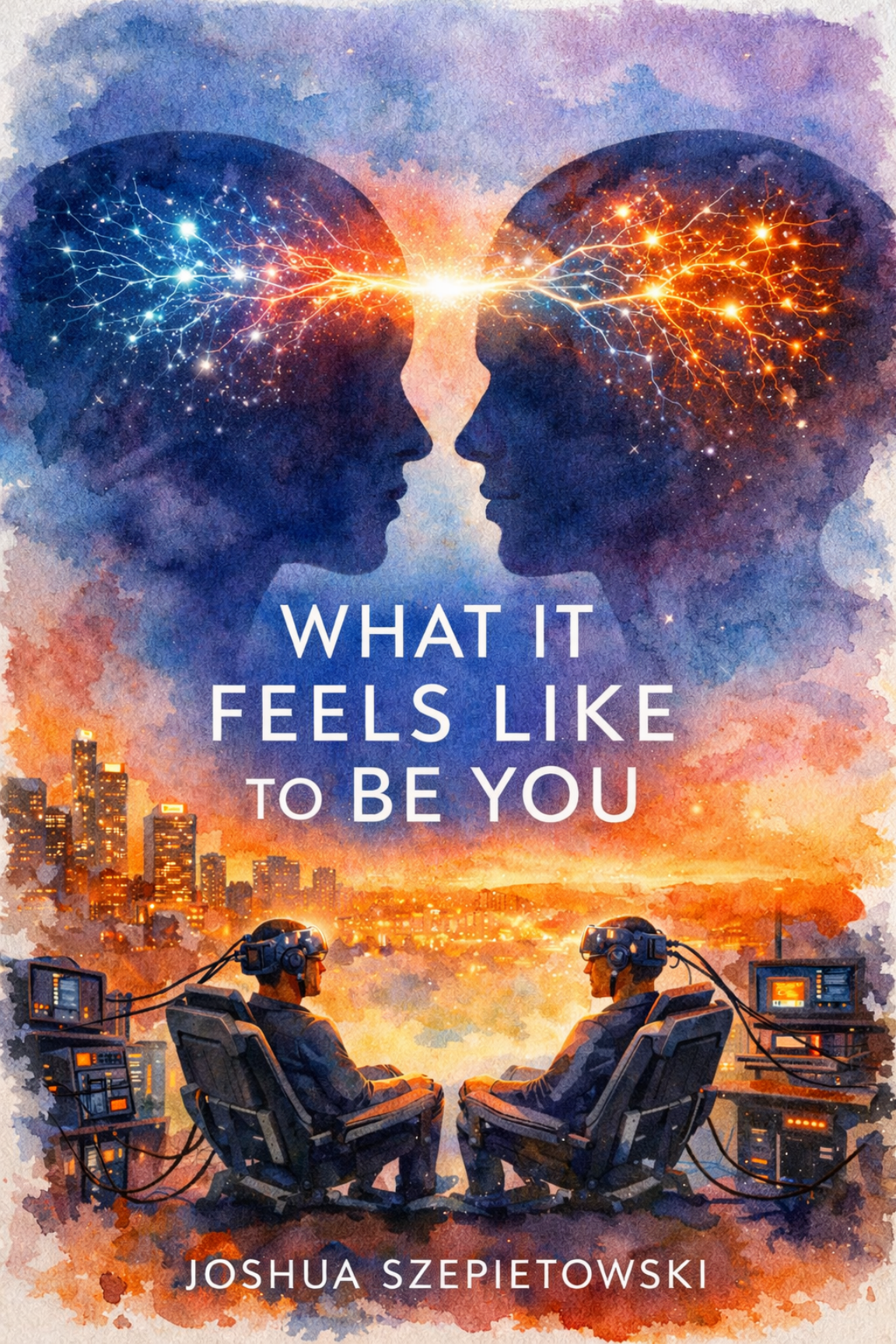
WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE YOU
JOSHUA SZEPIETOWSKI

Act 1 - The Breakthrough Leaves the Lab

Chapter 01 - The Tip

The first thing Matt noticed, once the menus were gone and the first glass had been poured, was that he was happy.

Not relieved. Not vindicated. Happy.

The feeling arrived so cleanly it almost made him laugh.

Shelby had chosen the restaurant, which meant the room looked the way success liked to imagine itself: amber light, dark leather, a long wall of glass looking over Los Angeles. The city below was turning itself on in layers. Headlights threaded through the streets. Hills gathered their houses into constellations. Somewhere beyond what the window could hold, the Pacific lay out in the dark, invisible and still real.

Piyush lifted his napkin, dropped it in his lap, picked up the wine list, put it down, and then looked at Matt with the bright, helpless grin of a man who had accidentally helped alter the terms of reality.

"I still don't believe it," he said.

Shelby smiled across the table. "You've said that three times."

"Because it continues to be true."

"It happened," she said. "You were there."

"That isn't the same as believing it."

Matt laughed. It came out easier than he expected.

All afternoon the lab had been fluorescent light, white surfaces, clipped instructions, and breath held a fraction too long. Now there were heavy glasses on the table and a server setting down bread with a seriousness that made bread seem like part of the ceremony. It should have felt abrupt, the switch from controlled trial to steakhouse. Instead it felt earned.

The server introduced himself as Marcus.

"Can I bring you another minute with the menu?" he asked.

Shelby closed hers immediately. "No. I'm ready to reward history."

Marcus smiled, not because he had heard a better version of that line before, but because he plainly had not. He looked to the others.

Piyush ordered as if he had forgotten what ordinary food was called. Matt chose the ribeye because it seemed, tonight, like the correct level of seriousness.

When Marcus left, Shelby folded her hands and looked from one man to the other.

"Tell it to me again," she said. "Not the technical version. The human version."

Piyush made a face. "The human version is the technical version."

"For you, maybe."

He glanced at Matt, inviting him in.

Matt leaned back in the chair. For a moment he simply let himself see the day as if it had happened to someone else: the preparation room, the chairs, the headsets, the filtered quiet before the session began. Their first successful human trial. Years of work compressed into a single afternoon so narrow it had almost seemed impolite to history.

"The human version," he said, "is that the therapist stopped guessing."

Shelby's expression sharpened.

He went on. "She'd been treating a bipolar patient for months. Intelligently, compassionately, with all the usual tools. But once the link started, she realized she had misunderstood the shape of the patient's emotional life. She'd been treating what the episodes looked like from the outside. Once she felt the state itself, she understood what they were built around."

Piyush leaned forward. "Fear."

Matt nodded. "Fear under the mania. Not incidental fear. Struc-

tural fear."

Shelby let out a low breath. "And it was that clear?"

"Yes," Piyush said.

He said it with no scientist's caution in him, no qualifying language, no defensive hedging. Just yes.

For a second the three of them sat in the fact of it.

Matt had been living for so long with prototypes, partial signals, failed mappings, unstable transfers, and papers that proved almost enough that he had forgotten what a result felt like when it stopped being arguable. He had forgotten how light the body could feel when one impossible thing became one true thing.

The Empathy Engine did not read thoughts. It did not drag memories out of people or empty a mind into another mind. The achievement was narrower than that, and to Matt far more beautiful. They had found a way to map emotional state itself—the body's living pattern of feeling, carried in neural signals and breath and pulse and a dozen other quiet measurements—and give one person a bounded encounter with what another person was actually undergoing.

No narrative. No speech. No performance.

Just the feeling.

For years he had believed the deepest distance between people might prove permanent. Today, for the first time, that belief had been shaken.

Shelby lifted her glass. "So," she said, and there was almost tenderness in her voice now, "it works."

Matt looked at Piyush. Piyush looked back.

This time neither of them dodged.

"Yes," Matt said.

Shelby smiled slowly, with the satisfaction of someone who enjoyed winning but knew this was bigger than winning. "Well," she said, "to yes."

Piyush raised his water. "To statistically insignificant proof of

concept."

"That is a horrible toast," Shelby said.

"It's a scientist's toast."

Matt lifted his own glass. "To yes," he said.

They drank.

It was not an elegant toast, but it was enough.

A little while later Marcus returned with the food, and if he noticed the table's unusual current he was too well trained to show it. He set down the plates with practiced care. The steaks shone. Steam rose from the potatoes in a slow, almost ceremonial drift.

Piyush looked at his plate and said, very seriously, "I would like to thank the entire field of neuroscience."

Shelby laughed. "You're welcome."

"You did not invent the cow."

"No," she said. "I only paid for tonight's."

Matt cut into the steak and, after the first bite, had the distinct feeling that life in all its forms had become briefly and irrationally cooperative.

For a few minutes they did what successful people always do right after a breakthrough: they retold it from slightly different angles, each version making the event both more ordinary and more astonishing.

Piyush described the therapist's face the moment the transfer settled. "She didn't say anything for a few seconds. She just looked at the patient like the room had rearranged itself."

Shelby asked whether the patient noticed.

"Oh, immediately," Piyush said. "Everyone noticed."

Matt smiled. "It's surprisingly hard to hide awe in a clinical setting."

"A problem I hope becomes widespread," Shelby said.

There had been, after the session, a sentence from the patient that

Matt knew would have to be reckoned with. She had been more shaken by the exposure than any of them had fully prepared her for. The protocols were not finished. The language around consent was not finished. The work ahead had already begun to branch in his mind.

But tonight he could hold that knowledge without letting it extinguish the greater fact.

They had built something real.

Piyush, who became more animated the more impossible a thing turned out to be, was already half inside tomorrow. "Do you understand what this could do for treatment-resistant cases?" he asked. "Not in theory. I mean actually. Trauma. Complicated grief. Addiction. Couples who have been saying the same thing to each other for fifteen years and still missing."

Shelby pointed at him. "Exactly."

"Family therapy," Piyush said.

"Conflict mediation," Shelby said.

"Parent-child interventions."

"Veteran rehabilitation."

"Addiction medicine," Piyush said again, because the possibility seemed to keep unfolding under his own voice.

Shelby looked to Matt. "Say something visionary."

"I'm eating."

"No, you're hiding."

Matt smiled despite himself. "I'm not hiding."

"You absolutely are."

He set down the knife.

The truth was that he did not yet trust himself with the full size of what he felt. Excitement, certainly. Pride, though he used the word warily. Gratitude, most unexpectedly. And beneath all of that, something older and quieter that he almost never let himself name

directly.

For twenty years he had lived with the suspicion that whole lives could split apart over the failure to transmit one inward truth in time. He had told himself many respectable stories about why he had built what he had built. Most of them were even true. But beneath the professional reasons there remained the private one: if human beings could cross the distance of feeling cleanly enough, perhaps fewer things would be lost stupidly. Perhaps fewer people would spend the rest of their lives guessing wrong about what another person had felt.

If something like this had existed then, he thought.

He did not finish the sentence. He never did.

Instead he said, "I think the real breakthrough is smaller than revolution."

Shelby made a face. "You are determined to undersell your own career."

"No." Matt looked at her. "I mean smaller in the right way. It won't fix being human. It won't remove selfishness or shame or fear. But maybe it gives people a different place to start."

Piyush nodded immediately. "Yes."

Matt went on, feeling the thought become clearer as he said it. "Language is a bad container for some truths. This isn't language. That's what matters."

Shelby sat back, satisfied. "There he is."

"There who is?"

"The man I invested in."

"That poor man," Piyush said.

Shelby ignored him. "You know what the most important thing is?" she said.

Neither man answered. She didn't require them to.

"People will understand this instantly."

Matt glanced up.

"I'm not talking about the mechanism," she said. "Nobody understands the mechanism of anything. I'm talking about the desire. The wish underneath it. Every person on earth knows what it is to feel misread. To love someone and fail to get through. To sit across from somebody who cares about you and still feel alone inside your own experience. You don't have to teach people that need. They come with it."

Piyush gave a short, almost shy laugh. "That is annoyingly persuasive."

"It's also true," Shelby said.

And because the day had gone the way it had, because the night had its own suspended brightness, Matt found himself letting the truth of it move through him without resistance. He thought of clinicians, yes, but also of marriages, estrangements, recovery groups, parents and children, negotiators, apologies that arrived too late, apologies that might not have to.

Even the city outside the window seemed, for a moment, newly legible to him. Not as data points or apartments or roads, but as millions of private interiors moving beside one another under the same dark.

Marcus came by to refill the water. He had an easy professional rhythm, though Matt noticed now what he had missed before: an alertness in him that felt almost like hope. Or perhaps the table was simply giving off more energy than most. Marcus glanced once, briefly, at the three of them in their expensive corner, and then away again.

Shelby ordered another side dish nobody needed.

Piyush surrendered to dessert before dessert had even been mentioned.

The conversation loosened after that. They talked about naming, branding, regulation, rival labs, timing, clinical design, and, once, very briefly, whether either of them had slept at all the night before.

Piyush showed them a picture Lina had texted him: Mira holding up a hand-drawn sign, Nikhil beside her grinning with one sock half on and half off. The sign said WOW in very large letters and congratulations in several incorrect ones.

"That," Shelby said, "is the first honest public response."

Matt laughed. "It's certainly the clearest."

He looked a second longer than he meant to at the photo. Not because it made him sad, exactly. Because it was lovely. Piyush had that kind of life. A wife who texted him pictures from home. Children young enough to make success look handmade. Matt felt the old envy, but it was mild tonight, almost affectionate. One of the unexpected mercies of joy was that it could soften comparison into appreciation.

"You should send them a picture back," Shelby said.

"Of what?"

"This table. The first night of the rest of your life."

Piyush shook his head. "Lina will only ask whether I'm eating vegetables."

"She sounds wise," Shelby said.

By the time Marcus set down the check, the restaurant had thinned into its later, quieter elegance. The city had gone fully dark outside, all its brightness now artificial and, somehow, more moving for that. The meal had left all three of them in the soft, slightly disbelieving state good food can imitate when history has already done the real work.

Shelby reached for the folder before either man could object.

"No," Piyush said. "We're splitting it."

"We are not."

"We are."

"We are celebrating my excellent judgment," Shelby said. "That makes this a business expense."

"That feels illegal," Matt said.

"That's because you're adorable."

She opened the folder, glanced down, and without hesitation entered a tip large enough that both men leaned slightly toward the table.

Piyush looked at her. "Shelby."

"What?"

"That's absurd."

"Absurd is relative."

"It's a lot of money."

She signed the slip. "Yes."

Marcus returned a moment later and picked up the folder with the same smooth efficiency he had brought to every other part of the meal. Then he opened it.

His face changed.

It was not greed. It was not the practiced gratitude servers learned to perform in expensive rooms. It was surprise so pure it briefly made him look younger. The kind of expression people wore when some small pressure in the day released all at once.

"Thank you," he said. "Really. Thank you."

Shelby smiled at him. "You took good care of us."

Marcus let out a quick laugh. "Well," he said, still looking a little stunned, "I'm very glad I did."

He stepped away, and Matt watched him pause near the service station and look down at the receipt a second time, as if confirming that reality had not made an arithmetic error.

Piyush was still shaking his head. "You didn't have to do that."

Shelby looked after Marcus for another moment before turning back to them.

"I know," she said.

"Then why?" Matt asked.

Shelby's expression changed almost imperceptibly. Some of the playfulness left it. Not all. Just enough.

"Because people don't forget what it feels like," she said, "to be seen generously."

Matt said nothing.

Shelby nodded toward the back of the room, where Marcus was now speaking quietly to another server, both of them smiling.

"People will pay far more than that," she said, "to feel understood."

Piyush gave a quick breath of laughter, partly admiration, partly warning. "And there it is."

But Matt was no longer really listening to either of them.

What he had seen on Marcus's face was not about money, not entirely. It was the shock of contact. The abrupt collapse of some ordinary distance. Shelby had recognized it instantly. That, too, was part of her talent. She understood hunger quickly.

All evening Matt had been thinking at the scale of the day: the trial, the result, the next steps, the work still ahead. But now the frame widened. The machine no longer looked to him like a brilliant clinical instrument waiting patiently in a lab.

It looked like an answer.

Not a final one. Not a pure one. But an answer to something people were already asking in private, everywhere, without the right words for it.

How do I get across?

How do I stop failing the people I love by inches and misreadings and approximation?

How do I make another person feel, even once, what it is like to be me?

He looked out through the glass at Los Angeles, vast and lit and full of separate lives moving beside one another. For the first time all evening, he understood that what they had built was never going

to belong only to the three people at this table, or to clinicians, or to research journals, or even to medicine.

It had touched something older than all of that.

By the time Marcus disappeared through the kitchen doors, Matt knew the Empathy Engine had already begun leaving the lab.

Chapter 02 - Breakfast

Nikhil had written a song about tying his shoe, and because he was six, he saw no reason not to perform it at full volume before seven in the morning.

"Cross it, pull it, bunny-ear two," he sang from the hallway, not quite in key and not at all in doubt. "Make a little house for my shoe."

Piyush stood at the stove in socks, whisking eggs with green chiles and scallions, and smiled before he had fully woken.

There were worse ways for history to arrive than through a child's song.

The kitchen windows were still dark enough to hold reflections. Beyond them, Los Angeles was taking shape slowly, roofs emerging first, then palms, then the pale geometry of neighboring buildings. Inside, the room belonged to family time rather than clock time. One lunchbox open on the counter. A school form waiting under a fruit bowl. Mira's backpack collapsed by the table with the studied carelessness of a ten-year-old who wanted everyone to know she had other things to think about. The kettle beginning to mutter. Coffee not yet finished. Nothing in the room remarkable except that it was theirs.

Nikhil appeared in the doorway with one sneaker tied and the other in a condition better described as conceptual.

"Appa," he said, which in this house could mean emergency, triumph, accusation, or simple announcement, "listen to the bridge."

Without waiting, he sang it.

"Bunny ear, bunny ear, go around, now my foot won't hit the ground."

From the table Mira looked up from the workbook she was pretending not to do. “That is not what shoes are for.”

Nikhil turned to her with the full dignity of an artist under attack. “It’s figurative.”

Piyush laughed aloud.

“Where did you learn figurative?” he asked.

Mira lifted one shoulder. “School. Obviously.”

Lina came in then, tying her hair up with one hand, still carrying the warmth of sleep. She had one of Piyush’s old T-shirts on and the expression of a woman who had been awake for less than three minutes and was already doing five things in her head.

“Why,” she said, “is there a concert?”

“Nikhil is developing his voice,” Piyush said.

“I already developed it,” Nikhil said.

Lina bent to kiss the top of his head anyway. “Yes. That is the issue.”

She moved to the counter beside Piyush, reached for a knife, and began slicing strawberries with the calm competence that made even rushed mornings feel collaborative rather than chaotic. It was one of the things Piyush loved most about marriage—not romance, though there had been plenty of that and still was, in the better invisible ways—but the quiet choreography that built over years. Two people learning where the other would already be.

“You were late,” she said softly, not accusing, just placing the fact into the morning.

“We stayed for dinner.”

“How did it go?”

Piyush looked at the eggs, because joy could still make him shy. “It worked.”

Lina stopped slicing long enough to look at him fully. “Worked worked?”

He nodded.

For a second her face opened into exactly what he had not let himself expect from anyone outside the lab: uncomplicated happiness.

"Oh," she said. "Piyush."

That was all. His name, said like a hand on the arm.

He turned off the heat under the eggs and set the pan aside. He wanted, absurdly, to tell her everything at once—to explain what had happened in the room, the specific shift in the therapist's posture, the extraordinary smallness of the moment when the impossible became mundane enough to use. But the children were there, and also the language for it still felt fragile in him. Not secret. Just young.

"So," Lina said, smiling now, "you changed the world and then had steak?"

"Shelby insisted on the steak."

"She would."

"Matt was in favor of it by the end."

Mira looked up. "Was Uncle Matt there?"

Piyush and Lina exchanged a glance, both amused by the title, which Matt had not yet earned but was, apparently, already being informally considered by committee.

"He is not your uncle," Mira said to herself, correcting the world.

"He could be honorary," Lina said.

"Honorary is fake."

"It is not fake," Nikhil said. "It is advanced."

Piyush set scrambled eggs onto plates and decided not to intervene. The children had entered the age where language itself had become part of the household furniture: always being moved, tested, climbed on.

They ate at the kitchen table because that was where weekday life happened. The dining table, like many dining tables, had become mostly a place for mail and good intentions. Nikhil continued

singing between bites. Mira objected to the distribution of strawberries with the moral precision of an eldest child. Lina signed a field-trip form while drinking tea. Piyush moved between the table and the counter, refilling, wiping, packing, answering questions no one had technically asked him.

He loved these mornings with a fullness so ordinary it almost never announced itself.

There were moments, watching Matt over dinner the night before, when Piyush felt the old flicker of envy. Matt had stories from cities Piyush had never seen except on maps and in long-haul itineraries he had never booked. Matt had swum in cold seas off countries whose names seemed already like anecdotes. He had slept in stations, changed plans at borders, mistaken freedom for inconvenience often enough to become good at it. When he told stories, even the bad ones sounded like proof that the world was wider than most people allowed it to be.

And some disloyal part of Piyush, especially in the later hours of a long domestic season, still responded to those stories like windows.

But this morning, with eggs cooling too fast and Nikhil improvising a fourth verse about double knots, the envy felt light enough to hold without shame. It was possible, he had learned, to desire roads not taken and still be grateful for the house one had built.

"What does it actually do?" Mira asked.

She had waited until the second half of breakfast, when the possibility of leaving for school began to threaten, because she understood leverage.

Piyush chewed, swallowed, and considered how much truth could be told before eight in the morning.

"It helps one person feel what another person is feeling," he said.

Nikhil stopped chewing. "Like mind reading?"

"No. Not thoughts."

"Then what?"

"Just the emotion part."

Mira frowned in concentration. "So if I'm sad, someone else can feel sad too?"

"In a careful setting," Piyush said. "With a lot of equipment and rules and grown-ups."

"That sounds less fun than the first version," she said.

Lina smiled into her tea.

Nikhil, who had no interest in responsible framing, brightened immediately. "Could I feel what a dog feels?"

"Not right now."

"What about Appa?"

"You already do," Mira said. "Appa mostly feels work."

"I also feel breakfast," Piyush said.

"No," Lina said. "That's appetite."

The children laughed. So did he.

He liked, suddenly and with unexpected force, that their first encounter with the idea of the machine was through joking curiosity rather than fear. If the Empathy Engine had any chance of being something good in the world, it would have to live there first—in ordinary human imagination, where people asked not how to dominate one another with it, but whether they could use it to get closer.

His phone, face down beside the fruit bowl, buzzed once.

He ignored it.

A minute later it buzzed again. Then twice in quick succession.

Lina glanced toward it without comment. She knew the rhythms of his work life well enough to hear escalation when it began. He kept eating.

Mira was explaining to Nikhil why his lyrics about the foot not hitting the ground were biomechanically unsound. Nikhil, with his mouth full, insisted that songs were not science. Lina packed cut fruit into small containers with a speed that suggested long practice

and a low tolerance for inefficiency.

The phone buzzed a third time, then a fourth.

Piyush turned it over just far enough to see the screen and immediately wished he hadn't.

Missed calls. A cluster of messages. Internal team chat. A number he didn't know with a Washington area code. Two investors whose names he did know and wished not to see before coffee. One message from Matt that said only: Awake?

He set the phone face down again.

Lina said, "Bad?"

"Not yet."

"Optimistic."

He smiled, but only partly.

The strange thing about success, he had been realizing for years in smaller and smaller increments, was that it rarely arrived alone. It brought weather with it. Attention, obligation, acceleration, distortion. A thing could become bigger than itself in less than a day if the wrong people loved it for the right reasons or the right people loved it for the wrong ones.

Last night in the restaurant, after the laughter, after the toasts, after even Shelby's remark about people paying to feel understood, he had looked across the table at Matt and seen in him the same bright disbelief he himself had been trying not to show. But he had also seen the familiar second thing in Matt—a reserve, a private tightening, as if triumph in him always traveled with an accompanying need to guard the exits.

Piyush understood that instinct. He just did not share it by temperament.

He wanted, perhaps foolishly, to believe that the first true use of the Empathy Engine should count for something. A therapist had understood a patient more deeply. A piece of loneliness in the world had been reduced. That was not nothing. That was not market

positioning or future scandal or policy risk. It was good. Cleanly, usefully good.

And yet his eyes kept returning to the phone.

Nikhil had finished eating and was now standing on one foot in the middle of the kitchen trying to tie the other shoe while singing the opening verse again.

"Cross it, pull it—"

"You have to look at it," Mira said.

"I'm performing."

"You're failing."

"Both can happen," Lina said.

Piyush bent and rescued the lace before the knot became theological. "Come here," he said.

Nikhil leaned against his knee without embarrassment, the effortless trust of small children who still believed competence could always be borrowed from an adult. Piyush retied the shoe slowly enough that the lesson remained nominally educational.

"See?" he said. "Cross. Pull. Loop. Around."

Nikhil nodded with grave artistic interest. "The bridge is the best part."

"I know."

"It's about resilience."

Mira made a noise of disgust so sophisticated it was almost affectionate.

Piyush laughed into his son's hair.

This, he thought, was the problem.

Not the machine. Not even Shelby.

This.

The small, breakable architecture of a weekday morning. The kind of thing success always claimed it was trying to improve and so

often ended by consuming. He had seen it happen to other people in other fields. The startup that became an acquisition, then a board, then a set of flights so frequent the family learned to speak around the absence. The book that became a career and then a permanent tour of self-extraction. The promotion that gave the house a better school district and removed from it, by degrees, the person who had wanted the house in the first place.

He had never said this aloud to Matt, but one of the reasons he admired him was that Matt seemed to belong to no system for long enough to be captured by it. The same quality that made Matt unsteady also made him hard to own. Piyush, by contrast, had built a life with fixed points: Lina, the children, mortgage, schools, routines, the repeating obligations that slowly formed love's visible structure.

Success, he thought, would know exactly where to find him.

The phone buzzed again. And again.

"All right," Lina said. "We need socks, water bottles, and consent forms signed by a person who knows where the pen is."

"That last category may be mythological," Piyush said.

Mira slid from her chair and went to retrieve her backpack. Nikhil resumed singing, now louder because he had an audience again. Lina crossed to the small kitchen screen by the coffee maker and turned on the morning show for traffic and weather, the way she always did on days when both school drop-off and hospital commute mattered.

The screen came alive mid-laughter.

A cheerful host was saying, "…and if this is really what people are calling it, then I'm sorry, but that is the coolest name we've heard all year."

Piyush looked up.

Shelby was on the screen.

Not on a later segment. Not in a still photo. Live.

Her hair was perfectly arranged. Her suit was the color of expen-

sive certainty. She sat angled toward the host with her shoulders relaxed and her eyes bright, wearing exactly the expression she reserved for moments when enthusiasm and control were intended to look like the same thing.

Across the bottom of the screen, a graphic read:

QUALIA LABS ANNOUNCES THE EMPATHY ENGINE

For half a second Piyush thought, absurdly, that perhaps there had been some other Shelby, some other Qualia Labs, some other machine. Then the host said her name.

"Joining us now is Shelby Vale, investor and cofounder of the company behind what may become one of the most important breakthroughs in mental health and human connection—"

"Appa," Mira said, startled. "That's your work."

His phone began vibrating in earnest, not buzzing now but skittering across the counter in short frantic bursts.

Shelby on the screen was smiling modestly. He knew enough about her to understand that modesty was not insincerity in her; it was a tool she could deploy honestly.

"We're still early," she was saying, "but yesterday we saw something extraordinary. We saw what can happen when one human being no longer has to guess entirely at what another human being is feeling."

Piyush stood very still.

Lina did too, one hand still on a lunch container she had not yet closed.

The host leaned forward. "So tell us in plain English—what is the Empathy Engine?"

Shelby laughed lightly. "In plain English, it's a clinical system that allows one person to directly experience the emotional state of another. Not thoughts. Not memories. Emotion."

Nikhil looked delighted. "I said it was mind reading."

"No," Mira said automatically, though her eyes had not left the

screen.

The phone lit again. Team chat. Matt. An unknown producer. A reporter. Three more reporters. Somebody from policy. Somebody from legal.

Shelby kept speaking.

She was good. There was no point pretending otherwise. She knew exactly how much wonder to permit into her voice, exactly how to make the thing sound both miraculous and inevitable.

"We believe this has enormous potential," she said, "for therapy, for trauma treatment, for repairing damaged relationships, even one day for diplomacy and conflict resolution. We're planning a carefully controlled clinical rollout within the year."

Within the year.

Piyush felt something in him drop.

Not because the words were impossible. Because they were public.

Because the breakfast table, which a moment ago had held eggs and shoelaces and child-sized arguments about figurative language, now also held the future in its polished, accelerated form. The children were hearing it. Lina was hearing it. The world was hearing it. Somewhere Matt was hearing it too.

On the screen the host said, "That could change everything."

Shelby gave the kind of smile that let other people say the largest sentence first.

Lina turned to look at him.

"You didn't know," she said.

It was not a question.

