopped steaming. Just stopped, the heat going out of it like a held breath.

“I don’t want your sister, Phoenix,” she said. Her voice was different, low, clear, almost gentle. “I never did.”

A beat. The radiator ticked.

Then the smile came back, crooked teeth, all sugar. The hunch returned, settling into her shoulders like a coat she’d hung up for one minute. The nasal voice.

“Dinner’s at six,” she said, and went back to her bowl like nothing had happened.

The cold lifted. The stew steamed again.

He sat across from her and ate the gray stew and didn’t taste it.

She kept talking. The plumber was coming Thursday, she’d finally called somebody about the pipes. The gutters needed cleaning before the real cold set in. Did his boots still leak? He said they were fine.; that was a lie too. She nodded like she believed him.

All sugar. All auntie. The thing in her eyes tucked away again, behind the coke-bottle glass.

He watched her hands. The spoon going up and down. The cramped fingers. He thought about those hands writing three years of his life in blue ink, the dates, the times, the small failures. His stomach turned over, and he kept eating anyway, because not eating would be noticed, and everything was noticed.

“You’ve been quiet, Phoenix,” she said, not looking up. “Everything all right at the warehouse?”

“Fine.”

“Eddie treating you right?”

The question landed wrong. He hadn’t told her Eddie’s name, not in this conversation, not ever. He’d written it on the application on her table, she’d said, weeks ago. He was almost sure that was a lie. He was almost sure of a lot of things.

“He’s fine,” Phoenix said.

“Good.” She smiled at her bowl. “Good men are hard to find. You’re a good man, Phoenix.”

He thought about the notebook under his mattress. His blue ink on lined paper, the dates, the knocking, the footprints. Proof in his own hand that he was seeing it straight.

Her blue ink in the cracked green ledger. The dates, the times, the small failures. Proof in her hand that he wasn’t.

They were doing the same thing. That was the thought that came to him, sitting across from her with the stew going cold, he was keeping a ledger too. Writing things down. Keeping

track. You write things down too, she'd said in his doorway, small and almost sad, and he'd thought it was a threat. Maybe it was something worse. Maybe it was recognition.

He wondered, not for the first time, whether she'd been like him once. Whether there'd been a time when Bre was the one writing things down in the dark, trying to prove she was seeing it straight. Before whatever was old in her had finished hollowing her out and moved in.

The thought scared him more than the cold had.

I don't want your sister. I never did.

He believed her. That was the worst of it, he believed her, as you'd believe the weather. It wasn't a promise. It wasn't a threat. It was a fact she was done discussing. Faith wasn't wanted. Faith was something else. Leverage, maybe. A pressure point. A photograph on a

pillow that said: I can reach anything you love, so be careful how you move.

He finished the bowl. He washed it, dried it, put it back in the cabinet. Clean your things as you use them. That was rule three, and he kept the rules, because rules only worked if somebody kept them. Somebody was going to be him.

Before he went up, he stood at the front window and watched the street.

Rain. The streetlights buzzing, throwing their sick yellow light onto the wet asphalt. A car went by slow, tires hissing. Across the street, the empty house sat dark, windows like missing teeth.

I don’t want your sister, Phoenix. I never did.

He turned the sentence over and over, looking for the lie in it. There wasn’t one. That was the thing about her, when the mask slipped, what came out was true. She didn’t want Faith.

So what did she want? The folder had the answer, probably. Three years of every day, and the last page in fresh ink: He is almost ready.

Almost ready for what? He stood at the window until his breath fogged the glass. He didn’t ask the question out loud, because the house was listening, and he was afraid of what might answer.

Below, the rain kept coming down. The streetlights buzzed. Nothing moved on the block. No cars, no people, just the rain and the dark houses. The kind of night where the whole north side felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for something it didn’t want to see.

He thought about calling Faith back. Telling her to lock her doors. But she’d ask why, and he didn’t have an answer that wouldn’t sound crazy, and crazy got you nowhere. So he stood at the window, and he didn’t call, and he told himself she was fine.

“Goodnight, Phoenix,” she called up the stairs, sweet as anything.

“Goodnight.”

Upstairs, his room was freezing. The radiator was dead cold. Ticked once when he touched it, like it was laughing at him. He lay in the dark in his coat and watched his breath come out in white puffs. Thought about the thing that had looked out of her eyes.

Old.; that was the only word. Not cruel, cruelty would have been easier, something he could understand. Old as a stone was old. The way something got when it had been doing one thing for so long it didn’t remember doing anything else.

Somewhere in the walls, very faint, something laughed.

He went still. It was far away, the back of the house, down low, near the basement. Children’s laughing, thin

as wire through the plaster. It lasted three seconds. Then it stopped, cut clean, and the house was quiet.

He didn’t move for a long time. He told himself he’d imagined it. He’d been telling himself that for weeks.

He is almost ready.

He understood, lying in the freezing dark, that the dossiers weren’t the worst of it. The photo wall, the maps, the three years of blue ink, the folder fat as a phone book, none of that was the worst of it.

The worst of it was that whatever she was getting him ready for—

he was letting it happen.

He lay there until the cold got into his bones and his teeth started to chatter. He thought about the thing that had looked out of her eyes at the dinner table. Old. Patient. The way something got when it had all the time

in the world. The trap was already built, and all it had to do was wait for him to walk in.

He was trying to do good.; that was the whole of him. And he understood, lying in the freezing dark with his breath coming out in white puffs, that she knew it, had known it for three years, had written it down in blue ink. That it was the one thing about him she was counting on.

The one thing she needed.



Chapter 15

The Basement Door

The shift ran clean for once. No late trucks, no busted pallets, no forklift with a dying battery. Just the work, box, stack, wrap, one after another, the rhythm of it settling into his shoulders like something he could trust.

He liked the rhythm. It didn’t ask anything of him. His hands knew what to do, and while they did it, his head could go somewhere else, except his head kept going to the same place. The hallway. The basement door. The new padlock, bright steel, still oiled, and her hand on it like you’d touch a sleeping dog.

Some doors should stay closed, Phoenix.

He’d believed her that night. Standing in the hall with her perfume rolling off her in a wave, her arm cold against his, he’d believed her as you believed a locked door. Now he wasn’t sure what he believed. The salt scattered. The small bare footprints leading into his

room. The voice through the closet crack, small as a moth.

At break he sat on the dock with a vending-machine coffee and watched the rain come down on the interstate. He didn’t taste the coffee either.

Take care of things today only.; that was the whole plan. One box, then the next one. Don’t think about tomorrow.

He thought about tomorrow anyway. He always did.

At six, Eddie caught him by the dock door. Rain was blowing in sideways off the interstate, drumming on the metal awning. The parking lot was a sheet of black glass.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Eddie said.

“Just tired.”

“You look like a man with something on his mind.” The forklift eyes did their one measurement, once, never again. “Whatever it is, today’s today. Leave it at the gate.”

Phoenix nodded. He’d been nodding at that sentence for weeks. It didn’t work any better than the other sentences.

“Eddie,” he said. “You ever—” He stopped. “Never mind.”

Eddie waited. When nothing came, he clapped Phoenix’s shoulder and went back inside. Phoenix stood in the rain a minute longer, and didn’t say the thing he’d almost said.

He rode the bus home through the gray morning rain. The bus had a busted heater and the windows ran with condensation. He wiped a circle clear with his sleeve and watched the north side go by. The corner store

with the bars on the windows, the empty lots full of wet newspaper and drowned leaves.

The laundromat went by. The buzzing sign. The row of washers.

He looked away before he could see the window. The one she'd watched him through, three weeks before he'd ever met her, folding the same two shirts. Fold, smooth, fold. You don't take care of your things, do you.

He kept his eyes on the condensation running down the glass until the laundromat was gone.

His boots were soaked through. The left sole flapped a little when he walked now. He'd meant to get new ones. He hadn't gotten new ones.

The house was quiet when he let himself in. No Bre in the kitchen. No shuffle upstairs. Just the rain on the windows and the radiators ticking. The smell of old wood and wet earth that never quite left the place.

He hung his jacket on the hook. He kicked off the ruined boots. He was halfway down the hall, thinking about sleep, thinking about nothing—

And the basement door standing open.

He stopped in the hall with his duffel over his shoulder and stared at it.

The padlock was gone. Not cut, not broken, gone, like it had never been there. The door just stood open on its hinges. Cold air breathed up out of the dark below, slow and steady, smelling of wet earth.

He thought about the last time he’d stood in this hallway. The children laughing inside the walls, moving toward the back of the house. The new padlock, bright steel, still oiled. Her hand on it, gentle as a sleeping dog. Some doors should stay closed, Phoenix.

Phoenix stood at the top of the stairs and told himself to walk away.

He’d been telling himself to walk away from things in that house for weeks. The closet crack, he’d taped it. The salt, he’d poured it. The photo wall, the filing cabinet. He’d seen them and said nothing, done nothing, the way you did nothing about a thing that was too big to touch.

Some doors should stay closed.

But the padlock was gone. Somebody had taken it off, her, it had to be her, and left the door standing open. An invitation, or a test. He didn’t know which was worse.

He went down three steps.

The rail was cold under his hand. The air got colder with every step, the smell of wet earth rising up to meet him. His breath started

coming out in white puffs. There, on the stairs, in October, in a house with the heat on.

The dark below was wrong. That was his first thought, standing on the third step with his hand on the rail, the dark went back farther than it should have. He knew this house. He'd walked the footprint of it a hundred times, mopped every floor, counted every step of every hall. The basement couldn't be that deep. But the dark went on past where the foundation had any right to be. The cold came up out of it in waves, and his breath started coming out in white puffs.

Then the singing started.

Children's voices. Two of them, weaving in and out of each other. One higher, one lower, chasing the tune and never quite catching it together. Some half-remembered song, the kind kids sang on playgrounds, except the words were wrong. Bent. He caught ring around and then something that wasn't rosie, something that didn't sound like words at all. The tune kept sliding sideways, melting in the cold air like light through water.

It wasn’t the laughing from the walls. This was clearer. Closer. Down there, in the dark that went too far. Two small voices, singing to nobody, in a place no child should have been.

“Hello?” His voice came back to him off the dark, small and stupid.

The singing stopped. Cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

The silence after was worse than the singing. It had a weight to it. A listening weight, like the dark itself had turned its head toward him. His breath came out in white puffs, too loud. Somewhere far below, deeper than the basement had any right to go, something shifted. A small sound. Bare feet on concrete.

On the wall beside the stairs, at knee height: a small handprint.

Dust wiped clean in the shape of a child’s hand. Fingers splayed wide. Clear as print, pale against the grimy

boards, like whoever made it had pressed hard, reaching up.

He crouched down to look at it closer, his knees cracking. The dust around it was thick, months, years thick, but the print itself was clean. Recent. The fingers were small. Smaller than he would have guessed. He held his own hand up next to it. His dwarfed it, and something cold moved through his stomach.

A child’s hand. Reaching up. From below.

Phoenix stared at it. His heart was doing something loud in his chest. He thought about the salt scattered across his doorway that morning weeks ago, the small bare footprints leading into his room, stopping at the closet. He thought about the voice through the crack, small as a moth: Is she gone?

He went down one more step. The cold got into his coat, into his bones. The dark pressed close on every side, and the smell of wet earth was thick enough to taste.

“Is somebody down there?”

Nothing. The house held its breath.

Somewhere above him, a floorboard creaked, the house, or her, and that was enough.; that was all it took.

He ran.

Up the stairs, down the hall, into his room, fourteen steps, he counted without meaning to. He slammed the door and dragged the dresser in front of it, wood screaming on wood. He poured the salt fresh across the doorway with hands that wouldn’t stop shaking.

The blue canister was half empty. The white line went down thick as his thumb, bright against the worn

boards. He sat with his back to the dresser and listened, his breath too loud in the quiet.

After a while he pulled the notebook out from under the mattress and wrote by the gray light coming through the blinds.

Oct 27, basement door open this morning. Padlock gone. Singing down there. Kids singing. Handprint on the wall, small. Oct 27, called in sick. First time. Eddie’s going to kill me. Oct 27, she asked about the pipes. Like she doesn’t know. Like I don’t know.

He stared at the last line. Then he crossed it out, one hard line through the blue ink, and wrote under it:

She knows I know.

He put the notebook back and sat with his back to the dresser until the light went gray. He didn’t go near the basement door.

Nothing. Just the rain on the windows. Just the radiators ticking.

He didn’t go back to the warehouse that night. He called the dock line from the kitchen phone and told the recording his name and that he was sick. His voice sounded like somebody else’s, thin, scraped out. He sat at the kitchen table until the gray came up, a mug gone cold in his hands. He didn’t go near the basement door. He didn’t look at it, and he didn’t think about the singing, and he thought about nothing else.

In the morning, Bre came down humming.

She moved through the kitchen the same as always, the shuffle, the housecoat, the perfume rolling ahead of her. She put the kettle on. She glanced at him sitting at the table, the cold mug, the dark circles he knew were under his eyes.

“You look tired, Phoenix,” she said, all sugar.

“Didn’t sleep great.”

“That old mattress.” She patted his shoulder as she went by. Her hand was cold through his shirt. “You want me to look at the basement? Sometimes the pipes knock down there. Keeps folks up.”

He looked at her. The coke-bottle glasses. The crooked teeth. The face that had looked a hundred years old across the dinner table, now just a landlady’s face, concerned.

“No,” he said. “It’s fine.”

“Good.” She smiled. “You’re a good man, Phoenix.”

She shuffled back upstairs with her tea. He sat at the kitchen table, and he didn’t move for a long time.

When the house went quiet, he went to look.

The basement door was closed. The padlock was back on, bright steel, still oiled, the same as before. Like the morning had never happened. Like he hadn’t stood on those stairs with his breath coming out in white puffs, listening to children sing.

He stood in the hall and stared at the padlock for a long time. Then he touched it, just one finger, cold steel. Went back to his room, and poured the salt fresh. Didn’t think about what it meant that she’d put it back.

He thought about it anyway. All day. He thought about nothing else.

That night the house knocked.

Front to back. Slow. Deliberate. Like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time.

He lay in the dark behind his salt line and counted the knocks, forty, fifty, sixty. Told himself it was the pipes, the settling, the rain.

Old houses made noises. Everybody knew that.

But it wasn’t the pipes. He knew the pipes. The tick of the radiators, the knock in the walls when the heat came on. This was different. This had a rhythm to it. A patience. It moved from the front of the house to the back as a person would walk if they weren’t in a hurry and they knew exactly where they were going.

He thought about the dark below the basement stairs, going back farther than the foundation allowed. He thought about the two small voices, weaving in and out of each other, singing words that weren’t words.

At 3am it stopped. Cut clean.

And in the quiet after, from inside the walls, small as a moth:

“Is she gone?”

He didn’t answer. He pulled the blanket up and stared at the ceiling and waited for morning.

It was a long time coming, and it came gray and rain-washed.



Chapter 16

What She Feeds Them

He almost got his hand crushed that day.

It was nothing. A pallet shifted, a moment’s inattention, his glove caught between the boxes for half a second. He jerked free. Nobody saw. He stood there with his heart hammering and his hand throbbing in the glove. All he could think about was two small mattresses on concrete that he hadn’t seen yet but somehow already knew.

Eddie found him at break, sitting on the dock with his gloves off, staring at his hand.

“You need the clinic?”

“It’s fine.”

“That’s what you said yesterday.” Eddie sat down next to him, which Eddie never did. “Phoenix. Talk to me.”

Phoenix looked at the rain coming down on the interstate. He thought about the open

basement door. The singing. The small handprint at knee height.

“Can’t,” he said.

Eddie nodded like that was an answer. “When you can, I’m here.”

The next evening he watched her cook, and that was how he knew.

He’d come home from the warehouse with his shoulders on fire and his boots full of water. The house had smelled like pepper and old meat from the porch. She was already at the stove.

She moved the same as always. The shuffle between the stove and the counter, the hunch in her shoulders, the perfume rolling off her in waves under the kitchen heat. The pot was the same. The gray meat was the same. The pepper went in by the handful, as it always did.

But she was humming. Nasal, off-key, something that might have been a hymn. And she kept glancing at the basement door, quick, sideways glances, as you’d check on something.

He sat at the kitchen table with his hands around a mug and didn’t drink. He watched her move between the stove and the counter, and he thought about the open basement door. The singing. The small handprint at knee height. He thought about her hand on his shoulder that morning, cold through his shirt. Sometimes the pipes knock down there.

She ladled two bowls. Set them on the counter. The chipped ones, the regular ones.

Then she ladled two more.

Smaller portions. The same gray mush, steaming in the cold kitchen air.

Phoenix’s hands went still around his mug.

He thought about the handprint on the stairwell wall, knee-high. The singing in the dark that went too far. The small bare footprints in his scattered salt, leading into his room. Is she gone?. Small as a moth, through the closet crack, through the walls at 3am.

She caught him looking. She always caught him looking. The coke-bottle glasses caught the kitchen light and went white, and for a moment there was nobody behind them at all.

He thought about saying something. Who are those for? But the question died in his throat. Because he knew, the way you knew things in that house without being told. The singing. The handprint. The small bare footprints in his salt.

Then she picked up the tray. Turned toward the basement door.

“They get hungry,” she said, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

His mouth had gone dry. His heart was going like a drum, he could feel it in his throat, in his wrists.

They. The word sat in the air between them. Not he. Not Mr. Abernathy. They.

All the small wrong things of the last weeks lined up in his head like boxcars. The laughing in the walls, the footprints in the salt, the voice through the closet crack, the singing in the dark that went too far. Is she gone? Small as a moth. How many nights had that voice asked? How long had it been waiting for somebody to answer?

“Can I—” His voice cracked. He swallowed and tried again, and hated the sound of himself. “Can I come?”

She looked at him a long moment. The glasses, the white discs. He couldn’t read her face at all. The sugar was gone, the shitty attitude was gone, there was just the watching. The way she’d watched his hands shake

at her kitchen table the day he signed the lease. The way she’d watched his shirts in the laundromat, folding and refolding.

He thought she would say no. He thought the sugar would come back and she’d tell him the basement was none of his business, some things weren’t his to fix.

Then she turned and shuffled toward the basement, and he followed.

The stairs went down farther than they should have.

He counted without meaning to, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. The air got colder with every step. The smell of wet earth got stronger, until his breath was coming out in white puffs and his fingers had gone numb on the rail and the dark pressed in from both sides like water.

Eighteen steps. He knew this house. There hadn’t been eighteen steps yesterday. There couldn’t have been.

He stopped counting. Counting was something a man did instead of imagining, and he was past that now.

The rail was slick with cold under his numb fingers. The dark had a smell down here. Wet earth, and something else under it, something old and sweet, like flowers left too long in a vase. His boots found each step by feel. The steps were concrete, worn in the middle. They went down, and down, and he thought about turning around with every one, and he didn’t turn around.

The basement was bigger than the house.

That was his first thought, stupid, impossible, true. The dark went back farther than the foundation allowed. Farther than the block

allowed. He’d walked this street. He knew how wide the lot was. But the dark went on, and on, past where any wall had a right to be.

A bare bulb hung from a wire somewhere out in the middle of it, swaying just a little, throwing a cage of yellow light onto bare concrete. Past the light, the dark just kept going.

He looked left. He looked right. He couldn’t find the walls.

The house above him was twenty-some feet wide. He’d mopped every inch of it. But down here the concrete ran out past the bulb light in every direction. The dark beyond it had a depth to it, a weight. The feeling of a place that went further than it should, as a held breath went further than it should.

Two small mattresses on the concrete, inside the cage of light. Two thin blankets, folded with a care that broke his heart, corners square, as his mama had taught him.

And the children.

Little. So little. Blonde hair matted and filthy, hanging in clumps around their faces. Blue eyes huge in scrawny faces, huge and haunted, there was no other word for it. You could see the bones at their wrists, at their collarbones, at their ankles above their bare feet. Dirt ground into the skin of their arms, their necks, their faces. The littler one’s lip was split and healing. There was a scar on the bigger one’s wrist, thin and white, half-hidden under the dirt.

They flinched when Bre came down the steps. Pressed back against the wall like animals. The littler one half behind the bigger one, both of them making themselves small, as you got when making yourself small was the only thing that ever helped.

It was automatic.; it was practiced. Phoenix had seen that flinch before, in holding cells, in intake lines, in the mirror. The flinch of

somebody who’d learned exactly how much space they were allowed to take up.; it was no space at all.

Then they saw him.

And stared.

Bre set the bowls down on the concrete between the mattresses. “Eat,” she told them, the nasal voice almost gentle.

While they ate, Phoenix looked at the rest of it.

A metal bucket in the corner, dented. A second bulb socket hanging empty from another wire, the bulb long gone. Scratches in the concrete near the mattresses. Thin white lines, close together, like something small had clawed at the floor. He didn’t want to know what. He knew anyway.

The cold was total down here. It wasn’t the cold of a basement. The cold of a place the

sun had never reached, not once, not ever. His breath came out in white puffs that hung in the bulb light before they faded. His fingers had gone too numb to feel the rail.

They didn’t move until she’d stepped back. Then the bigger one reached, fast, like a snatch, like the bowl might disappear. Pulled it close, and they ate with their hands, bent over the bowls, not looking up.

Phoenix watched them eat and felt something break open in his chest.

The bigger one ate with a kind of ferocity, shoveling, guarding, the free arm curled around the bowl. The littler one ate slower, carefully, like each bite had to be thought about. Between bites, the littler one’s eyes kept flicking up to Phoenix. Huge. Blue. Haunted. There was no other word for what was in those eyes. The look of a kid who’d learned early that the world had teeth, and had never learned anything else since.

How long? He wanted to ask. He couldn’t ask. The question sat in his throat like a stone.

Phoenix couldn’t move. His boots were rooted to the concrete. The cold had gotten through him now, he couldn’t feel his fingers, couldn’t feel his face.

He thought about the folder fat as a phone book. Three years of every day. He thought about the photo wall upstairs, his face repeated a hundred times. He thought about He is almost ready in fresh ink, still shiny.

And he thought about the voice through the closet crack, small as a moth, Is she gone?. He understood, down in the place where understanding hurt, whose voice that had been. How long it had been asking. How many nights it had whispered into how many darks, waiting for an answer.

Bre was already going up the stairs. He hadn’t seen her turn. The shuffle, the hunch, the perfume trailing in the cold air.

The padlock clicked, new padlock, bright steel, still oiled. The sound of it rang in the impossible dark.

The bare bulb swayed on its wire. The children’s chewing was the only sound. Fast, desperate, the sound of kids who’d learned that food could go away.

Phoenix stood at the bottom of the stairs in the cold dark, looking at the two small faces in the dim light. The bigger one had finished the bowl and was wiping it with a finger, getting the last of the gray mush. The littler one held the bowl in both hands, close to the chest, like it might be taken away.

He was trying to do good.; that was the whole of him. That was everything he had left, the one true thing in a house full of wrong things. He was trying to do good, and it had brought him down eighteen steps into this impossible dark, to stand on cold concrete and look at two starved children eating gray mush with their hands.

He thought about calling out. About saying something, anything. But his throat had closed, and the words

wouldn’t come. The littler one’s huge blue eyes were on him, waiting.

The littler one looked up at him. The huge blue eyes. The filthy face. The split lip.

“Is she gone?” the littler one whispered.

Phoenix couldn’t answer. His throat had closed around every word he owned.

The padlock held. The hinges didn’t, old pins in old wood, soft around the screws. He drove the pins up with his keys and lifted the door off, then eased it back onto its knuckles on his way out.

He went up the stairs backwards, facing them, like leaving them in the dark was something he had to watch himself do. At the top, the kitchen light hit his eyes, and he had to stop, blind, his hand on the doorframe.

Bre was at the sink, washing the pot. Humming. She didn’t turn around.

“They eat fast,” she said, conversational, like they were discussing the weather. “They’ve learned not to waste.”

Phoenix stood in the doorway with concrete dust on his boots and his hands shaking at his sides.

“How long?” he said.

She turned off the tap. Dried her hands on the dish towel, folded wrong, the way she always folded it. “You ask a lot of questions for a man with a ledger, Phoenix.”

The words landed like a hand on his chest.

She knew about the notebook. She’d always known about the notebook. She’d stood in his doorway and smiled that small sad smile. But hearing her say it, here, now, with the smell of the basement still in his clothes, it was different. It was her telling him the rules had changed. That the pretending was over, or getting over.

She shuffled past him, up the stairs, the perfume trailing. At the stairwell she paused, didn’t turn, just paused.

“Don’t get attached, Phoenix,” she said, to the dark upstairs. Not sugar. Not nasal. Just flat.

Then she went up, and he stood in the kitchen a long time, listening to her steps overhead. Then he went to his room and lay in the dark in his coat, and he did not sleep.

He lay awake and thought about the littler one’s whisper, Is she gone?. About the bigger one wiping the bowl with a finger, getting the last of it. He thought about the blankets folded corners-square. Whose hands had taught them that, and how long ago.

Don’t get attached.

He turned the sentence over until it cut him, and then he turned it over some more.



Chapter 17

Two Tomorrows

He talked to them through the basement door.

It took three nights.

The day before the first night, Bre did laundry.

He came home to the smell of detergent and the sound of the dryer thumping. She was folding dish towels at the kitchen table, corners square, the wrong way she always did it. She looked up and smiled, all sugar.

“There’s my boy. You want a sandwich?”

He said yes because saying no would be noticed. He sat at the table and ate the sandwich and watched her fold, and he thought about the tray the night before. The two extra bowls. The way she’d glanced at the basement door while she hummed.

“Big day coming,” she’d said over pancakes. He hadn’t asked again. He was afraid of what the answer would be.

She hummed while she folded. Nasal, off-key. The most normal sound in the world.

The first night, silence.

He waited until the house went quiet. Until her shuffle had gone up the stairs and the stairwell had gone dark and the radiators had ticked themselves to sleep. Then he went down the hall in his socks and sat on the floor with his back against the basement door.

The padlock was cold against his shoulder. New steel. Still oiled.

“Hey,” he said softly, to the wood. “It’s me. Phoenix.”

Nothing. Not a sound from below.

“I know you’re down there. I saw, I was down there. With the food.”

Silence. The kind of silence that listened.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk.”

He sat there a long time. The floorboards were cold through his jeans. Somewhere in the walls, the pipes knocked once, slow, deliberate, and then nothing, the house holding its breath around him.

They were afraid of every sound. He understood that. He'd been afraid of every sound, once. In a cell, you learned the sounds as you learned the walls. Which ones meant nothing, which ones meant somebody was coming, which ones meant you kept your eyes down and your mouth shut.

He talked anyway. Quiet, steady, to the wood. He told them his name was Phoenix. He told them he worked nights at the warehouse by the interstate. He told them it was raining, it was always raining. That the rain on the basement pipes probably sounded like drumming, far away.

"Like the world remembering you," he said.

Still nothing. But the silence had changed, he could feel it. It was listening now, not just empty.

“I’ll come back,” he whispered to the door. “Tomorrow. I promise.”

He went back to his room and poured the salt fresh across the doorway and lay in the dark. For the first time since the filing cabinet, the house didn’t knock.

He lay awake anyway, staring at the ceiling, seeing huge blue eyes in the dark behind his eyelids. He thought about the littler one’s whisper, Is she gone?. About all the nights that small voice must have asked it, into how many kinds of dark, and how the answer had always been no.

Not anymore, he told the ceiling. The answer wasn’t going to be no anymore. He didn’t know how yet. But he’d figure it out. Take care

of things today only, and today, the thing was them. Today, that was enough.

The second day, the warehouse felt like another planet.

Boxes of paper towels. Canned beans. Off-brand cereal. The guts of every dollar store in the county, moving through his hands one box at a time, box, stack, wrap. All he could see was two small mattresses on concrete. Two thin blankets, folded corners-square. The bigger one wiping the bowl with a finger, getting the last of it. The littler one holding the bowl close, like it might be taken away.

Eddie found him staring at a pallet at four in the morning, a box half-lifted in his hands.

“You sick, Phoenix? You look like hell.”

“I’m all right.”

“You’re a liar.” Eddie clapped his shoulder, the real kind, not the measuring kind. “Go home after shift. Sleep. Whatever it is, today’s today.”

An hour later a box split open on the line, cheap glue, too much weight. Canned beans went everywhere, rolling across the concrete, under the pallets, into the drains. Everybody groaned. Phoenix got down on his knees and picked them up one by one. Dent-check, wipe, restack. It took twenty minutes. Nobody helped. Nobody had to.

Eddie watched him from the dock door.

“You’re all right, Phoenix,” he said, when it was done. Quiet. Like it cost him something to say it.

Phoenix nodded. Take care of things today only. He’d said it a hundred times without meaning it. A slogan for staying clean, one day at a time.

He rode the bus home with the words going around in his head, and they didn’t sound like a slogan anymore. They sounded like something somebody had written on a wall in blue ink, years before he ever heard it.

The second night, the littler one whispered back.

He sat against the door the same way, back to the wood, knees up, the padlock cold on his shoulder. “It’s me again,” he said. “Phoenix.”

A long quiet. Then, from below, so faint he thought he’d imagined it, so small:

“…hi.”

His chest went tight. “Hi.”

“You saw us.”

“Yeah.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady. “I saw you.”

Another quiet. Smaller breathing, through the door, through the wood.

“Are you one of hers?” the little voice asked.

“No.” Steady. “No, I’m not one of hers. I’m, I live upstairs. The back room.”

“She says the upstairs is hers too.”

“Yeah,” Phoenix said. “I know.”

“Are you scared of her?” The little voice was matter-of-fact. Not mocking, just asking.

Phoenix thought about the dinner table. The mask slipping. The room going cold.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m scared of her.”

“Good,” the little voice said. “You should be.”

He talked until the gray started coming up. Talked about nothing, the warehouse, the rain, the bus with the busted heater, Eddie and his

forklift eyes. The little voice asked if it was still raining. He said yeah, it was always raining. The little voice said they liked the rain. They could hear it, down there, through the pipes, drumming, far away, like the world remembering them.

“Do you have a sister?” the little voice asked, sudden.

Phoenix went still. “Yeah. Faith.”

“Is she nice?”

“The nicest.” His throat was tight. “She’d like you. Both of you.”

A small quiet. Then: “Don’t tell her about us. She’d, she’d come. And then she’d be here too.”

He pressed his forehead harder against the wood. “I won’t tell her. I promise.”

“She’d try to take us,” the little voice went on, smaller now, as kids sounded when they were getting sleepy.

“Grown-ups always try to take us. It never works. The house—” A pause. “The house doesn’t let.”

Phoenix closed his eyes. “I know.”

“But you’re different,” the little voice said. “You promised.”

“What’s your—” he started, and stopped. Names. He didn’t ask. Something in him knew not to ask, as you knew not to touch a bruise.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered, before he went back upstairs.

“Promise?” Small as a moth.

“Promise.”

The third day, Bre made pancakes.

He came down to the smell of them. Real pancakes, browning in the pan, butter, the kitchen warm for once. She was humming. Nasal, off-key. She slid a plate in

front of him like it was any morning, like the house wasn’t wrong underneath them.

“Eat up,” she said, all sugar. “You’re too thin.”

He ate them. They tasted like nothing, he chewed and swallowed and tasted nothing. He watched her hands, the spoon, the flip, the cramped fingers. Thought about those hands setting two bowls on concrete in the dark. Eat, almost gentle.

“You sleep all right?” she asked.

“Fine.”

“Good.” She smiled her crooked smile. “Sleep’s important, Phoenix. Big day coming.”

His hands went still on the fork. “What big day?”

She just kept smiling, and shuffled to the sink with the pan. The humming started again, nasal, off-key, and she washed the pan like it

was any morning, like she hadn’t just said the thing she’d said.

He sat there with the pancakes going cold on his plate and his hands in fists under the table. He didn’t ask again. He’d learned, God help him, he’d learned, that asking her things got you answers you didn’t want, in a voice that wasn’t hers.

Upstairs, he opened the notebook and wrote.

Nov 1, she said, “big day coming.” Wouldn’t say what. Smiled the whole time. Nov 1, tonight’s the third night. I’m going to ask them how long. I’m afraid of the answer.

He put the notebook back under the mattress. He checked the salt canister, a quarter left. He poured the line fresh anyway, thick as his thumb. Sat on the bed with his back to the wall until the house went quiet.

The third night, they told him.

He sat against the door. The padlock cold on his shoulder. His forehead against the painted wood. “It’s me,” he said.

This time the bigger one answered. The voice was thin, starved thin, but there was something certain in it. Something that had stopped being afraid a long time ago, because there was nothing left to be afraid with.

“How long have you been down there?” Phoenix asked.

A pause. Small breathing, two rhythms.

“Years,” the bigger one said.

The word sat in the dark like a stone.