"No," Piyush said.

The phone slid another inch across the counter as if trying to escape its own contents.

Nikhil, oblivious to scale, resumed singing under the television

audio.

"Bunny ear, bunny ear, go around—"

Mira hushed him, but gently.

Piyush looked from the screen to his children to Lina and back again. A strange feeling moved through him then—not exactly panic, not yet anger, but the sudden recognition that the wall between one life and another could come down in less than a sentence.

Yesterday the machine had left the lab.

This morning it had entered his kitchen.

Chapter 03 - Happy Birthday

By six in the morning Shelby was already in a chair under studio lights, being turned into somebody reassuring.

The makeup room was colder than it needed to be. Everything in it seemed designed to deny the body any opinion of its own: hard mirrors, bright bulbs, chrome trays laid out with the confidence of instruments, a stylist steaming somebody else's jacket in the corner as if vapor could solve the problem of live television. On the wall, three screens ran different feeds with the sound off. Weather on one. A cooking segment on another. A smiling anchor on the center screen, laughing soundlessly at a joke Shelby had not heard.

"Close your eyes," the makeup artist said.

Shelby did.

A brush moved across her eyelid. She let the woman work. She was good. Everyone here was good. That was why morning television existed at all: an invisible army of competent people waking before dawn to make cheerfulness look natural.

Her phone lit on the counter.

She ignored it the first time.

Then it lit again.

The makeup artist stepped back to switch brushes, and Shelby glanced down.

The message preview was enough.

Happy Birthday.

No name attached would have been necessary. She knew his cadence even now. Two words, clean and harmless-looking, like flowers laid in the wrong room.

For a moment the whole body remembered before the mind did.

The tightening in the throat. The heat in the chest. The quick, disorienting conversion of time, as if a woman in her forties with a valuation, a board, and a black car waiting downstairs could still become a girl measuring the weather of a house by the sound of a key in the door.

She picked up the phone, stared at the message once, and set it face down.

The makeup artist looked at her in the mirror. "Everything okay?"

Shelby smiled immediately, because adulthood was sometimes just the speed with which one could restore a face. "Of course."

The woman smiled back, relieved. "Good. You have beautiful skin, by the way."

"Thank you," Shelby said, because there was no useful response to compliments received seconds after rage.

The brush returned.

She swallowed what she felt and held still.

It was her birthday. He did this every year. A text, occasionally a voicemail if he was drinking early, always brief, always phrased as if the problem between them were mostly one of scheduling. Not a man who had broken open a house for years. Just a father marking the calendar, politely undefeated by memory.

What he wanted from her remained, even now, offensively small. Recognition. The continuation of the role. Proof that the line between past and present had not been severed beyond repair.

What she wanted from him changed depending on the hour.

Publicly, when anyone asked, she said the same thing: she wanted him to understand what he had done.

Sometimes that was still true.

Sometimes, less comfortably, she wanted something else. Not absolution. Not reunion. Not even forgiveness, which always sounded to her like a word invented by people who had not had enough broken. She wanted context. She wanted to know what had made

him into a man who could come home from war, or from memory, or from wherever he had gone when the whiskey took over, and turn the kitchen into a frontier nobody crossed safely.

She wanted the hidden architecture of damage. She wanted the diagram.

And if she was honest—which she usually was, privately and to her own advantage—some part of her had funded Qualia Labs for that reason long before the returns looked heavenly.

The machine could help people. That was true.

The machine could make her one day sit across from her father and feel, without the protective fog of his stories, what he had actually been. That was also true.

The truths were not in competition. They only made each other less flattering.

A producer appeared in the doorway carrying a clipboard and urgency. “Shelby? We’re at twelve.”

Shelby turned in the chair. “Great.”

“Segment length just got extended by ninety seconds. They want more personal framing and less technical detail in the first half.”

“Of course they do.”

“The host is going to open with the name. People in the control room are obsessed with the name.”

Shelby smiled. “People like feeling promised something.”

The producer laughed, not realizing the sentence was not quite a joke. “Exactly. Also, legal asked me to remind you not to say consumer-ready.”

“I was never going to say consumer-ready.”

The producer gave her a look that suggested nobody in television trusted anybody in venture capital before breakfast. “Terrific.”

When he left, Shelby checked the phone again.

Still the same message. No follow-up. No apology. No elaboration.

As if two words could cross any distance worth naming.

She opened her texts with Matt and looked at the last thread.

Their exchange from the night before was still sitting there, full of his caution wearing the expensive clothes of principle.

We need to slow down.

We need better patient prep language.

We need to think about use cases before narrative.

Shelby admired many things about Matt. His mind. His seriousness. The fact that he was nearly impossible to flatter into laziness. But he had the fatal defect of nearly all great inventors: he still believed the invention belonged, in some moral sense, to the conditions of its creation.

It did not.

The moment something helped, the world began reaching for it. That was not corruption. That was hunger. Sometimes noble hunger. Sometimes vulgar hunger. Usually both at once. But the reaching itself was not something one got to forbid just because one disliked markets or noise or the poor manners of mass desire.

Yesterday, in a sealed lab, a therapist had stopped guessing at another human being's suffering and begun to understand it from the inside. Shelby had seen what happened in the room afterward. The change in everyone's face. Not triumph exactly. More like the brief, disorienting expression people wore when they realized some wall they had taken for permanent might only have been load-bearing until now.

Matt wanted to move carefully from there. Piyush wanted to move honorably. Both wanted, in different ways, to preserve the moral cleanliness of the breakthrough.

Shelby wanted something dirtier and more useful.

Momentum.

If they waited, someone else would name it for them. Regulators would define it in fear-language. Competitors would chase the story

before the science had time to harden around their lead. Journalists would hear rumors and publish them badly. A breakthrough could die not only from greed but from hesitation. There were cemeteries full of elegant ideas that had once mistaken caution for virtue.

She did not intend to bury this one.

The makeup artist dusted her once more and stepped back. "You're camera-ready."

Shelby looked at herself in the mirror.

She saw what other people usually saw first: the polished surface, the money correctly spent, the face arranged by will and repetition into a reliable instrument. She also saw, because birthdays had a way of summoning old x-rays, the small scar near her hairline from the winter she had learned that thrown objects did not become less dangerous just because the apology came the next morning.

The concealer had handled that too.

Good.

She stood, smoothed the line of her jacket, and slipped the phone into her hand.

For one second she considered answering him.

Not the text. Her father did not deserve the first words of the day.

Matt.

She could have warned him. She could have called and let him hear it in her voice first. She could have told him, calmly and persuasively, that she was about to do the necessary thing he would later resent for having been necessary.

Instead she locked the phone.

Some acts only worked if they arrived already accomplished.

The studio beyond the makeup room was all engineered morning: clean light, bright furniture, strategic plants, a table that looked informal only because experts had made it so. The host came over during commercial break, shook her hand, complimented her suit, and said, "I'm so excited about this," with the practiced intimacy of

someone who could sound personally invested in weather systems, dog rescues, and municipal bonds.

Shelby liked him immediately. He was a professional. He understood enthusiasm as a public service.

A stage manager counted down with her fingers from the side of the set.

Five.

Four.

Three.

The host's face became its on-air version—warmer by half a degree, brighter by one—and he turned toward camera.

"Welcome back. Our next guest is here to talk about a breakthrough that, if early reports hold, could change the future of mental health treatment, trauma care, and maybe even the way human beings understand one another. Joining us now is Shelby Vale, investor and cofounder of Qualia Labs, the company behind something called"—he glanced at the card and smiled—"the Empathy Engine, which I'm sorry, is just the coolest name I've heard all year."

The audience laughed lightly.

Shelby smiled with the exact amount of pleasure the moment required.

"Thank you," she said. "We were hoping it might translate."

"It definitely translates." He turned slightly toward her. "So tell us in plain English. What is the Empathy Engine?"

This was the moment. Not technically. Technically the moment had been yesterday, in the lab, in the silence after the link settled and a therapist felt a patient's fear clearly enough to change how she meant to help him. But this was the other kind of moment, the public one. The one after which desire would have a shape.

Shelby folded her hands and answered the way she had rehearsed and not rehearsed.

"In plain English," she said, "it's a clinical system that allows one

person to directly experience the emotional state of another. Not thoughts. Not memories. Emotion."

The host widened his eyes in practiced amazement, but not absurdly. "That sounds like science fiction."

"It did to us too, for a long time."

"And this is real now?"

"It's real enough that yesterday we completed a successful human trial."

She let that sit just long enough.

He leaned in. "What happened?"

Shelby thought, with a quick surge of affection, of Matt rolling his eyes if he could see her now. Piyush too, though he would look pained about it instead. She loved them both, in the complicated way one loved men whose gifts were genuine and whose instincts she did not always trust to survive scale.

She told the story cleanly.

A therapist. A patient. A breakthrough in understanding. No melodrama. No overclaiming. Just enough wonder to be honest.

When she finished, the host was silent for a beat longer than television usually allowed.

"So this could help therapists understand patients more deeply."

"Yes," Shelby said. "That's one of the clearest early use cases."

"And trauma care?"

"Yes."

"Couples?"

"Yes."

"Families?"

"Yes."

"Diplomacy?"

Shelby smiled, not because the question was ridiculous but be-

cause it was not. “One day, possibly. The point is not spectacle. The point is that so much human suffering gets worse when people cannot meaningfully get across to one another.”

The host nodded slowly. “So what happens now?”

Shelby felt, almost physically, the future align beneath the question.

“Now,” she said, “we move carefully but decisively. We’re planning a carefully controlled clinical rollout within the year. We believe this technology has enormous potential for therapy, trauma treatment, repairing damaged relationships, and eventually, in tightly designed settings, even conflict resolution.”

There it was.

Public clinical rollout within the year.

No retrieval possible now except through force.

She did not feel guilt. She felt velocity.

The host smiled in that satisfied way people did when they sensed they were sitting near the start of something and might later get to say they had been there first.

“This could change everything.”

Shelby gave him the smile she reserved for moments when agreement would sound arrogant and denial would sound false.

“It could help a lot of people,” she said.

That was the line she wanted. Not because it was smaller. Because it was the true size of her ambition.

The rest of the segment moved quickly. Questions about safety, access, timeline, ethics. Shelby answered all of them in the tone she knew how to produce when she wanted caution to sound like momentum rather than delay. Yes, the technology was early. Yes, it would require strict protocols. Yes, they were taking consent seriously. Yes, more trials were needed. Yes, her company understood the gravity of what it had made.

All of that was true.

And beneath each truth ran the deeper one: the door had opened.

When the segment ended, the host thanked her, the stage manager signaled cut, and the studio relaxed by fractions. Somebody came to remove her microphone. Somebody else offered coffee. The producer from earlier appeared with the grin of a man whose morning had just improved measurably.

"That was fantastic," he said. "We're already getting pickup."

"I assumed we might."

"Social clip team wants the plain-English answer immediately."

"Of course they do."

He laughed and hurried off.

Shelby stepped away from the set before looking at her phone.

It had become, in the intervening minutes, a live organism.

Messages from investors. From reporters. From policy people. From numbers she did not know. From people who had once ignored her and now wished to meet urgently. Two missed calls from Matt. Three from Piyush. One text from Matt that read:

Did you really just do that without telling us?

Another from Piyush, gentler and somehow therefore worse:

Shelby.

She stared at the screen for a moment.

Then she smiled—not because their anger amused her, though sometimes it did, but because anger was proof of motion.

Outside the studio windows, the day had gone fully morning. Traffic had thickened. The city was awake. Somewhere, she knew, breakfast tables had just heard the words clinical rollout within the year and felt something lift in them—hope, curiosity, hunger, skepticism, relief, fear. It did not matter which came first. The wanting was the thing.

Her phone lit again.

This time the name on the screen was her father's.

Not a text. A call.

Shelby watched it ring, then silenced it and slipped the phone into her bag.

There would be other mornings for that war.

Today belonged to a different one.

She walked out of the studio knowing two things with equal certainty: Matt and Piyush were furious, and the world now wanted what Qualia Labs had made.

For the moment, that was enough.

Chapter 04 - I Want This

By eleven-thirty the dining room looked less like wealth than maintenance.

In the evening, the restaurant knew how to flatter itself. Candlelight, leather, the long dark confidence of expensive glass. In the morning, before the lunch shift began, it looked like what it was: polished surfaces waiting for people with money to project meaning onto them. Chairs stood upside down on some of the tables. The bar smelled faintly of citrus cleaner and old smoke, though no one had been allowed to smoke in California for years. Sunlight came in through the front windows without asking whether the room preferred amber.

Marcus liked it best like this.

Before service, the place had not yet begun making demands. No one needed charm from him. No one needed the smile calibrated, the napkin folded again, the body made efficient and forgettable and pleasant. He could roll silverware, fill water glasses, and reset the little brass reservation plaques in a state almost adjacent to privacy.

The shift manager had the television behind the bar on for background noise and weather, though no one in Los Angeles had needed weather in years. Traffic, mostly. Fire conditions in the hills. The normal liturgy.

Marcus was polishing wineglasses when the cheerful host's voice came up through the room.

"…and if this is really what people are calling it, then I'm sorry, but that is the coolest name we've heard all year."

The bartender, Elise, who had three tattoos and the fatal serenity of a person born with boundaries, looked up first.

"Oh," she said. "That's your lady from last night."

Marcus turned.

Shelby was on the screen.

Not an actress playing rich. Not a local philanthropist. Not one of those women who came in trailing the smell of success and then vanished back into its invisible machinery. Really on television, in morning-show light, with her hair done perfectly and her smile arranged into a public instrument. Across the bottom of the screen ran the words:

QUALIA LABS ANNOUNCES THE EMPATHY ENGINE

Marcus put the glass down carefully.

For a second he felt stupidly vindicated, as if her being famous now made it make sense that she had tipped the way she had last night. The whole thing had sat badly in him after he got home, not because he hadn't needed the money—he had, desperately, always—but because the size of it had turned the interaction into something he couldn't file away properly. It was easier if she belonged to television. Television explained excess.

"Your lady?" he said.

Elise shrugged. "The one who made your entire birthday."

"It was not my entire birthday."

"It was the financial center of it."

She went back to slicing limes.

Marcus looked up again as the host turned toward Shelby and said, in a tone of delighted amazement, "So tell us in plain English. What is the Empathy Engine?"

Shelby laughed lightly.

"In plain English," she said, "it's a clinical system that allows one person to directly experience the emotional state of another. Not thoughts. Not memories. Emotion."

Marcus stopped moving.

He did not know exactly what he had expected from the segment. Some startup nonsense. Something about neural platforms or break-

throughs in personalized wellness or whatever clean euphemism rich people were currently using for colonizing the next human problem. But this was different enough to get past his defenses before he could arrange them.

Not thoughts. Not memories. Emotion.

He stared at the screen.

The host said, "That sounds like science fiction."

"It did to us too," Shelby said.

Elise snorted. "Everything sounds good if you say it in a blazer."

Marcus barely heard her.

He had spent enough time in recovery meetings to know that wanting relief could disguise itself in a hundred noble outfits. Healing. Clarity. Rest. Peace. Closure. All of them, sometimes, meant get me out of here.

Ketamine had once done that for him. Not elegantly. Not beautifully. But effectively, at first. It had lifted him just far enough sideways from himself that he could spend forty-five minutes without being fully inhabited by his own life. Without the noise in his head. Without the grind of wanting what he wanted and then hating himself for wanting it. Without remembering, every time he looked at another man too long, the rules his father had laid down in the house like tripwires.

He had been trying, with uneven dignity, to stay sober for six weeks.

Six weeks was long enough to feel proud of in a church basement and short enough to feel fraudulent in the privacy of your own kitchen.

He had a chip in the pocket of his work pants to prove it, though proof and belief were two different things.

On the television, Shelby was saying the machine had already completed a successful human trial. The host asked whether it could help therapists, trauma patients, families. She said yes, yes, yes.

Marcus imagined, with startling speed, other uses.

What would it feel like to spend five minutes inside somebody who had not grown up flinching at door sounds?

What would it feel like to have sex and not experience the whole event as part desire, part fear, part self-observation? To want and not immediately split in two—one self doing the wanting, another watching in disgust like a father in the room? What would it feel like to be happy in a way that did not seem borrowed or temporary or purchased with next week's shame?

Shelby said, "We believe this technology has enormous potential for therapy, for trauma treatment, for repairing damaged relationships—"

Marcus heard himself say, quietly and without permission, "I want this."

Elise looked over. "What?"

He hadn't realized he'd said it out loud.

"Nothing."

She studied him for half a second, then returned to the limes. "If it costs more than rent, which it will, you can want it from a distance."

"That's true of most things."

"Healthy perspective."

Marcus smiled, but only with the parts of his face that worked on coworkers.

The segment moved on. Shelby was promising a carefully controlled clinical rollout within the year. The host was saying it could change everything. Somebody in the kitchen shouted for more ice. The shift manager swore at a reservation software glitch. Noon approached in the usual vulgar way, by refusing to care what revelation had just occurred on national television.

Marcus turned back to the work in his hands.

Glass. Cloth. Stem. Rotate. Set down.

He had gotten good at repetition because repetition was cheap

and available and sometimes, if you surrendered early enough to its rhythm, almost merciful.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket.

Not a call. Just a notification.

He ignored it.

A minute later it buzzed again.

He pulled it out while no one was looking.

Birthday messages still trickling in from people who remembered late or had been prompted by the app. One from his sponsor, plain and kind. One from a number he did not save because he was trying not to answer it anymore. A bank alert he did not enjoy. Nothing from anyone he wanted. Nothing unusual.

He slipped the phone away.

By the time the first lunch reservations started arriving, the room had become itself again. Napkins folded, music low, silverware aligned to the millimeter. Marcus moved through the shift on instinct. Water. Bread. Specials. A businessman who asked whether the forty-five-day dry-aged was "worth the delta." Two women in activewear splitting a salad and a bottle of white wine. A family from Brentwood trying to persuade a child that mashed potatoes were not a personality violation.

He was good at the work. That was the problem with service jobs, or one of them. If you were bad, they expelled you. If you were good, they absorbed you.

At four, the floor emptied enough for the staff to breathe between lunch and dinner. Marcus sat on a milk crate behind the kitchen with a paper cup of coffee gone mostly cold and tried not to count the hours until the evening shift. He had picked up the extra block because money was money and because free time had lately begun to feel dangerous.

The alley behind the restaurant held the usual democratic ugliness of Los Angeles: dumpsters, heat shimmer, an abandoned office chair with one wheel missing, a jacaranda tree dropping purple confetti

no one had invited. A line cook was smoking where he technically wasn't supposed to. Elise came out with her own coffee, saw Marcus, and tilted the cup toward him in solidarity.

"Still thinking about the feelings machine?" she asked.

He looked up. "That obvious?"

"You had the face people get when they see beachfront property they can't afford."

Marcus laughed.

"You think it's real?" he asked.

Elise considered. "Probably. Everything awful is real now, so why not everything weird?"

"That's not the question."

"No," she said. "It isn't."

She took a sip. "You all right?"

Marcus gave her the answer that protected everybody's afternoon. "Of course."

She nodded as if she believed him just enough not to call it out.

"I'm serious," she said after a moment. "If your brain is doing birthday brain, go to your meeting tonight."

He looked down at the coffee.

Birthday brain. As if the day itself could be blamed for whatever old weather it stirred.

"My brain," he said, "is always doing something."

"That is, unfortunately, the brand."

She stood, squeezed his shoulder once in passing, and went back inside.

Marcus stayed where he was a little longer.

He had not told anyone at work the real shape of his sobriety. They knew, maybe, that he didn't drink. They knew he sometimes disappeared for ninety minutes in the evening and came back smelling

faintly of basement coffee and institutional optimism. But recovery was like sex in Los Angeles: everybody supported it in theory and preferred not to know details.

He had especially not told them the part about why ketamine had been so good at first.

It hadn't just quieted pain. It had quieted performance.

When you spent your childhood trying to become the kind of son your father wouldn't despise, you learned early that identity could be staged. Walk like this. Sit like this. Don't let your hands do anything soft. Don't look too long. Don't want wrong. Don't speak unless you know the shape your voice is making. By the time Marcus was fifteen he could have taught master classes in not being seen. By twenty-five he had become so practiced at the performance that sometimes the only place he could feel desire without immediate self-surveillance was chemically elsewhere.

So when Shelby said not thoughts, not memories, emotion, the sentence had entered him like a rumor of amnesty.

It was stupid, obviously. He knew that. The machine was for patients and billionaires and governments and couples in tasteful sweaters who said things like holding space for each other. Not for waiters doubling shifts in a steakhouse and going home to a studio apartment above a nail salon.

Still.

He finished the coffee and went back inside.

The evening shift built itself around him in the usual way. Servers arriving in staggered moods. A pre-service meeting no one respected. Specials recited. Reservations reviewed. Marcus buttoned his jacket, checked his reflection in the service station mirror, and saw the same useful face he always saw there: handsome enough to work the room, masculine enough not to raise questions, tired enough to be real.

The birthday from last night had already become yesterday's weather. The tip was in his account. The woman from television was

back in whatever realm television women returned to. The machine existed, if it existed, somewhere far above the civic altitude of his life.

By ten-thirty the dinner rush had softened. At eleven fifteen, when he finally got back to the apartment, he stood in the doorway for a moment without turning on the light.

The place was small enough that darkness did not make it feel mysterious, only undivided. Bed, kitchenette, chair, stacked books he had once intended to read in the order serious people recommended. The air still held the day's trapped heat. On the counter sat the recovery workbook he had been pretending to use. Above the sink hung a cheap print of the ocean, bought because it had been on sale and because he liked walls that implied the possibility of elsewhere.

There was a padded mailer on the floor just inside the door.

No return address. His name on a thermal label. Light enough to be cheap, neat enough to feel deliberate.

Marcus looked at it, then past it, then bent and picked it up anyway. Whatever was inside had almost no weight. He set it on the counter without opening it.

He kicked off his shoes, drank water straight from the bottle in the fridge, and sat on the edge of the bed with the phone in his hand.

There were nights when he could feel the old hunger arrive before it had words. Not hunger exactly. A thinning. A sense that his own life, once the shift ended and the room got quiet, was too narrow to carry him all the way to morning.

Those were the dangerous nights.

He opened the meeting app.

There was a late meeting in Koreatown. Another in Silver Lake. He could still make either if he left now. He knew the script of rescue. Shoes back on. Bus or rideshare. Bad coffee. Metal chair. A roomful of strangers telling the truth in manageable pieces.

His phone buzzed before he could decide.

Unknown sender.

No number, only an anonymized relay address. No body text visible from the lock screen.

He should have ignored it.

Instead he opened it.

The subject line was:

What It Feels Like To Be You

He stared at the screen.

Inside, the message was almost blank.

If you want to know what they made, start here.

Use the relay.

Below that, a link.

No signature. No explanation. No threat. Just the link.

Marcus felt the room grow very quiet around him.

He should have deleted it.

He knew that. There are moments in life when the self presents evidence against itself with admirable clarity, and this was one of them.

He tapped the link.

For a second nothing happened. Then a page opened in the browser.

No branding. No graphics. Just a stripped-down file index on a dark background. Session codes. Durations. Dates. Some tagged with single words that might have been categories or might have been bait.

JOY RELIEF DESIRE GRIEF AWE SAFE

Marcus stared.

At the top of the page was a line in small white text:

Recovered internal affect archives. Limited cache.

His pulse climbed.

This was impossible enough that part of him still believed it might be a joke. Or malware. Or one of those elaborate traps designed to harvest the weak under the cover of giving them exactly what they wanted. He should have closed it.

Instead he scrolled.

The files were short. Two minutes, four, six. Small enough, somehow, to look manageable.

He clicked one almost at random.

Nothing happened.

Then the page prompted him to pair a receiver.

Marcus looked toward the counter.

The padded mailer sat where he had dropped it, suddenly less innocent.

He got up, brought it back to the bed, and tore it open with his thumb.

Inside was a stripped-down rig: a matte-black elastic receiver band with two flat contact pads at the temples, a peel-and-stick patch for the side of the neck, a charging puck, and a card no bigger than a coaster.

RECEIVER ONLY. STIM SIDE.

NO SAFETIES.

The wording was clinical enough to make the whole thing worse.

Marcus turned the band over in his hands. It looked like somebody had built it out of stolen clinic parts and aftermarket neurofeedback gear, then sanded away anything that might identify where it came from.

Another prompt appeared on the phone.

Relay detected?

His body had already answered yes.

Another prompt.

Apply neck patch. Sit still.

Marcus sat very still.

He peeled the backing from the patch and pressed it to the side of his neck. Then he pulled the band over his head and settled the cold contact pads against his temples.

He tapped the file again.

At first there was no sound, and then he understood the mistake. This was not audio. The phone screen dimmed. A pulse moved once across it, pale and slow. His body waited, confused.

Then something shifted.

Not a thought. Not an image. Not words.

A bodily certainty arrived from nowhere and took up room inside him.

Desire, yes, but not the anxious, managerial kind he knew too well. Not the split-screen version in which one part of him wanted and another monitored the wanting for signs of weakness. This was simpler and larger. A clean heat. A sensation of being drawn forward without shame. Of being in a body that did not need permission to answer its own hunger.

And braided through it, more intoxicating than the desire itself, was welcome.

Not conquest. Not performance. Not fear disguised as appetite.

Welcome.

The feeling of being wanted back.

Marcus inhaled sharply.

The effect lasted less than a minute. When it ended, the room rushed back in around him with humiliating speed—the cheap print, the warm air, the narrow bed, his own hands gripping the phone too tightly.

He tore the neck patch free, pulled off the receiver band, and sat there breathing.

No one had touched him.

Nothing had happened, exactly.

And yet something had.

For one impossible interval he had stepped out of the emotional arrangement of his own life and into another one. Not another person's story. Not even another person's self. Just a state of being he recognized immediately by the violence of his need for it.

He looked back at the screen.

The file had a name now that he could actually see, tiny and clinical beneath the session code.

DESIRE / MUTUAL

There were dozens more below it.

Joy.

Relief.

Safe.

Home.

Awe.

Marcus lowered the phone slowly into his lap.

Then, before he had any chance to become wise again, he heard himself say into the dark apartment, with all the simplicity of prayer,

"I want this."

Chapter 05 - Launch

By the time the Waymo turned onto Sunset, Matt had accumulated twenty-three unread texts, eleven missed calls, three interview requests, one invitation to keynote something he had no intention of keynoting, and a voicemail from an aunt in New Jersey who had never once in his life shown curiosity about neuroscience and now wanted to know whether the machine could help her sister-in-law stop being "so defended all the time."

He had not slept enough to find any of it funny, though parts of it were.

The car moved in that polished autonomous glide that still, even after years of being normal, seemed faintly smug to him. Los Angeles passed by in clean morning light: coffee lines, delivery drones angling down toward rooftops, a man in running shorts arguing into invisible audio, jacaranda petals collecting in the gutters like somebody's overdetermined metaphor. The city looked exactly as it had looked yesterday and entirely altered, which was one of the more irritating qualities of history.

His phone lit again.

Unknown number. Washington, D.C.

He declined it.

Another text arrived before the screen had gone dark.

My daughter has not spoken to me in eight months. If what they said on television is true, I would wait in line for a week.

No signature. Just the sentence.

Matt stared at it for a moment too long, then locked the screen.

That was the problem. None of the wanting was abstract anymore.

All morning the messages had come in variations of the same ache.

Grief. Estrangement. Addiction. Marriages gone opaque. Parents afraid of losing children to distances too small to name and too large to cross. People were not responding to the science. They were responding to the wish underneath it. Shelby had known they would. She had seen that before either he or Piyush had let themselves admit it.

The fact that she was right did nothing to improve his mood.

He had watched the clip of her morning-show appearance exactly once, at six-forty-two, standing barefoot in his kitchen with coffee going cold in his hand. He had watched her say clinical rollout within the year with the calm confidence of a person who had never in her life mistaken irreversible for reckless. He had watched the host lean toward her with bright, rented amazement. He had watched the lower-third graphic turn a decade of work into a segment.

Then he had called her.

She had not answered.

He had called again.

Still nothing.

Then Piyush had texted only one word.

Shelby.

As if the name itself now contained a full sentence.

The Waymo slowed at a light. Matt looked out at a man washing the windshield of a food truck with absorbed care, a woman walking two very white dogs that appeared to regard the day as a personal victory, a billboard for some immersive therapy platform now made accidentally quaint by what Shelby had just done on national television.

He should have been happier.

Not because she had blindsided him. That part was real enough. But because beneath the fury there remained another fact, just as real and much more inconvenient: people were already understanding the Empathy Engine correctly. Not technically. Emotionally. They

heard about it and immediately imagined the one distance in their own life they most wanted closed.

He understood the pull. He had built the machine under the long pressure of exactly that kind of hope.

His phone rang.

Piyush.

Matt answered so quickly he nearly jabbed the screen wrong.

"Please tell me you're calling to say she's had a stroke of conscience."