“She takes us up sometimes,” the littler one whispered. “When the house is hungry. We walk the halls. We’re supposed to be quiet. We’re supposed to—” A pause. “We left

footprints once. In the white stuff. She was mad.”

Phoenix’s throat closed. The salt. The small bare footprints leading into his room, stopping at the closet.

“How old were you?” he asked. “When she, when you came here.”

“I don’t remember not here,” the bigger one said. “Not really.”

“Why?” Phoenix said. His voice came out rough. “Why you?”

“I don’t remember not here,” the bigger one said. “Not really. I remember—” A pause, reaching. “A yard? With a dog? Maybe I made that up.”

“You didn’t make it up,” Phoenix said.

“She says we’re almost done being drained.” The littler one said it the way kids said things they’d been told a hundred times, repeating, not understanding, the words

worn smooth. “She says there’s a new one. She says you’re special.”

His blood went cold.

“Special ones go to him,” the bigger one said. Flat. Certain. “That’s what she says when she thinks we can’t hear.”

“Go to who?”

A longer pause. The two small breathings, quick now, scared now.

“Him,” the littler one whispered. Like the word was hot. Like saying it could burn.

Phoenix sat in the hall with his forehead against the door and his heart going like a drum. He didn’t ask who him was. Something in him knew not to ask. The way you knew not to touch a bruise, as you knew not to say a name out loud in the dark.

He thought about the folder fat as a phone book. Three years of every day, where he’d

been, who he’d talked to, what he’d eaten. He is almost ready.

Almost ready for what. He’d been afraid to ask. He was still afraid to ask.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Both of you. I’m getting you out.”

“You can’t,” the bigger one said. Not scared, certain. The certainty of a kid who’d watched every door stay shut for years. “Nobody gets out.”

“Watch me.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady, to the end. “Take care of things today only. Today’s today.”

Through the door, small as a moth: “Promise?”

“I promise.”

He sat in the hall until the gray came up. He didn’t move, and the house didn’t knock.

He thought about the word he’d given them. Promise. He’d made promises before, to his mama, to Faith, to Ms. Hart, to himself in a cell at 3am. Most of them he’d broken, or the world had broken for him. But this one was different. This one sat in his chest like a stone, heavy and true.

Take care of things today only. Today’s today.

Tomorrow would be today soon enough. And he would be ready, whatever ready meant, whatever she was getting him ready for. He’d walk into it with his eyes open, as he’d walked down those eighteen steps.

For them. Not for her. For the two small breathings on the other side of the wood, and the two tomorrows they were owed.

He didn’t know how. Not yet. But tonight, sitting in the hall with his forehead against the painted wood, the how didn’t matter.

Tonight, the thing was the promise. And he would keep it.



Chapter 18

The Longest Night

The warehouse shift ran long, and Phoenix was glad of it.

Eddie kept him late on the dock. A truck half-loaded, rain coming sideways under the overhang, the forklift out of propane. They hand-stacked two hundred boxes of canned corn by the yard light, Eddie working alongside him like a regular man, neither of them saying much. The rain hissed on the hot forklift engine. The boxes were heavy in the wet. Cardboard going soft at the corners, the cans shifting inside with a dull iron music.

Phoenix’s shoulders burned. His hands went numb and then came back. It was honest hurt, the kind a body understood, and he stayed in it as long as he could.

Eddie found him on the dock at four, stacking the last of the corn. Stood watching a minute with his hands in his pockets.

“You got somewhere to be?” Eddie said.

Phoenix shook his head. Didn’t stop stacking.

“Usually a man trying to kill time’s got somewhere he don’t want to be.” Eddie picked up a box, set it on the pallet square. “That landlady of yours treating you right?”

The question landed wrong. Phoenix kept his eyes on the boxes.

“She’s fine.”

“She called here once,” Eddie said. “Month ago. Worried about you, she said. Wanted to make sure you were showing up.” He set another box down. “I told her you showed up.”

Phoenix’s hands stopped. “When was this?”

“October. Early.” Eddie shrugged. “Figured it was a landlady thing.”

Phoenix stacked three more boxes before he trusted his voice. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Anytime.” Eddie clapped his shoulder, the real kind, and went back inside, leaving Phoenix on the dock with the rain and the arithmetic of it: October, early. Before the ledger. Before the dossiers. She’d been checking his attendance at work while he still thought the trap was just rules on a fridge.

He didn’t want to go home.

Three nights he’d talked to the children through the basement door. Three nights of small voices through painted wood, “The house drinks us. Slow. Like a straw.”. And last night, the littler one’s whisper, small as a moth: “Promise?” And his answer, steady, the steadiest lie or the truest thing he’d ever said: “I promise.”

He’d promised two children in a basement he couldn’t open that he was getting them out.

Take care of things today only.

He walked home in the rain with his hood up and his hands in his pockets, past the shuttered check-cashing place, past the bus stop where he’d slept sitting up his first night out. The streetlights buzzed. The gutters ran brown. Somewhere a car alarm cried itself hoarse and gave up.

He took the long way without deciding to. Down past the overpass, around the block with the burned-out duplex, anywhere the rain was just rain and the houses were just houses. It didn’t help. Every porch he passed, he checked for a big woman in a housecoat. Every window, for coke-bottle glasses catching the light.

The block looked the same. The house looked the same. Sagging porch, one shutter hanging crooked, paint peeling off the siding in long gray tongues.

But the air around it didn’t feel the same.

He stood on the sidewalk a long minute, rain running off his hood. Looked at 412 as you’d look at a dog that had stopped barking.

Then he went in.

The kitchen was dark.; that was wrong first. She always left the light on over the stove, the bare bulb burning all night like the house had insomnia. Tonight: dark. The fridge hummed. The linoleum was cold through his boots.

He stood in the doorway and listened. The fridge hummed. Somewhere a pipe ticked once and stopped. He thought about turning the light on and didn’t. The dark felt, occupied. Like a room where somebody had just been sitting.

“Bre?”

Nothing. The house gave him nothing back, no pipes, no knocking, no shuffle upstairs. A held-breath quiet, the kind the walls got right before they started walking.

He said her name again, louder, and hated the sound of it in the dark. The way it came back to him off the walls, smaller. He stood in the kitchen doorway with rain dripping off his hood onto the linoleum and waited for an answer he didn’t want.

He went down the hall slow, one hand on the wall, counting steps without meaning to.

Fourteen. The hall was being honest tonight, straight, right-shaped, doors staying doors. That worried him more than the wrongness would have. The house only behaved when it wanted something.

His door was open.

Salt first, his eyes found it before anything else. The line he’d poured that morning, thick as his thumb, white against the worn boards.

Scattered. Walked through. And it hadn’t been walked through on the way out, the spill fanned inward, across his threshold, into his room.

She’d come in through his line. Not around it, not over it, through it, like it wasn’t there. All those mornings pouring it thick as his thumb, all those nights sleeping behind it feeling safe. He’d been drawing lines in chalk on a door that was already open.

His hands wanted to shake. He made them stay loose at his sides.

She was sitting on his bed.

The notebook was open in her lap. His notebook, the black one from the break room, the blue ink, every date. She wasn’t reading it. She just had her hands resting on the open pages, palms down, like she was warming them.

She looked up at him. Her face was calm. Not the sugar-face, not the shitty-attitude face. Calm.

He could smell the wet earth under the perfume, faint, old, the basement smell, here in his room. It had been here all along, he realized. Under everything. He'd just stopped noticing, the way you stopped noticing any smell you lived with.

"You've been busy," she said.

In the old voice. Low, clear, almost gentle.

Phoenix stood in the doorway. His heart was going like a drum, and he made his hands stay loose at his sides, as he'd learned inside, loose hands, steady eyes, don't give them anything.

"You knew," he said.

“I’ve always known.” She closed the notebook. The sound was soft. Final, as the ledger had been final. “I let you. Do you understand?”

He didn’t answer.

“Every step.” She set the notebook on the bed beside her, very carefully, squared with the edge of the mattress. “The door. The dossiers. The children. I let you find all of it.”

“The salt,” he said. “You walked through my salt.”

“The salt.” She almost smiled. “Phoenix. The salt never kept anything out. You were drawing lines in a house that was already mine.”

His mouth had gone dry. Behind him, the hallway was doing something wrong. He felt it more than saw it, as you feel a room tilt on a boat. The angles off. His room suddenly longer than it should have been, the far wall further away, the lamplight not reaching it.

The cold came up through the floorboards. His breath fogged.

She stood.

The hunch was gone. She rose straight up out of the housecoat like she’d never been bent at all. The housecoat hung straight, and something old looked out of her eyes and didn’t bother hiding anymore.



“The children are mine by right,” she said. “Souls owed. Souls kept. That’s the shape of it, and it’s older than your name for it.”

“Let them go.”

“There’s a trade.” She came closer. Each step was silent. No shuffle now, no drag of bad back, nothing human in the walk at all. “There’s always a trade. A soul for two souls, Phoenix.”

“Yours,” she said softly, “is the only one I’d take.”

Her hand came up. Cold. Cold through his skin, through the bone, like she’d reached past his face and touched something underneath it. He didn’t flinch. He made himself not flinch.

“Why mine?” he said.

The old thing looked at him a long moment. And for one second the mask, the real mask, the sweet one, flickered across it, almost fond.

“Because you’re trying,” she said. “That’s the whole of it. You’re trying so hard to be good.”

She went out. Past him through the doorway. The hallway was the right shape again the moment she crossed it, fourteen steps to the bathroom like it had always been. The cold sank back down through the floorboards. His room was warm.

Warm. The radiator ticking like nothing had happened.

He stood in the doorway and touched his face where her hand had been. His skin was cold there. Cold in the shape of her fingers, like a print in frost. It faded as he stood there. He told himself it faded.

He sat on the bed until the rain eased.

He didn’t sit long.

He got up and went upstairs in his socks, quiet on the boards, and stood outside her door.

He didn’t knock. He just stood there with his ear near the wood, listening the way he’d listened to walls for weeks. The house let him. The house held its breath with him.

Shuffling. Drag-step, drag-step, slow across the floorboards. The performance of the bad back. And under it, faint, far off, like a television through an apartment wall, the children’s song. The half-remembered tune with the words wrong, bending in the cold air. Coming from inside her room.

His skin went cold all over.

He went back downstairs and sat on the bed and thought about the last page of his dossier. The fresh ink, still shiny when he’d found it.

He is almost ready.

He’d read it as a threat. Now he read it as a schedule. Ready for what, for the trade. For

the choosing. She hadn’t been fattening him. She’d been ripening him, as you ripened fruit on a windowsill, turning it every day, waiting for the exact morning it would fall on its own.

He thought about the photograph of his mother’s grave.

It had been in the dossier, third page, paper-clipped. The stone, the plastic flowers, the dates. He hadn’t been there in years. Couldn’t afford the bus, then couldn’t afford the time, then just couldn’t.

His mama had taught him the towels. Corners square. She’d taught him the one-day-at-a-time thing too, in her way. “Baby, you can’t wash tomorrow’s dishes today.” She’d said it over the sink, hands in the gray water, when he was sixteen and already running wild.

She’d be ashamed of the ledger. Twelve minutes late. A mug in the sink. Not the infractions, the smallness of them. The way

he’d let a witch with a green leather book make him afraid of his own life.

But the promise to the children, she’d have understood that one. “You take care of what’s in front of you, Phoenix. That’s the whole job.”

He sat with that a while. The radiator ticked. The house held its breath.

“I’m trying, Mama,” he whispered to the dark. “I’m trying to do good.”

Three years of watching. The bus stops. The warehouse gate. The halfway house on Division. Photographs of his mother’s grave. Every day of his life pinned up like a hunting trophy. And the last page in fresh ink, because the watching wasn’t over. The watching was almost done.

He is almost ready.

Almost. The trade needed him ripe. The trade needed him to choose.

He tried to think as a man thought. Practical. The way Eddie would think: what’s the job, what’s the tool, what’s the order of operations.

The padlock on the basement door. Bright steel. He had no key. He had a screwdriver in his duffel and hands that knew how to hurt from the warehouse. But the house had shown him what it could do with doors. He’d watched the hallway go wrong. He didn’t trust a screwdriver against that.

The phone. Call somebody, Faith, the cops, Ms. Hart. And say what? My landlady’s a witch. There’s children in the basement. She walks through salt. They’d hear the record in his voice before they heard the words. Ms. Hart would hear “violation of good judgment,” one phone call, back inside. The ledger would open. Bre would make sure of it.

Faith. God, Faith. He thought about calling her as a thirsty man thought about water. And then he saw her face on his pillow, the blue ink on the back: “pretty girl.” Bre had been outside Faith’s building. Bre knew where she lived. A phone call didn’t protect Faith. A phone call painted a target.

No. It was him, or it was nobody.

He got up and went to the basement door. The house let him walk the hall, straight hall, right shape, doors staying doors. The padlock hung cold and bright. He put his forehead against the painted wood, the way he had three nights running.

“Hey,” he whispered. “You awake?”

Silence. Then small movement, down low. Bare feet on concrete.

“Is she gone?” The littler one. Barely a breath.

“She’s gone upstairs.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady. “Listen. I’m working on it. You hold on, you hear me?”

“Are you scared?” That was the bigger one.

Phoenix closed his eyes against the wood. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m scared.”

A pause. Small breathing through the door.

“Us too,” the bigger one whispered.

“You just hold on,” he said. “Take care of things today only. Today’s today. Tomorrow we figure out tomorrow.”

He stayed until their breathing went slow and even on the other side of the wood. Then he went back to his room and sat on the bed and opened the notebook, and he wrote.

Oct 29, She knows everything. She let me find it all. She wants a trade. My soul for the two of them. She says mine is the only one she’d take.

He stared at what he’d written. Then he added one more line.

She’s been getting me ready. Three years of dossiers. The ledger. All of it. Getting me ready for what?

He wrote one more line in the notebook before the gray came up.

She sang to them. In her room. Their song.

He didn’t know why he wrote it. Maybe so the witness would know everything. Maybe so he’d remember, later, what kind of thing he was trading with.

He sat on the bed until dawn, and he understood the shape of the trap. He understood that she’d built it around the one thing she knew about him—

that he was trying to do good.

Outside, the rain kept coming down on the north side. In the walls, nothing knocked. The house was quiet, as a held breath is quiet.

He thought about the trade until the gray came up at the window, a soul for two souls, the only math she’d ever offered him. He couldn’t find the seam in it. Every angle he worked came back to the same door. The padlocked door. The small voices behind it.

The longest night of his life, and it hadn’t even started yet.

Chapter 19

The Shape Of It

He packed the duffel on a Friday.

It didn’t take long. It never took long. A man who’d lived out of a bag for years knew the order of it. Two shirts, folded as his mama had taught him, corners square. Socks. The notebook, black, blue ink, under the shirts. The salt canister, half empty, wrapped in a shirt so it wouldn’t spill. His wire-frames in their case. The rest, the towel, the soap, the cheap razor, stayed. Let her keep them. Let the house keep them.

He stood in the room with the duffel over his shoulder and told himself he was a free man walking out of a bad rental.

No lease on paper. Cash on wood. Nothing tying him here but a promise to two children behind a padlocked door. And a trade he hadn’t agreed to, spoken by something old in his bedroom in the middle of the night.

He could walk to the bus station. He had forty dollars once; he had more now, warehouse pay, folded in the notebook. He could be three counties over by dark.

Take care of things today only. Today’s today. Today he walked out.

He picked up the duffel and went down the hall.

The front door wouldn’t open.

Not locked. The deadbolt was thrown back, the knob turned free in his hand. It just wouldn’t open. He put his shoulder into it. Nothing. He put his whole weight into it, boots braced on the worn boards, and the door didn’t give a quarter inch. It sat in its frame like it had grown there, like the house had set its jaw around it.

He stepped back, breathing hard, and tried the knob again, gentle this time, as you’d try a sleeping animal. It turned. The latch clicked back, clean and oiled. The door didn’t move.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Come on.”

The house didn’t answer. The house had nothing to say to him.

He tried the back door. Same. The knob turned. The door didn’t move. He tried it three times, like the third time might be different. It wasn’t.

He went window to window. The front room window he’d never opened, painted shut, old paint, that was normal. The bathroom window, small and high, he dragged the chair over, stood on it, pushed. Nothing. Not stuck, refusing, the way a held breath refuses.

He got the screwdriver out of his duffel and worked the bathroom window frame. The wood didn’t give. It wasn’t wood anymore, or it

wasn’t only wood. The screwdriver tip bent, and the frame sat there, painted and patient, like it had all the time in the world.