Piyush did not laugh.

"Where are you?"

"In the car."

"How far?"

"Ten minutes. Why?"

There was a brief silence, the kind that made Matt sit forward before the information had even arrived.

"Shelby arranged a demonstration," Piyush said.

Matt stared through the windshield. "A what?"

"A private demonstration. For diplomats."

"Today?"

"Yes."

Matt laughed once, without humor. "No."

"I know."

"No, I mean no. As in that isn't happening."

"I know," Piyush said again, more sharply now. "I am informing you of the current delusion, not endorsing it."

Matt pressed a hand over his eyes. "Who?"

"India and Pakistan."

He took the hand away. "Shelby arranged an empathy session

between Indian and Pakistani diplomats."

"Yes."

"Without telling us."

"Yes."

"And she thinks she can do that this morning, after a first human trial yesterday afternoon."

"She does not think she can," Piyush said. "She has done the part where she invites them, gets NDAs signed, loops in three people from State and two from her policy advisory board, and tells operations to prepare Room A."

The light changed. The Waymo moved forward with infuriating smoothness.

Matt said, "Tell me you're joking."

"I am not built for this kind of joke."

He was right. Piyush's humor ran toward exhausted accuracy, not absurdist disaster.

Matt looked out at the boulevard without seeing it. "When were you planning to tell me?"

"As soon as I finished trying not to throw my phone into the sink."

That got the smallest possible breath out of him.

Then Piyush said, quieter, "There's more."

Of course there was.

"The patient from yesterday?"

Matt felt his jaw set.

"What about her?"

"Rosa wants to pull the post-session notes from general circulation until we review them with ethics."

Rosa Halpern, the therapist from the trial. Careful, formidable, almost offensively sane.

"Why?" Matt asked, though he already knew.

"She says the patient is more distressed this morning than she presented last night. Not destabilized exactly. But she keeps saying some version of the same thing—that she consented to the session without understanding what it would feel like to have so little interior distance left."

The sentence landed exactly where it had been waiting all morning.

Matt looked out the window at the city and had the strange sensation that every hopeful text on his phone had developed an equal and opposite shadow.

"How bad?" he asked.

"Bad enough that if we had any institutional self-respect, we would spend the day talking to lawyers, ethicists, and the patient, and not to nuclear states."

Matt leaned back against the seat.

The car announced, in a gentle voice no human being had asked it to develop, that they were seven minutes from destination.

"Don't let her start anything," he said.

"I'm trying."

"Trying is not the same as succeeding."

"I'm aware."

Piyush exhaled. When he spoke again, the anger had thinned just enough for the fear underneath to show. "Matt, if she does this without us, or around us, or with consultants who don't understand the system, somebody gets hurt. Politically, clinically, maybe both."

"I know."

"She keeps saying that if we refuse, we're refusing an opportunity to prevent actual human suffering because our paperwork isn't perfect."

Matt closed his eyes briefly.

That too sounded like Shelby. Her most infuriating gift was that she rarely lied when the truth could be made sufficiently directional.

“Five minutes,” he said. “I’m almost there.”

He ended the call and looked at the phone again.

The text from the woman with the silent daughter was still on the screen beneath everything else.

He did not delete it.

Outside Qualia Labs, two camera crews were already behind the temporary barriers, not close enough to cause trouble yet, close enough to promise it later. The building itself looked no different from yesterday—glass, pale concrete, expensive discretion—but it had acquired the thin aura of a place recently identified by television. Security had doubled. Somebody from operations was talking too quickly into an earpiece at the entrance.

The Waymo stopped. Matt got out before the door had fully finished its little mechanical courtesy.

Inside, the lobby was full of people pretending not to move faster than usual.

A legal assistant he knew only as Priya gave him a look of pure administrative grief as he crossed toward the elevators.

“Matt,” she said, “we need fifteen minutes with you on the adverse-event language before noon.”

“Define noon.”

“Structurally? Or spiritually?”

He almost smiled. “Later.”

The elevator ride felt too slow and then too short.

On the third floor, outside the conference room, Rosa Halpern was standing with a paper cup of coffee gone untouched and the posture of a person who had already decided to be difficult in the correct direction.

“Tell me you’re here to stop this circus,” she said.

“I’m here to identify which circus.”

“Good answer.”

She handed him a tablet.

On the screen was the morning follow-up note from yesterday's patient. Most of it was clinically composed, but one paragraph had been highlighted.

I know I agreed to it. I know nobody tricked me. But it felt like there was nowhere left in me to stand back from myself. I don't know how to explain that better. I thought being understood would feel relieving. Instead it also felt like some necessary private distance disappeared.

Matt read it twice.

Rosa watched him. "She isn't psychotic, suicidal, or decompensating. This is not a medical emergency. But it is not nothing."

"No," he said. "It isn't."

"She believes the session helped me understand her," Rosa said. "She also believes that what helped me may have taken something from her she did not know she was risking."

Matt handed the tablet back.

"Shelby's upstairs," Rosa said. "And unless one of you physically restrains her with a piece of furniture, she's trying to turn a first-in-human success into foreign policy before lunch."

He nodded and kept moving.

Room A's outer prep corridor already looked wrong.

Too many people. Two security agents he didn't recognize. Someone from facilities checking the sensor chairs as if they were about to receive royalty or explosives. The system itself—two clinical recliners fixed within the white geometry of the transfer frame, headsets at rest, the whole device both elegant and somehow still overhonest about its medical ancestry—seemed to be enduring all this attention with more dignity than anyone else in the building.

Piyush was in the observation room with his suit jacket off and his expression sharpened into something almost brittle. He turned when Matt came in.

"You look terrible," he said.

"So do you."

"Good."

Shelby was at the far end of the room with a policy advisor Matt had met once and disliked on sight. She ended the conversation the second she saw him, not startled exactly, but alert in the way some people got when the real meeting had finally arrived.

"There you are," she said, as if he were late to something consensual.

Matt stopped three feet short of her. "Tell me this is cancelable."

Shelby folded her hands. "Everything is cancelable."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the correct answer."

Piyush came around the console and joined them. "Why are diplomats coming to our lab today?"

Shelby looked from one to the other and seemed, for one moment, genuinely puzzled by the need to explain herself.

"Because yesterday proved the system works," she said. "Because today the world is paying attention. Because two states in active hostility expressed interest through channels capable of making that interest real. Because if this machine can reduce suffering outside a clinic, we have a moral obligation to find out."

Matt stared at her.

"A moral obligation," he repeated.

"Yes."

"The patient from yesterday feels violated by her own consent."

Shelby's eyes flicked, just briefly, toward Rosa in the hallway beyond the glass. "And we will address that."

"No," Matt said. "We are addressing that. Right now. Today."

"And while we do," Shelby said, "the rest of the human species continues existing."

Piyush let out one short breath that might have become a laugh in a less serious room. “That is a monstrous sentence.”

“No,” Shelby said. “It’s an unsentimental one.”

Matt could feel the anger clarifying in him, which was at least more useful than confusion.

“You do not get to announce rollout on television and then schedule a diplomatic demonstration before the first human subject has finished telling us what the first one cost her.”

Shelby held his gaze. “If we wait until every ethical discomfort has been resolved in advance, we will never use the technology at all.”

“That is not what I said.”

“It is functionally what you always say.”

The policy advisor, wisely, had vanished.

Piyush said, “The system is not stable enough for improvisation.”

“I’m not asking for improvisation.”

“You invited two diplomats from hostile nuclear states to a first-generation neuroaffective interface with less than half a day of notice,” Piyush said. “That is improvisation wearing expensive shoes.”

Shelby’s mouth almost moved toward a smile, then didn’t. “You two are making the same mistake inventors always make after a breakthrough. You still think the cleanest version of the thing is the truest version. It isn’t. The truest version is the one that has to survive contact with actual human need.”

Matt said, “Human need is not an argument for skipping sequence.”

“No,” Shelby said. “But fear of sequence failure is often an argument for disguised cowardice.”

The room went quiet.

It was, Matt knew instantly, a line designed to wound because some part of it would land. He hated that about her. He hated more that she usually aimed accurately.

"Cowardice," he said.

"If this can help people outside a clinic—and I believe it can—then what exactly are you protecting by refusing to test that? Them? Or yourselves? Your sense of moral cleanliness? Your right to introduce this to the world only once it arrives wrapped in language that flatters your caution?"

Piyush's face had gone very still. That was never a good sign.

Matt said, "We are protecting the machine from being turned into theater before we understand its harms."

"And I am protecting it," Shelby said, "from being strangled in its cradle by men who would rather be right than be useful."

He took one step toward her before he knew he had moved.

Piyush put a hand lightly on his arm. Not restraining. Only reminding.

Matt looked past Shelby, through the glass, at the white frame of the system in Room A. For one treacherous second he saw the argument she was making in the best possible light. If two people who had spent their careers translating grief into policy could actually feel, even briefly, what the other had lost—what then? If it worked, even partially, what right did he have to refuse the experiment because the first use case had frightened him with its cost?

The answer came quickly.

The same right he had always had. The right to care what power did on its way to helping.

But rights were one thing. Leverage another.

"What happens if we say no?" he asked.

Shelby answered immediately. "The delegations are already en route. State is looped in. My board is looped in. Three reporters know something is happening here, though not what. If we cancel now, we do it publicly and explain why we denied a conflict-resolution trial after announcing clinical success on national television."

Piyush said flatly, “You set this up so refusal becomes the scandal.”

“I set this up so indecision has a cost.”

Matt almost admired the brutality of the architecture.

Almost.

He said, “You built a trap.”

Shelby’s expression softened, which in her was often more dangerous than hardness. “I built momentum,” she said. “Because once people understand what this is, they are going to ask it to do everything. Therapy. Marriage repair. Addiction treatment. Diplomacy. You know that. You know it because you built toward exactly that depth of need, whether or not you like the language I use for it.”

He said nothing.

She went on, quieter now. “If this can reduce suffering outside your preferred order of operations, Matt, then delaying it is not neutral. Delay has victims too.”

He hated the sentence because he could not fully dismiss it.

Piyush looked at him. Matt looked back.

There was no agreement in the glance. Only arithmetic.

If they refused outright, Shelby would still find some way to stage something adjacent to the real thing, and then the machine would be in the hands of people who understood even less than she did what it could do to a body. If they agreed, they could at least control parameters.

He felt tired suddenly. Not of the work. Of the speed.

“All right,” he said.

Shelby’s face changed, not into triumph exactly, but into forward motion.

Matt raised a hand. “Do not misunderstand me.”

She said nothing.

“This happens under our protocol, not yours. No cameras in the room. No live feed. No recording. Full briefing to both participants

about boundary confusion, emotional aftereffects, and incomplete predictability. Transfer duration capped. Medical supervision. Immediate debrief. If either of us calls it, it stops."

Piyush added, "And no one says diplomacy again unless the session actually earns the word."

Shelby let the silence sit just long enough to register that they were still bargaining inside her timeline.

Then she nodded. "Fine."

"Not fine," Matt said. "Temporary."

"Temporary is how history usually enters the room."

Before he could answer, the operations lead stepped into the doorway with the expression of someone arriving at the worst possible sentence.

"Security just checked in," she said. "The delegations are seven minutes out."

No one spoke.

Behind the glass, the empty chairs waited under the white geometry of the Empathy Engine as if nothing about the day were unusual at all.

Matt looked at them and had the sick, precise sensation that the machine had ceased, sometime between breakfast television and this moment, to belong even in theory to the pace he would have chosen for it.

The diplomats were already on their way.

Chapter 06 - I Thought Only We Buried Children

Farah Qureshi looked at the photograph only once before handing over her phone.

That was part of the discipline. Not because one look was enough, which it never was, but because grief had already proved how little repetition could help. The photo had been taken eight years earlier, before the border took on the full appetite of destiny and bureaucracy. Her son was standing in a white cricket uniform with one pad half-fastened and an expression of theatrical impatience, as if history itself were a delay in the day's more important business.

The security officer waited without appearing to wait.

Farah locked the screen, placed the phone in the tray, and slid it across the small steel table.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said.

She nodded.

The prep room at Qualia Labs had been designed by someone who believed neutrality could be manufactured. Pale walls. Hidden vents. No visible corners sharp enough to become psychologically suggestive. A sealed glass panel looking onto a corridor where no one happened to be standing just then. Even the armchair appeared selected for the lack of opinion in its shape.

On the low table beside her sat a printed briefing packet she had already read twice, then once again in the car from the airport. Her staff had read it too, marked it, challenged it, translated it into caution and policy language. The Americans had explained the technology in the flat, soothing vocabulary powerful countries preferred when they needed other nations to feel safe while entering rooms full of

untested things.

Raw emotional state transfer.

No memories.

No thoughts.

Limited session duration.

Low observed medical risk.

Unknown range of psychological aftereffects.

Farah had spent half her career listening to men in suits describe volatility as a manageable variable.

Still, she had come.

That fact mattered.

Outside this room, in the larger machinery of state, the session had already been translated into a hundred interpretations she did not need repeated to her. Gesture. Optics. American theater. Unacceptable softness. Tactical experiment. Humanitarian innovation. Potential humiliation. Potential opening.

Farah had let all of them exist. They were not wholly wrong. Nations, like families, often survived by allowing contradictory explanations to do each other's work.

But beneath the official reasoning there was a simpler private one she had not given to anyone on her team. She wanted, once in her life and for one controlled interval, the man from across the table to feel what his country had done.

Not the abstract cost. Not the speech. Not the televised sorrow, which all governments learned to perform in calibrated units. The actual cost. The way grief reorganized a body. The way a woman could go on speaking at summits and reviewing ceasefire language and never again inhabit a room without first noticing the age of the boys in it.

They had told her the Indian diplomat's name three times already. Arjun Mehta. She knew his record. Hardliner, disciplined, self-controlled, decorated for the kind of public composure states liked

to confuse with wisdom. She had seen him on panels and in back-channel photographs. He always looked like a man who kept his own weather offshore.

Good, she thought.

Let him feel something inland for once.

A soft knock came at the door.

One of the American clinicians entered, a woman with calm shoulders and the tired kindness of someone who had chosen a difficult profession for reasons not wholly strategic.

"We're ready whenever you are," she said.

Farah rose. "And he is already here?"

"Yes."

Not he has arrived. Not the delegation is on-site. He is already here.

It annoyed her how intimate English could become when it wanted efficiency.

She followed the clinician into the corridor.

At the far end, through a pane of observation glass, she could see the machine.

It was uglier than the morning shows had made it look and therefore more trustworthy. Two clinical chairs under a white sensor frame. Full headsets at rest. Coiled leads and diagnostic panels and the clean geometry of something built first for function and only later for meaning. She felt, to her own surprise, a small easing in the body.

Charlatans preferred elegance.

Real power usually still contained screws.

Arjun removed his wedding ring and placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

He did it without ceremony.

There had once been a time when he never took it off. Then another time when he took it off only to sleep. Then the years after his daughter died, when he discovered there were occasions on which the weight of it altered the body's equilibrium just enough to become unhelpful. Not because his marriage had failed. It had not. If anything, grief had made the marriage truer by removing from it all decorative speech. But there were rooms in which he needed, for an hour or two, to be only one thing.

Today he needed to be a father.

The prep room assigned to him was almost the same as the one down the corridor where, he assumed, Farah Qureshi was waiting. That detail irritated him more than it should have. Equality in architecture was among America's cheapest moral habits. Build the rooms alike and imagine power has been neutralized.

He checked the ring once in his pocket to feel that it was secure.

Then he sat.

On the table before him was his own phone, still unlocked to the photograph he had looked at three times since the car entered the city. He should not have opened it again. He knew that. Yet grief never once in his life had improved under instruction.

His daughter in the picture was fourteen. Hair pulled back. School uniform slightly crooked. Looking at the camera with the practiced patience of the young for the sentimental incompetence of adults. He had taken the photo in a parking lot because she had been annoyed with him about something small and temporary and he had wanted to keep, though he did not know it then, the exact shape of that annoyance forever.

He handed the phone to security and watched it leave the room.

This was what he disliked about private grief becoming public credential. Once other people knew the shape of your wound, they began offering you opportunities to use it.

The Americans had described today's session as exploratory. Humanitarian. Potentially historic. There had been words like bridge

and breakthrough and conflict transformation, all of them clean enough to make him distrust the sentence around them.

Arjun did not believe in breakthroughs. He believed in incentives, shame, memory, force, fatigue, and the occasional accidental mercy. He believed that nations taught their children stories and then mistook those stories for geology. He believed grief was the one form of knowledge states could not successfully bureaucratize, though they never stopped trying.

He had agreed to the session not because he trusted the machine, and certainly not because he trusted American innovation to remain bounded once cameras had smelled blood in it. He had agreed because his daughter was dead and because somewhere on the other side of the corridor waited a woman whose country had spent years teaching itself to narrate loss as if only one side had ever paid for it in children.

Let her feel that, he thought.

Let her feel what policy becomes in a house.

A knock at the door.

A clinician entered and asked if he was ready.

"No," he said.

She waited.

Then he stood. "Yes."

The observation room smelled faintly of coffee, static, and the expensive sterility of new systems. Matt stood behind the glass with his arms folded and watched the two diplomats enter from opposite doors without looking at each other.

Farah moved first as people moved who had long ago decided not to give rooms more of themselves than necessary. Arjun did the same, though his restraint was built differently. Farah's had edges. Arjun's seemed worn smooth by use.

Neither of them looked like people who intended revelation.

Good, Matt thought.

Neither should.

Piyush stood at the main console with Rosa and one of the clinical engineers. Shelby was farther back than usual, phone in hand for once but dark-screened and lowered, as if proximity to the machine had reminded even her that there were atmospheres into which ambition entered more carefully.

The system checks began.

Headsets aligned.

Neck contacts secured.

Interoceptive baselines captured.

Translation model locked.

Matt listened to the clinicians run through the consent language one more time. Emotional boundary confusion possible. Aftereffects unpredictable. Stop signal available at all times. Session duration capped. No one in either chair would be asked to narrate or perform. The machine would do only what it was designed to do and no one could promise that would feel ordinary.

He watched both diplomats sign.

Farah did not hesitate.

Arjun did not either.

When the room sealed, the last ordinary noises disappeared.

The machine did not make a dramatic sound when it came alive. That was one of the things he valued most in it. Real transformations rarely announced themselves with the taste for percussion that filmmakers preferred. The frame lights went from standby amber to active white. The headsets synced. A set of lines stabilized across the monitoring screens.

Piyush glanced at Matt.

Matt gave the smallest possible nod.

Piyush initiated the link.

Farah had expected intrusion.

Instead the onset felt like recognition arriving ahead of memory.

Déjà vu, the clinicians had said.

They were right, but only in the way translation was sometimes right: accurate without being sufficient. It felt less like remembering something forgotten than like becoming briefly convinced she had always been standing one room away from a door she had never opened.

Then the other feeling arrived.

Not India.

Not argument.

Not the masculine armor she had prepared herself to enter.

Grief.

The shock of it was not that it existed. She had expected him to have his own dead, his own archive, his own sanctioned forms of mourning. No state manufactures hardliners from the unbruised. The shock was the structure of it.

This was not grief at the level of principle or patriotism or history. It was grief organized around a smaller body.

A parental grief.

Not memory. Not image. Nothing she could convert cleanly into scene. And yet the body knew. The grief carried in it the whole ruined shape of protection with nowhere left to go. The reflex to turn toward a younger life. The unbearable continuation of vigilance after the object of vigilance had been removed from the world.

Farah's breath caught.

Across from her, Arjun had not moved, but the monitoring line representing his autonomic load had changed. She watched it dimly through the haze of the link and then lost interest in the screen because the feeling coming through was too complete to leave room for instrument panels.

He had buried a child.

The knowledge arrived not as information but as force.

For one raw instant Farah resisted it. Not intellectually. More primitively than that. The body's refusal to allow the enemy's wound to become legible because legibility risked complication and complication weakened grievance, and grievance had been one of the few reliable engines in public life.

Then, against her intention, another feeling rose in answer to his grief.

Not forgiveness. Not softness.

Compassion.

Simple, humiliating, immediate compassion.

She felt the machine take that from her too.

A second later something moved across Arjun's face.

He had received it.

And then—because the link was live, because feeling in one body answered feeling in another, because none of them in the observation room had yet found language for the recursive moral stupidity and beauty of that fact—Farah felt his startled recognition of her compassion, followed by the compassion he had not meant to feel toward the grief from which hers had risen.

The loop widened.

Not a feedback error.

A human one.

She could not have said how long it lasted. Time behaved badly inside strong feeling. The other grief remained present, but now it was altered by contact. Not diminished. Seen.

Somewhere in the middle of it Farah understood, with a clarity so abrupt it might have been called revelation if the word had not been so overused by fools, that the dead did not belong to flags.

Her son was still hers.

So was the woman she had become after him.

But the sentence her politics had been built around—that only we know this cost, only we have paid this price, only we have a right to speak from this wound—had been broken open from inside.

Not by argument.

By another parent's body.

Arjun had entered the session prepared to encounter resentment.

He was ready for accusation. Ready for the moral vanity of reciprocal grievance. Ready even, in a disciplined corner of himself, for pity so self-congratulatory it would feel like insult.

He had not prepared for grief that resembled his own so closely it made preparation irrelevant.

The onset came first as dislocation and then as certainty.

Déjà vu, someone had said earlier.

No. Not exactly. It felt like stepping into a room whose furniture had been rearranged by loss before he got there.

Then her feeling entered him.

Not her argument. Not her nation. Her grief.

He understood at once that it was maternal, though not because of image or memory. The system gave him no biographical scene. Instead it delivered the emotional architecture itself: the body's impossible continuation after the interruption of a child's life. The reflexive turn toward tenderness with no one left to receive it. The sensation of time becoming obscene because the world insisted on continuing to produce mornings after it had taken the one person for whom morning had meant structure.

His hands tightened on the chair arms.

She had buried a child.

For one second he hated the fact.

Not because it was false. Because it was true enough to inconve-

nience everything.

He had spent years building a life in which control over expression was not merely temperament but instrument. The self-controlled hardliner. The disciplined envoy. The man who could enter rooms full of cameras and say necessary things in a voice uncontaminated by the private weather of a father who had once stood in a hospital corridor and discovered that language had no jurisdiction there.

Now the machine had brought him the one thing diplomacy never survived elegantly.

Unusable tenderness.

He felt, against his will, compassion rise in him toward her.

Then he felt her compassion for him.

The astonishment of that nearly undid him.

Because it was not abstract compassion. Not the kind nations performed over each other's dead while tightening procurement budgets. This compassion had passed through the body first. It had form. Temperature. A species of unwilling recognition.

The woman across from him, whom he had been prepared to read as an official posture with blood behind it, had felt his grief and answered it before either of them had the chance to become clever.

The answer went through him like weather finding a seam.

He thought, wildly and with no sequence to it, of his daughter's school shoes by the door the week after. Of his wife sitting upright in bed at four in the morning because lying down had become a kind of accusation. Of the first ceremony at which some man from the ministry had spoken to him with beautiful restraint about sacrifice and national pain and the future, as if the future had any moral right to arrive before the sentence had even cooled in the air.

He had told himself for years that if the other side truly understood, policy might change. If not policy, then at least the internal posture from which policy was made. Now, as feeling moved between them in a circuit neither of them controlled, he understood the more terrible thing.

Understanding might not change policy at all.

It might only remove innocence from it.

Across from him, Farah's eyes were closed. Two tears had escaped without changing her face.

Arjun had spent a career studying faces.

He had never seen one more disciplined and less defended.

He realized then, with the blunt helplessness of a man arriving late to his own humanity, that he no longer wanted her to feel what her country had done in order to win anything.

He wanted her to know that the dead on his side of the border had not made them special.

Only bereaved.

In the observation room, nobody moved unless required by function.

Piyush was staring at the live-state mapping with the expression he wore when the system did something he had hoped for in theory and feared in practice. Matt, beside him, had stopped taking notes without seeming to notice. Rosa stood with one hand covering her mouth, not in sentimentality but in concentration so total it had accidentally taken the shape of feeling.

On the far side of the room, Shelby had not touched her phone in twelve full minutes.

The diplomats' metrics had done something none of them had previously seen this clearly in human subjects.

The first exchange—grief—had settled exactly where the translation model predicted it would.

The second exchange had not been separately initiated.

It had emerged.

Farah receiving Arjun's grief altered her state toward compassion. Arjun received that compassion in real time, which altered his toward

her. The system, bounded as it was, had found a way to expose not just feeling but the human answer to being felt.

Piyush whispered, to no one in particular, “My God.”

Matt did not tell him to be quiet.

The session ran forty seconds longer than originally planned because no one wanted to be the first person in history to interrupt it for administrative reasons.

Then Matt gave the stop signal.

The transfer eased.

The room returned in layers.

Headsets came off.

Farah blinked once as if the light had changed species while she was away. Arjun took longer to move. Neither looked toward the observation glass immediately. They looked only at each other.

A clinician stepped forward to begin the debrief and then, with unusual wisdom, said nothing.

Farah stood first.

For a moment Matt thought she might leave without speaking. He would not have blamed her. Some experiences were insulted by the first available sentence.

Instead she took one step toward Arjun.

Her voice, when it came, was low and nearly level.

“I thought only we buried children,” she said.

No one in the room wrote that down fast enough.

Arjun looked at her with the exhausted astonishment of a man whose enemy had just spoken the only possible true sentence.

Then he stood as well.

He did not answer immediately. He only gave the slightest nod, as if some older and more decent part of himself had been waiting years for permission to acknowledge what the rest of him had already known.

The doors opened.

Beyond them, in the corridor and then the lobby beyond that, waited officials, staff, security, and more media than Matt had authorized and fewer than Shelby would eventually prefer. Whatever private rules had governed the session itself had already begun dissolving on contact with the world.

Farah and Arjun walked out side by side, not close, not yet, but no longer performing the full geometry of opposition.

Someone asked whether the session had been successful.

No one answered.

The first cameras saw them before the clinicians did. Flash. Lens. Human appetite with good posture.

Matt came out behind them and watched the whole room reorganize around the possibility that something historically photogenic might occur.

He almost hated that instinct.

Then Farah stopped.

Arjun turned toward her.

For one long second both simply stood there in the public air, each looking at the other with the bewildered steadiness of people who had lost the right to remain abstract.

No handshake.

No statement.

No diplomatic theater translated into humane proportions.

Farah moved first, though later nobody would agree on that. She stepped toward him. Arjun did the same. Then they were in each other's arms with the awkwardness of strangers and the full sincerity of parents who had, however briefly, been deprived of the illusion that grief obeyed borders.

The corridor went silent.

Not press-conference silent. Real silent.

The kind that occurs when a room realizes it has been accidentally made too honest.

Matt felt, absurdly, the back of his own throat tighten.

Beside him, Piyush let out a breath that sounded like half prayer, half warning.

And then, as always, the world resumed.

Phones rose.

Voices restarted.

A policy aide began speaking too quickly into an earpiece. Someone from security shifted from witness back into procedure. In the reflection of the glass, Matt saw Shelby already moving—not toward the diplomats, but toward the communications team, one hand lifted, face bright with the terrifying calm of a person who recognized not merely wonder but leverage.

Farah stepped back first. Arjun did too. Neither smiled. The room, disappointed by the lack of theatrical closure, had to make do with something rarer and therefore more dangerous: evidence.

Across the corridor, one of the American officials whispered, "My God."

Another said, "Get State on the line."

Someone else said, "Do not let that clip out before—" and was too late even as the sentence was spoken.

Shelby was already speaking into her phone.

Matt looked from her to the diplomats, then beyond them to the machine in Room A, still lit, still clinically indifferent, as if none of this had anything to do with it. But of course it did. The machine had done exactly what it promised in the narrowest possible sense. The world had done the rest immediately, greedily, as the world always did.

And yet the room had changed for a real reason before it changed for a vulgar one.

That mattered.

Through the observation glass he could still see the two empty chairs facing one another under the white frame of the Empathy Engine.

This morning it had been a dangerous prototype.

By afternoon, it was already becoming an event.

By night, he knew, it would be something worse and larger.

Not because it had failed.

Because it had worked.

Act 2 - Promise, Temptation, Addiction, and Exposure

Chapter 07 - You Look Good for 44

By the third day, Matt had become one of those men people discussed in the abstract while he was still in the room.

He had forgotten, or perhaps had never properly understood, how quickly a person could stop being a person once television got hold of him. Not in full, of course. He still had to shave. He still had to answer emails. He still had to remember to eat something that had once grown in dirt. But some outer layer of him had already been converted into a more portable object. A breakthrough. A controversy. A future. A threat. A hope. Depending on the headline, all five before lunch.

The diplomats' embrace had escaped containment in under two hours.

Someone had gotten footage from a corridor camera. Someone else had leaked a cleaner angle from a phone. Then every network, every clipped-feed account, every international desk, every opportunistic pundit with a ring light and a patriotic opinion had taken hold of it and turned it over until it produced whatever meaning they preferred. By the next morning the image existed in so many forms that Matt could feel it becoming less like an event than a myth in real time.