He put the screwdriver back. His hands were shaking. He put them flat against his thighs to stop it.

The kitchen window. He’d opened it a hundred times for air, leaned on the sill in the gray mornings with coffee, watched the rain come down on the alley.

Painted shut. The paint fresh. Still tacky under his thumb, smelling of turpentine and wet earth.

He stood in the kitchen with his thumb on the fresh paint and understood: somebody had painted it shut while he slept. Or the house had. He thought about the smell, turpentine and wet earth, her perfume and the basement mixed. He thought about her hands, the cold hands, holding a brush in the dark while he

slept ten feet away. Or the house doing it. It didn’t matter which. The difference had stopped mattering days ago.



Through the front window, the street was wrong.

He saw it and his stomach dropped out from under him. The rain was falling up. Fat drops rising off the asphalt in slow gray ribbons, climbing back into a sky the color of dishwater. A car sat at the curb across the

street, he knew that car, rusted blue sedan, always parked there. Its windows showed a street that wasn’t the street, a long empty road going nowhere, no houses, no lights.

He’d read once, in one of Faith’s paperbacks, that the eye believed what it expected. His eyes had expected the north side. The bus stop, the check-cashing place, the liquor store with the bars on the windows. What they got instead was weather running backward and a road to nowhere. His mind kept trying to correct it, as a tongue kept finding a missing tooth.

He stepped back from the glass. His hands were shaking.

“Phoenix.”

Bre stood in the hall. Housecoat. Hair hanging lank around her shoulders. Coke-bottle glasses. No pretense left in her at all now, the old thing looking out, calm as Sunday. She wasn’t shuffling. She wasn’t hunched. She just

stood there, big and still, filling the hallway as weather fills a sky.

“You can leave,” she said, “when the trade is settled.”

He looked at her. He looked at the window, the rain climbing upward, wrong, wrong. He understood then, down: the house wouldn’t let him go until the debt was paid. One way or another.

His debt or hers. The shape of it was simple. It had always been simple. That’s what made it a trap and not a maze, a maze you could solve. A trap just waited.

“What if I don’t trade?” he said.

The old thing looked at him. Almost gentle.

“Then the children stay,” she said. “And you stay. And we all wait together. I’m very good at waiting, Phoenix. I’ve been waiting on you for years.”

She turned and went upstairs. He heard her on the steps. The shuffle back now, the drag-step, the hunch returned like a coat she’d hung by the door. The performance. He wondered, standing in the hall with his duffel over his shoulder, how much of Bre had ever been real at all.

He put the duffel down.

He didn’t unpack it.

He carried the duffel down to the basement door.

The house let him walk the hall, straight hall, right shape, doors staying doors. It wanted him near that door. It had always wanted him near that door. That was the thing about a trap: it didn’t stop you from walking. It just made sure every walk ended in the same place.

He set the duffel down and put his forehead against the painted wood.

The padlock was cold against his shoulder. Bright steel, still oiled. Nothing else in this house was new, and the

newness of it had stopped surprising him. New padlocks, fresh paint. The house maintained itself as she maintained her ledger: everything in its place, everything written down.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s me.”

Small movement, down low. Bare feet on concrete.

“I tried to leave,” he said quietly. “Packed the bag and everything. The doors won’t open. The windows are painted shut. The rain’s falling up outside.”

Silence. Then the bigger one, thin: “Nobody gets out.”

“She talked to me last night.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady. “She offered a trade. My soul for the two of you.”

A sharp little intake of breath. The littler one: “Don’t.”

“I’m still deciding,” Phoenix said. “That’s the truth. I’m still deciding.”

“She’s lying,” the bigger one whispered. “She lies about everything.”

“I know.” He pressed his palm flat to the door. The paint was cool. On the other side, he could hear them breathing, two small rhythms, fast and shallow, like rabbits. “You hold on. Whatever happens, you hold on.”

“Will it hurt?” The littler one. Barely a breath. “The trade. Will it hurt you?”

Phoenix closed his eyes against the wood. His voice was steady.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “That’s my job. You just hold on.”

He picked up the duffel and went back upstairs. The hallway stayed straight for him. The house was being polite. The house had manners, when it wanted something.

He sat at the kitchen table a long time. The fridge hummed. The linoleum was cold through his socks.

He thought about the Civic. Seven nights in the back seat behind the gas station, windows fogged, laundry damp no matter how long the dryer ran. He’d thought that was the bottom. He’d been wrong about the bottom. The bottom was a kitchen table in a house that wouldn’t let you leave, with fresh paint on the windows and the rain falling up outside.

He thought about Ms. Hart’s office. “You want to go back, Phoenix? Because I can arrange it. One phone call.” Funny. The worst threat in his life used to be going back inside. Now going back inside sounded like a door that opened.

He rehearsed the call in his head, the way he’d rehearsed everything in his life that mattered. “Ms. Hart, it’s Phoenix. My landlady, she’s, there’s children in the basement—”

He heard how it sounded. He heard the pause she'd take. He heard the ledger opening on Bre's kitchen table, twelve minutes late, eleven-minute shower, a mug in the sink, twenty minutes past lights-out on the porch. Bre's voice, sweet as rot: "I just thought you should know he's been restless."

One call from Bre and his call became a violation report.; that was the shape of it. The trap wasn't just the house. The trap was paperwork.

He didn't pick up the phone.

He ate dinner standing up. Bread and peanut butter at the counter. The way he'd eaten in the Civic, seven nights with the windows fogged. He didn't think about the Civic. He ate standing because sitting at the table felt like waiting, and he'd done enough waiting.

She didn't come down. No shuffle on the stairs, no perfume in the stairwell, no bowl of gray stew. The

house just, held him. The way a hand holds something small.

He washed the plate. Dried it. Put it away. Clean your things as you use them. The rule was still the rule, even if the woman who made it wasn’t a woman.

He stood at the sink with his hands in the dishwater and looked out the kitchen window, painted shut, the paint fresh, at the alley going dark. Somewhere out there the rain was falling up. Somewhere out there Faith was going about her night, not knowing. He wished she were packing a bag. God, how he wished.

Take care of things today only. Today’s thing was the plate. The plate was clean.

He thought about the children. “The house drinks us. Slow. Like a straw.” He thought about the littler one’s whisper, “Promise?”, and his answer. He’d meant it. He’d meant it as he’d never meant anything.

Take care of things today only.

He got up and went to his room and sat on the bed with the notebook in his lap. He didn’t write. He just held it, the black cover worn soft at the corners, and listened to the house.

The pipes knocked once, slow, deliberate, and then stopped.

Somewhere upstairs, something shuffled. Drag-step. Drag-step. The performance of an old woman with a bad back, in a house that did her will.

He lay back on the bed with his boots on and stared at the ceiling. The duffel sat by the door, packed, ready, useless.

He understood the shape of it now. He just didn’t know yet what it was going to cost him to break it.

At some point, he didn’t know when, the dark had gone total, the knocking started.

Front to back. Slow. Deliberate. Like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time.

He counted without meaning to. Forty. The same forty as October 14th. The house had a route, and it walked it, as she walked her shuffle, as he walked his fourteen steps.

He got the notebook and wrote by the light of his phone.

Oct 30, Tried to leave. Doors won’t open. Windows painted shut. Rain falling up. She says the trade settles it. I told the kids I’m still deciding.

He stared at the last line. Then he set the pen down. He never crossed out, the notebook was a witness, and a witness didn’t edit.

I’m still deciding. The truest lie he’d ever written. He’d decided in the basement, three nights ago, with his forehead against the wood and a small voice saying “Promise?” He’d decided before that. In the laundromat, maybe, seven days out, when a big woman

told him he didn’t take care of his things. He followed her home because he was trying to do good.

The knocking reached the back of the house and stopped. Cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

He lay in the dark and listened to the rain, falling which way, he didn’t know anymore, and he didn’t sleep.

Outside, the rain fell up into a sky the color of dishwater. He didn’t look at the window again.

Chapter 20

Faith's Call

He’d been lying awake since ten, listening to the house not knock.

That was the new sound, the absence. For weeks the walls had walked: knock, knock, knock, front to back, slow and deliberate, like somebody taking the long way around. Tonight, nothing. The house was resting. Or the house was waiting. He’d stopped trying to tell the difference.

The trade sat in his chest like a stone. A soul for two souls. Yours is the only one I’d take.

He kept turning it over, looking for the seam. Every trap had a seam. Every contract had fine print. But she’d spoken it plain, no fine print, no tricks in the wording.; that was the worst of it. The honesty of it. She didn’t need tricks. She had him.

He thought about the photograph on his pillow. Faith through the laundromat window,

laughing at something, rain on the glass. “Pretty girl.” In the blue ink. In the cramped hand.

He’d told himself it was a warning. He’d been telling himself a lot of things.

Faith called at midnight, crying.

The phone buzzed on the nightstand, and he was awake before the second buzz. Warehouse nights had trained him out of deep sleep, and the house had finished the job. He saw her name on the screen and his stomach dropped before he even answered.

“Faith?”

“Phoenix.” Her voice was thin, coming apart at the edges. “There’s a woman. Outside my building. She’s been there three days, Phoenix. She just, stands there. Across the street. In a housecoat.”

His blood went cold.

The room tilted. He sat up slow, one hand on the mattress, and made his breathing stay even.

“What does she look like?” he said.

“Big. Glasses.” A sound that wasn’t quite a sob. “She, she waved at me today, Phoenix. Like she knew me. Like we were, friends. I’ve never seen her before in my life.”

“What was she wearing?”

“A, a housecoat. In the rain, Phoenix. Just standing there in a housecoat, getting soaked, and she waved at me like—” Her voice broke clean in half. “Like she was waiting for me to come over.”

Phoenix closed his eyes. He could see it. The housecoat hanging straight, the hair lank in the rain, the coke-bottle glasses. Three days. Standing across the street from Faith’s building for three days, in the rain, waiting to be noticed.

“Did you talk to her? Did she say anything?”

“No. I, I went inside. I locked the door. I’ve had the door locked for three days.” A sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “But tonight I looked out, Phoenix, and she’s gone. Three days, and tonight, nothing. Empty street.” Her voice dropped. “That’s worse, isn’t it? Where did she go?”

Rain on his window. The radiator ticking. His own breath loud in his ears. He pressed two fingers hard to his temple, like he could push the cold back out.

Three days she’d been scared and trying not to be, and she hadn’t called until midnight, until she was crying. Because she was Faith, because she was the steady one, because she’d spent her whole life being the one who didn’t panic.

“Listen to me.” His voice was steady. “Go stay with Auntie. Tonight. Pack a bag and go tonight.”

“Phoenix, you’re scaring me.”

“Good.” He stood up. The floor was cold through his socks. “Be scared. Don’t come back here, not to my place, not to your building. You go to Auntie’s, and you stay there. You call me from Auntie’s. Every day. You hear me?”

“What’s happening?” Thin. Small. His little sister, the one who’d visited him inside with paperback books and talked about the weather like it mattered. “Phoenix, what’s happening?”

What could he say? That his landlady was a witch running a soul trap for the devil? That there were two children in the basement and the house drank them slow like a straw? That the rain was falling up outside his window?

He wanted to tell her everything. God help him, he wanted to. Wanted to lay the whole impossible weight of it at her feet the way he’d laid everything at her feet his whole life.

She was the steady one. She’d know what to do.

But the photograph on his pillow said otherwise. “Pretty girl.” In the blue ink. Telling her everything painted the target brighter. The only thing he could give her was a bag packed and a door locked at Auntie’s.

“I’m taking care of it,” he said. “Today only.”

He hung up and sat in the dark a long time.

Then he got up and went to the front window.

The street was normal.; that was the worst of it. Rain falling down, as rain was supposed to fall, the rusted blue sedan at the curb, the streetlights buzzing. Normal. No woman in a housecoat. No wrongness. Just the north side at midnight, wet and empty.

Normal was worse. Normal meant she could be anywhere. Normal meant the street only went wrong when the house wanted him to see it go wrong.

He stood at the glass until his breath fogged it, and he didn’t wipe it clear.

He thought about visiting day.

She’d come every week, the whole stretch, rain, snow, the dead heat of August. Paperbacks, always. Mysteries, mostly; she said he liked figuring things out. She’d sit across the bolted-down table and talk about the weather like it mattered, like the sky over the yard was the same sky as anywhere. He’d loved her for the lie.

“You get out,” she’d said once, near the end, leaning in. “You get out, and you do good, Phoenix. That’s the whole assignment.”

“I’m trying,” he’d said.

“I know.” She’d reached across the table, the guard cleared his throat, and she’d pulled her hand back. “You’re my brother. That’s not a small thing.”

He stood at the window with his breath fogging the glass, and he thought about the assignment. Do good. The whole assignment. And he thought about what doing good was going to cost, and he didn’t wipe the glass clear.

He thought about Faith as you thought about a wound, carefully, around the edges, never pressing the middle.

She was two years younger and had always been the steady one. When their mama died, Faith was the one who’d made the calls, signed the papers, kept the lights on. When he went inside, she was the one who showed up every visiting day with books and news and never once asked him what he’d done, like the details didn’t matter next to the man.

She’d stood on his porch three weeks ago with rain in her hair and said, “This place feels wrong, Phoenix.” She’d been polite to Bre for his sake, lied through her teeth for his sake. Then Bre had stood in the doorway and waved until the car was gone, sugar-sweet, and

turned around with the sugar gone like it had never been there.

And four days later, a photograph on his pillow. Faith through the laundromat window. Blue ink on the back: “pretty girl.”

She wasn’t just watching him anymore. She was watching Faith.

He’d told himself the photograph was a warning. Leave your sister out of this. He’d confronted Bre at dinner, “Stay away from my sister”, and she’d gone still in that gone-still way. The old thing had looked out for one second and said, “I don’t want your sister, Phoenix. I never did.”

Lies. It had all been lies. The dossiers, the ledger, the sugar, the shitty attitude. All of it was weather over something old. The something old had been standing outside Faith’s building for three days in a housecoat, waving.

His hands were fists. He made them open. Loose hands, steady eyes. Don’t give them anything.

He got up and went to the door and stood in the hall. The house was quiet, the held-breath quiet. Upstairs, nothing shuffled. He wondered if she was even up there. He wondered if she’d ever needed sleep at all.

The stairs creaked under his socks. He’d climbed them a hundred times and never noticed how loud they were. Or maybe the house was letting him hear it tonight, as it let him hear whatever it wanted him to hear.

Her door. The paint. The brass knob gone dull with age.

He stood there with his hand raised and didn’t knock. Not yet. He listened. The way he’d listened outside her room the night before, the way he’d listened to walls for weeks. Nothing. No shuffle, no song, no breathing. Just the house, ticking.

He knocked.

The knock sounded too loud in the quiet. He stood in the hall with his hands at his sides and waited. The perfume came first, thick, sweet, layered over the sour underneath, and then the door opened.

She was smiling.

Not the old thing. Bre. Housecoat, hair pinned up crooked, coke-bottle glasses catching the hall light in two white discs. The performance, full costume. She looked like somebody’s aunt.; that was the worst of it.

“Phoenix,” she said, sweet as rot. “Can’t sleep?”

“Leave her alone.”

“She’s fine, Phoenix.” Almost gentle. The nasal voice gone soft at the edges. “She’ll stay fine. As long as you do what you’re going to do.”

The words landed like a hand on his throat.

“What I’m going to do,” he repeated.

“You know.” She tilted her head. The glasses caught the light and went white, and for a second there was nobody behind them at all. “You’ve known since the basement. Since the trade. You’re just walking around it.”

“The children go free,” he said. “That’s the trade. My soul for the two of them.”

“That’s the trade,” she agreed.

“And Faith stays out of it. All the way out. That’s part of it.”

“Faith was never the point,” Bre said. “She’s just, leverage, Phoenix.”

The word landed like a slap. Leverage. His sister, the steady one, the one who’d brought paperbacks to visiting day, leverage. A line in a ledger he hadn’t seen yet.

“You’re a man who takes care of things,” Bre went on, almost fond. “I know you. Three years of you. I know

the shape of you better than you do. I know what you'll trade for, and I know what you won't, and I know exactly how much pressure the good in you can take before it does something beautiful."

"Don't," he said.

"Don't what? Don't admire you?" She smiled, crooked teeth, all sugar. "You're the best one I've ever found, Phoenix. I want you to know that. Whatever happens, you were worth the wait."

She reached out, slow, so he could see it coming, and patted his cheek. Her hand was cold.

Cold through the skin, through the bone, as it had been in his bedroom. He didn't flinch. He made himself not flinch, as he'd made himself not flinch at everything in this house, the knocking, the laughing, the photograph on his pillow. Loose hands, steady eyes. Don't give them anything.

But his eyes stung, and he hated that. He hated that the cold hand on his cheek felt

almost kind. That some broken part of him wanted it to be kind, wanted somebody’s hand on his face to mean something gentle. That was the trap too, he understood, not just the fear. The hunger for it to mean something.

“Go on back to bed,” she said. “Rest. You’re going to need it.”

The door closed. Soft. Final.

He stood in the hall with the perfume settling around him, thick, sweet, layered over the sour underneath, and he understood the squeeze. The house had him, and now it had Faith too. There was only one way out that didn’t cost her.

Soon. It had to be soon. Every day he waited was a day the house drank the children a little thinner. A day Bre stood outside Faith’s building in the rain, waving. He could feel the schedule of it now, as he’d felt the forty

knocks. The trap had a rhythm, and the rhythm was speeding up.



He went back downstairs. He didn’t go to his room. He went to the basement door and stood in front of it with his hands in his pockets, looking at the padlock, bright steel, still oiled, nothing else in this house new.

“Hey,” he said quietly, to the wood. “It’s me.”

Small movement, down low.

“Is she gone?” The littler one.

“She’s upstairs.” He pressed his forehead to the door. The paint was cool. “Listen. I need you to know something. My sister, Faith, she’s going somewhere safe tonight. So you don’t worry about her. You just worry about holding on.”

“Is she coming to get us?” The bigger one. Hope, thin as wire.

“No.” His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady, to the end. “It’s just me. But I’m coming. I promised, didn’t I?”

Through the door, small as a moth: “Promise?”

“I promise.”

He stayed until their breathing went slow. Then he went to his room and sat on the bed in the dark. He didn’t pour the salt, what was the point, the salt was hers, the lines were hers, the house was hers. He sat there until

the gray came up, thinking about Faith packing a bag in the middle of the night, thinking about a woman in a housecoat standing across the street in the rain, waving like they were friends.

Take care of things today only.

Today, Faith got to Auntie’s.; that was today’s thing. That was the one he could do.

Tomorrow would be the rest of it.

He checked his phone. No call yet. No number he didn’t know, no “made it.” It was going on two. He told himself she was driving. He told himself Auntie’s was across town and the rain slowed everything down.

He lay down with the phone on his chest, the way he’d slept in the Civic with his boots laced, ready. The screen stayed dark.

He didn’t sleep. He waited for it to light up. It didn’t, and he waited anyway.; that was the job now. Waiting for the one person he could still protect to tell him she was safe.

Chapter 21

Today Only

His last day at the warehouse, Eddie shook his hand and didn’t ask.

Men who’d done time recognized the look. Phoenix had seen it in the yard. The quiet in a man who’d made a decision and was carrying it alone. Eddie took one look at him at the start of shift and didn’t say a word about the notice. Just handed him the pallet jack and said, “Last one, make it clean.”

They worked the night as they’d worked every night. Trucks in from the interstate, boxes of paper towels and canned beans and off-brand cereal, the guts of every dollar store in the county. Phoenix stacked and hauled and swept, and the work was simple. It hurt, and he stayed inside the hurt as he’d stayed inside it the night before, honest pain, the kind a body understood.

His last pallet jack run, he took it slow on purpose. Down the long aisle between the racks, the wheels humming on the concrete, the load swaying gently. He’d learned the jack in this building. Learned the aisles, the rhythms, as Eddie wanted the corners square. He’d been somebody here. Not a record, not a file in a cabinet, a man who showed up and worked clean.

He parked the jack in its bay and stood there a minute with his hands on the handle, saying goodbye to it the way you said goodbye to anything that had treated you fair.

At five, the sky going gray at the dock doors, a kid from the day shift asked him where he was headed.

“Nowhere yet,” Phoenix said.

The kid nodded like that was an answer. “You were fast,” he said. “On the jack. Eddie says you’re the fastest he ever trained.”

Phoenix almost smiled. “Tell Eddie I said thanks.”

“For what?”

“For measuring me once.”

The kid frowned, not getting it, and Phoenix didn’t explain. Some things you only understood if you’d been measured and found short your whole life, by judges, by landlords, by women with ledgers. Eddie had looked at his hands and his boots and said, “You will,” and that was the whole interview, and it had been enough.

At six, Eddie walked him to the gate. The rain was coming down thin and cold. Eddie was a wide man with forklift eyes, and he’d measured Phoenix once, months ago, and never again.

Eddie handed him an envelope. Cash, the last week’s pay, counted out in twenties.

“Count it,” Eddie said.

Phoenix counted it at the gate, rain spotting the bills.; it was all there. It was always all there with Eddie.

“You were all right, Phoenix,” Eddie said. The real kind of clap on the shoulder, not the measuring kind. “Whatever it is, you were all right.”

Phoenix nodded. He didn’t trust his voice.

He put the envelope in his jacket, inside pocket, zipped. The weight of it sat against his ribs, twenties, counted out, all there. His last honest money. He thought about the forty bucks he’d walked in with, the duffel bag, the record. He was walking out with more than he’d walked in with. Not much more. But more.

It wasn’t about the money. About Eddie counting it out and saying “Count it”, the respect in that, the clean transaction between men. No ledger. No blue ink. Just pay for work, square. He walked out through the gate with his duffel over his shoulder and didn’t look back. Behind him, the dock doors rattled down for the night.

He walked home in the rain.

It was the long way, as he’d walked a hundred times. Past the interstate overpass, past the shuttered tire shop, down into the north side where the streetlights buzzed and never quite reached the sidewalk. Gray morning. Rain still coming down. His boots splashed through the gutters.

He passed the laundromat.

He stopped without meaning to. The windows were fogged, the dryers humming their low tired hum behind the glass. Two washers over from where he’d sat, folding the same two shirts, fold, smooth, fold, a woman was feeding quarters into a machine. For one second his chest seized, but it wasn’t her. Just a woman doing laundry on a gray morning.

He stood in the rain and looked at the laundromat where she’d found him. “You don’t take care of your things, do you.” Not a question. He’d been seven days out, sleeping in the Civic, forty bucks, a duffel bag, and a

record. And she’d been watching him for three years before that night. The photo wall. The dossiers. The laundromat photo dated three weeks before he’d ever met her.

She’d chosen him before he sat down.

He walked on, past the corner store with the bulletproof glass. He went in, the bell over the door, the smell of coffee and mop water. Bought a coffee he didn’t want, just to stand somewhere warm a minute. The clerk didn’t look up from his phone.

He stood at the window with the coffee going cold in his hand and watched the rain come down on the empty street. He thought about how ordinary the morning was. Trucks. Coffee. A clerk on his phone. The world going on like it didn’t know.

The world didn’t know.; that was the thing. The world never knew.

He left the coffee on the sill and walked out into the rain.

He passed Division without meaning to. The halfway house, gray brick, the steps where he’d smoked his first cigarette as a free man. A kid was sitting on those steps now, duffel between his knees, hood up, watching the rain. Twenty-two, maybe. Fresh out. Doing the math on forty bucks and no address.

Phoenix stopped. The kid looked up.

“You good?” Phoenix said.

The kid shrugged. “Working on it.”

Phoenix nodded. He reached into his jacket, the envelope, the twenties, and peeled one off and held it out. The kid stared at it like it might be a trick.

“Take it,” Phoenix said. “Get coffee. Stay dry.”

The kid took it. “Thanks, man.”

“Take care of things today only,” Phoenix said. “That’s the whole trick.”

He walked on before the kid could answer. He didn’t look back, because looking back would’ve made it about him, and it wasn’t about him. About a kid on some steps in the rain, and twenty dollars, and today only.

He walked on. The rain came down on the empty street. The city smelled like wet asphalt and fryer oil and fallen leaves turning to rot in the gutters. He thought about the shape of the trap, every rule, every kindness, every line in the ledger, all of it steering him toward one door. The basement door. The trade.

A soul for two souls.

He turned it over as he’d turned it over all night. The terms, as she’d spoken them: her death by his hand, no, she hadn’t said that yet. Not plain. What she’d said was the shape, not the terms. A soul for two souls. Yours is the only one I’d take.

He wondered what “take” meant. He wondered if it hurt. The littler one had asked him that, “Will it hurt you?”, and he hadn’t answered, because the answer was yes, probably, and some truths weren’t for children.

He was done walking around it.

He cleaned his room.

It took the morning. He swept, slow, corners first, as his mama had taught him. He mopped until the boards shone dull and the bucket water ran brown, then clear. He folded the dish towels corners-square. He wiped the windowsill. He opened the closet.

The crack was there in the back. The thin crack where the pale light had come through, where the whisper had come through. “You promised her.” The two strips of tape he’d pressed over it weeks ago lay on the floor

where they’d fallen that first morning, curled and dusty.

He stood looking at the crack a long time. No light now. No whisper. Just a crack in the back of a closet in a run-down house on the north side.

He closed the closet door.

In the kitchen, he washed the one mug in the sink, his mug, the chipped one. Dried it and put it in the cabinet. Twelve minutes late. Eleven-minute shower. A mug in the sink. He closed the cabinet door on the last line of the ledger.

He ran the shower ten minutes exactly and stood in it counting, the water hot the whole time. He didn’t grin this time. He just stood there and let it run over him. When the ten minutes were up he turned it off and stood in the cold drip a second, because rules only worked if somebody kept them. Somebody was going to be him, to the end.

He packed the duffel again, shirts, socks, the salt canister, the notebook on top. He set it by the door. Ready. The way a man packed who wasn’t sure he’d need it but wasn’t leaving it behind either.

He looked at it a long time. Packed Friday, unpacked never. The house had made sure of that.

“Sorry,” he told the duffel quietly. “Not today.”

Then he poured the last of the salt in a line across the doorway, thick as his thumb, the white grains bright against the worn boards.

He knew it wouldn’t keep anything out. He knew the salt was hers, the lines were hers, the house was hers.

He poured it anyway. Some things a man did because they were his to do. The line wasn’t for the house. The line was for him. A thing he’d chosen, with his own hands, in a house that had taken every other choice.

Then he opened the notebook and wrote the last entry.

He flipped back through it first. He couldn’t help it. The whole of it there in his own hand, blue ink on lined paper. Oct 14, knocking, front to back, 2am. Counted 40. Oct 17, photo wall. She’s been watching me for years. Oct 19, salt held one night. Footprints in the morning. Child-sized. Into my room. Oct 29, She knows everything. She let me find it all. She wants a trade.

Proof, in his own hand, that he hadn’t imagined any of it. That he’d seen it straight, the whole way down.

Whoever found it would know. That was the point, he realized, not just a record. A witness. If the house took him, the notebook would still be here, squared on the pillow, saying: this happened. This was real.

The pen was the cheap kind from the break room, the blue ink going thin. His hand was steady. He was proud of that, steady.

Nov 2, I’m getting them out. Whatever it costs. I will take care of things today only.

He stared at the line a long time. Then he closed the notebook and set it on the pillow, squared with the edge of the mattress, the way she’d squared it the night she sat on his bed.

He’d said it a hundred times without meaning it. A slogan for staying clean, one day at a time. One box, then the next one. Don’t think about tomorrow.

He meant it literally now. Today was the only day he had left to spend. He was going to spend it on them.

He lay down. The room was warm. The radiator ticking, the house quiet, no knocking in the walls. The salt line white across the

doorway. The notebook on the pillow beside his head.

He lay there listening. No knocking. No shuffling. No small voices in the walls. Just the rain, and the radiator, and his own breathing going slow.

He slept. The deep, dreamless sleep of a man who’d finally stopped running.



Chapter 22

The Trade

He woke as you wake the morning of a thing you can’t take back, early, all at once, no groggy middle. Gray light at the window. Rain still coming down.

The notebook was on the pillow where he’d left it. He didn’t open it. The last entry was already written. There was nothing left to write that would make it truer.

The house was silent.; that was new enough to notice. No knocking in the walls. No pipes. Just the rain on the glass and his own breathing, deep and even, like a man who’d finally stopped running.

He got up and made the bed. Hospital corners. He swept the room, under the bed, the corners, the boards by the closet. He folded his two shirts and put them in the duffel and zipped it and set it by the door. He

mopped the kitchen floor on his hands and knees, the bucket water going brown and then clear.

Take care of things today only.

Today was the only day he had left to spend. He was going to spend it clean.

He stood at the kitchen window a long time with the mop handle in his hands, watching the rain come down on the empty street. Seven nights in the back of the Civic, windows fogged. The parole officer wanting an address by Friday. The warehouse wanting an address for the W-2. Nobody renting to a man fresh out with forty bucks and a duffel bag and a record.

She’d given him the address. That was the thing he kept coming back to. Whatever she was, whatever she’d done, she’d given him the address. The rest of it, the rules, the ledger, the watching, the rest of it he’d agreed to, one small yes at a time, because a man with nowhere to go didn’t say no to a roof.

He wasn’t angry.; that was the strangest part. He’d expected anger. What he felt was something closer to, recognition. Like the last piece of a puzzle clicking in.

He was trying to do good. That was the whole of him, the whole shape of him. She’d seen it as you’d see a light on in a dark house. She hadn’t corrupted it. She hadn’t needed to. She’d just, pointed it where she wanted it to go.

The rules were still taped to the fridge. Five of them, in the blue ink.

One. Shower, ten minutes. Two. No guests after nine. Three. Clean your things as you use them. Four. You promised. Five. Lights out at ten.

He stood there a long time with the mop handle in his hands, reading them as you’d read a headstone. Every one of them had been a thread. He could see it now. All the way back to the laundromat, her watching him

fold the same two shirts. Fold, smooth, fold. She’d been reading him the way she read everything. Looking for the shape.

He left the rules where they were. They weren’t his to take down.

He checked the closet before he left the room. The crack in the back was dark. No wire of pale light, no cold air breathing out, no whisper. Just boards and dust. The house was at rest. Or she was letting it rest. He couldn’t tell the difference anymore, and it didn’t matter.

He set the salt canister by the duffel. Half empty. He’d poured the last of it across the doorway weeks ago, thick as his thumb, and it hadn’t kept anything out. It had never been his to keep out. He left it there anyway. Somebody else might need the comfort of it.

He called Faith from the kitchen phone at ten.

She picked up on the second ring, Auntie’s television loud behind her. “Phoenix? It’s early. You okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“You sound weird.”

“I’m tired.” He leaned against the counter. The linoleum was cold through his socks. “You still at Auntie’s?”

“Yeah. She made biscuits. You want me to save you some?”

He closed his eyes. “Save me some.”

“When are you coming over? You’ve been saying soon for a week.”

“Soon.” The word came out steady. He was proud of that, steady. “Faith. Listen. Whatever happens, whatever you hear, it was my choice. You hear me?”

A beat. The television got quieter, like she’d turned away from it. “Phoenix. What’s happening.”

“Nothing’s happening.” He looked out the kitchen window at the rain. “I just wanted you to know. You’re the best person I know. You take care, you hear me?”

“I don’t like this.” Her voice had gone small. “You sound like, like you’re saying goodbye.”

He closed his eyes. The linoleum was cold through his socks. Somewhere in the walls, a pipe ticked once, soft.

“I’m just tired,” he said. “It’s been a long month. But I’m taking care of things. Today only, right?”

“Today only,” she echoed. She didn’t sound convinced.

“Eat a biscuit for me.”

“I’ll save you two. You call me tomorrow.”

“I will,” he lied.

He hung up and stood in the kitchen a long time with his hand on the phone, listening to the dial tone hum. Then he put the receiver back in the cradle gentle, as you’d set down something sleeping.

He wrote her a page in the notebook.

Not a letter, he didn’t have paper to spare, and it didn’t matter. The notebook was the truest thing he owned. Blue ink, his own hand, the dates going back to October. He sat at the kitchen table with it, and he wrote slow, pressing hard enough to dent the page.

Nov 3. Faith, if you’re reading this it means I did what I said I’d do. Don’t let anybody tell you different. It was my choice and I’d make it again. The kids are free. That’s the whole of it. Take care of things today only, and make the todays count. P.

He read it twice. There was more he wanted to say, about Mama, about the warehouse, about the biscuits, but the page was small and the words were big. He’d never been good with the big ones. The small true ones would have to do.

He put the notebook back on the pillow.

The day refused to end.

He tried sitting in his room. He tried the kitchen. The house was so quiet it pressed on his ears, no settling, no breathing, nothing. Waiting. The whole house was waiting, as a held breath waits.