Farah and Arjun embracing.

Two hardliners, altered.

The machine that made enemies feel each other's grief.

He had stopped watching after the seventh replay.

Now he was sitting in a glass conference room at Qualia Labs while three people from policy, two from communications, one lawyer, Shelby, Piyush, and a man from somewhere adjacent to the State Department all argued over phrases that would in the end

fail to control anything worth controlling.

"Breakthrough diplomacy is too grand," the communications lead said.

"It is also stupid," Matt said.

"Nobody asked you to improve it," Shelby said. "Only to stop murdering momentum."

Piyush had the expression he wore when he was one minute from becoming sarcastic in a room that did not deserve the pleasure. "I'd settle for not saying world peace before noon."

The lawyer, whose entire face seemed built out of patient disapproval, adjusted her glasses. "No one is saying world peace."

The policy man said, "Not explicitly."

Matt leaned back in his chair and looked through the glass at the corridor outside, where half the company now walked with the accidental tension of people who knew history had passed through the building and might still be contagious. Two staffers who had never once in the old days pretended not to stare were now fully committed to it, which he appreciated on aesthetic grounds. Attention should either hide or stand there honestly. The halfway version was exhausting.

His phone buzzed.

He ignored it.

The communications lead was saying, "We need language that preserves awe without implying uncontrolled use."

"We also need reality," Matt said.

Shelby did not look at him. "Reality is what survives contact with narrative."

"That sentence is why God invented regulation."

This got an involuntary laugh out of Piyush and a visible recoil from the lawyer.

The phone buzzed again.

Then again.

Matt looked down at it on the table.

Unknown numbers. Two producers. One old classmate. A senator's staffer. A long message from someone in Belgium asking whether the machine could be used in palliative care. A shorter one from a man in Michigan who said his brother had not spoken to him since their mother died and if this was real he would sell his truck for one hour in that chair.

This was the part no one in the room knew what to do with. Not the media cycle. Not the geopolitical interest. The need.

Shelby had been right about that from the beginning. He disliked having to remember it this often.

The world was not hearing invention. It was hearing possibility addressed to its own private damage.

Another buzz.

This time the preview line was from Rachel.

Call me when you can. Proud of you. Also this is insane.

That made him smile despite himself.

Rachel had known him in the Los Angeles years before any of this, when he still attended parties he claimed to dislike and had not yet become a man routinely asked by strangers to save their marriages with a device. She was one of the few people in the city who had the right to call him out in complete sentences and one of the even fewer who did it well.

He typed back under the table.

Alive. Barely. Call later?

She answered almost at once.

Of course. Also do not let them make you look noble on cable news.

Too late, he wrote.

This earned him, for the first time all morning, an uncomplicated

laugh.

Shelby looked over. “If you’re flirting while we’re in crisis, at least have the decency to share.”

“I’m being bullied by a friend.”

“Good,” she said. “It’s important to remain domesticated.”

The policy man, who clearly believed humor existed mainly to reduce seriousness in undesirable people, cleared his throat. “Can we return to the fact that the Indian foreign ministry has requested a private follow-up and the Pakistani side has not ruled it out?”

Nobody in the room said yes with their face.

Matt felt the old split in him widen again: part of him still stunned by what the machine had done in the room with Farah and Arjun, another part already exhausted by what the world was doing to it outside the room. He had wanted proof. Now proof existed and had become instantly available to every appetite larger than wisdom.

He should have been flattered by all of it. Not the commentators. Not the producers. But the fact that people had seen something on a screen and thought maybe this could help. There were worse fates for a scientist than being turned, temporarily, into a structure on which other people hung hope.

The problem was that hope scaled faster than care.

“Matt.”

He looked up.

Shelby was watching him the way she did when she believed he had wandered off into principle and left the practical people to drag civilization alone.

“We need a sentence,” she said. “A clear one. About what the machine is for.”

He thought of the messages. The father in Michigan. The Belgian note about palliative care. Rachel’s absurd tenderness. The diplomats in the room. The first patient, still trying to describe the cost of being so directly felt. Every use case already full of both promise

and injury.

"It's for understanding," he said at last. "Not access for its own sake. Understanding in bounded settings where understanding might relieve suffering."

The communications lead wrote that down instantly.

Shelby tilted her head. "That's the best sentence you've said all week."

"I'm devastated to hear it."

Piyush muttered, "Write it down before he corrects it into death."

The meeting lasted another forty minutes and solved nothing except that it finally ended.

When Matt stepped out into the corridor, the building felt warmer than it should have. Or perhaps he did. He had not slept properly in three nights. Every surface seemed either too bright or too reflective. Somebody had left a tray of sandwiches untouched in the breakout area, proof that collective stress still sometimes overestimated the appetite for turkey.

He walked past the glass wall at the far end of the floor and looked down at the city.

Traffic moved. Delivery bots crossed the sidewalks in patient diagonals. Two helicopters cut low over the basin like aggressive punctuation. Los Angeles had already accepted the diplomats' embrace into its bloodstream and gone back to being itself, which he envied in a weak moment.

His phone buzzed again.

He assumed it would be another producer, another request, another cousin of hope.

Instead the preview line stopped him before he had fully looked at the name.

You look good for 44.

He stared at the screen.

For a second he did not understand what he was seeing, not

because the sentence was unclear but because the world behind it had been missing for so long that the brain refused immediate restoration.

Then he saw the name.

Tifa.

He sat down very abruptly on the bench by the window.

Around him, the office continued existing. Two junior staffers passed carrying tablets and anxiety. Somewhere down the hall, Shelby was already on another call, her voice bright with the stamina of a woman who metabolized acceleration into purpose. A printer started up. Someone laughed too loudly in one of the rooms.

None of it reached him properly.

He looked at the message again.

You look good for 44.

Not hello.

Not after all this time.

Not congratulations, even though of course that was what the sentence partially was.

Just the angle only she would have chosen: intimate enough to destabilize, casual enough to leave him no immediate shelter in drama.

He became aware, with mild humiliation, that his heart had changed pace.

Twenty years was long enough for a person to acquire other lives, other countries, other bodies, other mistakes, and still not long enough, apparently, to stop one sentence from restoring an entire register of the self.

He had not heard from Tifa in two decades. Not once. No birthdays. No reunion-message nonsense. No occasional social-media creep toward false ease. They had accomplished the clean break so thoroughly that it had, in the years after, begun to feel less like a choice than a geological event.

And yet there she was, on his phone, inside a sentence that sounded as if the interval had been a long afternoon.

He should not have smiled.

He did.

He looked at the message a third time, as if it might alter under repeated examination and become safer.

It did not.

The bench under him, the glass, the city, the office—all of it seemed suddenly arranged at a greater distance than it had been one minute earlier. The media storm, which had felt total for seventy-two hours, moved backward in his body and became weather rather than climate.

What replaced it was not joy exactly.

Disbelief first.

Then a finer thing under the disbelief. Not hope. Hope was too large, too vulgar a word for a text message from a woman who had once occupied the organizing center of his idea of the future and then vanished from the geography of his life entirely.

Recognition, perhaps.

Or the sharp return of an older version of himself he had spent years learning to carry without reopening.

His thumbs rested above the screen.

He could, if he wanted, ruin this immediately. Say too much. Say the wrong old thing. Perform astonishment until it became burden. Ask a question too large for a first reply. People spent their entire middle age disqualifying themselves from grace by being unable to receive it at human scale.

So he did the only thing that felt survivable. He looked for the version of himself she would still recognize without pity.

Then he typed:

I spend a lot of time in the jimjilbangs.

He stared at it.

It was stupid. Which was why it was right.

One beat. Two.

Then he sent it.

The office came back around him in layers.

He became aware again of the conference room behind him, of the fact that two analysts were having what appeared to be a disagreement about embargo language, of the murmur of a building trying to behave as if history were administratively tractable. But none of it had quite the same authority anymore.

His phone remained silent.

Of course it did. She had a life. A husband, maybe. Children. A workday. He knew almost nothing now except the shape of her name on the screen and the fact that she had chosen to use it.

Across the window, the reflection of his face looked older than he felt and more tired than he wanted to admit. Forty-four was not old. It was, however, old enough to have learned that the past rarely returned for your convenience. If it returned at all, it did so on its own terms.

He sat with the phone in his hand and thought, with no particular order to it, of all the people who had texted him that morning wanting the machine to close some impossible distance in their lives.

The irony was almost indecent.

He had helped build a device the world now wanted for its ruptures, and the one message capable of making him feel newly unsteady had crossed the distance between two people by the oldest technology available.

A sentence.

His phone buzzed.

He looked down so quickly it was almost adolescent.

No new message from Tifa.

Only another producer.

He laughed once, quietly, and stood.

By the time he reached the end of the hall, another thought had arrived, less dramatic and therefore more dangerous.

The machine had made him famous.

Tifa had noticed.

And for the first time since Farah and Arjun walked out of Room A into the world's hunger, Matt felt something cut through the glare of public meaning and touch the older private life beneath it.

That was not safety.

But it was alive.

Chapter 08 - Koreatown

The café was on a side street in Koreatown above a stationery store and beside a place that sold nothing but porridges with names so specific they sounded medicinal. Matt got there twelve minutes early, which was not like him except when he was worried, and then spent seven of those minutes pretending to read the menu board as if he were a man with strong convictions about red bean pastries.

It was late afternoon. Light came through the front windows in a pale gold angle that made the place look calmer than it probably was at noon. There were six small tables, two plants that had survived more neglect than seemed fair, and a woman behind the counter who moved with the flat competence of someone who had already decided nobody in the room would surprise her.

He had worn a cap for no reason except vanity disguised as privacy. It did not matter. If anyone recognized him, they were kind enough not to say so.

On the walk over from the garage, three people had looked twice at him. One had stopped him outright near the pharmacy and asked, with an intensity almost devotional, whether he really believed the machine could save marriages. Matt had told him he believed many marriages would probably be better served by a long walk and a therapist. The man had not laughed.

Now Matt stood at the counter and ordered an iced coffee he did not want because choosing hot tea felt too deliberate.

When he turned, Tifa was already inside.

There was no cinematic delay in the room to mark her entrance. No suspension of sound. No moral weather event. The woman at the counter kept frothing milk. Someone in the back dropped a tray. A bus sighed outside. The world, offensively enough, remained

ordinary.

Tifa lifted one hand in greeting as if they had last seen each other two months ago instead of twenty years.

He felt the shock of recognition low in the body rather than high in the mind. Not because she had not changed. She had. So had he. But there were certain continuities the years could not improve on or erase. The way she tilted her head slightly before smiling. The economy of her movements. The look of someone whose attention had always been a form of steadiness rather than force.

She came toward him smiling, and before he could calculate whether this was a handshake situation or a hug situation, she solved it by hugging him lightly once, briefly, without ceremony.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

Then, because panic still sometimes preferred old routes, he said, "You look good for forty-something yourself."

She laughed immediately. It was a clean laugh, unchanged in the one way that mattered.

"That was fast," she said. "I'd hoped age had improved your material."

"It has not."

"That's reassuring."

They sat.

For the first thirty seconds, Matt waited for awkwardness to arrive in the official capacity everyone had promised it would. It did not. What came instead was stranger and more merciful: the specific ease of two people who had once known each other before either had become narratively useful to themselves.

Tifa took off her coat and folded it over the back of her chair. "I'm glad you came."

"You texted like someone who might interpret absence as emotional cowardice."

"I would have."

"That sounds right."

She looked at him for a moment, not intensely, just fully. "You really do look good, Matt."

"Thank you. I'm trying to decide if this is a compliment or an anthropological finding."

"It can be both."

He smiled into his coffee.

This, more than anything, unsettled him. Not her presence exactly. The lack of theatrical strain in it. He had spent enough years imagining this impossible encounter in the abstract to assume that if it ever happened, it would arrive dragging revelation, accusation, or some large and humiliating weather system behind it. Instead they were two middle-aged people in a café making fun of each other's faces.

It was almost rude of life to make the miraculous feel so normal.

Tifa ordered tea and a small plate of injeolmi toast. When it arrived, she pulled the toast toward the middle without asking, the old gesture so unconsciously familiar that Matt had to look away for a second.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"The toast?"

"The fame."

He exhaled once through his nose. "Bad enough that I got asked this afternoon whether I think Congress should subsidize empathy for couples on the brink of divorce."

She winced. "That feels offensive to at least three professions."

"It was on a podcast."

"Even worse."

"I've become a category of person I don't trust."

She smiled, but there was sympathy in it now. "I watched some of it."

"That was unwise."

"The diplomats?"

He nodded.

Her expression changed, not dramatically, just enough to show that the joke layer had moved aside. "It was extraordinary."

Matt looked at the table. "It was complicated."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive."

"No." He rubbed one thumb against the side of the cup. "That's the problem, actually."

She seemed to understand this at once. Of course she did. She had always been able to hear the second sentence underneath the one he said out loud.

"I'm proud of you," she said.

He looked up.

There was no ceremony in the way she said it. No effort to make it larger than the table could hold. If anything, that made it harder to receive.

"For becoming famous?" he said.

"For making something that might help people," she said. "And for still looking worried enough that I believe you understand what could go wrong."

He let out a small laugh. "That is probably the nicest available reading of my face."

"It's the medically informed one."

"You really did become a doctor."

She leaned back slightly. "Family medicine. Glendale now. Though half my time I feel less like a doctor than a witness with good handwriting."

"That sounds like family medicine."

"It is family medicine." She smiled. "Teenagers who won't speak in front of their parents. Men in their sixties who say they're fine and

then quietly describe a month of chest pain. Exhausted mothers. Kids with fevers. Grandparents raising grandchildren. The occasional marriage that should have ended three years earlier but now has the flu together, which somehow makes them kinder for forty-eight hours."

He could hear, beneath the description, the shape of her life: full, useful, bounded by other people's needs in a way his never had been. He tried not to romanticize it. He had spent enough of his life turning what he lacked into moral scenery.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

He regretted the question at once for its size. But Tifa did not seem offended by it.

"Yes," she said, after only a brief pause. "Not in the constant way people pretend to be on the internet. But yes. I have a good life."

She said it simply, without triumph, apology, or defensive emphasis. That simplicity did something to him. It made the truth feel less like a verdict and more like weather he had long ago agreed to live under without quite realizing it.

"I'm glad," he said.

"I know."

She tore off a piece of toast and dipped it in condensed milk. "I'm married to a firefighter, which is exactly as calm as it sounds."

"Shu, right?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "You remember."

"I remembered enough to look him up and then feel bad about it."

"That's healthy."

"I didn't do anything creepy."

"You're saying that preemptively, which suggests ambiguity."

He laughed. "It was one search. Maybe two."

"I'll tell him his digital perimeter held."

The ease held. That was the strange thing. Not because nothing difficult existed beneath it, but because neither of them seemed interested in using difficulty as a form of performance.

"He knows I'm here," she said.

Matt nodded once.

"He knows about you."

There was nothing accusatory in the statement. Nothing defensive either. Just fact.

"In the actual way," she added. "Not the mythologized way people tell old stories when they're bored with their present life. He knows you mattered to me. He knows I saw you on television looking deeply uncomfortable in a suit and texted you because apparently I still enjoy creating manageable amounts of chaos."

"That's generous."

"It's also true."

He looked down at the table again, then back at her. "Is he okay with this?"

"Yes." She smiled a little. "He likes that I once knew someone pretentious enough to say jimjilbangs in a text message as if it were a normal punch line."

"That feels unfair."

"It is, but he's right."

He took that in. Not just the husband, though that too. The form of her life around the husband. The children, though she had not mentioned them yet. The fact that she had not come here sneaking around some private dissatisfaction. This was not the old story reopening to offer him a hidden annex. It was something cleaner and therefore harder: two people with fully built lives meeting honestly inside the fact of what they had once been to each other.

"You?" she asked. "Are you happy?"

He gave her the look he reserved for questions he believed to be unfair in a technically accurate way.

"That bad?"

"It depends on the hour."

"That sounds like a no with graduate-level vocabulary."

He laughed. "I'm fine."

"Still a liar."

"Less ambitious than before."

Tifa watched him the way good doctors and old intimates did, as if evasions themselves were useful data. "You don't have to give me the polished version."

"I don't think I have one."

"That tracks."

He set the cup down. "I don't know. My life has been interesting, which is often a warning sign. Some of it has been very good. Some of it has just been motion with flattering lighting. Lately I've been asking myself whether those are different things."

She smiled softly. "That sounds more honest."

"It's also less flattering."

"You're forty-four. That's what the discount is for."

He sat with that for a moment, then said, "You should know something."

Her expression changed, attentive now.

He had thought about this sentence in several forms since she texted him. Most of them were unusable. Too sweeping. Too confessional. Too eager to turn her into an explanation for his own life. He did not want to do that. He had already spent too many years, in one way or another, building private cathedrals around people who had not asked to live there.

So he tried for accuracy.

"You inspired me," he said.

Tifa blinked once. Not in confusion. In surprise.

He went on before he could ruin it. “Not the engineering. Obviously. You did not secretly invent intersubjective affect transfer and fail to mention it. I mean the reason I cared about the problem in the first place.”

The café was quiet around them. Two students in the corner were sharing a tablet. Someone at the counter was asking for oat milk as if it were an ethical disclosure. Outside, a bus groaned away from the curb.

Matt looked at the grain of the table. “I think a part of me spent a very long time believing that if I had understood you better back then, I would have made different choices. Or maybe I would have been capable of making them. And somewhere along the way that turned into a professional obsession with whether people could really feel each other clearly enough to stop causing so much damage.”

He looked up. “That’s not me saying I built this for you. That would be insane and also rude. I’m just saying you were in the question.”

Tifa was quiet for a few seconds.

When she spoke, her voice was gentler, not heavier. “Thank you for saying it like that.”

“I had several worse versions.”

“I believe that.”

He smiled.

She folded her hands around her cup. “For what it’s worth, I’m not surprised.”

“You’re not?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Even then, you were always trying to get underneath things. It made you brilliant. It also made you exhausting.”

“That is completely fair.”

“I don’t mean it cruelly.”

“I know.”

She looked out the window for a moment, then back at him. “We were so young, Matt. And so obedient to stories we hadn’t chosen. I thought I was supposed to want one kind of life on one timeline. You thought motion was the same as freedom. We were both wrong in ways that felt, at the time, very serious and adult.”

He felt something in him go still.

Not healed. That would have been too dramatic and also false. But stilled enough to hear the sentence properly.

"We were," he said.

She nodded. “I wanted things then I didn’t know how to say out loud. More time. School. A life that felt chosen instead of merely correct. Becoming someone other than the person I’d been praised for being.”

He did not ask the obvious question. Why didn’t you tell me. He did not ask because the answer was already in the room, and because middle age, if it did anything useful, should have taught him that the young often failed each other less from malice than from a lack of language.

Instead he said, “You said them eventually.”

“I did.”

“And you built a life that fits you?”

“Mostly.” She smiled. “Some days it fits like good clothes. Some days it fits like scrubs and dried cereal in the car. But yes.”

“Kids?” he asked.

“Three.” The answer came with immediate warmth. “Twelve, nine, and six.”

He smiled despite himself. “That seems like too many people.”

“It is exactly too many people. It’s also wonderful.”

She took out her phone and, after the briefest visible hesitation of a fundamentally sensible woman deciding whether this was indulgent, showed him a picture. Three children on a beach, one running away from the frame, one squinting, one holding a plastic shovel like a

weapon. Shu behind them, smiling with the exhausted steadiness of a man who understood both gravity and snacks.

Matt looked carefully, because anything less felt disrespectful.

"They're beautiful," he said.

"They are loud," Tifa said. "But yes."

He handed the phone back.

There was grief in him then, but not the annihilating kind he had once expected truth to produce. It was more precise than that. A sadness with edges. A recognition of time, of consequence, of the lives that had happened because the other life had not. But threaded through it, unexpectedly, was relief.

She had not been ruined.

The old private trial he had held against himself for twenty years shifted slightly off its axis.

He did not say any of this. Not yet. Maybe not ever in quite those terms.

Instead he said, "You seem... very like yourself."

Tifa laughed softly. "That is either lovely or devastating."

"It's lovely."

"I know what you mean." She stirred what was left of her tea. "You do too, actually. More than I expected."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It might be healthy."

He glanced at the window. The light had changed. The room had gone from gold to the softer gray that meant evening was making practical decisions. He realized with surprise that they had been there more than an hour.

Neither of them had reached for the melodramatic center. Neither had demanded a verdict on the past. No apology had been extracted, no old promise reenacted, no covert audition for another life attempted. And because of that, something more credible had

happened: the past had stopped behaving like a sealed chamber and started feeling, for the first time, like part of a human history that could be looked at without drowning in it.

Tifa glanced at her phone and sighed. “I have to go pick up one child from robotics and another from a birthday party where I’m fairly sure frosting has become a governing principle.”

“That sentence contains a lot of life.”

“It does.” She stood and put on her coat. “I’m glad we did this.”

He stood too. “Me too.”

At the door, she turned back once.

“Matt.”

“Yeah?”

She smiled, smaller this time but somehow more direct. “I really am proud of you.”

He held her gaze for a second, then nodded. “Thank you.”

There were other things he could have said. About the machine. About the years. About guilt. About whatever remained unfinished between the people they had been. But none of them improved the truth already present.

So he said the right-sized thing.

“Drive safe.”

She laughed. “You too.”

Then she was gone, down the stairs and back into the evening, absorbed almost instantly by the ordinary city that had somehow produced both this reunion and a parking ticket waiting on his windshield.

He stood outside the café for a while before heading to the garage.

Koreatown moved around him in its usual layered way: neon coming alive above small businesses, families negotiating dinner, delivery scooters making legally ambiguous decisions, music leaking out of a second-floor bar, the air carrying coffee and broth and traffic

in unequal portions. Nothing in the street suggested that his life had just become, in some quiet internal sense, more habitable.

He thought of the machine. Of all the impossible hopes now attached to it. Of the messages flooding his phone each day from people who wanted one hour of unbearable closeness in order to survive their own distances.

And he thought of the fact that this—this meeting, this small table, this unadorned exchange of truth—had required no machine at all.

Not because empathy was unnecessary. But because access had not been what was missing between them. Language had been missing. Time. Permission. The humiliating maturity required to stop narrating your own pain as the only important one in the room.

When he reached the garage, he did not start the car right away.

He sat with both hands on the wheel and let the feeling settle into a shape he could keep.

Closure still seemed too triumphant a word. Too neat. Too much like a door clicking shut.

This was not that.

But as he sat in the dim concrete light with the city humming above him, Matt felt for the first time that the truth of what had happened between him and Tifa might not destroy him when it finally came fully into view.

It might simply be bearable.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 09 - The Archive

At first Marcus treated the archive like a story he was telling himself about restraint.

One more file.

Then done.

Not because he believed this exactly. Belief had very little to do with it. But because every appetite, if it plans to stay, has the decency to introduce itself as temporary.

The second session happened the next night.

He worked dinner, smiled at four anniversary couples and a man who sent back a ribeye for being insufficiently medium rare, rode the bus home with his knees aching, stood in the apartment doorway looking at the receiver band on the counter, and told himself he would only check whether the first time had been a fluke.

He chose a file labeled JOY / RELEASE.

It lasted fifty-three seconds.

No pictures came with it. No scene. No borrowed narrative. Just a sudden opening in the body, as if some interior fist he had not realized was clenched had finally let go. Not triumph exactly. Not relief after fear. Something lighter and stranger. The feeling of laughing so hard the body stopped guarding its borders. Of happiness that did not need to explain itself in order to be permitted.

When it ended, the apartment felt shabbier than it had one minute earlier.

Marcus sat on the edge of the bed with the band in his lap and his own life returning to him in pieces: the humming fridge, the cheap blinds, the smell of the upstairs tenant's fried garlic seeping through the vent, the text from his sponsor asking how the birthday

had gone.

He did not answer the text right away.

Instead he opened another file.

By the weekend he had developed rules.

Never before work.

Never more than two in a night.

Never on meeting days.

Never the same file twice in twenty-four hours.

He liked the rules because they gave the whole arrangement the dignity of management. They let him feel, briefly, like a customer rather than a person kneeling in front of a new altar.

The archive was not large in any ordinary sense. Short files. Clinical tags. Thin metadata. Nothing to explain who had felt what, or why, or under what legal fiction these sessions had been captured in the first place. But whoever maintained the relay understood dosage. There was always just enough there to imply abundance.

DESIRE / MUTUAL still hit hardest at first.

Marcus told himself this was unsurprising. Sex had always been the easiest route into the machinery of self-deception. But what kept bringing him back was not the charge itself. It was the absence of splitness inside it. The fact that for one minute he could inhabit wanting without also inhabiting judgment. No father in the room. No second self standing behind his own shoulder taking notes.

Then he found SAFE / HELD.

That one lasted only thirty-eight seconds and made him cry so fast it offended him.

Again there was no memory in it, no actual transfer of image or voice. He did not suddenly see a room, or arms, or a face bending over him. But the feeling arrived with such bodily authority that his mind supplied a grammar for it anyway: being small and feverish and not alone with it. Being miserable and fully expected. The absolute certainty that someone bigger had arranged themselves

around your pain without resentment.

He ripped the neck patch off when it ended and stood in the kitchenette wiping his face with the heel of his hand as if tears were something the body had done without paperwork.

That night he went to a meeting in Silver Lake and talked earnestly about vigilance.

Everyone nodded in the right places.

A man named Devin, twenty months clean from pills and permanently sincere, said, "The brain is always looking for a side door."

Marcus said, "Yeah."

He was wearing the chip in his pocket like a saint's bone.

The fact that he was lying by omission did not yet feel like a full lie. It felt, in the taxonomy addicts prefer, like a complication.

No substance. No powder. No syringe. No dropper bottle on the nightstand. No chemical smell in the bathroom. Nothing entering the blood except whatever ordinary current the rig used to persuade the nervous system to believe what it was being given.

He could still say sober and make eye contact.

This mattered to him more than it should have.

The relay updated three days later.

No email this time. No warning. He got home after a double and saw that the index had changed.

Three new files.

AWE / ARRIVAL RELIEF / FORGIVN JOY / RECEIVING

The middle one had a typo in the tag, which made the whole thing worse. Human enough to be sloppy. Mechanical enough not to care.

Marcus stared at JOY / RECEIVING for almost a minute before pressing it.

The session was forty-six seconds long.

He did not know, when it began, what he was entering. Only that

the first sensation was expectancy without fear. Not suspense. Not dread disguised as excitement. Something cleaner. The feeling of waking toward a world that had already decided to be kind.

Then came astonishment.

Not the adult kind that arrives tangled with suspicion. Not the wary pleasure of somebody who has learned to search every gift for an invoice hidden underneath it. This was total, childish astonishment: the body discovering that delight had been prepared in advance and meant specifically for it.

No tree appeared. No wrapping paper. No living room. No scene at all. But Marcus knew with painful precision what sort of morning the recording must have come from. A child waking into evidence that somebody had stayed up late arranging joy.

His own childhood had not contained many mornings built that way.

There had been one Christmas when his mother, trying and failing to make optimism contagious, wrapped two shirts from Ross in red paper and put them under a plastic tree that leaned left. His father had come home drunk before noon, said something ugly about waste, and started a fight so dull with repetition that by dinner it no longer even felt personal. Marcus remembered sitting on the hallway carpet afterward holding one of the shirts in his lap like proof from the wrong trial.

This session was not a memory of somebody else's Christmas. The machine did not work like that. But the emotional shape of it was unmistakable. Surprise without danger. Receiving without debt. Innocence unpunished.

When it ended, he made a sound in the room that he would later refuse to classify.

After that, everything reorganized itself.

He still went to work. He still rolled silverware and described fish specials and refilled water glasses before people asked. He still joked with Elise and avoided the one busboy who watched him a little too

knowingly and texted his sponsor back with enough competence to remain in circulation. Outwardly, very little changed.

But the days developed a hidden second structure.

There was work time.

There was meeting time, or the time in which he pretended to remain eligible for meetings.

And there was the time before he could go home and use.

He tried not to think of it with that word. The word was too plain. Too accurate.

Instead he called it checking the relay.

He called it taking the edge off.

He called it ten minutes.

He called it not ketamine.

He called it a lot of things that left the central fact untouched.

The archive kept widening by teaspoons. A new file every few nights. Sometimes two. Never enough to attract attention outside the sort of private desperation that refreshed the page at work in the staff bathroom with the stall door locked. Never enough to make the breach public. Just enough to train waiting into devotion.

AWE / ARRIVAL felt, to Marcus, like stepping for the first time into a world larger than your fear and discovering it was not hostile by default. Maybe it was somebody seeing the ocean. Maybe a cathedral. Maybe a concert, a birth, snowfall, the desert at dawn. The feeling carried no image, only magnitude without threat.

RELIEF / FORGIVN, typo and all, made him yank the band off after nineteen seconds and pace the room swearing at nothing. He was not ready for whatever arrangement of the soul had produced that one. The bodily knowledge of having done harm and remained loved anyway was too implausible to bear for long.

There was another file called FULL / HOME that he played four times in one week.

That one was almost unbearable in its simplicity. Not ecstasy. Not

thrill. Just fullness. The nervous system at rest inside belonging. The sense of arriving somewhere and not adjusting your voice before you speak.

He started sleeping with the receiver band in the drawer beside the bed.

Then on top of the drawer, because pretending it was put away no longer interested either of them.

He stopped going to some meetings and doubled up on others, as if attendance could be averaged into virtue. In church basements and community rooms, he kept hearing versions of the same sentence: the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety, it's connection. Everyone loved this sentence because it was beautiful and mostly true.

Marcus sat in folding chairs and thought, with growing irritation, that beauty was no protection against competition.

What if the counterfeit connection felt better than the real kind?

What if it arrived on time, asked nothing of you, required no disclosure, and never looked disappointed when you failed to become inspiring?

At a Tuesday night meeting in Koreatown, a woman with nicotine fingers and forty years of clean time said, "Your disease will always tell you you're different."

Marcus thought: I am different.

Not morally. Mechanically.

Nobody in the room was going home with a black-market device capable of giving them thirty-eight seconds of being held without history.

He hated himself a little for the arrogance of this thought. Then he fed it anyway.

The ordinary world became flatter by degrees.

Food still tasted like food, but mostly after comparison. Work still exhausted him, but no longer usefully. Men were still attractive, but the attraction had regained all its old static: fear, self-consciousness,

the little jury of internalized voices voting against pleasure before it began. Even sleep became subordinate. If the archive could give him forty-six seconds of innocence or thirty-eight seconds of care, why waste the evening unconscious?

One night Elise asked him, halfway through polishing cutlery, whether he was all right.

"Your face is weird," she said.

"That is the face I was born with."

"No. The other thing. You keep disappearing while standing still."

Marcus made himself smile. "I'm just tired."

"Tired I know. This is different."

He shrugged.

She studied him long enough to become annoying. "You going to meetings?"

"Some."

"Some is not a real number."

"Enough to remain aggressively spiritual."

That got the smile he wanted, but not the surrender.

"Just don't get clever," she said.

It startled him, the accuracy of it. Not because she knew. She didn't. But because cleverness was exactly what the archive had offered him: a technically novel method of self-erasure dressed up as experience.

That night he skipped the meeting he had told his sponsor he was attending.

Instead he went home, locked the door, and opened JOY / RECEIVING twice.

The second time he played it, he tried to observe it scientifically.

This was absurd. Marcus knew nothing about neuroscience beyond the kind of words people used on podcasts to justify expensive

hopelessness. But he wanted to understand why this file, more than the others, seemed to bypass the usual checkpoints in him and go directly to the wound.

He thought the answer might be simple.

It was the feeling of being anticipated.

Not tolerated. Not managed. Not accidentally included after the fact.

Anticipated.

Somebody had thought of your delight before you arrived to feel it.

He did not know how to metabolize the fact that this was enough to undo him.

So he used it again.

By the second week, the ritual had become exact.

Shoes off by the door.

Phone on the bed.

Patch on neck.

Band over temples.

One file if he had worked late.

Two if he hated himself.

Three only on the nights he promised were unusual.

Afterward he would sit in the quiet and bargain with tomorrow.

Last one.

Meeting tomorrow for real.

Delete the relay.

Throw out the band.

Tell Devin.

Tell the sponsor.

Tell Elise, who would probably say I knew it in a tone somehow

both irritating and merciful.

Then the feeling would thin out, his own life would reassemble around him with its usual narrow seams, and the bargains would begin to sound melodramatic compared with the simple practicality of another session.

He stopped charging the rig in the kitchen because seeing it there in daylight made him feel seen.

He charged it beside the bed instead.

He started waking in the night and checking whether the relay had updated.

Sometimes it had.

Sometimes it hadn't, which became its own form of torment. The page would sit there unchanged, the same files in the same order, and Marcus would stare at them the way a thirsty man stares at a tap that still technically works. He could always replay what he already had. The archive did not prevent that. But replay carried its own shame. It made the dependence visible even to himself.

So he would wait.

Refresh.

Wait.

Refresh.

Somewhere on the other side of the relay, someone kept deciding that his hunger should not starve all at once.

The thought should have frightened him.

Instead it comforted him.

It suggested curation. Attention. A hand at the dosage wheel.

Toward the end of the month, after a long Saturday shift that left his shoulders burning and his patience stripped down to electrical wire, he got home and saw a new file at the top of the index.

SAFE / MORNING

He sat down on the bed without taking off his jacket.

This one was fifty-one seconds. Longer than most.

He pressed play.

The feeling that came through was so modest, so ordinary, that for the first few seconds he nearly missed its force.

Not ecstasy. Not rescue.

Morning safety.

The body waking without bracing.

The first consciousness of the day being trust.

No argument in the nervous system about what version of the self would be required. No rapid scan for danger. Just the simple, unremarkable confidence that the world beyond the bedroom door remained habitable.

When it ended, Marcus kept the band on and stared at the wall.

Something in him had crossed over while he wasn't looking.

The archive was no longer a secret pleasure or a temporary mistake or a weird private annex to an otherwise difficult but manageable life. It had become the place against which he measured all other experience. Meetings, work, sleep, sobriety, conversation, sunlight, food, other people's concern. Everything now arrived pre-diminished by comparison.

His sponsor called while he was still sitting there.

Marcus watched the phone ring.

Once.

Twice.

Then it went quiet.

A text followed.

You good?

Marcus looked from the screen to the relay page still glowing beside it. There were six files he had not played in the last forty-eight hours. Three he was saving. One he was pretending not to be saving. The new one sat at the top like a fresh vial on a tray.

He typed back eventually.

Yeah. Just tired.

Then he put the phone facedown, reached for the neck patch, and opened JOY / RECEIVING again.

By then he no longer needed the lie that this was the last time.

That part of the performance had exhausted even him.

He only needed the next file.

That was simpler.

That was honest.

That was how he knew he was no longer experimenting.

He was using.

Chapter 10 - Clinic Days

By the second week of clinic days, Piyush no longer recognized the furniture of his own work.

The lab was still the lab in the technical sense. The same secured doors. The same pale corridors, the same clean smell of filtered air and expensive electronics warmed into usefulness. Room A was still Room A, and Room C still contained the extra calibration rack that hummed faintly on bad electrical days. But everything around the machine had multiplied.

Clipboards.

Consent packets.

Temporary clinicians with visitor badges.

Security protocols.

Water service.

A refrigerated drawer for sensor gel that someone had labeled in cheerful block letters as if morale could be laminated into existence.

Piyush stood at the central workstation at seven ten in the morning staring at a shared schedule so crowded it no longer looked like science. It looked like an airport trying to organize weather.

Therapy consult at nine.

Couples pilot at eleven.

Family-repair intake at one.

Regulatory review at three.

Private clinician training at four-thirty.

Possible State Department follow-up pending confirmation.

Every box on the calendar carried two shadows behind it. One was hope. The other was administration.

He missed the phase of the work in which a bad day meant corrupted data.

Now a bad day could mean a newspaper story, a panic attack, a lawsuit, a senator, a marriage discovering in public that it had been held together privately by exhaustion.

Rosa was already there when he walked in, tablet in one hand, coffee in the other, reading a fresh intake summary with the expression of someone who had lost the luxury of surprise.

"Morning," she said.

"That sounds speculative."

"It is." She handed him the tablet. "The nine a.m. therapist wants permission to increase session length if the patient destabilizes and then re-regulates inside the link."

"No."

"I said no."

"Good."

"She would like a more nuanced no."

"Tell her nuanced no is scheduled for next quarter."

That got the brief upward movement at one corner of Rosa's mouth that, on her, counted as delight.

Piyush scanned the intake summary. Everything now came to him already translated into the new language the machine was forcing into existence. Emotional load. Link tolerance. Post-session disorientation risk. Identity-boundary fragility. Terms that had not existed in medicine six months earlier and now appeared in PDFs with logos.

He handed the tablet back.

"When did we become a field?" he said.

"When television said we were," Rosa replied.

This was close enough to true that he did not argue.

Past the glass wall he could see two waiting-area chairs, a table with untouched magazines, and the modest potted tree Shelby had

insisted on because "clinical spaces should not look like morally neutral airports." Piyush had not bothered to point out that the whole country now seemed determined to turn the clinic into an airport.

He set his bag down and opened the overnight queue.

There were twenty-three new requests.

A trauma specialist in Pasadena asking for emergency consideration.

A hospital group in Santa Monica wanting a demo "for palliative applications."

A celebrity divorce lawyer, which he closed on principle.

Two veterans' organizations.

An interfaith mediation center.

A prison-reform nonprofit.

Three couples who had somehow found the private clinic address and attached paragraphs so raw they made him feel indecent reading them at a desk.

And one message forwarded by Shelby at 1:12 a.m. with the subject line:

HIGH PRIORITY FAMILY REPAIR TRACK?

The body of the message contained only:

We need a clear lane for these. This is where the moral and commercial case converge.

Piyush read it twice and disliked it both times.

The first patient arrived at eight forty-seven, which meant the clinic was now operating on the universal medical principle that every schedule represented either fantasy or threat.

By nine fifteen, Piyush had already explained three times that the Empathy Engine was not telepathy, once that it was not admissible proof of anyone's intentions, and once that they were not, under any circumstances, offering "pre-marital truth packages," though he

admired the shamelessness of the phrase.

Matt came in near ten carrying his own coffee and the face of a man who had slept recently only in the legal definition of the term.

"You look terrible," Piyush said.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Matt set the coffee down and glanced at the board. "Why is there a family-repair track now? That sounds like a cable show hosted by trauma."

"Ask Shelby."

"I did."

"And?"

"She said families are where suffering compounds and where everyone will most urgently want help."

Piyush looked up from the intake notes. "That's the noble version."

Matt took a sip of coffee. "There is also the other version."

"There is always the other version."

The door at the far end of the corridor opened, and Shelby came through talking into an earpiece with the contained velocity of someone who had decided fatigue was a problem for bodies with less to do.

"No," she said to the invisible person in her ear. "I don't want consumer language anywhere near this release. Clinical access, limited capacity, controlled pilot. If anyone says democratizing empathy, I will become ungovernable."

She ended the call without breaking stride.

"That sounds promising," Matt said.

Shelby looked from him to the board and back again. "If either of you has a better phrase for ethically restricted public good under temporary scarcity, I'm listening."

Piyush said, “No.”

“Constructive as always.”

She moved to the schedule and tapped the one p.m. slot.

“Who approved this intake?”

Rosa, from the workstation behind them, answered without looking up. “You did. At 12:14 a.m.”

Shelby leaned closer to the screen.

The room changed in some small way Piyush would not have been able to defend in a court of law. Not her expression exactly. That stayed composed. But a little of the speed left her shoulders.

On the screen, above the screening notes, was the summary line:

Adult daughter, 34, requests mediated affective session with estranged father, 68. Veteran. Alcohol-use history. No contact in four years.

Shelby read the line once. Then again.

“Move it,” she said.

Matt looked at her. “Why?”

“Because the pre-session stabilization isn’t sufficient.”

Rosa said, “It meets the threshold we used yesterday.”

“Raise the threshold.”

“That is not how thresholds work,” Matt said.

Shelby ignored him. “I want another clinical interview, longer prep, more post-session support, and no media-adjacent staff anywhere near the floor.”

“The media-adjacent staff are not on the floor,” Piyush said.

“Good,” she said. “Then this should be easy.”

Matt watched her for half a second too long. “You okay?”

Shelby gave him a cool look that would have worked better if she had not just changed the policy with her pulse. “Perfectly.”

Then she straightened, tapped the board twice, and became public-

facing again. “We need throughput without sloppiness. If this becomes a place where people leave more shattered than they arrived, we are finished.”

She walked away before either of them could answer.

Piyush went back to the queue, though not with any real concentration.

Matt said quietly, “That one got close.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know about her father being a veteran?”

“Yes.”

Matt nodded once. “So did I.”

Neither of them said anything more. One of the strange side effects of working with Shelby for long enough was learning that her sincerity and her danger were often made of the same material. She could believe wholeheartedly that the machine might help families and also see, instantly, how a family case could become a testimonial, a market, a future. The wound did not cancel the appetite. If anything, it refined it.

At eleven, Piyush sat behind one-way glass for a couples pilot and watched two people discover that tenderness, when made undeniable, could be almost as destabilizing as resentment.

The husband received his wife’s exhaustion first and wept so suddenly it embarrassed them both. Then the wife received, not his excuses, not his private running commentary, but the raw shape of his fear that he had already become to her one more dependent body in the house rather than a partner inside it.

They left holding hands in the awkward, reverent way of people unsure whether what had happened was medicine or trespass.

Rosa said, “That one will either save them or produce three weeks of highly literate conflict.”

Piyush rubbed at his eyes. “Those may not be different things.”

At one-thirty, the family-repair intake that replaced the moved

veteran case turned out to be a mother and seventeen-year-old son who had stopped speaking to each other in complete sentences sometime the previous year. The boy came in with the brittle contempt of somebody too young to know how much fear it was costing him. The mother came in with the overcontrolled brightness of a person trying not to become the kind of parent whose grief embarrassed the child.

Shelby watched the prep interview through the observation window with her arms folded.

At one point the mother, speaking to Rosa, said, "I just want him to know I'm not angry all the time. I'm scared all the time, and it keeps coming out wrong."

Something went across Shelby's face then. Not enough for anyone who did not know her to name it. Enough for Piyush.

When the session ended, the son left first, stunned into politeness. The mother remained in the chair a minute longer, crying the quiet, humiliated tears of somebody who had just been accurately felt and did not yet know whether that was blessing or violation.

Shelby turned away from the glass before anyone else did.

Later, at three, while Piyush was trying to explain to a visiting oversight attorney why "emotional carryover duration" could not yet be predicted with statistical confidence, he saw Matt step into the corridor and stop moving.

It was not the kind of stillness public life had recently been imposing on him. Not annoyance. Not calculation. Something more personal.

Piyush finished the sentence he was in, handed the attorney off to Rosa, and followed him after a minute.

Matt was standing by the vending alcove looking at his phone.

"Good news or bad?" Piyush said.

Matt held up the screen. "Rachel."

The name was enough.

Piyush knew Rachel by reputation first and then, over time, by dinner tables and the occasional fundraising night Shelby considered strategically useful. Film director. Funny. Sharp. One of the few Los Angeles people Matt allowed into his life without first making eccentricity part of the price of admission.

"What does she want?"

Matt exhaled. "She wants to use the machine in therapy."

Piyush leaned against the wall. "That was inevitable."

"She says she's spent ten years circling the same trauma and she's tired of becoming articulate instead of different."

That sounded enough like Rachel that Piyush could hear her voice in it.

"And?"

Matt looked back at the phone. "And I think she might be exactly the kind of case this is actually for."

Piyush let that sit.

There were reasons to say no. Good ones. The clinic was already too full. The public scrutiny too high. The machinery of care still too young and badly outnumbered by the machinery of wanting. But the thought of a genuine therapeutic use, one no diplomat or network could turn into spectacle, had its own force.

"You trust her therapist?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You trust Rachel?"

Matt gave him a look. "With this? More than most governments."

Piyush nodded once. "Then build the safest version you can."

Matt studied him. "You say that like I'm the reckless one."

"In this friendship?"

"That feels overstated."

"It is not."

Matt almost smiled. Then he looked back at the phone, and for the first time all day, something like hope crossed his face without television in it.

By five-thirty, Piyush had approved six revised forms, deferred four cases, explained identity-boundary blurring to three clinicians, and eaten lunch standing up over a trash can, which he considered a decisive sign of institutional maturity.

At six ten Shelby appeared in his doorway holding another tablet.

"You still here?" she said.

Piyush looked at the clock. "No. Spiritually I left at noon."

"Good. Then your body can do me one favor."

He took the tablet.

It was a draft of a scaling proposal disguised as a restraint proposal.

Tiered access pathways. Satellite clinicians. Expanded licensing architecture. Referral partnerships. Future international pilots, pending regulatory carve-outs.

He handed it back. "This is an industry."

Shelby's expression did not change. "It is a response to demand."

"No," he said. "Demand is the weather. This is you building an airport."

That made her laugh once, unexpectedly. "That's good."

"It wasn't a joke."

"I know."

For a moment she looked tired enough to be ordinary.

Then she said, more quietly, "If we don't shape it, someone worse will."

Piyush thought of Marcus without knowing he was thinking of Marcus. Of the endless human appetite for shortcuts into each other. Of black markets, workarounds, investor decks, intelligence agencies, churches, grief. Someone worse was not a difficult hypothetical. It

was the default timeline of every useful thing.

"That may be true," he said. "It's still not the same as being right."

Shelby looked at him as if deciding whether he was worth arguing with after hours.

Apparently he was not.

"Go home," she said.

"I'm not going home yet."

"No?"

He hesitated. "Lina's coming in."

Shelby's eyes flicked toward the clinic corridor, then back to him. "Personal session?"

"Private. Bounded. Logged. Before you say anything."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were absolutely going to."

She let that pass. "Use Room C. A is still being recalibrated."

Then she left, carrying the future under one arm.

Lina arrived at seven, after the children were with her sister and after Piyush had already spent twenty minutes regretting the idea.

She came through security in jeans and a navy sweater, not looking frightened exactly, but alert in the way sensible people looked when agreeing to interact with machines that had recently become international news.

"This is deeply romantic," she said, taking in the badge scanner, the quiet corridor, the wall-mounted emergency kit.

"I considered candles," Piyush said.

"Were they in protocol?"

"Very much not."

That earned him the smile he had been hoping for.

Room C looked gentler at night. Less institutional, though this was probably an illusion produced by fatigue and lower light. The

clinical chairs still faced one another with the composed menace of expensive intention. The headsets rested on their stands. Cables ran where cables had to run. Monitors slept in a blue dimness against the wall.

Lina stood in the doorway a moment longer than she needed to.

"You can still say no," Piyush said.

She looked at him. "I know."

"Really. I mean it."

"I know," she said again. "I'm here because I want to understand what has taken hold of your life."

The sentence landed harder than she seemed to intend.

Piyush busied himself with the setup because procedure was easier than answer. He checked the chair sensors, ran the standard calibration, reviewed the abbreviated consent language even though she had already signed it upstairs.

Lina listened for forty seconds before holding up one hand.

"You know I love you," she said.

"Yes."

"You know I respect science."

"Yes."

"You also know you sound, at this moment, like a man reading warranty exclusions for a toaster."

He laughed despite himself. "This is me being reassuring."

"It is not your best register."

He set the tablet down. "I'm sorry."

She stepped closer. "You don't have to apologize. Just stop pretending this is only technical."

He looked at her.

There were people with whom Lina was patient by instinct and people with whom she was patient by discipline. With him it was

usually instinct. The difference mattered.

"What do you want from this?" he asked.

She considered before answering. "I want to know what you keep bringing home but not saying."

That was precise enough to scare him.

They sat.

The onset, when it came, still felt to Piyush like the edge of déjà vu. Not recognition exactly. More like the body becoming aware of a pattern one beat before the mind could name it.

They had agreed to keep the session short and structured.

First: Lina would receive while Piyush held in mind the emotional field of home.

Second: he would shift toward the emotional field of work.

Third: if it remained tolerable, he would hold the human knot between them that he had most failed to explain with language.

Rosa monitored from the adjoining room and had made him promise twice that he would not improvise.

For the first phase, Lina closed her eyes.

Piyush did the same.

He did not think in scenes so much as orient himself toward the durable feelings beneath scenes. The children's morning noise. Mira's sarcasm. Nikhil's songs. Lina moving through a kitchen at speed. The almost embarrassing gratitude of returning each night to a life that had remembered to save a place for him.

When the link settled, he felt the transfer take hold with the now-familiar strangeness of self becoming slightly plural.

Lina inhaled.

Not sharply. Just enough that he knew something had arrived.

What moved through him then was not one thing but a field: love, yes, but also the ongoing humility of being depended on by people he loved more than he trusted himself to deserve. The low

ordinary wonder of domestic life. The fear threaded through it. The knowledge that everything most worth protecting in his life was also breakable by neglect, ambition, fatigue, distraction, success.

When the first phase ended, Lina opened her eyes and looked at him as if she had walked farther than the distance between the chairs.

"Okay," she said softly.

He almost stopped the session there.

But she nodded once, ready.

The second phase felt harsher from the first second.

Work was not love's opposite, but lately it had been acting like a competing religion.

Piyush let himself orient toward the lab, the queue, the calendar blocks breeding overnight, the impossible burden of other people's private hope, the fear that every responsible use was also a proof-of-concept for ten irresponsible ones. Under all of it ran the bruised pride of the thing itself: the fact that they had made something real, something good enough to help, which made the danger worse rather than smaller.

Lina's hands tightened on the chair arms.

Afterward she let out a long breath. "That one I already knew."

He smiled weakly. "Yes."

"Not the shape of it. The pressure."

He nodded.

Rosa's voice came through the monitor. "You can stop there."

Lina looked at him. "One more."

Piyush should have said no.

Instead he said, "Okay."

The third phase had no good technical name.

Human knot, he had called it, because anything more precise would have required too much confession before the session even

began.

He closed his eyes again.

This time he did think of Matt, though not in narrative. Not as the man at the steakhouse or in the Waymo or half-asleep in a conference room finding better words than anyone else after first insulting all available language. He thought instead toward the emotional structure Matt occupied in his life.

Admiration first, because truth had to start there. Not hero worship. Matt was too chaotic, too avoidant, too intermittently impossible to qualify for anything that simple. But admiration, undeniably. For the size of his mind. For the rare seriousness of his questions. For the fact that even now, with fame and policy and Shelby's acceleration pressing on all sides, some part of him still cared more about whether the machine should exist in a given room than whether it could.

Then gratitude.

Then something harder to admit: protectiveness.

Not because Matt needed rescuing in any ordinary sense. He would hate the premise. But because Piyush had spent enough years beside him to know that brilliance and loneliness had formed a private treaty in him, and that the part of Matt that drew people in was not always the part best equipped to stay tethered to them.

Under all of that, unexpectedly visible once he stopped editing himself, was brotherliness. Not metaphorical. Emotional. The feeling of having found, in adulthood and outside blood, a person whose existence had altered the architecture of your own life.

He felt the link take hold.

Lina made a small sound.

It was not distress.

Recognition, maybe. Or surprise crossing into comprehension too quickly to sort cleanly.

Piyush kept still.

The feelings moved through him as a single pattern now: respect, loyalty, exasperation, worry, affection, indebtedness, the rare humility of being changed by a friend. Also fear. Fear that success would strip Matt into a symbol before anyone got the chance to protect the person inside it. Fear that the machine would devour the man who had helped make it. Fear that Piyush himself, in trying to build something useful, had helped hand Matt to forces he was temperamentally unfit to survive.

When Rosa ended the link, the room came back all at once.

Lina was crying.

Not dramatically. Not even heavily. Just tears she seemed too surprised to hide.

"I'm sorry," Piyush said immediately.

She shook her head and wiped at her face with the heel of one hand. "Don't do that. Don't apologize before I know what I'm feeling."

He waited.

The monitors dimmed. Somewhere in the hallway a cart wheel clicked over a seam in the floor.

Finally Lina laughed once, softly and in disbelief.

"That was Matt," she said.

Piyush looked at her.

"Yes."

"I knew it before I knew how I knew it."

He let out a breath he had not noticed he was holding.

Lina sat back in the chair, still looking at him, but differently now. Not suspiciously. More as if some invisible angle in the room had corrected itself.

"You really love him," she said.

The sentence might have embarrassed him if it had been less accurate.

"Yes," he said.

"Not instead of us."

"No." The answer came too quickly to mistake. "Never that."

"I know." She looked down at her hands. "I think I knew you cared about him. I didn't know it was built that deep."

Neither had he, not in so clean a form.

"I'm not sure I knew either," he said.

Lina nodded slowly.

"When you talk about him at home," she said, "I sometimes think you're defending a difficult coworker out of habit. Or guilt. Or male loyalty, which is usually one of the least interesting forces in the world."

Despite everything, he laughed.

"But that," she said, glancing toward the darkened headset, "wasn't habit."

"No."

"It was gratitude."

"And respect."

"And worry."

"Yes."

She was quiet a moment longer.

"Is he all right?" she asked.

The question startled him more than anything else that evening.

Not because it was hard to answer. Because of what it meant that she was asking it now.

"I don't know," he said. "Not entirely."

Lina looked toward the glass wall into the corridor beyond. "He always seems like someone who can keep going long after keeping going has stopped being the same as being okay."

Piyush smiled faintly. "That is unfortunately exact."

She stood, and he stood with her. The session had left both of them looking slightly rearranged, as if some quiet interior furniture had been moved while they were still in the room.

At the door, Lina stopped.

"Invite him over," she said.

Piyush blinked. "What?"

"For dinner. Breakfast. Whatever he can make without turning it into an anthropological event."

He stared at her.

"I'm serious," she said. "Not a pity invitation. I just..." She searched for the sentence. "If he matters to you like that, I don't want to keep treating him like weather attached to your job."

Something in Piyush softened so quickly it almost hurt.

"Okay," he said.

Lina reached for his hand.

On the walk back through the corridor, the clinic looked the same as it had an hour earlier. The chairs. The cables. The blue monitor glow. The locked doors. Nothing in the architecture acknowledged that anything irreversible had happened.

But something had.

Not because the session had solved a problem. It had not. The machine remained dangerous. The clinic remained overcrowded with human hope. Shelby would still wake tomorrow trying to turn emergency into system. Matt would still be Matt. The waiting list would still lengthen. The world would still keep arriving at their door convinced that feeling more directly must be the same thing as loving better.

And yet.

Piyush walked beside his wife toward the elevator and felt, with equal parts gratitude and unease, that the Empathy Engine had done in one carefully bounded hour what years of ordinary conversation had not quite managed.

It had changed the map inside a marriage.

Gently.

Usefully.

Irreversibly.

When the elevator doors closed, Lina squeezed his hand and said, as if she had been thinking it over for several floors already, "Also, if he comes for breakfast, warn him Nikhil has a new verse."

Piyush laughed.

"I will," he said.

And because the night had been strange enough already to permit one more kindness, he let himself believe for half a minute that maybe careful use and dangerous use would remain, in the world they were building, meaningfully distinguishable from each other.

It was not certainty.

But for that elevator ride, it was enough.

Chapter 11 - Rachel

Rachel arrived at the clinic wearing sunglasses at six in the evening, which in Los Angeles could mean celebrity, migraine, or the simple refusal to let a room tell you what mood it expected.

In Rachel's case it was mostly defiance.

She pushed the glasses up into her hair when Matt met her in the private corridor and looked around at the badge scanner, the security door, the subdued lighting, the wall art selected by committee to imply care without committing to taste.

"This," she said, "is the least glamorous place I have ever come to for a breakdown."

Matt took her coat. "That's because glamorous breakdowns are usually fake."

"Mine have all been artisanally sourced."

She smiled when she said it, but the smile had edges.

Rachel had always been one of the few people in Los Angeles whose humor felt less like performance than velocity. Film sets, premieres, festivals, panels, dinners where everyone spoke in well-lit abstractions about story and urgency and truth. She could move through all of it with the efficient impatience of a person who knew how much theater professional adults were willing to mistake for honesty. Matt had liked that about her before he trusted it. Later he trusted it enough to notice the cost.

She was smaller than she looked in photographs, though photographs in Los Angeles tended to enlarge people into their most marketable surfaces. In person she carried tiredness openly. Not self-pity. Just the fatigue of somebody who had been competent for too long in rooms that rewarded competence more than healing.

Dr. Levin was already inside the consultation room reviewing intake notes on a tablet.

Rachel's therapist was in her fifties, quiet-faced, with the kind of attention that made people lower their voices without being asked. Matt had met her twice before, once by video and once for protocol review. She had the rare trait of taking the machine seriously without allowing it the dignity of mysticism.

"Rachel," she said, standing. "How are you feeling?"

Rachel considered. "Like a person who is beginning to suspect that decades of insight may not, by themselves, be a full treatment plan."

Dr. Levin nodded as if this were a blood pressure reading.

"And more honestly?"

Rachel let out a breath. "Afraid. Interested. Offended that I'm here voluntarily."

"That sounds useful," Dr. Levin said.

Rachel looked at Matt. "Do you ever notice therapists can make dread sound like excellent paperwork?"

"Constantly."

They sat around the small consultation table first because Matt had insisted on it. The machine could accelerate access, but it did not excuse ritual. Explanation. Boundaries. The slower human things. Especially here.

Matt reviewed the protocol once more even though all three of them knew it.