At noon he couldn’t stand it anymore, and he went out walking.

The rain came down steady on the north side. The streetlights buzzed. He walked past the laundromat, slowed, as you slow past a place that changed your life, and looked through the steamed glass. A young man

inside, folding shirts. Fold, smooth, fold. Twenty-something, tired eyes, duffel bag at his feet.

Phoenix stood in the rain and watched him a moment. His hand was on the door handle before he knew it. He could go in. He could tell the kid, don’t. Don’t take the room. Walk away, sleep in your car, sleep in the rain, anything.

The kid looked up. Their eyes met through the glass.

Phoenix took his hand off the door. There was nothing to say that the young man would believe. There was nothing to say that wouldn’t sound like madness. And somewhere, two washers over, a woman might already be watching.

He walked on. Past the corner store, the neon sign bleeding red into the wet street. Past the gas station where he’d slept seven nights in the back of the Civic, windows fogged, laundry damp no matter how long the

dryer ran. His spot was empty. Somebody else’s car sat there now, fogged at the windows. Somebody else’s seven nights.

He kept walking until the block ran out and the rain ran through his collar and his shoulders ached. Then he turned around and walked home, because there was nowhere else to go and there never had been.

He stopped across the street and looked at the house. His house, for another day. The sagging box of it, paint peeling, one shutter hanging crooked. The yard gone to mud and wet newspaper. The streetlights buzzing, never quite reaching the porch.

412, painted on the curb in fading white.

He’d hated this house. He’d feared it. And standing in the rain looking at it, he felt something he didn’t expect, something like grief. Not for the house. For the man who’d walked into it a month ago with a duffel bag, trying to do good, not knowing the price of the room.

He went inside.

That evening he went to the basement door.

He sat in the hall with his back against the painted wood and the new padlock cold against his shoulder. He talked through it low, the way he’d talked the last three nights.

“It’s tonight,” he said.

Small breathing on the other side. Two sets.

“When the front door opens, it’ll open, I promise you that, you walk up the stairs, and you go out, and you don’t stop. You hear me? You don’t look back, you don’t wait for me.”

“What’s it like?” the littler one whispered. “Outside.”

Phoenix pressed his forehead to the painted wood. “It’s raining. Gray rain, the ordinary kind. There’s a corner store down the block with a neon sign. The streetlights buzz. It’s the most ordinary street in the world, and it’s all yours.”

A long quiet. Then, small as a moth: “Okay.”

“Where are you going?” the bigger one whispered.

“I’m taking care of things.” He pressed his forehead to the wood. It smelled like old paint and wet earth. “Today only.”

Through the door, small as a moth: “Promise?”

The word sat in his chest like a stone. Every promise in this house had been a thread. Coerced ones. Feared ones. Hers.

This one was his.

“I promise,” he said.

He sat there until the gray went dark.

12:07 came. The house didn’t knock. The pipes didn’t walk the walls. The closet in his room stayed dark.

At midnight he went upstairs.

The stairs creaked under his socks. He counted them without meaning to. He'd never counted them going up. His heart was going like a drum, and his hands were steady. The two things didn't feel like they belonged to the same man.

Her door was open. Lamplight spilled into the hall, warm and yellow, wrong for this house. This house had never been warm and yellow in its life.

She was waiting. Sitting in the chair by the photo wall. His face repeated a hundred times in the lamplight, bus stops and warehouse gates and the halfway house on Division, the laundromat through the window. The filing cabinet stood open beside her, the drawers pulled out like a mouth. PHOENIX, fat as a phone book, sat on top in a stack. She looked almost gentle. The hunch was gone. The

housecoat hung straight. The old thing looked out of her eyes and didn’t bother hiding anymore.

“Sit down, Phoenix.”

He sat on the edge of the bed. His hands were in his lap. They were steady.

He looked at the photo wall while she talked. A hundred versions of him, not knowing. Him folding shirts. Him walking out of the halfway house with his duffel. Him at his mother’s grave, he hadn’t known anyone was there that day. He’d cried at that grave, alone, or so he’d thought. Somebody had been watching through the trees with a long lens, writing down the time in blue ink.

“The terms,” she said, “spoken plain.”

“Spoken plain,” he agreed.

“My death by your hand.” Her voice was the old voice, low, clear, no nasal edge left in it at all. “Your life, given after, freely, or it doesn’t

count. The children walk out the front door and the house lets them go.”

“And me?”

“Murder.” She said it softly, almost kind. “And self-destruction. You know what those buy.”

Damnation. That’s the price.

He looked at the photo wall. A hundred versions of him looked back, not knowing.

“Why does it have to be me?” he said. “You’ve got a filing cabinet full of souls. Why not one of them?”

“Because you’re the only one I’d take.” The old voice, low and clear. “Theirs were cheap, Phoenix. Fear and smallness. They damned themselves for nothing, a warm room, a full bowl. Yours—” She paused, and something almost like reverence crossed the old thing in

her eyes. “Yours will damn itself for love. That’s the only kind worth having.”

That’s why she chose him, the good man, the trying man. Only a soul like his was worth the trade.

He let that sit. The lamp hummed. Somewhere in the walls, nothing knocked.

“You knew,” he said. “All along. That’s why, the dossiers, the ledger. You were getting me ready.”

“I know you,” she answered. “Three years of you. I know the shape of you better than you do.”

A beat. The house was silent, holding its breath.

“The children go free,” he said. “Really free. Not traded, not owed. Not hers-by-right or souls-kept or any of your old words. Free.”

“On my death, the claim breaks.” The old voice, and it didn’t hide. “They walk out. I swear it on him.”

A beat. The lamp hummed.

“And if I say no?” Phoenix said.

“Then the house keeps them.” She said it without cruelty, as you’d state the weather. “It drinks them slow, like a straw, until there’s nothing left to drink. And Faith—” She let the name hang. “Faith stays fine. As long as you do what you’re going to do.”

Spoken plain. The squeeze and the trade, laid out side by side. He’d known it already. Hearing it didn’t change anything.

He stood. His hands were steady.

“Tomorrow night,” he said.

“Tomorrow night,” she agreed.

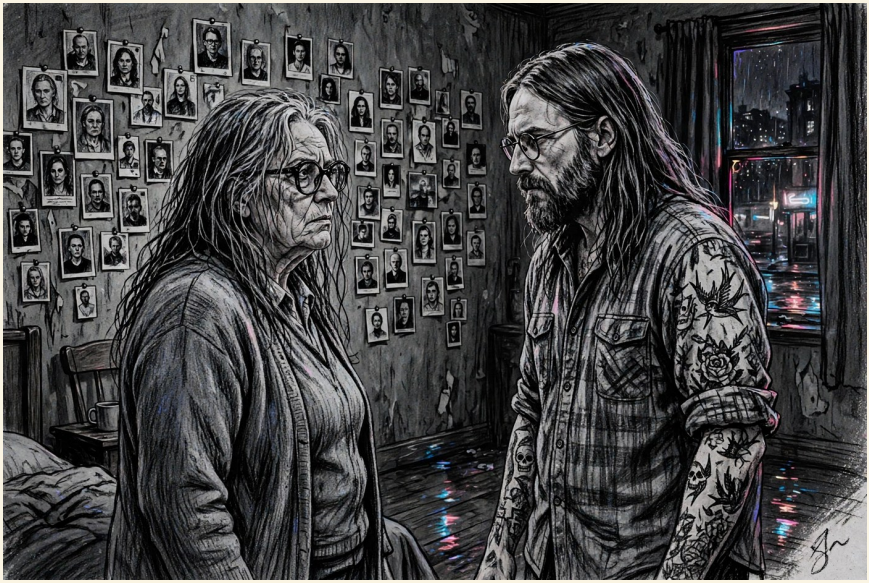
He was at the door when she spoke again, in the old voice, almost gentle.

“Phoenix.”

He turned.

“Thank you,” she said.

He went back downstairs to his room and lay down on the made bed. For the first time in weeks, the house didn’t make a sound.



Chapter 23

What The Fire Takes

The next day was the longest of his life, and he spent it taking care of things.

He woke before the gray came up. The house was silent, no knocking, no pipes, nothing. He lay in the dark and listened to the rain and told himself to get up. Then he got up, because a man took care of things today only, and today was today.

He swept the kitchen. He mopped the hall, fourteen steps, he counted without meaning to. He cleaned his room top to bottom, though he’d cleaned it yesterday, the boards, the windowsill, under the bed. He folded the dish towels corners-square, as his mama had taught him. He stood in the basement doorway with the mop bucket and looked down into the dark and listened to the house not breathe.

He pressed his ear to the basement door. Nothing. The kids were quiet down there, waiting, as he'd told them to. He wondered if they were scared. He wondered if they believed him.

"Tonight," he whispered through the wood. "I promise."

Something small shifted down there. A mattress creak.; that was all.; it was enough.

The duffel sat by his door, zipped. He'd thought about taking it with him tonight, old habits, and he'd left it. He didn't need it where he was going. Maybe the next man would need the shirts. Maybe the kids would. He left it by the door.

He couldn't eat. He tried, bread, dry, and his throat closed on it. He drank water standing at the sink, watching it run clear. He thought about the brown faucet water of the first weeks, and he understood that even that had been hers. The house doing her will. Everything had been hers.

At noon he went upstairs.

He didn’t know why. His feet just took him up. Her door was open, it was always open now, no pretense left. She was sitting in her chair by the photo wall with her hands folded in her lap, looking at the photographs the way you’d look at a garden.

She heard him. She turned, and she smiled, and for a second she was just Bre, the laundromat woman, the housecoat, the crooked teeth.

Behind her, the photo wall watched with his hundred faces. The filing cabinet stood open, the drawers pulled out. Everything she’d spent three years building, laid out like instruments on a tray.

“You’re a good man, Phoenix,” she said.

It landed like a stone in still water. He stood in her doorway with his hands at his sides. He couldn’t answer, because she meant it. Because it was true, and because his goodness was the thing she was spending.

“Get some rest,” she said gentle. “Tonight’s a big night.”

He went back downstairs.

At dusk he went to the basement door.

He sat in the hall with his back against the painted wood and the padlock cold against his shoulder. He talked through it low.

“It’s tonight,” he said.

Small breathing on the other side. Two sets.

“When the front door opens, it’ll open, I promise you that, you walk up the stairs, and you go out, and you don’t stop. You hear me? You don’t look back, you don’t wait for me.”

“Where are you going?” the bigger one whispered.

“I’m taking care of things.” He pressed his forehead to the wood. It smelled like old paint and wet earth. “Today only.”

“Will you be there?” The littler one, small as a moth. “When we come up?”

He closed his eyes. “I’ll be close.”

Through the door, small as a moth: “Promise?”

The word sat in his chest like a stone. Every promise in this house had been a thread. Coerced ones. Feared ones. Hers.

This one was his.

“I promise,” he said.

He sat there until the dark came down.

She made dinner that night. Gray mush, steaming, pepper and old meat. The same as always, except she set his bowl down gentle.

She sat across from him, and for a while they just ate. It was almost like somebody’s house.

“You remember,” she said, out of nowhere, sugar-sweet, “what the fire takes?”

He looked up. “What?”

She smiled her crooked smile and went back to her bowl, like she hadn’t said anything at all.

He turned it over in his head all evening. What the fire takes. It sounded like one of her sayings. The house doesn’t like the cold, some doors should stay closed. Words that meant more than they said. He asked himself what fire she meant. The stove? The furnace? He didn’t ask her. He was afraid of the answer.

He didn’t sleep that night. He lay in the dark and listened to the rain and told himself to be a man about it. At some point the radiator ticked. At some point the pipes knocked once, soft, like the house was dreaming.

12:07 came. Nothing happened. The house was holding its breath, and so was he.

He went up at one.

The stairs creaked under his socks. The house was silent. Something emptier than held breath, like a room after everybody’s left. He counted the steps without meaning to. He’d never counted going up.

He’d thought about the knife in the kitchen drawer, the big one, the one she used on the gray meat. He’d left it where it was. It had to be him. No distance. No trick.; that was the terms, spoken plain.

Her door was open. Lamplight.

She was waiting in her chair by the photo wall. She didn’t get up. She looked at him, the old thing, the real thing, not hiding anymore, and she smiled, almost kind.

“You’re sure,” she said. Not a question.

“The children go free.”

“They go free.”

He crossed the room. The floorboards were warm under his feet, the radiator in her room ran hot, always had. The lamp on the side table threw his shadows up the photo wall, a hundred versions of him watching, not knowing.

She didn’t get up. She didn’t fight.

That was the worst of it, later, that she didn’t fight. She just sat there in her chair with her hands folded in her lap, the coke-bottle glasses slipping down her nose. She looked up at him with the old thing in her eyes, and she was almost gentle.

He did it with his hands.

It wasn’t fast. He won’t lie about that, not to himself, not ever. Her hands came up. Not to fight, just to hold his wrists, as you’d hold someone’s hands to keep from falling. The perfume rose up thick. Then thin. Her glasses slipped off and hit the floor and one of the lenses cracked, a bright star in the glass.

The lamp went over. He didn’t notice until later. His elbow caught the side table and the lamp fell sideways against the photo wall, the shade tipping, the hot bulb kissing dry paper.

When it was done, he sat on the floor with his back against the bed. He put his hands in his lap and looked at them. They were steady.

They were steady, and that was the most terrible thing.

He made himself check. He put two fingers to her wrist, as he’d seen it done. Nothing. He held his hand in front of her mouth. Nothing. Her skin was already cooling under his fingers, going from warm to room-temperature, as meat did.

No tricks. No coming back. The old thing was gone out of her like air out of a tire, and what was left was just, a woman. A big woman in a housecoat, with greasy hair and crooked teeth and one cracked lens on the floor beside her.

“You knew I’d do it,” he said to her.

The room didn’t answer. The lamp’s hot bulb kissed the dry paper, and the paper began to brown.

He cried then, not for her. He cried for the weight of it, sitting in her dead woman’s room with her dead woman’s smell thick in the air. He said the word to himself the way he’d said it a hundred times in his head, and it hadn’t prepared him, nothing had prepared him.

Murder.

He’d said it a hundred times.; it was a different word now. It had her face in it. It had his hands in it.

He cried for the kids downstairs, who didn’t know yet. He cried for Faith, at Auntie’s, saving him biscuits. He cried for the man he’d been that morning, mopping the hall, folding the towels corners-square, believing, still

believing, right up to the end, that taking care of things today only would be enough.

He was a murderer. That was the shape of him now. All the trying, all the todays, all the clean kitchens and folded towels, and the shape of him was this. A man sitting on a dead woman’s floor with steady hands.

Then the house screamed.

Not a sound, a feeling. It came up through the floorboards and into his teeth, a long shudder that ran the length of the house, front to back, like something with its spine being snapped. The walls shook. Dust fell from the ceiling in a soft rain.

The photo wall caught first.

The lamp’s hot bulb had been kissing the dry paper all through it, and now the paper took. One photograph, then ten, his face going brown at the edges, curling, blackening. Him at the bus stop. Him at the warehouse gate. Him walking out of the halfway house on Division with his duffel. A hundred versions of him, going up in the heat.

The filing cabinet was next. The dossiers went up like dry leaves. PHOENIX, fat as a phone book, the pages lifting, blackening, and flying. FAITH, thin and new. MR. ABERNATHY, thinner than it should have been. The dozen others, names he didn’t know, men and women going back years. The maps of the city, his routes in blue ink. All of it. All of her three years of him.

The heat pushed him back toward the door. The curtains went. The housecoat she wasn’t wearing anymore, the spare, on the hook, went up like a torch. The room was an oven now, the air shimmering. He stood in the doorway with his back against the jamb and watched it all go. He didn’t try to stop it, and he didn’t want to.

The smoke was sweet. Perfume and paper.

He watched his faces burn from the doorway, and he understood. All the way down, as you understand a joke when the punchline lands.

What the fire takes.

She’d whispered it once, sugar-sweet over dinner, and he hadn’t understood, and he understood now.

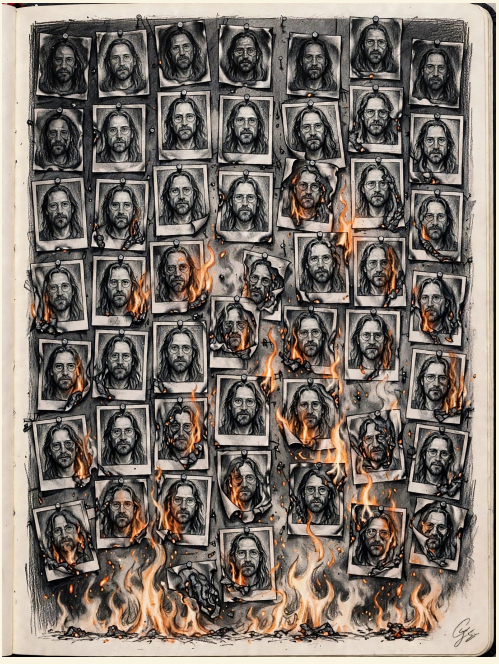
It took her.