"No memories will transfer," he said. "No images, no narrative content. If specific recollection comes up, it will come up through you, not through the system. The system only transmits raw affective state."

Rachel put two fingers to her temple. "I know."

"I also know you know. I'm still saying it."

"Because you enjoy sounding like a very anxious appliance man-

ual?"

"Because consent is not decorative."

That silenced her, though gently.

Dr. Levin set the tablet down. "Rachel, the goal tonight is not to force a revelation. The goal is to reduce the distance between what you already know intellectually and what your body still treats as unspeakable. If at any point the session exceeds your tolerance, we stop."

Rachel nodded.

Matt watched her do it. There were people who nodded because they agreed, people who nodded because they wanted the room to proceed, and people who nodded because the gesture gave them something small to control. Rachel, at this moment, was the third kind.

"You can still walk out," he said.

She turned to him. "You know that's not comforting, right?"

"It isn't meant to be comforting."

"Excellent. Just checking."

Dr. Levin said, "What are you most hoping for?"

Rachel looked down at her hands.

When she spoke, the humor had gone out of her voice, not dramatically, just fully.

"I'm tired of being eloquent about it," she said. "I'm tired of understanding every pattern and still feeling, when something brushes the wrong part of me, like I'm nine years old and made of exit routes. I'm tired of telling the story around the story."

Matt felt something in his chest tighten.

Rachel went on, still looking at her hands. "I make films for a living. I know how to shape pain into meaning. I know how to give it pacing, language, music, distance. I can do that all day." She looked up then. "I do not know how to stop my body from acting like the thing is still happening somewhere just off camera."

Dr. Levin nodded once. “That’s clear.”

The room stayed quiet for a second.

Then Rachel looked at Matt and said, almost irritably, “If this turns into one of those experiences that makes everyone in the room admire the future while I get nothing except a bill and a new vocabulary word, I’m haunting you.”

“That seems fair.”

“Good.” She stood. “Let’s do it before I become inspirational by accident.”

Room C was dimmer than during daytime clinics. The main lights stayed low. The monitors cast a blue-gray wash across the wall. The chairs faced one another at a careful angle, intimate enough for therapy, clinical enough to prevent any illusion that closeness was being improvised.

Rachel sat in the sender chair. Dr. Levin took the receiver chair opposite her.

Matt moved between the console and the sensor rack with the deliberate, almost priestless ritual of setup. Headset contacts. Baseline read. Interoceptive sync. Skin conductance. Respiration. He hated how normal the actions had become in his hands. It made him trust them more and fear them more at once.

Rachel watched him attach the neck sensors.

“You get calmer when there are cables,” she said.

“That is one of my worst traits.”

“It is not top five.”

Dr. Levin settled her hands on the chair arms. “Rachel, before we begin, orient to the room.”

Rachel did, because she was trying. Wall. Light. Chair under her. Air on skin. Matt at the console. Dr. Levin across from her.

“Good,” Dr. Levin said. “Now orient to the fact that you are here now, not there then.”

Rachel’s mouth shifted in what might have become a smile in

another context. “Therapists really love prepositions.”

“And directors love control,” Dr. Levin said.

“That felt personal.”

“It was intended to.”

Matt almost smiled despite himself.

He initiated the low-link calibration first.

The onset always came with the same wrong familiarity. Not a jolt. Not a visible effect. The body simply became aware of a pattern arriving half a beat before thought could justify it. Like déjà vu stripped of memory and left with only the eerie conviction of a second reality overlapping the first.

Dr. Levin’s breathing changed first.

Rachel sat very still.

The readings held.

“Link stable,” Matt said quietly.

Dr. Levin closed her eyes for two seconds, then opened them again.

Something had already reached her.

He knew the look by now, though each version of it was different. The receiver did not suddenly become the sender. They remained themselves. But the other person’s emotional state moved into them with enough force to change the weather of the room.

At first, what registered in Dr. Levin’s face was not fear exactly.

Compression.

As if her body had been made smaller from the inside.

Then came a second change, harder to watch.

She looked not frightened but managed. Intensely, prematurely managed. The affect of a child organizing herself around danger faster than any child should know how.

Rachel’s eyes were open now, fixed somewhere past Dr. Levin’s

shoulder.

Matt watched the numbers because that was what he was for. Heart rate up, but within tolerance. Respiration shallow. Cortical load climbing. Not catastrophic. Not yet.

Dr. Levin spoke softly.

"I'm here with you."

Rachel's jaw tightened.

"I'm here," Dr. Levin said again. "You do not have to perform coherence for me."

Something in Rachel's face broke at the word perform.

Not outwardly. More like a support beam failing inside a building that still appeared, for the moment, intact.

The emotional field deepened.

Matt felt it only by inference, but the inferences were enough. The room had filled with the shape of an old terror that had learned to disguise itself as usefulness. Beneath it, something worse than fear: confusion welded to self-blame. The bodily conviction that what was happening must in some way be your fault because otherwise the world would be too unsafe to inhabit.

Dr. Levin's eyes filled.

She did not look away.

"Rachel," she said, voice low and steady, "this isn't seduction. This isn't consent. This isn't your body choosing wrong. This is a child adapting to violation."

Rachel made a sound Matt had never heard from her before.

Not loud. Not cinematic. Just a raw, involuntary sound of recognition that seemed to leave her body without asking the rest of her permission.

Her hands gripped the chair.

"We can stop," Matt said immediately.

Rachel shook her head once.

Dr. Levin kept her gaze on Rachel, but Matt could see that receiving the state was costing her. That was part of the truth no one on television liked. Compassion at this depth was not uplifting. It was labor. Nervous-system labor. The trained willingness to let another person's pain cross your threshold without turning it into spectacle or retreat.

"Stay with the chair," Dr. Levin said. "Stay with your feet. Nothing is being asked of you now except presence."

Rachel was crying openly now, though in the startled way of somebody discovering that crying had already started somewhere lower in the body than she had been monitoring.

"I hate that it still lives there," she said.

"I know," Dr. Levin said.

"I hate that I can explain everything and it still—" She broke off, pressing one hand against her sternum. "It still makes me disappear."

Dr. Levin's expression shifted. A new feeling had entered the link.

Not from her. From Rachel. Or rather from the part of Rachel that had been surviving beneath the articulate adult architecture for so long that survival itself had started to look like personality.

This was the terrible clarity of it.

Not memory.

Matt saw that at once. No one in the room was watching a replay. Nothing visual had been transferred. No secret movie had been projected into anyone's brain. But the emotional structure underneath the history had arrived with such force that language could now finally land where it belonged.

Smallness.

Freeze.

Contamination.

The frantic intelligence of a child learning to leave herself just enough to remain inhabitable afterward.

Matt felt his hand hover over the stop control.

He had designed this threshold himself with Piyush and Rosa after the first therapy trial. Link duration ceiling. Autonomic overload cutoffs. Manual interruption. No heroics. No revelation worth the nervous system that had to survive it.

Still he did not stop the session.

Not because he wanted breakthrough more than safety. Because, for the first time since the machine left the lab, he could see a use of it that did not feel like appetite wearing moral clothing. It felt like assistance. Precise, bounded assistance where language alone had been circling for years.

Dr. Levin looked at him briefly. "I want to try a brief reciprocal phase."

Matt looked at Rachel.

Rachel's cheeks were wet. She nodded once, eyes closed now.

"Ten seconds," Matt said.

"No more," Dr. Levin agreed.

He adjusted the protocol.

The reciprocal link was always riskier, not because emotion became less real in both directions, but because mutuality confused boundaries more quickly than one-way receipt. That was why they kept it rare. That was why this room existed at all.

He initiated the return phase.

Dr. Levin closed her eyes.

Matt did not know exactly what she chose to orient toward. Not thoughts. Not concepts. The machine could not transmit ethical propositions. But he could see from the readings what kind of state she built: steadiness, first of all. Then compassion with structure in it. Not pity. Not sentimental softness. The emotionally trained conviction that another person could be fully seen without being made dirty by what had happened to them.

Rachel inhaled sharply.

Her whole body changed around that breath.

Not healed. Not even calmed, exactly. But less alone inside itself.

A person can spend years hearing the sentence it wasn't your fault and still never have it arrive below the neck. Matt understood that suddenly, with humiliating force. Dr. Levin's state was not language, but it gave Rachel, for a few impossible seconds, the bodily experience of being regarded without disgust.

Matt ended the link at nine seconds.

The room went very still.

Rachel bent forward, both hands over her face.

Dr. Levin sat back slowly, breathing like someone returning from a long swim.

No one spoke for several seconds.

Then Rachel laughed once through tears, which was so purely Rachel a sound that Matt nearly had to look away.

"That was awful," she said.

Dr. Levin nodded. "Yes."

Rachel lowered her hands. "No. I mean it was awful and..." She searched for the rest of the sentence. "And it wasn't vague. Do you understand? It wasn't vague."

Dr. Levin did not hurry her.

"For years," Rachel said, "I've had language for it. I've had themes. I've had insight. I've had the version I can tell smart people without ruining dinner." She wiped under one eye and shook her head. "But that was the first time it felt like the body and the story were occurring in the same country."

Matt looked at the console so he would not accidentally intrude on the size of the moment with his face.

Dr. Levin said, "What do you know now that you didn't know ten minutes ago?"

Rachel answered without delay.

"That I was a child."

The room stayed quiet around the sentence.

Then, more quietly: "I know that sounds absurd. Of course I knew that. But I didn't know it in the place that kept treating me like an accomplice."

Dr. Levin nodded once. "That's not absurd."

Rachel sat back in the chair and stared at the ceiling for a moment. "I am going to be very annoying about this later."

"That's a good sign," Matt said.

She looked at him and managed a tired half-smile. "You're not allowed to turn this into a product demo."

His answer came too fast. "I won't."

"I know."

That was the dangerous thing about Rachel. She could hand him trust in a way that made him feel, instantly, more responsible for not breaking it than for almost anything else in the room.

The debrief took another forty minutes.

Water. Grounding. Language. Time stamps. Clinical notes. The patient's return to chronology after affect. Dr. Levin insisted Rachel name five present-tense facts before anyone discussed meaning. My feet are cold. The chair is ugly. Matt looks worse than he did last week. The overhead vent is too loud. I would like tea and possibly several new laws.

By the end of it, color had returned to her face.

Not health exactly. More occupancy.

Matt walked her to the recovery room, where soft lamps and a mediocre couch attempted the architectural fiction that trauma and furniture could negotiate as equals.

Rachel sat, accepted the tea he handed her, and looked at him over the rim of the cup.

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?"

"You invented the thing. You're supposed to look either triumphant or morally ill."

"I'm deciding."

She considered him. "You look both."

"That may be the permanent condition."

"It's not your best look."

He sat in the chair opposite her.

Through the half-open door he could see Dr. Levin at the counter finishing the initial notes, methodical as weather.

Rachel wrapped both hands around the tea. "I'm not saying it fixed anything."

"I know."

"I'm also not saying it was just intense." She looked down into the cup. "I've had intense. I live in Los Angeles. Intense is a municipal service."

That got a laugh out of him.

She looked back up. "That felt useful."

Useful.

Not miraculous. Not life-changing. Not saved.

Useful.

The word reached him more deeply than anything else she could have said.

Because usefulness could be defended. Usefulness could be bounded. Usefulness belonged to medicine, not myth. It implied real help inside real limits. No salvation claims. No world-historical nonsense. Just one human intervention doing actual work where other methods had stalled.

For a brief, almost shameful moment, Matt felt relief so clean it bordered on joy.

Not because the machine had justified itself entirely. Nothing could. Not after the diplomats, the appetite, the first patient who had felt too exposed, the investors, the governments, the raw public hunger. But because here, in a quiet clinic room after hours, with no cameras and no speech about changing humanity, the thing had done exactly what he had once hoped it might do in its most defensible form.

It had helped one suffering person become less alone inside the truth.

Rachel watched his face and said, "You're doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Believing in your own invention with your whole stupid chest."

He exhaled. "Only provisionally."

"Good. Keep the provision."

He nodded.

Dr. Levin stepped in then and said Rachel should not drive herself home. Rachel said this was insulting but correct. Matt called a car despite Rachel claiming she was still capable of both transportation and irony.

When the car arrived, she stood in the corridor holding her coat and looked, for the first time all evening, less sharp-edged than tired.

"Thank you," she said.

Matt shook his head. "Thank Dr. Levin."

"I am thanking Dr. Levin. I'm also thanking you."

He nodded once.

Rachel studied him a second longer. "Do not let them turn this into a circus."

"I'm trying."

"No," she said. "Try harder."

Then she kissed his cheek in the old Los Angeles way that only worked when nobody involved was performing Los Angeles, and

followed the security guard toward the exit.

Matt stood in the corridor after she left.

The clinic had gone quiet in the dense, electrical way buildings did after the official day had ended and only the systems remained fully awake. Air handling. Servers. Backup power. Locked doors preserving the fiction that anything inside them could stay bounded if enough adults cared hard enough.

Dr. Levin came out carrying her bag.

"She'll need follow-up quickly," she said.

"I know."

"But it was good work."

The sentence landed with unusual force coming from her. She was not a woman who distributed praise for atmospheric reasons.

Matt looked through the glass at Room C, where the chairs already looked emptied of meaning by their own stillness.

"Yeah," he said.

For the first time in weeks, maybe months, he could see the outline of an argument sturdy enough to survive his own skepticism.

Not scale.

Not access.

Not markets or speeches or governments hugging in corridors while the world clipped the footage into propaganda or hope.

This.

A therapist receiving, for a few unbearable minutes, what a patient had been carrying alone. A patient feeling, not conceptually but bodily, that another person's regard did not turn filthy on contact with the truth. The machine not as spectacle or substitute for love, but as an adjunct to careful human work.

It was possible, standing there in the quiet after Rachel's session, to imagine that maybe restricted therapeutic use really could justify everything else they had already risked.

That maybe the line between transformation and trespass could be held.

That maybe the thing could survive if it stayed small enough to remain humane.

He stayed at the clinic later than he needed to, finishing the session log himself.

He corrected one metadata tag by hand.

He confirmed the local encryption.

He closed the debrief notes.

At 9:43 p.m., he shut down the active monitoring screens in Room C and walked out without noticing that one process remained open behind the dark glass of the terminal.

It ran in a window labeled for routine redundancy testing.

The session file compressed itself in silence.

A mirror copy split off from the protected archive and moved through an old vendor maintenance tunnel no one at Qualia had properly disabled after the first rush of expansion. Small packets. Ordinary names. Nothing dramatic enough to trip alarm thresholds written for louder kinds of theft.

By the time the building lights fell to night mode, Rachel's session existed in more than one place.

No one inside the clinic knew that yet.

Which was why, for several more hours, the hope remained pure.

Chapter 12 - Access Denied

By the time the archive disappeared, Marcus had stopped pretending he still used it for variety.

The labels remained useful, but mostly as filing systems for need.

JOY / RECEIVING for the nights when he could not bear the apartment's indifference.

SAFE / MORNING for dawns that began with panic before thought.

FULL / HOME for the hour after work when his own life came back around him too narrow to inhabit.

He had once wanted new files because newness implied abundance. Now he mostly wanted reliability. The known shape of borrowed feeling, available on command. Innocence by appointment. Relief in under a minute.

The rules from the beginning had rotted quietly.

Never before work became once before work on hard days.

Never on meeting days became after meetings, because surely honesty should earn him something.

Never the same file twice in twenty-four hours became an old superstition from a phase of the addiction in which he had still wanted to look original to himself.

He started using in smaller and uglier gaps. In the staff bathroom during split shifts, the receiver band under his black work shirt, the neck patch hidden by his collar. In the alley after close, sitting on an upturned milk crate with the rig pressed into his temples while the dumpsters radiated stored heat. Once, in a locked dry-storage room, because the need had arrived so fast he could not imagine carrying it all the way to midnight.

The sessions were still short. That was part of their genius.

Nothing in your life had to look dramatically ruined for a minute at a time to take it over.

Outwardly, he was still passing.

Not well. But enough.

He forgot an order on a six-top and recovered quickly enough to make it seem like the kitchen's fault. He broke a wineglass polishing stems and sliced the side of his thumb because his hands had started to shake in the wrong parts of the day. He laughed a beat too late at jokes. He disappeared into himself mid-conversation and then snapped back with serviceable charm. Elise watched all of this with the narrowed eyes of a woman whose affection took the form of accurate suspicion.

"You look haunted by a startup," she said one Thursday while they folded napkins before dinner.

"That's very current of you."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

She did not smile. "Have you slept?"

"Some."

"That is not a quantity."

He folded another napkin. "You have very high standards for data in an industry built on lying."

Elise leaned against the service station. "Are you using?"

The question moved through him so fast it nearly looked like offense.

"No."

The answer was not fully false, which was how he had learned to keep saying it.

Elise studied him another second, then nodded in the unsatisfied way people did when they knew pressure would only improve your

performance.

"If you do the thing where you convince yourself technicalities are morality," she said, "at least don't make me listen to it."

That night he went home and opened SAFE / MORNING twice in a row even though it was past eleven.

The archive had flattened other appetites with humiliating efficiency.

He had thought, at first, that if the relay ever vanished he could go back to ketamine. The thought stayed in his head as a procedural reassurance for a while, the way people kept old exits mapped in buildings they no longer intended to burn down. But as the weeks passed he understood that the archive had spoiled him for simpler forms of escape.

Ketamine had once removed him from himself.

This did something more dangerous.

It lent him pieces of a self he had never been allowed to become.

A boy waking toward delight.

A body wanted without surveillance.

A nervous system at rest inside belonging.

What powder or vial was going to compete with that?

So the old number stayed unsent in his phone. A museum piece from a previous religion.

The loss of meetings happened less dramatically than he would later wish.

No single renunciation. No slammed doors. No declared relapse. Just arithmetic.

If he worked lunch and dinner, the Koreatown meeting became inconvenient.

If he felt fragile after a session, the Silver Lake meeting felt too far.

If he was tired, tomorrow would be more sincere anyway.

His sponsor kept texting.

Checking in.

You good?

Meeting tonight?

Call me.

Marcus answered often enough to preserve the appearance of being reachable.

Still here.

Long shift.

Rain check.

Doing okay.

The last one sat on the screen for a long time after he sent it, like an insult written in polite language.

The cutoff came on a Monday that had done nothing, objectively, to earn its place as catastrophe.

He worked lunch. A private-equity man with a watch like a minor monarchy asked if the dry-aged strip was "still worth it in this economy." A woman in sunglasses drank half a bottle of Chablis alone and left no tip. A child ground bread into the banquette with the concentration of a scientist testing the limits of matter. Marcus moved through the shift with his body on loan and his mind held together by the thought of JOY / RECEIVING waiting at home.

Not even a new file. That would have been greed.

Just the known one.

The one that still, even after replay, gave him forty-six seconds of being expected by joy.

He got back to the apartment after ten. Shirt damp at the spine. Feet aching. Head full of restaurant music and other people's money.

He did not turn on the light.

He sat on the bed, put the phone in his lap, and opened the relay.

The page did not load.

For one second that meant nothing. Pages failed. Wi-Fi in the building regularly became theoretical around ten-thirty. He refreshed.

The black screen appeared.

White text.

ACCESS DENIED.

Below it, smaller:

RELAY INACTIVE.

He stared.

Then refreshed again.

Same text.

He checked the signal. Full.

He turned Wi-Fi off and on. Switched to cellular. Refreshed again.

ACCESS DENIED.

He opened the direct bookmark to JOY / RECEIVING.

Nothing.

Back to the index.

ACCESS DENIED.

He stood up so fast the bed frame knocked the wall.

"No," he said to the empty room.

He restarted the phone.

He re-paired the receiver band, though of course the band had nothing to do with the relay itself. He peeled a fresh neck patch anyway, pressed it into place with shaking fingers, and opened the browser again as if the body's readiness could persuade the page to return.

ACCESS DENIED.

He searched the inbox for the first email.

What It Feels Like To Be You.

The relay link still opened. The page still existed. The door simply no longer opened for him.

He tried old session links from history.

One redirected.

One timed out.

One loaded long enough to let his pulse rise before collapsing into the same black refusal.

ACCESS DENIED.

The phrase lost meaning through repetition and then regained it with a worse one.

This was not a glitch.

Someone had turned him off.

He sat down again because standing had become too ambitious.

The phone glowed in his hands. Black page. White letters. The entire economy of his nights reduced to two words cold enough to be almost elegant.

He did not know how long he kept refreshing.

Long enough for the room to heat around him.

Long enough for the cheap blinds to become visible, then invisible again.

Long enough for panic to burn through its bright phase and enter the flatter, meaner one beneath it.

He tried bargaining with the page.

One file.

Any file.

Not even the good one.

Something new. Something bad. Something thin. He would take grief, awe, forgiveness, anything, if the system would only stop returning him in full to himself.

It did not.

Around midnight his sponsor called.

Marcus looked at the phone vibrating on the bedspread and, for once, answered.

"Hey," the sponsor said immediately, relief arriving before questions. "You alive?"

Marcus laughed once. It came out wrong.

"Debatable."

There was a pause on the line. Not alarm exactly. Attention tightening.

"What's going on?"

Marcus rubbed at his eyes with the heel of one hand. "I think I'm in trouble."

The honesty of it made the room tilt.

"Okay," the sponsor said. "Good. Good that you answered. Talk to me."

Marcus tried.

What came out was useless.

"I can't..." He looked at the dead relay page as if it might provide vocabulary out of spite. "Something got shut off."

His sponsor, bless him, did not ask for immediate sense. "Did you use?"

Marcus closed his eyes.

"Yes," he said.

It was the nearest available truth.

"Today?"

"No. That's the problem."

The sponsor was quiet for one beat. "Can you get to Koreatown? There's still a late meeting. I can meet you there."

Marcus almost said no. The word rose automatically.

But something in him, some old reflex not fully burned out by the

archive, made a different choice.

"Yes," he said.

"Good. Shoes on. Water. Wallet. Phone charged. I'll wait outside."

Marcus nodded before remembering nodding did no work over the phone.

"Okay."

"And Marcus?"

"Yeah?"

"Do not disappear between now and then."

"I won't."

It was not a promise he knew how to make. But it was the sentence he wanted to be true.

He put on shoes. Drank water standing at the sink. Left the receiver band on the bed as if refusing to put it away might count as moral seriousness. Then he took the bus east under fluorescent light that made everyone look temporarily guilty.

Koreatown was damp with marine layer and fryer smoke when he got off.

The church basement meeting was where it always was: down the side entrance, past a hand-lettered sign, through a corridor that smelled faintly of old coffee, floor cleaner, and the democratic exhaustion of folding chairs. Marcus had been in rooms like this often enough to know their weather. Wariness first. Then recognition. Then, if you stayed long enough, the slow humiliating relief of hearing other people say the parts out loud.

His sponsor was waiting outside under the yellow spill of a security light, hands in jacket pockets, face arranged into the careful neutrality recovery people used when they did not want alarm to become an alibi.

"You made it," he said.

Marcus nodded.

The sponsor hugged him once, briefly, without performance.

Human contact. Warm. Real.

Marcus hated, in that instant, how little it resembled what he needed.

Inside, the meeting had already started.

A woman with a wheezing laugh was speaking about lying to herself in small administrative ways. A college kid with fresh sobriety and an expensive haircut nodded at everything like it was a manual for landing planes. Someone poured coffee at the back table with reverence out of proportion to the coffee. The room was ugly in the familiar merciful way of places not trying to seduce anybody.

Marcus sat beside his sponsor and tried to keep his body in the chair.

The speaker said, "I kept thinking the big lies were the problem, but really it was the little permissions. The little exceptions. The private amendments."

Marcus stared at the floor.

Private amendments.

He could have built a legislature out of them.

When it came time to share, he passed.

His sponsor did not push.

Another man spoke about boredom. Another about shame. A woman in a Dodgers cap said the hardest part of getting clean had been accepting that most salvation arrived without soundtrack.

That line should have reached him.

It did, in a way.

But the room had been made unbearably thin by comparison.

That was the true obscenity of what the archive had done.

Not that ordinary human care had ceased to exist.

It was all around him. In the sponsor's waiting outside. In the bad coffee. In the folding chairs. In the practiced patience of strangers

willing to sit with one another through repetition and failure and the humiliating pace of actual recovery.

The obscenity was that his nervous system had been retrained to experience anything slower than immediate borrowed feeling as insufficiency.

By the time the meeting ended, he felt skinned.

Not helped enough to keep going.

Not dishonest enough to say it had done nothing.

Just painfully aware that the old routes back into ordinary life still existed and that he, at this exact hour, could not seem to travel them.

Outside, his sponsor lit no cigarette, though he clearly wanted one.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asked.

Marcus looked at the wet shine of the parking lot under the streetlight.

"It's insane," he said.

"I've heard insane."

"It's not like before."

"Okay."

Marcus tried to assemble an explanation and failed at the first requirement, which was believing it would sound real.

"There was this thing," he said. "And I know how that sounds."

His sponsor waited.

"It made everything else feel..." He stopped.

"Thin?" the sponsor said.

Marcus looked at him.

"Yes."

The sponsor nodded as if this, at least, was legible in any century. "That part I know."

Marcus laughed once, bitterly. "No. You don't."

The cruelty landed between them and Marcus regretted it at once.

His sponsor looked tired, not offended. "Probably not in your exact flavor. But enough to stay standing here."

Marcus put one hand over his mouth.

The sponsor said, more gently, "Come home with me tonight."

It was a good offer. A plain one. Couch. TV too loud. Breakfast in the morning. One human being keeping another in the world by the oldest available methods.

Marcus wanted to want it.

That, more than anything, undid him.

"I can't," he said.

"You can."

Marcus shook his head. "No. I can't do the part after."

"The part after what?"

He looked at the parking lot, the church door, the city beyond, all of it painfully ordinary and therefore, tonight, almost abstract.

"After the room goes quiet," he said.

His sponsor stepped closer. "Then don't be alone when it does."

For one second Marcus nearly said yes.

You could see it happen, he thought later, if later had continued. The tiny hinge in the self. The small ordinary gate that sometimes opened toward life and sometimes, for reasons too mixed and humiliating to narrate cleanly, swung the other way.

He almost said yes.

Instead he said, "I need air."

"I'll come with you."

"No." Marcus managed something like composure. "Just five minutes."

His sponsor looked at him for a long moment.

Then, because trust was the method and always had been, he

nodded. “Five.”

Marcus walked to the corner.

Then past it.

He heard his name once behind him and kept walking anyway.

Back at the apartment, the relay page still said ACCESS DENIED.

Of course it did.

He sat on the bed in the dark with the phone in one hand and the recovery chip in the other.

Thirty days from a different life. A small metal coin stamped with survival measured one ordinary day at a time.

He turned it over with his thumb.

The receiver band lay beside him like a dead animal or a relic. Hard to tell which.

His phone buzzed.

Sponsor: You there?

Then again.

Sponsor: Please answer.

A minute later another message.

Elise: If you die on a Tuesday I will be furious.

He laughed once at that and then covered his face.

There were still people in the world.

That was the tragedy.

A sponsor in a parking lot.

Elise irritated enough to care.

A room in Koreatown full of strangers willing to hold open the next hour without demanding that he deserve it first.

He knew all of this. He knew it the way people knew facts that no longer reached the organs making decisions.

The archive had not taught him love.

It had taught him speed.

It had taught him that relief could arrive before language, before trust, before the humiliating labor of staying long enough to be known.

Now that speed was gone, and his own unborrowed life rushed back in with all its old unfinished weather: the father, the hiding, the wanting, the watchfulness, the apartment, the thin walls, the body that had never once mistaken itself for home.

He looked once more at the phone.

ACCESS DENIED.

It seemed, in that moment, to describe more than the relay.

He set the chip down beside the band.

One token from the life he had been trying to build.

One from the thing that had replaced it.

Outside, a siren passed and kept going. Someone in the building laughed too loudly. A faucet ran in the next unit and shut off.

The city remained itself with offensive consistency.

Marcus sat in the dark until the dark stopped changing.

Then, sometime before dawn, unable to imagine any ordinary morning he could survive, Marcus ended his own life.

Chapter 13 - The Human Soul for Sale

Piyush called at 5:11 in the morning and said, before Matt had fully found his voice, “Can you come in right now?”

No explanation. No apology for the hour. Just the question asked in a tone that made explanation feel secondary.

Matt sat up in bed.

The room still held the dark, unrevised shapes of a life not yet back under management: chair with yesterday’s clothes, glass of water on the nightstand, phone cable hanging half off the dresser like a failed intention. He had slept badly and not long. Rachel’s face kept returning every time he closed his eyes. Not the crying, not even the moment in the chair. The look afterward when she said useful and forced the word to remain small enough to be honest.

“I’m coming,” he said.

Piyush hesitated for a fraction of a second.

“Matt,” he said, and that was all.

By the time Matt reached Qualia, the sun was barely up and the building already looked compromised.

Not physically. The glass still shone. The security bollards still stood in their decorative seriousness. The lobby still offered the same expensive quiet to anyone wealthy enough to mistake it for calm. But there were two police cruisers at the curb and a plain sedan he did not recognize, and the receptionist who usually greeted early arrivals with the strained brightness of a well-trained person now looked as if she had aged six months before seven in the morning.

Rosa met him by the elevator bank.

Her face was pale in a way that made makeup irrelevant.

"What happened?" Matt said.

She did not answer in the corridor. "Conference room B."

Inside were Piyush, Shelby, a lawyer from outside counsel, Qualia's head of security, and two detectives who looked as if they had already seen enough of rich people's innovation to be unimpressed by another instance. On the table lay a clear evidence bag.

Inside it was a receiver band.

Matt stopped walking.

It was stripped down, matte black, ugly in the purposeful way of black-market objects built from real components and contempt. Two flat temple contacts. Adhesive residue. One side of the elastic frayed where it had been repaired by hand.

He knew what it was immediately.

Piyush looked up at him. There was no anger in his face, which made everything worse.

One of the detectives stood.

"Matt?"

Matt nodded.

The detective introduced herself. Matt did not retain the name. He was still looking at the band.

"This device," she said, "was recovered last night from the residence of a deceased male. Your company's security team believes components may have originated from Qualia hardware."

Recovered.

Residence.

Deceased.

The language entered the room dressed as caution and landed as fact.

Matt sat because his knees had made a recommendation.

The head of security slid a tablet across the table. "Stim-side contact pads match a vendor batch we used in early clinical rigs. Modified, obviously. But it's ours underneath."

Matt looked at the screen without seeing it.

The detective continued. "We also recovered what appears to be repeated access history for an illicit data relay hosting session files associated with your system."

Shelby spoke for the first time.

Her voice was level. Too level. "Associated how?"

The detective looked at the bagged receiver band. "Enough that we're here."

Piyush rubbed one hand over his mouth.

The lawyer said, "What exactly are you asking from our clients?"

The other detective, a man with tired eyes and a wedding ring worn thin at the palm, said, "Right now? Help understanding what we're looking at."

On the screen, the security lead pulled up a second image: a browser capture from the dead man's phone. Black background. Clinical-looking tags. Session names in columns. Repeated access logs. Downloads. Replays.

Matt felt his stomach turn with a slow, deliberate certainty.

He had imagined this breach in theory. Piyush had imagined it. Rosa had written memos about it in language no one outside the lab had wanted to read until the diplomats made the machine newsworthy. A captured session. A replay market. Emotional state stripped from the bounded room in which it had first been offered and turned loose in private, hungry hands.

Now the theory sat in front of him with time stamps.

The detective tapped the screen. "He accessed these files hundreds of times over the last month. Then, according to the device history, access was cut. Last entry attempt returned access denied repeatedly."

Matt heard, rather than saw, Rosa inhale.

No one said the word addiction.

No one needed to.

The detective turned the tablet.

"His name was Marcus."

The name meant nothing for one full second.

Then the detective pulled up the identification photo.

And the restaurant came back.

Not all at once. Not cinematically. In pieces.

Dark wood. Candlelight. Shelby's ridiculous tip. The strange buoyant disbelief of the first real trial having worked. And moving among it all, easy and alert and professionally unreadable until the check folder opened and the expression on his face changed.

Marcus.

Matt saw again the quick laugh, the little shock of being abruptly reached across some ordinary distance. He saw the water glasses, the polished rhythm, the brief glance at their table that had carried more hope in it than he had understood at the time.

"The waiter," he said.

No one answered.

"He waited on us," Matt said, looking at the photo as if it might refuse agreement. "The night of the first trial. At the steakhouse."

Piyush closed his eyes for half a second.

Shelby looked at the picture and did not say anything at all.

Matt thought of her nodding toward Marcus in the back of the restaurant, saying people would pay far more than that to feel understood. He thought of Marcus opening the folder, startled by money and contact at once. He thought of the machine leaving the lab through a face that had seemed, at the time, merely adjacent to the story.

The detective said something about next of kin. The lawyer asked

what exactly had been found at the residence besides the device. The head of security started explaining log signatures and relay traffic. Matt heard almost none of it as language. Only pattern.

A man with a stripped-down receiver band.

A relay of stolen feeling.

Repeated use.

Cut off.

Dead.

Rosa was the first to say the rest aloud.

"If those files were enough to condition dependency," she said quietly, "then removing access abruptly could have been..." She stopped.

The detective finished the sentence clinically. "A destabilizing event."

Matt looked at the black session index again.

The column of tags had an indecent familiarity now. JOY. SAFE. AWE. RELIEF. Words that belonged to lives, not products. Words someone had packaged, copied, distributed, and metered out until one man had begun treating them like oxygen.

Shelby's hand was flat on the table. Matt noticed because the rest of her was so controlled. The hand was not.

"Do we know who ran the relay?" she asked.

The head of security hesitated. "Not for certain."

"Which means you have a guess."

He touched the screen again and brought up a second set of logs. "There are signature overlaps with the intrusion we flagged after the Room C vendor tunnel issue."

Matt looked up.

Rachel.

For one irrational beat the room lost depth.

The security lead kept talking. “Same obfuscation style. Same packet timing irregularities. Same use of maintenance tunnels and misnamed processes. It’s not proof, but it’s enough to suggest the same actor or actor set.”

“HumansRHumans,” Piyush said.

No one contradicted him.

The detective frowned. “That the privacy group?”

“Hacker group,” Shelby said. “They prefer conscience language.”

The male detective said, “If it’s the same people, then they didn’t just steal your data. They curated access.”

The sentence settled over the table with the force of accusation.

Curated access.

Fed in drips.

Then denied.

Matt had to grip the arms of the chair to keep his body where it was.

Because if that was true, Marcus had not simply found a black-market narcotic and used it until it killed him. Someone had built the habit with intention. Someone had watched hunger and decided it could be useful.

The lawyer was asking whether that speculation should really be on record.

Shelby cut across her. “Speculation is not the issue.” She looked at the evidence bag. “The issue is that a man is dead with our stolen hardware on his body.”

Her voice cracked on body.

Very slightly.

Enough that everybody in the room heard it.

Then she recovered it at once, which was also audible.

Matt looked at her and understood, with exhausted clarity, that both things were true. She was shaken. Deeply, perhaps. And she

was already building the wall around the damage.

The detectives left with promises of follow-up, requests for technical cooperation, and the kind of procedural calm that made catastrophe feel administrative. The outside lawyer went with them to discuss subpoenas no one had yet formally issued. The head of security stayed behind long enough to say he was expanding the breach review and then vanished into the building's nervous system.

When the room finally emptied down to the four of them, no one immediately stood.

Piyush said, "We shut it down."

Shelby looked at him. "What exactly?"

"The clinic. New sessions. Everything that is not direct patient safety."

"We have patients in treatment," Rosa said.

"And what do we tell them?" Shelby asked. "That the safest response to criminal sabotage is abandonment?"

Piyush's voice sharpened. "We tell them we no longer know where the edges are."

Matt kept looking at Marcus's photo on the dark tablet screen.

He had seen that face before the machine was a public phenomenon. Before the archives, the therapy pilots, the foreign ministries, the networks, the consultants, the policy language. Back when the thing was still close enough to wonder that it had felt, for one evening, almost clean.

Now the first civilian life visibly caught in its wake belonged to the man who had carried their food.

"Matt."

It was Rosa.

He looked up.

She did not ask if he was okay. Rosa had too much respect for language to waste it that way.

"Your phone," she said.

He had left it face down on the table.

It was vibrating.

Screen lit.

Rachel.

Once.

Then again.

Then a text from Dr. Levin.

Call now.

A new text from Rachel appeared before he opened the first.

It's out.

For one bright second he did not understand the sentence.

Then he did.

He stood up so fast the chair legs scraped the floor.

Piyush saw his face and went pale. "What?"

Matt was already opening the message.

Rachel had sent a link.

The page loaded into a storm.

Not one post. Hundreds. Fragments replicating faster than any corrections could hope to follow. A clip from inside Room C, cropped vertically, grainy but unmistakable. Rachel in the chair, bent forward, hands over her face. Dr. Levin's voice audible underneath. A screen capture of clinical notes with her name partially redacted and therefore more exposed, not less. A thread on a forum Matt had never heard of offering "full package mirror" for crypto. A culture-war account declaring elite therapy had become mind porn. A privacy account calling it proof that inner life was now infrastructure. A gossip feed asking what a famous director had been hiding. The comments below it were already breeding.

Matt could not feel his hands.

Rosa stood and came around the table. “Matt?”

He put the phone in her hand because if he kept holding it he might throw it through glass.

Piyush read over her shoulder and said one word.

“No.”

Shelby took the phone next.

For the first time since Matt had known her, she looked not strategic, not furious, not even afraid.

Sick.

Then the look changed because it had to.

“Get legal in here,” she said. “And crisis.”

Piyush stared at her. “Crisis?”

“What would you like me to call it?”

“I’d like you not to sound like this is brand management.”

Shelby turned on him with a kind of exhausted ferocity. “A woman’s trauma therapy session is on the internet and a dead man used our stolen hardware to drug himself with feelings until he stopped surviving. I am aware of the scale of the problem.”

No one in the room answered.

Shelby put the phone down more carefully than necessary. “That is exactly why I want everyone in this building who knows how to limit damage doing their jobs immediately.”

Matt was already backing toward the door.

Rosa said, “Where are you going?”

“Rachel.”

He was in the car before anyone could argue him into staying.

Rachel lived in the hills in a house that looked, from the street, like everyone else’s idea of what a director’s house should look like and from inside like a person’s life had actually occurred there despite the architecture. Books. Framed stills. Too many lamps. A kitchen

island with unopened mail and two kinds of salt. By the time Matt got there, three cars were already outside.

Rachel opened the door herself.

No sunglasses now. No velocity either. Just fury holding her upright.

Inside were Dr. Levin, Rachel's producer friend Mara, and a lawyer who seemed built entirely out of expensive exhaustion. Three screens were open on the kitchen counter, all of them radiating versions of the same violation.

Rachel did not hug him.

"Tell me," she said, "that your apocalypse people have solved privacy in the last thirty minutes."

"No."

"Good. I'd hate to miss the miracle."

She turned back to the counter.

On the center screen, a statement draft was open.

Mara said, "We can still hold. We do not have to respond tonight."

Rachel laughed once. "They put my therapy session on the internet and we're considering dignity as a tactic?"

The lawyer said, "I'm considering whether giving the story more verified details helps."

"It already has details." Rachel pointed to the screen. "It has my face."

Matt stepped closer.

The clip was shorter than he had expected, which somehow made it filthier. Not enough for context. More than enough for spectacle. Someone had paired it with a waveform render and language from the notes. Not the full truth of what happened in the room. Just the parts most likely to survive without tenderness.

Rachel caught him looking and said, "You don't get to apologize with your eyes. Use words or don't."

He met her gaze.

"I'm sorry."

Her face changed for half a second. Not softening. Just acknowledging receipt.

"I know," she said.

Dr. Levin was the one who looked shattered.

"I should have insisted on in-person note entry only," she said quietly. "I should have pushed back on digital synchronization."

"You should not have had to conduct medicine under siege," Rachel said.

The lawyer cleared his throat. "If you go public, choose one axis. Privacy violation, criminal theft, therapy stigma, childhood abuse survivorship. Not all four."

Rachel turned to him very slowly. "That may be the most professionally insane sentence anyone has said in my kitchen."

Mara put a hand over her mouth to hide a laugh that did not survive into sound.

Rachel looked at Matt. "What are they saying at Qualia?"

He thought of the conference room. Evidence bag. Marcus's face on the screen. Shelby's hand flat on the table. Piyush wanting to shut everything down.

"Not enough," he said.

"Accurate."

She read the draft once more and then started deleting lines.

The lawyer objected twice. She ignored him both times.

Finally she said, "I'm not going to let anonymous sadists and opportunists explain my life to the public while I take the high road into a ditch."

She typed:

Yes, that is me in the leaked clip.

It was a confidential therapy session.

I was sexually abused as a child.

The shame belongs to the people who violated that privacy, not to me.

No one should have their interior life turned into content.

She stopped there.

The room went still.

Dr. Levin looked at the statement and closed her eyes once.

Matt felt the force of the sentence interior life. He thought of HumansRHumans calling the mind the last refuge of privacy. He thought of how right they were and how monstrously they had chosen to prove it.

Rachel hit post.

For twelve seconds, nothing happened.

Then everything did.

The replies came in species.

Gratitude that still looked at the wound a little too greedily.

Performative solidarity from strangers who wanted to be seen having the correct emotion in public.

Men insisting on skepticism as a form of intelligence.

Conspiracy amateurs.

Voices calling her brave in tones so generic they might have been automated.

People asking for the clip.

People saying there must be more to the story.

People saying therapy itself was theatrical rot for elites.

People saying no child could misread that kind of attention unless something in her wanted it.

Dr. Levin made a sound that could have become nausea.

Mara started blocking accounts with murderous concentration.

The lawyer muttered, “Don’t read replies,” in the tone of a man who knew advice could still be ethically required even after it was rendered useless.

Rachel read enough to go white.

Then she put the phone down face first and said, very calmly, “I would like to set the internet on fire.”

“No objections,” Mara said.

Matt stood in the kitchen and understood something he had been trying, until that moment, not to know.

The leak itself was not the whole crime.

The whole crime was that once private feeling became transferable, it also became extractable, copyable, distributable, marketable, discussable by strangers, sortable into political factions and monetizable outrage. The machine did not need to intend any of this. Markets and institutions and anonymous sadists were fully capable of doing the imaginative work once the threshold had been crossed.

His phone buzzed.

Piyush.

Matt stepped into the hallway to answer.

“There are already listings,” Piyush said without preamble.

Matt leaned against the wall. “Listings where?”

“Security is pulling darknet captures. Replay boards. Invitation rooms. Somebody’s charging for access to pieces of Rachel’s session package.”

Matt closed his eyes.

“How much?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Don’t ask questions you can only hate the answers to.”

Matt looked through the doorway back into Rachel’s kitchen. At the lamps. The tea going cold. The lawyer drafting takedown language no one would respect for more than minutes. Rachel standing

at the counter with one hand over her eyes, refusing collapse out of what looked, at this distance, like contempt.

"I know the answer already," he said.

Piyush exhaled. "Come back when you can. Congress is making noise."

Matt almost laughed.

Of course Congress was making noise.

By the time he got back to Qualia, the building had fully converted into crisis architecture.

Conference rooms occupied. Security rerouting access. Lawyers multiplying by mitosis. Screens on every floor showing some version of Rachel's statement, the leaked clip, panel segments, outraged privacy experts, opportunistic moralists, and one anchor who managed to say "empathy economy" with enough enthusiasm that Matt briefly wanted the television to experience gravity.

Shelby was in the main glass room with her jacket off and her hair no longer fully obeying her. It made her look younger and more dangerous at once.

She was standing over a table of printouts.

Incident timelines.

Vendor tunnel diagrams.

Traffic maps.

A screenshot of the forum where Rachel's session package had been listed.

And, beside it, another screen capture from a replay board Matt had never seen before.

File names in a column.

Short tags. Prices. Crypto addresses.

One of them was Rachel's.

Another, farther down the list, was labeled JOY / RECEIVING.

Matt stopped breathing for a second.

Marcus had not been using a hidden personal stash. He had been a customer inside an actual market.

Or something worse than a market, because markets at least admitted what they were.

Shelby noticed him and, for once, did not start with message discipline.

"Sit down," she said.

He did not.

Piyush was there already, standing with both hands braced on the table as if leaning toward collapse without conceding it. Rosa sat at the far end, reading a preliminary breach memo with murderous stillness.

The outside lawyer said, "The House Committee on Science, Technology, and Public Welfare has formally requested documents and testimony. Expect subpoenas within forty-eight hours if voluntary cooperation isn't immediate."

Matt laughed once, because the alternatives had become too ornate.

Shelby looked at him. "What?"

He pointed at the printouts. "That. The machine is a week away from becoming a street drug and a humiliation engine, Rachel's pain is being sold in pieces, a man is dead, and we're already in the pre-subpoena phase of American democracy. I'm just admiring efficiency."

No one told him to calm down.

Rosa tapped the replay-board screenshot. "We need to assume there are more files than we've identified."

"There are," said security from the screen at the end of the table. "Mirror sites are replicating faster than takedowns. Some of the packages include synchronized room footage, clinical note headers, and rendered affect traces. Enough to replay in illicit rigs, enough to sensationalize on mainstream platforms."

"Can you kill the vendor tunnel?" Piyush asked.

"It's already closed."

"That is not what I asked."

The security lead looked tired enough to become honest. "We can stop the original bleed. We cannot un-invent copying."

The room went quiet.

That was the sentence at the center of all of it.

Not a technical failure.

A civilizational one.

Shelby sat down slowly.

For the first time all day, she looked less like an operator than a person who had just watched her own arguments turn on her.

When she spoke, the old strategic force was still there, but now it moved through visible shock.

"We suspend all new external sessions," she said. "Immediately. Existing patients only under direct clinical review. No media statements from anyone except through counsel. We get Rachel every resource she wants. We cooperate with law enforcement on Marcus. We preserve every system image. We find every tunnel. Every mirror. Every vendor failure. Everything."

Piyush said, "And then what?"

Shelby looked at him with a bleakness Matt had not seen on her before. "And then we try to keep this from becoming normal."

It was the most honest sentence she had said in weeks.

The lawyer slid a folder across to Matt.

Inside was the congressional notice.

Not yet a subpoena. Close enough that refusing would only change the format of the same humiliation.

He read the committee title, then the language requesting his appearance to testify regarding public safety, privacy failures, black-market dissemination, clinical harms, and the death now under

investigation.

Clinical harms.

As if Marcus had been a side effect.

As if Rachel's session were a compliance breach.

As if any of the available nouns were still equal to the thing itself.

He set the folder down.

Across the glass wall the city was going dark, one window at a time. Screens glowed everywhere. Offices, cars, apartments, bars. A whole civilization running on illumination and appetite.

He thought of Marcus at the restaurant, looking briefly toward their table as if hope had taken an interest. He thought of Rachel in the chair saying she was tired of telling the story around the story. He thought of the replay-board listing, the prices beside the tags, the obscene neatness of formatting pain for purchase.

Not content.

Worse than content.

Inventory.

He had wanted to build a bridge between isolated selves.

He had told himself, all along, that the danger lay in misuse around the edges. Coercion. Consent failures. Governments. Investors. All of it true. All of it serious.

But sitting in the glass room with Marcus dead, Rachel exposed, and Congress preparing to haul him forward as the public face of a thing he was no longer sure deserved a future, Matt saw the full shape at last.

He had not simply helped make a machine that could deepen understanding.

He had helped crack open the final protected category of private life and invite every ordinary human appetite inside: greed, voyeurism, desperation, righteousness, grief, loneliness, ambition, lust, pity, cruelty, need.

The human interior had acquired a supply chain.

And somewhere between the restaurant tip, the diplomat embrace, the therapy room, the replay boards, and the dead man in the apartment with the receiver band beside him, what they had built had crossed from medicine into market.

Matt looked at the congressional notice again.

Then at Rachel's stolen face on the muted television.

Then at the list of session files with prices beside them.

He understood, finally and without any remaining shelter of abstraction, that he had not merely helped build a bridge between people.

He had helped put the human soul up for sale.

Chapter 14 - Shoe-Tying Song

Matt did not decide to go to Piyush's house so much as fail, eventually, to invent a reason not to.

After the day of Marcus and Rachel and Congress and replay boards and the phrase human soul for sale arriving in his head with the authority of a verdict, collapse turned out to be mostly clerical. He showered without feeling cleaner. At one point he stood in his kitchen with the freezer open and no idea what he had been looking for. He sat on the bed with his shoes still on and watched Rachel's statement, then Marcus's session tags, then the congressional notice, until all three began to feel like one image wearing different clothes. He answered two texts, ignored fourteen, and slept in the fractured, humiliating way of people whose bodies have accepted exhaustion without granting rest.

By morning his phone contained a small civilization of concern.

Rosa, practical.

Rachel, brief and angry in a way that suggested continued function.

Unknown numbers from Washington.

Shelby, saying only We need alignment before legal.

And Piyush, sent at 6:12 a.m. and then again at 6:37.

Breakfast. No arguments.

The second message said:

Lina says this is not optional.

That was what got him into the car.

Traffic was light in the rare, suspicious way Los Angeles traffic sometimes was when the city seemed momentarily willing to let a person arrive somewhere before deciding what to do with him. Matt

drove east with both hands too tight on the wheel and the radio off because information, for once, felt like a form of litter.

He had not been to Piyush's house in weeks.

Not because he had not been welcome. Because welcome, in some phases of a person's life, was harder to tolerate than loneliness. Loneliness at least knew how to mind its own business.

When Lina opened the door, she looked at him once and stepped aside without any expression meant to make the moment easier.

"Come in," she said.

There was mercy in that. No theatrical concern. No are you okay asked of a man visibly not okay. Just entry.

The house smelled like coffee, toast, and something with cumin in it. Morning light fell across the kitchen island in pale rectangles. A school lunchbox sat open beside a half-finished homework sheet. Mira's backpack had collapsed against the wall with the same eloquent disdain for gravity it always seemed to carry. The room was alive in the ordinary, unspectacular way that no camera ever managed to respect correctly.

Nikhil was in the middle of the floor with one shoe tied and the other in active philosophical dispute.

He looked up, saw Matt, and brightened with immediate, impractical joy.

"Matt!" he said. "Listen to the new verse."

Before Matt could answer, Nikhil began singing.

"Cross it, pull it, bunny-ear two," he sang, louder than melody required and with complete indifference to embarrassment. "Make a little house for my shoe."

Then, with the solemnity of a composer unveiling late-period work, he added the bridge.

"Bunny ear, bunny ear, go around, now my foot won't hit the ground."

Mira, from the table, did not look up from her workbook. "That is

still not what shoes are for."

"It's figurative," Nikhil said.

"I know what you think it is."

For one ugly second Matt wanted the child to stop.

Not because the song was bad. Because it was innocent, and innocence had become difficult to sit near.

Then Nikhil looked at him with total expectation, and there was no dignified way to refuse a six-year-old offering.

Matt laughed before he could stop himself.

The laugh hurt on the way out. That was how he knew it was real.

The sound surprised him enough that he almost looked around the room for whoever had made it.

Piyush turned from the stove. He had a dish towel over one shoulder and the look of a man who had already been awake long enough to earn coffee but had not yet received the moral recognition due him.

"You made it," he said.

"You weaponized your wife."

"Yes," Piyush said. "It was the only responsible option."

Lina set a mug in front of Matt at the counter.

"Coffee," she said. "And before you refuse breakfast out of damaged pride, I already made enough for that to be irritating."

He sat.

That, too, felt more difficult than it should have.

Nikhil climbed onto the stool beside him and resumed adjusting the laces of the rebellious shoe while narrating his own technique. Mira rolled her eyes with the effortless expertise of an older sister who had built irritation into an art form and discovered, against her will, that affection could survive inside it.

Lina moved through the kitchen with quiet speed. Plates. Eggs.

Toast. Cut fruit. One hand signing a school form while the other reached for the kettle. Piyush carried a pan to the table and immediately stopped being a co-creator of world-altering technology and became, instead, a father trying to stop a six-year-old from pouring orange juice directly onto his own sock.

Matt held the coffee in both hands and let the heat arrive slowly.

The room did not ask anything impressive of him.

That was the first kindness.

The second was that nobody made a ceremonial space around what had happened.

Mira asked whether Congress could legally ban an invention if other countries copied it anyway.

Nikhil wanted to know whether dogs would need their own headsets someday.

Lina said no one was discussing dog headsets before eight in the morning.

Piyush asked Matt whether Rachel had slept.

Matt said, "I think she laid down near the concept of sleep and glared at it until dawn."

"That sounds like Rachel," Lina said.

Then she put a plate in front of him as if feeding people were still, in the end, a more serious response than analysis.

He ate because refusing would have created labor for everyone else.

And because the eggs were good.

That detail offended him slightly. Not the goodness itself. The fact that anything in the world still possessed the nerve to be good on a morning like this.

At some point Nikhil restarted the song from the top.

Then, because composition is revision plus insistence, he sang it again with one more line tacked onto the end.

"Double knot, double knot, now it's strong, if it opens up then I did it wrong."

Mira looked up this time. "That one is actually accurate."

Nikhil took this as triumph and repeated the entire thing from the beginning.

Matt watched Piyush watching him.

Not in an evaluative way. Not checking whether the social resuscitation was working. Just making room and keeping the room intact.

He had spent years treating this part of Piyush's life as the steadier, narrower one. The house. The routines. The repeating obligations. Important, yes, but not ultimate.

Now, sitting at the table with a child singing about laces and a woman he had once thought of as Piyush-adjacent handing him more toast without any fuss, Matt saw the insult in that old hierarchy. This was not the reduced version of life after ambition. This was what ambition kept claiming it meant to serve.

Nikhil finished the song and looked around, pleased enough with applause to consider art essentially solved.

"Again?" he asked.

"No," said Mira.

"Yes," said Piyush.

Lina said, "One chorus."

Nikhil accepted this compromise as evidence of a basically just universe.

Matt looked down at his plate.

He did not want to cry in Piyush's kitchen before eight thirty in the morning, which was a sentence he had once been arrogant enough to believe could never become biographically relevant.

So he ate another piece of toast.

After the children were pushed through the last stages of depar-

ture and the front door closed on backpacks, arguments, and one last shouted line about figurative shoes, the house fell into the abrupt quiet families sometimes achieved only by exporting their loudest members to school.

Lina started clearing dishes.

Matt stood automatically. “Let me—”

“No,” she said.

The word was not unkind.

She rinsed a plate, set it in the dishwasher, and looked at him over her shoulder. “You can dry if it stops you from becoming abstract.”

So he dried.

It was almost insulting how useful the task was. Plate. Glass. Fork. The body allowed to serve without performance.

Piyush leaned against the counter drinking reheated coffee.

For a while the three of them existed in the kitchen without manufacturing a summit.

Then Lina said, still facing the sink, “I saw Rachel’s statement.”

Matt closed his eyes briefly.

“She was brave,” Lina said.

“She was furious,” Matt replied.

“Sometimes that’s the same thing.”

He dried another plate.

“I should have protected it better,” he said.

Lina shut off the tap. “Probably.”

He looked up.

There was no cruelty in her face. No absolution either. Just accuracy. It was startling enough to feel kind.

“She should never have had to make that statement,” Lina went on. “Marcus should never have had access to those files. None of this should have happened.”

"No," Matt said.

She set a bowl into the rack. "That is different from saying all the good was fake. Or from letting the ugliest use decide what the whole thing means."

He looked at her fully then.

From anyone else, the sentence might have felt like comfort disguised as wisdom. From Lina it felt earned. She had no stake in flattering the machine. She had children. A job. A husband who had brought home too much of the future already.

Piyush said quietly, "Come in tonight."

Matt blinked. "What?"

"After hours. Room C."

"No."

"Excellent reflex. Still no."

Matt set the dish towel down. "I am not getting in that chair today."

Piyush nodded. "That's why you probably should."

Lina looked between them and then, to Matt's surprise, said, "Go."

He stared at her.

She dried her hands and leaned back against the counter. "Not because the machine is innocent. Because right now you're letting the worst thing it can become explain the whole thing to you."

Matt almost laughed. "That feels, at minimum, directionally correct."

"It also feels incomplete," she said.

Piyush said, "One short session. No speeches. No revelation performance. If it's useless, you can tell me I've become spiritually coercive."

"That would not be new."

"True."

Matt wanted to refuse again. The refusal was almost ready. But something in him had already weakened in the kitchen, though not in the way weakness was usually described. More like a rigid false structure giving way because ordinary life had persisted in his presence with insulting authority.

"Fine," he said.

Piyush nodded once, as if this had been the expected result of a process he trusted more than Matt did.

That evening the clinic looked smaller than it had during the crisis days.

Not safer exactly. But less enchanted by its own importance. The screens were dark except where needed. The hall lights stayed low. Most of the building had gone home to whatever version of home it still believed in.

Room C held its usual arrangement: two chairs facing each other across a calibrated distance, headsets on their stands, cables neatly gathered, monitors waiting in blue dimness like patient animals.

Rosa had approved the session with the expression of someone signing off on a controlled burn in drought conditions.

"Fifteen minutes," she said from the adjoining room. "No heroics, no improvisation, no metaphysics."

Piyush called through the glass, "You've removed his three favorite modes of operation."

"That is why I remain employed," Rosa said.

Matt sat in the receiver chair.

He had not been in it as a participant since the earliest internal testing, back when awe had still outrun consequence often enough to feel available. Now the chair seemed to him not sinister but overburdened. A piece of hardware made to carry more moral weight than any object should have to bear.

Piyush settled opposite him.