It took the claim. It took the three years. It took every thread she’d tied to him, every blue-ink date, every photograph. All of it going up in the heat, all of it unmade. On her death, the claim breaks. Spoken plain. She’d told him true.

A page lifted off the filing cabinet on the heat, turning end over end, and landed near his knee. He caught it before he thought. His mother’s grave. The photograph from the dossier, him kneeling in the wet grass with his head down. The edges were already brown. As he watched, the brown ate inward. Her name on the little stone went first, and then the grass, and then him.

He let it fall. He watched it blacken and curl and fly up into the smoke.

He was free of her.; that was the shape of it. Whatever came next, whatever the terms bought, she couldn’t touch him anymore. The three years were ash. The threads were cut.



He walked out of her room and down the hall and the house let him pass, because the claim was breaking, because she was dead. Really dead, no tricks, no coming back, her body cooling in the chair with the cracked glasses on the floor beside her.

The hallway was the right shape. Fourteen steps. He counted without meaning to. The doors were doors. The walls were walls.

He passed the end room, Mr. Abernathy’s door, shut and silent. He stopped. He put his hand flat against the painted wood and left it there a moment, feeling nothing but paint and old boards.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the door. “I didn’t know how to fix it.”

The door didn’t answer. The house didn’t knock. He took his hand off the wood and kept walking.

Behind him, her room burned, and the house screamed its silent scream, and he didn’t look back.

He went down to his room and sat on the made bed with the notebook on the pillow. He waited for morning, and the house didn’t make a sound.

Somewhere in the night the screaming stopped. Cut clean, like a hand over a mouth.

He slept. Or something like it. The deep gray kind, dreamless, the kind he’d slept the night before the terms were spoken. He didn’t move until the gray came up at the window.

Chapter 24

Two Tomorrows

Gray morning. Rain still coming down.

He woke on the made bed with the notebook on the pillow and for a second he didn’t know where he was. Then the smell came, smoke, old and sweet, perfume and paper, and he knew.

He went upstairs first.

Her door was open. The room beyond was charred black. The photo wall gone to ash, the filing cabinet a melted husk, the chair a black skeleton. The fire had burned down in the night, eaten everything there was to eat, and died to embers breathing slow in the ash.

She was still in the chair.

He stood in the doorway a long time and looked at her. She was smaller now. That was the thing he couldn’t get past. How small she’d gotten, folded in the burned chair, the housecoat fused and black. The glasses were

on the floor where they’d fallen. One lens cracked in a bright star.

He waited for the trick. For the hand to move. For the old thing to look out of the burned face and smile.

Nothing moved. The room was cold. The rain ticked on the window glass.

She was dead. Really dead. No tricks, no coming back. The claim was broken and the proof of it was sitting in a burned chair, small and still.

He closed the door gentle, as you’d close a door on someone sleeping.

In his room he stopped at the bed. The notebook was on the pillow, the last entry in blue ink. I’m getting them out. Whatever it costs. He put his hand on it a moment, the truest thing he owned.

The bolt cutters were in his duffel.

He’d taken them his last day at the warehouse. Walked past the tool cage at the end of shift, lifted them off the hook, put them in his bag. Eddie had been standing ten feet away doing the end-of-shift count. Eddie had looked right at him.

Eddie hadn’t said a word.

Men who’d done time recognized the look.; that was all. Eddie had clapped his shoulder, the real kind, not the measuring kind, and said, “You were all right, Phoenix.”

He’d carried them home in the duffel and never said why. He hadn’t needed to.

He went down to the basement with the bolt cutters over his shoulder.

The hall was the right shape. The doors were doors. The padlock on the basement door was the same bright steel, still oiled. And when he set the cutters on it and squeezed, it came off clean. One bite. It hit the floorboards with a sound like a dropped coin.

Cold air breathed up out of the dark, smelling of wet earth.

He went down.

They were awake. They'd been awake. He could see it in as they sat bolt upright on the two small mattresses, pressed back against the concrete wall, the thin blankets clutched up to their chins. They'd felt the house break. Whatever she fed them on, whatever kept them down here in the dark, they'd felt it stop.

The basement smelled like wet earth and old concrete and something sour underneath, like sickness. The two small mattresses were stained. The blankets were thin

enough to see through. Years, they'd told him through the door. Years down here.

They stared at him with huge blue eyes.

"Is she gone?" the littler one whispered.

"She's gone." His voice was steady. He was proud of that, steady, to the end. "It's over. I'm getting you out."

They didn't move. The bigger one, he thought the bigger one was a boy, he couldn't be sure, they were both so thin, so filthy, the bigger one looked at the bolt cutters in his hand and flinched.

Phoenix set the cutters down on the bottom step. He held his empty hands out where they could see them.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm not her. I'm Phoenix."

They’d heard his name through the door for three nights. He saw it land, the littler one’s shoulders dropping a fraction.

“Did the house stop?” the bigger one whispered.

Phoenix looked at the concrete walls, the dark going back farther than the foundation allowed. “The house stopped,” he said. “It’s just a house now.”

“Are you thirsty?” he said.

The littler one nodded, fast, like the question had been waiting in her, for years.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He went up to the kitchen and filled two glasses at the sink. The water ran clear. He stood there a moment with the glasses in his hands, watching it run, clear water, no brown,

the first time since he’d moved in. Something in his chest cracked open.

The first morning, the faucet had dripped brown. She’d set the mop against his doorframe and the bucket water had already been brown. He’d mopped until his back burned and at noon the footprints were back. All of it hers. The brown water, the footprints, the cold spots. All of it her will in the walls.

The water ran clear now. He watched it run a moment longer, just to be sure.

He carried them down careful, one in each hand.

They drank like they’d never stop. The bigger one drank half and then held the glass to the littler one’s mouth, steadying it with both hands while the littler one gulped. Water ran down their chins and cut clean tracks through the dirt on their faces.

“Slow,” Phoenix said. “There’s more. All you want.”

He filled a third glass and drank it himself, standing in the kitchen with the gray morning at the window. It tasted like nothing. It tasted like the best thing he’d ever had.

“Is it morning?” the bigger one asked when he came back down. Small voice, careful, like the answer might be a trick.

“It’s morning,” Phoenix said. “It’s raining.”

He went back up and wet a dish towel and came down and knelt in front of them. He wiped their faces gentle. The filth coming away in gray smears, the skin underneath pale as paper. Blonde hair, matted and tangled, falling around faces that were all eyes. Blue eyes. Huge. Haunted.

He’d seen those eyes in the closet crack. In the salt. In the walls. He was seeing them now in the gray basement light. They were just children’s eyes, and that was the worst of it.

They were just children’s eyes, and she’d kept them down here for years.

“The house drinks us,” the bigger one had said through the door. “Slow. Like a straw.”

“Can you walk?” he said.

The bigger one nodded. The littler one, he wasn’t sure. She, he thought she, the smaller frame, the longer hair, she tried to stand and her legs folded.

Phoenix picked her up.

She weighed nothing.; that was the thing. She was maybe six, maybe seven, and she weighed nothing. A bird’s weight, a handful of sticks in a thin blanket. He held her against his chest and felt her heart going like a moth against his shirt. He had to stop for a second on the basement steps and breathe.

“Front door,” he said to the bigger one. “Stay with me. Don’t look back.”

They went up. Her bare feet, his bare feet, on the boards. The bigger one’s hand found his sleeve and held on.

“Where’s the lady?” the bigger one whispered, halfway up.

“She’s gone,” Phoenix said. “She can’t hurt you anymore.”

The bigger one was quiet a moment. Then: “Are you sure?”

Phoenix stopped on the steps. He looked down at the kid, the filthy face, the huge blue eyes, the fear that had lived in those eyes for years. He made his voice as steady as he knew how.

“I’m sure,” he said. “I made sure.”

“Is it over?” the bigger one said. “The drinking? The house?”

Phoenix thought about the embers upstairs. The burned chair. The small, still thing in it.

“It’s over,” he said. “It’s just a house now.”

Halfway up, the bigger one stopped and put a free hand flat against the wall. Just stood there, palm on the paint, feeling it.

“It’s just a wall,” Phoenix said gentle.

The bigger one nodded, and took his hand off the wall, and kept climbing. But he looked back once, like he couldn’t quite believe it.

The hall was straight. The doors were doors. The house didn’t stop them. The claim was broken, and the house knew it, and the house let them pass.

In his room he stopped long enough to pull his coat off the hook and wrap it around the littler one, she disappeared into it, just her eyes showing. To press his two clean folded shirts into the bigger one’s arms.

“For the rain,” he said.

The bigger one clutched them like they were gold.

“Are we going outside?” the bigger one whispered. Like the concept needed checking.

“You’re going outside,” Phoenix said. “It’s raining. It’s gray. It’s the most ordinary morning in the world. You’re going to walk in it.”

The front door.

He stood in front of it with a child in his arms and a child holding his sleeve. He put his hand on the knob, and for a second he was back on that Thursday with the duffel over his shoulder. The knob turning, the door not moving, the house with its jaw set, the rain falling up through the window. “You can leave,” she’d said, “when the trade is settled.”

The trade was settled.

He turned the knob.

The door opened.

It just opened. No resistance, no weight, nothing. It swung inward on its hinges like it had never been anything but a door. The gray morning was there, and the rain was falling down, the right way, real rain.

The small shock of it went through him like a current.

“It’s open,” the bigger one breathed.

“It’s open,” Phoenix said.

They walked out onto the porch together.

Rain. Gray morning rain, real rain, falling down.

The children stood on the porch and lifted their filthy faces to it. The drops hit the littler one’s forehead and ran down her cheeks, and she made a sound. A laugh, small, broken, and

rusty, like a hinge that hadn’t moved in years. She held her hands out, palms up, and watched the rain pool in them. She stared at it like it was a miracle.

The bigger one was crying, silent, the tears cutting tracks through the dirt, mixing with the rain. He looked back at the house, the sagging porch, the peeling paint, the dark windows. He shuddered, once, all over, like a dog coming out of cold water.

“Don’t look back,” Phoenix said gentle. “Look at the rain.”

Phoenix set the littler one down on the top step. She stood in his coat, the sleeves hanging past her hands. She turned her face up and up, like she was drinking it.

The littler one looked at him with those huge blue eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Phoenix.”

A pause. Rain on the porch roof.

“Like the bird?” the bigger one said. “The one that burns up and comes back?”

Phoenix stared at them. “You know that story?”

“She told us.” The littler one’s face clouded. “She said, she said you were going to burn up.”

The rain came down. Phoenix knelt in front of them, rain running off his hair, into his eyes. He didn’t have an answer for that, so he gave them the only thing he had.

“Go,” he said. “That way. Down to the corner, left at the light. The corner store. The man there, the one with the gray in his beard. You tell him. You tell him everything. Somebody will find you.”

The bigger one looked at him. “Aren’t you coming?”

The rain came down. The street was empty. Somewhere a bus sighed at a stop.

He smiled. “I took care of things today. Today’s today.”

The bigger one stared at him a moment longer. He saw it, the understanding landing in those huge blue eyes, the kid too young and too old all at once. Then the bigger one took the littler one’s hand, and they ran.

He watched them go. Two small figures in the rain, his coat flapping around the littler one like a sail, the bigger one half-carrying her when she stumbled, getting smaller, not stopping. The littler one looked back once, at the corner, just once. Phoenix raised his hand, and then they were gone around the corner, and the street was empty.

Two tomorrows. He’d given his today so they could have theirs.

He stood on the porch until they turned the corner and were gone. The rain kept coming

down. The street was empty. Somewhere a bus sighed at a stop.

He thought about the notebook on the pillow. The last entry, in blue ink. I’m getting them out. Whatever it costs.

Done.; it was done. They were out.

Then he went back inside, and he closed the door, and he didn’t lock it.



Chapter 25

The Collecting

He went back upstairs, into her burning room.

The stairs creaked under his socks. Fourteen steps, no. Fewer, going up. He’d never once counted. The smell got thicker with every step: smoke, old and sweet, perfume and paper, the burned-chemical stink of the filing cabinet’s melted guts.

The fire had eaten the photo wall and the filing cabinet and died down to embers, but it wasn’t out. It breathed in the ash in slow orange pulses. The window had blown out in the night, and the rain came through in gray sheets, hissing where it hit the coals. Smoke hung low under the ceiling, curling toward the dark.

The deal was the deal. Her death by his hand, done. His life, given after, freely, or it didn’t count.

Spoken plain.

He stepped through the ash.; it was warm under his socks. The chair sat in the middle of the room like a black skeleton. She sat in it, small and still, and he didn’t look at her long. He’d already said his goodbye in the doorway that morning. This part wasn’t about her.

Except it was. It had always been about her. Every step of it, from the laundromat to this ash. He stood a moment at the edge of the burned circle where the photo wall had been, where a hundred versions of him had watched, not knowing. He thought about her hands on his wrists, holding on the way you’d hold someone’s hands to keep from falling.

Then he lay down on the floor where the photo wall had been.

The ash was warm against his back, still warm, hours later, the embers breathing underneath. The heat was a hand on his face.

The smoke was sweet, perfume and paper, and it got into his lungs and sat there, heavy, familiar. He’d been breathing her for months. The whole house had been breathing her.

He folded his hands on his chest, as he’d seen them do it at funerals. He waited for the fear to come.

It didn’t come.; that was strange. He’d expected fear. What came instead was something colder and clearer, rising up through the smoke like the embers breathing in the ash.

Understanding.

It came as you understand a joke when the punchline lands. All at once, and then piece by piece, every piece clicking into place with a sound like a lock turning.

The laundromat.

She’d been watching him for years. The dossiers had said it in blue ink. Three years of every day, bus tickets stubbed and saved, a receipt from a diner he’d forgotten, photographs of his mother’s grave. But she’d been watching longer than the dossiers. He understood that now. She’d chosen him before he ever sat down at those washers. Fold, smooth, fold. “You don’t take care of your things, do you.” Not a question. A reading. She’d been reading him as she read everything, looking for the shape. And she’d found it, in a man refolding the same two shirts like they mattered, like taking care was a religion.

“He is almost ready.” Fresh ink. Still shiny.

Almost ready for what, he’d wondered. He knew now.

The rules.

One through five, taped to the fridge in blue ink. Shower, ten minutes. No guests after nine. Clean your things as you use them. You promised. Lights out at ten. They’d never been about the house. They’d been about him. About making him afraid enough to stay and good enough to be worth it. Every rule was a thread, and every thread pulled him one step closer to the only door that mattered.

The ledger.

The cracked green leather, the cramped blue hand. Twelve minutes late. Eleven-minute shower. A mug in the sink. Twenty minutes past lights-out on the porch. She’d made ONE real call, the porch, Ms. Hart, “you want to go back, Phoenix? Because I can arrange it”, and that one real call had been the teeth. The rest of the ledger was the threat of the teeth. “I

can make one call, Phoenix. Or I can make none. Depends on how the week goes.”

She’d never needed to make the other calls. She’d only needed him to believe she would. Fear kept him in the house. Fear kept him reachable. And all the while, the fear was fattening him. Every small failure written down, every small forgiveness granted, until he believed down in his bones that he owed her his obedience.

He remembered her voice through the vent by the porch door that night, low, nasal, and sweet as rot: “...yes, that’s right. Phoenix.... No, nothing, well. I just thought you should know he’s been restless.” He’d sat on the top step with the cigarette burning down to his fingers. He’d understood that the trap wasn’t the house at all. The trap was paperwork. The trap was a phone call. And she’d built it so carefully. One real call, to make the threat

true, and then the ledger to make the threat endless.

The salt.

He’d poured it thick as his thumb across his doorway. He’d slept the first full night in weeks, and he’d woken up stupid with relief. And the footprints had been there in the morning, small, bare, child-sized, leading INTO his room.

She’d let him pour it. She’d let him feel clever. She’d let him feel safe enough to stay one more night, and one more, and one more. “You shouldn’t play games with this house, Phoenix,” she’d said, and for one unguarded second she’d looked afraid. And he understood now that the fear had been for the game, not of it. She’d been afraid he’d stop playing. Afraid he’d leave before he was ready.

Her voice through the vent, that second night. Nasal and close, like she was kneeling right at

the grate: “Sleep tight, Phoenix.” He’d torn down the hall and found it empty, her door shut, the house holding its breath. She’d been everywhere in that house. She’d never been anywhere but where she wanted to be.

The dossiers.

“I let you,” she’d said, sitting on his bed with his notebook in her lap. “Every step, the door, the dossiers, the children. I let you find all of it.”

He’d thought she meant she was toying with him. He understood now. She’d been feeding him the truth in doses he could swallow, the photo wall, the filing cabinet, the fat PHOENIX folder, because the trap needed him to know. A man who didn’t know couldn’t choose. And the choosing was the whole of it.

And the other folders. The dozen names he didn’t know. Men and women going back years, every one ending the same: “violated.”

Every one gone. He thought of Mr. Abernathy’s door, the clouded, yellowed eye in the sliver of dark. “Don’t let her—” The door slamming. The shuffling that stopped one Tuesday and never came back.

Cheap souls. Taken through fear and smallness. Abernathy hadn’t been special. Abernathy had just been, available. A man with bad legs and bad nights. She’d written him down and used him up, and his folder was thinner than it should have been because there hadn’t been much to write.

Phoenix’s folder had been fat as a phone book. Three years of every day.; that was the difference.; that was what “special” meant. Not better. Just, worth the long game.

Faith’s photograph.

On his pillow. “pretty girl.” in blue ink on the back.

“I don’t want your sister, Phoenix,” she’d said, in the old voice, low, clear, and almost gentle. “I never did.”

She hadn’t wanted Faith. She’d wanted the squeeze. The woman in the housecoat standing outside Faith’s building for three days, waving like she knew her. “She’ll stay fine. As long as you do what you’re going to do.” Faith was the lock on the last door out. With Faith threatened, he couldn’t run, couldn’t call for help, couldn’t do anything but walk the one road she’d left open.

The laughing in the walls.

Children’s voices, faint and far away, moving down the hall toward the basement door. The new padlock, bright steel, still oiled. “Some doors should stay closed, Phoenix.” She’d been right behind him, no shuffle, no hunch, no sound at all. Just there.

She’d wanted him to hear it. She’d wanted him to follow it. Every clue had been placed like a breadcrumb. He’d followed the trail like a good dog, straight to the basement, straight to the two small mattresses, straight to the love that would damn him.

The basement door.

The padlock, gone. Just standing open, like it had never been locked at all. The children’s voices, singing. The small handprint on the wall at knee height.

She’d left it open. She’d let him go down those three steps. She’d let him see the two small mattresses, the two thin blankets, the two scrawny filthy children with huge haunted eyes who flinched when she came down the steps. She’d let him talk to them through the door for three nights. She’d let him love them.

The trap needed him to love them enough to trade.

And then the trade itself.

“The terms,” she’d said, “spoken plain. My death by your hand. Your life, given after, freely, or it doesn’t count.”

She’d offered it. She’d laid it out like a hand of cards. A soul for two souls. Because she couldn’t ask him to damn himself outright, no man would. She had to make him choose it as goodness. She had to build the choice out of the one thing she knew about him.

That he was trying to do good.

He lay in the ash, and he saw it whole, the entire shape of it, beautiful and terrible as a spider’s web with the dew on it.

She couldn’t take his soul. That was the rule underneath all the rules, the one she’d never said out loud. It had to be given. It had to be forfeited, freely, through damnation. Murder and self-destruction. The two things that damned a soul past arguing. Chosen.

And it had to be his. Not just any soul. His.

That was why he was special. That was the thing she’d seeded and never explained, the dread fuel, the mystery he’d carried for months. It wasn’t that his soul was strong. It wasn’t that his soul was bright.

It was that his soul was good enough to choose the fall.

Not the brightest. Not the strongest. The willingest. The one that would look at the trade, murder for mercy, damnation for two small lives. Say yes with open eyes, and mean it, and never flinch.; that was the vintage she collected. That was the only kind worth having.

A wicked soul was cheap. She had a filing cabinet full of the cheap ones. A dozen folders, names he didn’t know, men and women going back years. Every one ending the same: “violated.” Every one gone. Cheap souls, taken through fear and smallness.

But his, his had to damn itself. His had to look at the trade and say yes with open eyes. His had to wrap its hands around her throat out of love for two children and

then lie down in the ash out of the same love. Nobody could force that. It had to be chosen, freely, or it didn’t count.

“I know the shape of you better than you do.”

Three years of watching. Three years of reading. She’d known, before he ever sat down at those washers, that he was the kind of man who would give his today so somebody else could have a tomorrow.

Take care of things today only.

He’d said it a hundred times without meaning it. A slogan for staying clean, one day at a time. And then he’d meant it literally. Today was the only day he had left to spend, and he’d spent it on them.

That was the inversion.; that was the punchline. Taking care of “today only” was exactly what she needed him to do. His whole religion of the present tense, his whole trying-to-do-good one day at a time, she’d read it

like a recipe. She hadn’t fought his goodness. She’d farmed it.

Every rule. Every kindness. The gray stew, served gentle. “You take care,” soft as a blessing. The ledger, the letting-him-find-everything, the children, the trade. All of it, the whole book of it, had been her fattening the sacrifice.

She’d never been afraid of him. Not once. Not in the doorway at 3am. Not when he told her to stay away from Faith. Not sitting in her chair with his hands coming toward her throat.

She’d smiled. Almost kind.

She’d been welcoming it. She’d been ready. “He is almost ready”, ready to be collected.

And at the door, in the old voice, almost gentle, “Thank you.”

He’d thought it was gratitude. A dying woman’s manners. He understood now. It had

been a collector’s gratitude. The trap thanking the foot for stepping in.

“You knew,” he whispered to the smoke.

The embers breathed in the ash. The rain hissed on the coals. The smoke curled toward the dark, sweet with perfume and paper.

And the smoke seemed to answer, in the old voice, low, clear, and almost gentle:

“I know you.”

The embers pulsed, once, like a heartbeat. Like something down in the ash was still keeping time.

Three years of watching. Three years of reading. She’d known the shape of him better than he did. The good man, the trying man, the one who would give his today so somebody else could have a tomorrow. She’d known it before he ever sat down at those

washers. She’d known it the way a trap knows the shape of a foot.

The collecting was quiet.

No drama. No hand from the dark, no voice from below. Just a cold hand somewhere deeper, somewhere under the ribs where the warm things lived. Not on his shoulder. Not on his brow. And a long fall, slow as sinking.

The embers breathed in the ash, dimmer now. The rain hissed on the coals, softer. The smoke curled toward the dark, thinner, letting go.

He didn’t fight it.; that was the terms. Freely, or it didn’t count.

He thought about Faith, at Auntie’s, saving him biscuits. He thought about Eddie, doing the end-of-shift count, looking right at him and saying nothing. He thought about the warehouse at ten at night, the boxes of paper towels and canned beans, one box then the next one, one today, don’t think about tomorrow.

He didn’t have to think about tomorrow anymore. That was the mercy in it, if there was one. The tomorrows weren’t his. They were theirs.

Far above him, through the embers and the rain, he could see them. Two small figures in the gray morning, getting smaller, not stopping. His coat flapping around the littler one like a sail. The bigger one half-carrying her when she stumbled.

Going. Gone. Free.

The cold hand closed. The long fall went on.

Down past the smoke. Down past the heat. The embers dimmed above him to a single orange pulse, then to nothing. The rain kept hissing, and the dark kept deepening. Somewhere in the deepening he understood that this was the shape of the trap after all, not the house, not the rules, not the ledger. This. The fall. The cold. The collecting.

She’d won. That was the truth of it, and he held it as he’d held everything else: steady.

She’d won, and the children were free, and both of those things were true at the same time. That was the whole of the joke, and it wasn’t funny at all.

His last thought, going down:

They’re free.



Epilogue

Ten Thousand Houses

The house on the corner lot sold in the spring.

It sat empty through the winter. The burned room upstairs open to the weather, the charred boards going gray, the For Sale sign leaning in the muddy yard. In April a young man signed the lease. Fresh out. Twenty-four, maybe. Trying to do good.

The landlady was big, with glasses and a nasal voice, and she showed him the back room and said, “You take care.”

The rules were taped to the fridge in blue ink. He read them standing in the kitchen with his duffel over his shoulder. He nodded at each one, and he signed the lease on her kitchen table, cash on wood, no background check.

His hand shook from the cold. She watched his hand shake, watched him, really, a beat

longer than the moment needed. Like she was reading something under his skin.

“You want to do good, right?”

“Yes,” he said.

That night she opened her ledger to a fresh page and wrote the date in blue ink. Under it, in her cramped hand:

He is almost ready.

She’d written it a hundred times before. She’d write it a hundred times again.

The first night, the heat came on too hot and wouldn’t turn down.

He twisted the radiator knob both ways. Nothing. The pipes knocked like someone walking in the walls. Slow, deliberate, from one end of the house to the other.

Three soft knocks at his door.

The landlady, hunched in the hallway. “The house doesn’t like the cold.”

“It’s ninety degrees in here.”

“The house doesn’t like the cold,” she said again, and shuffled back upstairs.

He closed the window.

On the third night, at 12:07, a thin crack of light showed in the back of the closet.

Three streets over, a woman in a housecoat taped a new rule to a fridge.

The tenant found it in the morning, in the blue ink. Six rules now. The sixth one read:

Six. You promised.

He stared at it a long time. He asked her what it meant, and she smiled in the doorway with the rain behind her, and she said, “Means you will take care.”

That night he heard the knocking. Slow. Deliberate. Moving from the front of the house to the back like somebody walking the long way around, taking their time.

At 12:07, a thin crack of light showed in the back of his closet.

A week later he heard the laughing. Faint. Far away. Inside the walls. He followed it in his socks to a door at the end of the hall he’d never noticed before.

It was padlocked. Bright steel, still oiled.

He never mentioned it. He told himself old houses made noises. Everybody knew that.

In another city, in another state, a boarding house with a padlocked basement took in a tenant with tired eyes and a duffel bag.

The landlady kept a ledger. Cracked green leather, pages full of neat blue ink in a cramped hand. She wrote in it every night after lights-out, the dates going back weeks, then months, then years, times, places, small failures.

The tenant started counting his steps in the hallway. Fourteen. The day before it had been eleven.

He told himself he’d miscounted.

One night he heard children laughing inside the walls. He followed it in his socks, one hand on the wall, to the basement door.

The padlock was new. Bright steel, still oiled.

“Some doors should stay closed,” the landlady said behind him, soft as rot. He spun, and she was just there, no sound at all, the perfume rolling off her in a wave.

He went back to bed. He didn’t sleep.

In another city, rain.

A laundromat, late. The dryers hummed their low, tired hum. A man sat refolding the same two shirts, fold, smooth, fold, and two washers over, a woman watched him.

She was thin, this one. Gray hair pinned up. A cardigan with the elbows worn through. She watched him fold for a long time, her head tilted, as you'd watch an animal you're deciding about.

"You don't take care of your things, do you," she said.

Not a question.

He looked up. "Excuse me?"

"Your shirts." She nodded at his hands. "You keep folding the same two. They'll wear through at the creases."

A beat longer than the moment needed. Reading something under his skin.

“I’m Agda,” she said. “I have a room.”

He took it. They always took it. The rules were simple. Anybody could keep them.

Three weeks later he bought salt on his lunch break. A big blue canister, the kind with the girl in the yellow dress. He poured a line across his doorway, thick as his thumb.

He slept one full night. He woke up grateful. He woke up stupid with relief.

The salt was scattered. And in the white spill across the floorboards, clear as print: footprints. Small. Bare. Child-sized.

Leading INTO his room.

A bus station, 2am. A woman with a cane and kind eyes bought a tired man a coffee and listened to his whole story, the time inside, the parole officer, the forty bucks

and the duffel bag. She nodded in all the right places. She said she had a room, just until he got on his feet, and the rules were simple, anybody could keep them.

She kept her photographs in a shoebox. Not on the wall, she was tidier than that. But the shoebox was full, and the dates on the back went back years. The last page of her notebook was in fresh ink.

Still shiny.

The first night in the room, he heard the pipes knock. Slow, deliberate, walking the walls from one end of the house to the other. He lay in the dark and told himself it was the house settling. Old houses made noises. Everybody knew that.

At 3am she was standing in his doorway. Just standing there. Watching him.

He sat up fast. She shuffled backward into the hall. Didn’t speak. Didn’t hurry. Just went, as smoke goes when you wave at it.

He sat in the dark a long time after, listening to the house not make a sound.

A shelter doorway, November. A young-looking woman, too young, until you looked at her eyes, took a man’s hands in hers and said, “You want to do good, right?” and he cried, because nobody had asked him that in years. She smiled, and the smile didn’t reach the old thing looking out of her eyes.

She kept tapes. Little cassette tapes, labeled in blue ink. She played them at night sometimes, with the door closed. Voices on the tapes, small and far away, singing half-remembered songs with the words wrong.

A rooming house above a bar, last call long over. The landlady was a big woman with a soft voice and hard eyes. She kept her ledger

in the drawer of the nightstand. She wrote in it with a fountain pen, blue ink, the dates going back further than the tenant wanted to think about.

The tenant found the salt first. Lines of it, under the windowsills. Thick as a thumb. Old.

He asked her what it was for.

“Drafts,” she said, and smiled, and changed the subject.

At 12:07 he woke to the sound of small bare feet in the hall. He lay in the dark and counted them going past his door. He didn’t get up. He’d learned already: some doors should stay closed.

A motel off the interstate, the kind that rented by the week. The woman at the front desk was old and kind. She gave a tired man a room at the back, away from the road noise. She told him the rules, quiet hours, no guests, clean up after yourself, and she wrote his name in her book in blue ink, and she underlined it twice.

That night the ice machine hummed. The rain came down on the flat roof. At 12:07, the television in his room turned itself on.

Static. Then, small and far away, through the static, children, singing.

He told the front desk in the morning. The old woman smiled her kind smile and said the wiring in these old places, you know how it is.

He stayed. They always stayed. The rules were simple. Anybody could keep them.

The camera pulls back.

A thousand houses. Ten thousand. Boarding houses, rooming houses, flats above laundromats. Sagging and run-down, in every inner city in the country. Paint peeling. One shutter hanging crooked. The kind of places the block had given up on.

A thousand witches with ledgers in blue ink. A thousand photo walls, a thousand shoeboxes,

a thousand tapes. A thousand basement doors with new padlocks, bright steel, still oiled.

A thousand souls, almost ready.

Almost ready for what, the new ones wondered, the ones who found the dossiers, the ones who counted the steps. Almost ready for the trade. Almost ready for the night the landlady sat in her chair and didn’t get up and didn’t fight. Almost ready to wrap their hands around a throat out of love and then lie down in the ash out of the same love.

Almost ready to be collected.

And in every one of them, on the night the trade was settled, the same quiet ending. A burned room. Embers breathing in the ash. Rain hissing on the coals. A soul going down the long fall, slow as sinking. And far above,

through the smoke, two small figures running in the rain.

Or no children. Sometimes there were no children. Sometimes the trade was different, a sister, a friend, a stranger on a porch. The shape changed. The collecting didn’t.

The collecting never changed.

In every one of them, a man or a woman seven days out, forty bucks and a duffel bag, trying to do good. In every one of them, rules taped to a fridge. In every one of them, salt poured thick as a thumb across a doorway, and small bare footprints in the morning, leading in.

In every one of them, at 12:07, a thin crack of light in the back of a closet. A whisper, almost sweet.

“You promised.”

In a parole office somewhere, a phone rang. A woman answered, listened, made a note. “Ms.

Bre just checking in,” the note said. “Worried about him. A man in his situation.”

And underneath it all, under the thousand houses, under the thousand ledgers, under the blue ink, the photo walls. The padlocks, something patient as rain, waiting to collect.

Never explained. Never shown. Just the pattern, repeating, street after street, city after city, the math doing itself.

A thousand witches. Ten thousand houses. A hundred thousand souls, almost ready.

Count them. Go ahead. Count the houses on your block with the peeling paint and the crooked shutter. Count the rooms for rent in the paper, cash on wood, no background check. Count the tired men and women seven days out, forty bucks and a duffel bag, trying to do good.

Count the ledgers. Count the photo walls. Count the padlocks, bright steel, still oiled.

They’re all still there. They were never not there. You just never had a reason to look.

Tonight, at 12:07, listen.

What the f***.



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