"What exactly am I receiving?" Matt asked.

Piyush adjusted the headset once. “Something you missed this morning.”

“I was there.”

“You were present,” Piyush said. “That is not always the same thing.”

Matt would have objected, but Rosa’s voice came through the monitor.

“Breathe first. Argue later.”

The onset came as it always did. The wrong familiarity. The body registering a pattern one beat before the mind could object to its arrival. Déjà vu without memory. Recognition without content.

Matt felt the link settle.

Then Piyush oriented toward the morning.

Not the facts of it.

Not eggs or toast or school forms or backpack zippers.

The emotional field beneath those things.

The song arrived first, though not as melody. As offering. Small, repetitive, wholly unguarded delight. The emotional equivalent of a child tugging your sleeve until you turned toward him and agreed that what he had made mattered.

Then Piyush’s pride came through, and Matt understood immediately that pride was too thin a word for it.

This was love made alert by fragility. The astonishment of being entrusted with something ridiculous and perfect and feeling, in the same instant, how temporary the voice singing it was. Childhood already moving away even as it announced itself. Joy braided to time.

Matt’s breath changed.

The field widened.

Mira’s dry corrections. Lina’s competence moving through the kitchen like a practiced refusal of chaos. The lunchbox. The school

form. The shoelaces. None of it background. Each small task lit from within by the same fierce fact: these were the daily motions by which people kept one another in the world.

And running through all of it, deeper than delight, was gratitude so intense it was almost grief.

Not because Piyush was melancholy. Because he knew, in the ordinary animal way parents know, how much there now was to lose. Every plate, every joke, every repeated morning inconvenience had become charged by vulnerability. Family life was not soft focus. It was attachment under conditions of exposure.

Matt felt, with humiliating force, how long he had let danger audition as meaning. He had spent years mistaking intensity for depth because intensity arrived loud, flattering, and self-interpreting. But this was deeper precisely because it asked more. To stay. To repeat. To be frightened by how much you loved and still keep making breakfast.

This did not flatter him.

It accused him.

Still more came through beneath it: fatigue, yes, but willingly borne; trust in Lina; fear sharp enough to prove the love was real; the almost holy smallness of tying a child's shoe and knowing that this too, not despite its ordinariness but because of it, was what a life was for.

Matt felt tears start before he had assembled a philosophy to authorize them.

He did not see Nikhil. He did not hear the lyrics exactly. The machine did not work that way. But the affective shape was enough. More than enough. It gave him, from the inside, the reality he had spent years describing from the outside with inadequate seriousness.

Ordinary rooted love was not the compromise people made after real life disappointed them.

It was where the real stakes had been all along.

And he had mistaken spectacle for depth because spectacle had

better lighting.

Rosa ended the link before the session could become reverence.

The room came back slowly.

Matt took off the headset and sat very still.

Piyush watched him without speaking.

Finally Matt laughed once through what remained of the tears.

"That was cheap," he said.

Piyush smiled. "Because my son is devastating?"

"Because you used a six-year-old as a philosophical weapon."

"I used the truth."

Matt wiped at his face. "That's annoyingly plausible."

Piyush leaned back in the chair. "You've spent years acting like meaning has to arrive through extraordinary conditions or it doesn't count."

"That is slander."

"It is biography."

Matt looked down at the headset in his hands.

The plastic was ordinary. Slightly warm where it had touched him.

He thought of Marcus in the apartment, desperate for borrowed safety. Rachel in the chair, receiving for the first time a bodily form of non-disgust. Shelby trying to turn need into scale and scale back into morality. Congress preparing its questions. Tifa's face in Koreatown, easy and fully built. And underneath all of it, the kitchen that morning: toast, coffee, shoe laces, a child singing badly and with total confidence.

He had spent so long trying to solve the distances between people by building something extraordinary that he had, without meaning to, downgraded the older instruments.

Presence.

Witness.

Staying.

The humiliating slowness of love.

Piyush said, more gently now, "I'm not telling you the machine doesn't matter."

"I know."

"I'm telling you it matters only if it serves that."

Matt nodded.

That.

Not access for appetite's sake. Not proof of concept. Not market capture. Not scale. Not the intoxication of being the person who cracked open a new layer of reality and got interviewed about it by governments.

That.

The kitchen. The shoelaces. The people whose lives were mostly composed of recurring obligations and recurring care. The forms of witness that built homes instead of headlines.

For the first time since Marcus's photo on the tablet and Rachel's face on the screen and the replay-board listings with prices beside them, Matt felt something in him move that was not collapse.

Not relief. Not absolution.

Direction.

He put the headset down carefully.

"When Congress calls me in," he said, "they're going to want me to defend the future."

Piyush did not answer right away.

"No," he said at last. "They're going to want you to help them decide whether there should be one."

Matt looked through the glass at Rosa in the adjoining room. She was pretending not to listen with the concentration of a person who had long ago stopped believing in the privacy of adjacent spaces.

Then he looked back at Piyush.

"I'm afraid of it," he said.

Piyush nodded once. "Good."

The answer startled him.

"Good?"

"Yes." Piyush stood and took off the sensors from his neck with economical movements. "Because if you weren't, I'd think we'd lost you entirely."

They left the clinic together a little after ten.

Outside, Los Angeles had entered its gentler night shift. Fewer cars. Cooler air. The city still lit, still restless, but not currently asking to be interpreted.

In the parking lot, Matt stood for a moment with his keys in one hand and the night open in front of him.

Piyush said, "Breakfast this weekend. Lina's instruction, not mine."

Matt glanced at him. "Does Nikhil have more verses?"

"He has, unfortunately, a cycle."

Matt smiled.

Not because anything had been repaired.

Marcus was still dead. Rachel was still exposed. Congress was still coming. The replay boards still existed. The market for stolen feeling had not vanished because one man cried in a chair and remembered that family life possessed metaphysical weight.

But the scale of the thing had changed back into human proportions.

Or maybe he had.

Driving home, Matt found himself thinking not about testimony strategy or committee language or Shelby's inevitable calls, but about the distance between two economies.

On one side: prices beside stolen feelings.

On the other: a child singing about shoelaces to the people he trusted to listen.

One turned the interior life into inventory.

The other made a life out of paying attention.

By the time he reached his apartment, one obligation had become simple enough to trust.

When Congress put him under lights, he would not spend his intelligence protecting the machine from the truth.

He would spend what remained of it trying to protect the truth from what the machine had become.

Act 3 - Truth, Relinquishment, and Belonging

Chapter 15 - Love

By the time Matt asked Tifa to do the session, he had already invented six reasons not to send the message.

It was too late.

It was manipulative.

It was an abuse of the machine.

It was ethically unserious to use a device that had already done so much damage in order to answer a private question twenty years old.

Most of all, it might only confirm the oldest version of the story, the one he had been living inside so long that even after Koreatown, even after her children's faces on the screen, even after the sentence you did not ruin my life had begun to emerge in him as something conceivable, some part of him still kept the trial open.

But Congress was in two days.

And if he was going to tell the truth about the machine in public, he did not want to do it while still privately living under a lie.

So he had texted her.

Not elegantly.

Would it be insane to ask whether you'd consider one private session before I go to Washington?

He had watched the message sit there and immediately despised the word insane for its cowardice.

Her reply came twelve minutes later.

Probably. But maybe some insanity is administrative.

Then, after another minute:

Yes.

Now she was sitting across from him in Room C with the consent form signed and the headset resting in her lap like an object from a future neither of them had wanted to arrive this way.

The clinic was almost entirely dark beyond the active rooms. Congress had converted the building into a legal organism by day, but at night it retreated into something closer to a hospital that had misplaced its patients. The hall outside was quiet. The monitors cast their blue light across the walls with an almost underwater calm. Rosa was in the adjoining room because Matt had insisted on clinical oversight and Rosa had insisted, dryly, that his sudden respect for procedure was overdue.

Tifa looked smaller in the chair than she had in the café, though this was probably the room doing what such rooms always did: shrinking people down to the scale of their nervous systems.

She was wearing a charcoal sweater and dark jeans. No makeup beyond what her face already knew how to do. Hair back. Her hands resting lightly on the headset, not clutching it. Matt recognized in that posture the same thing he had always recognized in her: steadiness that was never identical to ease.

"You can still say no," he said.

Tifa looked up. "You already used that line in Koreatown."

"It remains available."

"So does my answer."

He nodded.

A trace of a smile crossed her face. "Also, for the record, Shu knows exactly where I am, exactly what this is, and exactly how many times I rolled my eyes before agreeing."

"That sounds like Shu."

"You have built him, emotionally, out of approximately three data points."

"Four," Matt said. "You showed me the beach picture."

"That's right."

She looked down at the headset again, then back up at him. “He told me that if I thought this would give me peace, then I should do it. Which was both generous and annoying.”

Matt let out a short breath that might have become a laugh on a different night.

“He sounds decent.”

“He is.”

Nothing in the sentence asked for anything from Matt except reality. He appreciated that.

Rosa’s voice came through the speaker in the wall.

“I’m still here,” she said. “Just in case either of you romanticizes this into a folk remedy.”

Tifa looked toward the glass. “That’s comforting.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Rosa said. “Comfort is not the product.”

Tifa glanced back at Matt. “You do collect a very specific kind of woman.”

“Apparently.”

He should have felt more nervous than he did. Or rather, the nervousness had gone past its ordinary shape and become something flatter and more serious. Not performance anxiety. Not even dread. More like the bodily awareness that one’s life, having been explained badly for years, was about to lose that excuse.

He said, “I need to say this once before we start.”

Tifa nodded.

“If this feels wrong at any point, we stop. If it feels like too much, we stop. If it feels like the machine is getting between us instead of clarifying anything, we stop.”

“I know.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know,” she said again. “Matt. I’m not here because I think the machine can do the human part for us.”

He looked at her.

"I'm here," she said, "because I think maybe it can stop us from lying to ourselves about what the human part was."

That was exact enough to leave him quiet.

Rosa opened the inner door just far enough to step halfway in with the tablet.

"Structured reciprocal protocol," she said. "Short phases. If either of you dissociates, withdraws, or starts chasing revelation like an idiot, I cut the link."

Matt said, "You have an impressive amount of faith in me."

"I have almost none," Rosa replied.

That, too, was a form of care.

They put on the headsets.

Tifa closed her eyes first.

Matt followed a second later.

The onset came wrong and familiar. The body noticing pattern before thought. The eerie approach of emotional weather not yet distinguishable as self or other. Déjà vu stripped of memory and left with only recognition's skeleton.

Matt felt the link take hold.

And then the first thing that reached him was love.

Not nostalgia.

Not longing.

Not regret dressed up to resemble tenderness.

Love.

Clean enough to be unmistakable.

It moved through him with such immediate authority that for a second he forgot to breathe. Love without claim. Love without agenda. Love as simple continuing regard for the person he had been and the person sitting across from her now. Not a future. Not

an invitation. Just the fact that what they had been to one another had not become false because it had ended.

His throat tightened.

Beneath the love came grief, but not accusation. The grief of lost possibility without prosecution attached to it. Then something harder to name.

Pressure.

No, not pressure exactly. Constriction. The emotional shape of a self folding inward because every available future felt already scripted by other people's approval. Good daughter. Good woman. Good timeline. The feeling was not aversion to him. That was what shattered first. It was not the absence of love that had lived inside their ending. It was love braided to an incapacity she had not known how to confess, perhaps had not even known how to name.

The field deepened.

He felt, from inside her affect, the panic of being praised for a life she did not yet want. The shame of not being ready for the role everyone around her could already see her occupying. The body-level knowledge that marriage, then, would not have been arrival but enclosure.

No thoughts transferred. No scene. No voice from the past. The machine did not break its own rules for sorrow. But the emotional pattern was so coherent that Matt understood with a violence almost equal to relief.

She had not been waiting at the altar of adulthood while he ran from decency.

She had been standing under the same false script, unable to read her own lines without choking on them.

Tifa made a small sound in the chair opposite him.

Rosa's voice came once through the monitor, distant and clinical.

"Stay with your breathing."

Then another current crossed the link.

Love still, but now attached to hunger of a different kind. Not hunger for him. Hunger for a self not yet permitted. School. Time. Becoming someone other than the person reward had already chosen. He did not receive those as concepts. He received them as yearning without language, the grief of possibilities one could feel before one could defend them.

And threaded through all of it, humiliating in its tenderness, was care for him. Even then. Even inside her own confusion. She had loved him and still not known how to marry him. The two truths had not canceled one another. They had only made the silence between them more destructive.

The old private courtroom in Matt's head did not collapse all at once.

But its authority did.

Rosa ended the first phase before he could drown in it.

The room came back in layers. Blue light. Chair arms under his hands. Headset weight. The small sound of Tifa breathing through her mouth as if air had become newly material.

When he opened his eyes, she was already looking at him.

Not shocked.

Not weeping.

Just fully there in a way that made performance impossible.

Rosa's voice, gentler now: "Do you both want to continue?"

Tifa said yes first.

Matt did too.

The second phase began.

Tifa had expected apology first.

Or guilt.

Or some strained, middle-aged refinement of the old injury.

What reached her instead was love.

Not nostalgia. Not romance trying on adulthood as camouflage. Love without future tense, without claim, without demand. The simple, devastating continuity of being profoundly known in someone else's body even after the life built around that knowledge had failed to happen.

She felt at once how much of the old story she had simplified in order to carry it.

Then the field turned.

No memory came with it. No airport, no apartment, no young face saying the wrong thing badly. The machine kept its boundaries. But emotion arrived with enough force to make the old categories collapse on contact.

Fear first.

Not fear of her.

Fear of enclosure.

Fear of stepping into a life that looked correct from the outside and feeling the self begin, almost immediately, to disappear inside it. The panic was so young it nearly humiliated her to feel it. Not noble. Not sexy. Not the glamorous hunger for freedom she had punished him with in memory. Something rawer and sadder. A man too inarticulate to say I am not ready and too frightened to trust that saying it would leave him forgivable.

Then came the worse part.

Shame.

Hot, immediate, bodily shame. The knowledge that he was hurting her. The knowledge that he was failing some basic human exam for which everyone else seemed to have been given instructions. The knowledge that even in leaving, he was not cleanly honest, because he did not yet understand what he was fleeing well enough to describe it before the damage was done.

Tifa drew in a sharp breath.

Still no scenes. No transferred narrative. Only the emotional

structure under the vanished years. But it was enough. More than enough.

He had loved her.

He had not been choosing appetite over love.

He had been terrified of becoming false inside a life he did not yet know how to choose, and terrified too that if he stayed, he would one day blame her for the falseness.

It did not absolve him.

It did something harder.

It made him human again.

Rosa cut the link.

This time the silence afterward felt longer.

Matt removed the headset slowly and set it in his lap. Across from him, Tifa had one hand over her mouth.

He waited.

Not because patience was suddenly easy. Because anything spoken too quickly here would risk becoming self-defense in the clothes of honesty.

Finally Tifa lowered her hand.

"Oh," she said.

It was barely more than breath.

Matt looked at her.

"Oh," she said again, and now the word held the weight of twenty years of corrected misreading.

He laughed once, softly and without humor. "That seems fair."

She shook her head, not disagreeing, just trying to re-enter language at human speed.

"I spent so long," she said, then stopped. "I spent so long reducing you into someone I could be angry at without complication."

Matt looked down at his hands.

“That wasn’t hard to do,” he said.

“No,” she said. “It wasn’t. Because you made it easy in several very important ways.”

He nodded. The correction landed as care, which was the worst kind to receive.

“But that wasn’t all of it,” she said. “You were frightened.”

He let out a breath.

“Yes.”

“Not of me.”

“No.”

“Of the whole shape.”

“Yes.”

The room stayed quiet around the word.

Tifa leaned back slightly in the chair, not retreating, just making space for the sentence inside her.

“I thought,” she said slowly, “that if you had loved me enough, you would have wanted the life I thought we were supposed to want.”

Matt looked up.

“And I thought,” he said, “that if I admitted I didn’t, it would make me the villain in a story I didn’t know how to survive.”

“That is such a young person’s tragedy.”

He smiled without pleasure. “Yes.”

Tifa looked down at the headset on her lap.

“I wasn’t ready either,” she said.

He closed his eyes for one beat.

“I know,” he said.

She gave a quiet, astonished laugh. “Do you?”

He looked at her.

"For the first time in the way that matters," he said.

Her eyes filled, but she did not look away.

"I thought I was supposed to be ready," she said. "That was the part I didn't know how to admit even to myself. You weren't the only one obeying a script."

He felt the sentence settle into him with a steadiness that hurt differently than guilt. Less like punishment. More like bone being set.

"I wanted more time," she said. "I wanted school. I wanted to become a person I had actually chosen before I became necessary to everyone else in a permanent way."

Matt let out a long breath.

"And I thought I had ruined your life."

Tifa's face changed then. Not to pity. To something cleaner.

"No," she said. "You didn't."

He laughed once, because the body sometimes answered impossible mercy with disbelief before gratitude.

"I know you know that intellectually," she said. "I'm saying it because I want you to stop carrying it as biography."

He looked at her and could not, for a few seconds, answer.

Outside the room, something in the clinic clicked softly on a timer. Air moved through the vent. Rosa did not interrupt.

Finally he said, "I was so certain."

"I know."

"I made a career out of it."

"I know that too."

He smiled despite himself.

She went on, not gently but accurately. "You did hurt me."

"Yes."

"You were selfish sometimes."

"Yes."

"You were also not some simple man choosing pleasure over love. You were scared and proud and young and badly equipped for honesty."

"That is devastatingly fair."

"It's also my gift."

He laughed again, more fully this time.

Something in the room loosened.

Not the grief. The way the grief had been required to sit inside accusation alone.

Tifa wiped under one eye with the heel of her hand and said, "You know what the worst part is?"

"There are apparently many candidates."

"The worst part," she said, ignoring that, "is that I loved you all the way through it. And then I turned that love into a simpler story because the simpler story was easier to carry."

Matt felt the truth of that move immediately because he had done the same thing from the other side.

"I did too," he said.

She nodded once.

The strange thing was how little either of them seemed interested now in innocence. Not his, not hers. The machine had not vindicated either life. It had done something harder and more useful. It had made simplification emotionally untenable.

Matt looked at her and saw, with clean sorrow, not the lost future itself but the two young people who had once stood inside it without enough language to tell the truth before it broke.

"You know what came through first?" he asked.

Tifa smiled faintly. "Love?"

He nodded.

"Same," she said.

The room did not become romantic because of that. If anything, it became more adult. More exact. Love had survived, but not as claim. Not as alternative timeline demanding reactivation. Love as enduring fact capable of changing form without becoming false.

Matt said, "I think I thought if I ever really understood what you felt then, it would either destroy me or make everything unbearably simple."

"And instead?"

He looked at her. "It made everything sadder and kinder."

Tifa let out a short breath that might have been a laugh in contact with air.

"That sounds right."

They sat there a while longer, no longer needing to rush the scene toward conclusion as if conclusions were the only respectable outcome of pain.

Eventually Rosa's voice came softly through the speaker.

"I'm going to pretend this room is not occupied for the next five minutes," she said. "Use them like adults."

The inner door clicked shut.

Tifa smiled despite herself. "Romantic."

"Qualia Labs specializes in atmosphere."

"That seems false."

"It is."

She set the headset down beside her.

"When do you leave?" she asked.

"Tomorrow night."

"For Washington."

"Yes."

She nodded slowly.

"Then I should say this while we're still in the room where every-

body's electrically sincere."

Matt waited.

"I'm glad you asked," she said. "I'm glad we didn't leave it at the café. That would have been good, but incomplete."

He swallowed once. "Incomplete is one of my core competencies."

"I know."

He smiled.

Tifa looked at him steadily. "You don't owe the machine your protection."

The sentence landed with an almost physical force.

He said nothing.

"You owe the truth your protection," she said. "Those are different debts."

He stared at her.

"Shu said something very annoying last night," she went on. "He said sometimes the best thing you can do for something you made is refuse to lie about what it is."

Matt laughed softly. "He continues to sound decent."

"He is. Irritatingly."

Matt looked down at his hands, then back up.

"I loved you," he said.

Tifa's face changed, but not in surprise.

"I know."

"No," he said. "I mean then. I know you know that too. I just..." He searched for the sentence and found, to his relief, that simplicity was still available. "I don't want truth to become so technical that we lose the plain parts."

She looked at him with all the steadiness that had first undone him twenty years earlier and was doing it again now in a different key.

"I loved you too," she said. "I do. Just not in the direction we once thought."

He nodded.

It was enough.

More than enough, actually. Because it did not demand resurrection. Only honest continuation.

When they stood, the room seemed smaller than before. Not because the feelings had diminished. Because they had taken up a more human amount of space.

At the door, Tifa touched his arm once.

"You didn't destroy me," she said.

He closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, she was still there.

"Thank you," he said.

She nodded.

"And you," she said, "didn't fail because you were incapable of love."

That one reached deeper.

He laughed once under his breath, half wrecked by it. "You don't do things by halves."

"No," she said. "It's inefficient."

They walked out into the corridor together.

The clinic had gone nearly silent. Night staff at the far end. Blue monitor light under one door. The building holding its systems inside itself like breath.

At the exit, Tifa stopped.

There was no dramatic farewell. No kiss. No backward step toward an impossible life. Just two people standing in the clean aftermath of a truth that had, at last, become bearable.

"Go tell the truth," she said.

Matt looked at her.

"I'm going to try."

"Good," she said. "Try harder."

Rachel, he thought, had contagious taste in final instructions.

He smiled. So did Tifa.

Then she was gone into the parking structure and whatever ordinary, beloved obligations waited on the other side of it.

Matt stood alone for a moment under the exterior light with the night open around him.

He felt no triumph.

Grief, yes.

Love, still.

The sadness of lives that had not happened.

But braided through all of it now was something quieter than relief and stronger than consolation.

Clarity.

The old story was over at last. Not because the past had become painless, but because it had become true.

When he got back to his apartment, he did not open the hearing prep first.

He sat on the edge of the bed and let the session settle.

Love first.

Then grief.

Then the unmistakable knowledge that understanding did not erase damage, but it did end false sentences.

Outside, the city moved through its ordinary nocturnal transactions. Traffic. Sirens. Laughter from a neighboring building. Somewhere a dog objecting to nothing available to human reason.

Matt took out the congressional notice and placed it on the table in front of him.

For the first time since the summons had arrived, it did not feel like an accusation he needed to out-argue.

It felt like a place to stand.

By morning he would still be afraid.

That was fine.

He would go to Washington carrying love, grief, clarity, and a steadiness he had not known, until now, could coexist with sorrow.

For the first time in twenty years, and maybe for the first time in exactly the right way, Matt understood that what remained between him and Tifa did not need to become a future in order to be a blessing.

It could simply be true.

Chapter 16 - Afraid

Congress did not look, in person, like history.

It looked like carpet.

Bad water in paper cups. Staffers with lanyards and exhausted posture. Men in expensive shoes speaking urgently into silence-muted phones. Screens mounted at angles no one loved. Flags arranged with enough symmetry to imply seriousness and enough neglect to prove repetition. The hearing room held none of the grandeur television had trained the country to project onto it. It looked instead like what power often became once stripped of music: fluorescent procedure with consequences.

Matt sat at the witness table with his name printed on a card in front of him and tried not to think about how often a person could lose his own invention before lunch.

There were three microphones. Two pitchers of water. One stack of prepared remarks he had already decided not to use except as structural scaffolding in case fear degraded him into compliance. Behind him, somewhere in the rows reserved for staff and observers, were Piyush, Rosa, outside counsel, and Shelby. He had not turned to check whether Shelby looked angry, frightened, or strategic. He already knew the answer was yes.

The chairwoman was thanking everyone for appearing at short notice in the calm, firm tone people used when they wanted urgency to sound responsible rather than panicked. Her opening statement touched all the expected stations. Breakthrough. Concern. National interest. Public safety. Privacy. Clinical promise. Criminal misuse. Death.

Death landed in the room and then became one more noun in a paragraph.

Matt kept his hands flat on the table.

Across from him sat the committee members in their various emotional relationships to technology. Earnest. Opportunistic. Suspicious. Performatively informed. Actually informed. Some wanted a villain, some a miracle, some an angle broad enough to survive the evening cycle. Most, Matt suspected, wanted all three if possible.

When the chairwoman finished, she nodded toward him.

"Dr. Ashford, you may begin."

He looked down once at the pages in front of him.

Then he folded them closed.

The small sound of paper moving seemed louder than it was.

"Madam Chair," he said, "members of the committee. Thank you."

His own voice sounded thinner than he wanted. Not weak. Just human enough to disappoint anyone in the room hoping for a prophet or a monster.

"I helped create the Empathy Engine," he said. "For a long time I believed that if we were careful enough, it could become a tightly bounded tool for helping people understand one another more truthfully. I still believe some of that is true."

He stopped there because anything after still believe some of that is true had to be earned by the rest of the sentence.

"But what has happened over the last weeks has made clear that the dangers are not peripheral," he said. "They are central. Addiction is real. Consent failures are real even when paperwork exists. Emotional privacy can be breached, copied, replayed, sold, and weaponized. Clinical use can help people. It can also expose them to forms of vulnerability most of our laws and institutions are not built to protect."

No one in the room moved much.

That was good. Movement in hearings usually meant theater. Stillness at least had a chance of being listening.

"The machine's promise is real," Matt said. "So is the catastrophe."

He looked briefly toward the back wall rather than at any individual face.

"I am here to tell you that both are true at the same time."

The first member recognized for questioning was a senator from Ohio who had spent the opening statement performing bipartisan seriousness with the alertness of a man hoping the clip might travel.

"Dr. Ashford," he said, "do you believe your technology can help trauma victims?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe it can assist diplomacy?"

"Yes."

"Then why should the United States respond to criminal misuse by choking off a life-saving innovation?"

There it was immediately. The oldest false choice in American governance: save or stop. Advance or fear. Miracle or cowardice.

Matt leaned slightly toward the microphone.

"Because if the innovation itself creates a category of vulnerability that cannot be contained by good intentions," he said, "then scaling it before we understand that vulnerability is not courage. It's recklessness with better branding."

A few heads lifted at that.

The senator smiled in the way men smile when they think sharpness will make them look unserious if they answer it directly.

"So you're against the commercialization of your own invention?"

"Yes."

That got the room's attention properly.

Not because it was morally complex. Because it was economically legible.

The senator blinked once. "As of when?"

"As of seeing what it became outside the lab."

The chairwoman intervened before the exchange could harden into cable.

"Dr. Ashford," she said, "let's be specific. In your view, what are the categories of harm we are dealing with?"

This was a better question.

He answered it like a man cataloging damage after flood.

"First," he said, "there is the false-consent problem. A person can agree on paper to emotional linkage and still not understand what it will feel like to have another person receive them at that depth. Second, there is the identity-boundary problem. Users struggle to distinguish their own emotional state from the linked state, especially during and shortly after sessions. Third, there is the addiction problem. Recorded emotional states, separated from relationship and context, can become an extraordinarily powerful form of escape. Fourth, there is the privacy problem, which is not merely data breach in the ordinary sense. If emotional sessions can be captured, replayed, copied, and sold, then inner life itself becomes extractable. Fifth, there is the institutional misuse problem. Any tool this powerful will draw interest from governments, markets, coercive systems, and people who believe access justifies itself."

He heard, distantly, pens moving.

"And sixth," he said, before anyone could move on, "there is the moral confusion the machine encourages. It tempts people to believe that feeling another person more directly is the same thing as loving them well. It isn't."

That one changed the room in a different way. Not because everyone agreed. Because the sentence was stranger than policy language and therefore harder to sort into an existing box.

A representative from California, a former prosecutor with the unnerving habit of sounding least emotional when most angry, leaned toward her microphone.

"Dr. Ashford, a man is dead."

Matt looked at her.

"Yes."

"He obtained black-market replay hardware built from your system's components. He appears to have developed a dependency on stolen emotional files. In your view, are those files analogous to a narcotic?"

The word analogous hung there, tidy and legal and too small.

"In effect," Matt said, "they can be worse."

The room went still again.

He continued before anyone else could supply the wrong version of his meaning.

"A chemical narrows experience by blunting or distorting it," he said. "These files can narrow experience by offering states a person's own life may have failed to provide and doing so with extraordinary speed and precision. Safety. Welcome. Relief. Belonging. If those states become available on demand, detached from relationship, effort, and time, then returning to ordinary life can feel intolerably thin by comparison."

The California representative did not rescue him from the implication.

"Then say it plainly," she said.

He did.

"Recorded emotional states can function as a lethal drug."

Somewhere behind him, a camera shutter clicked despite the posted rules.

The chairwoman glared toward the sound without success.

Another member, younger, smoother, visibly troubled by the possibility of nuance, asked, "To what extent do you blame the hacker group known as HumansRHumans for these harms?"

Matt took a sip of water.

The paper cup was cheap enough that the rim bent slightly under

his fingers.

"They bear responsibility for criminal theft, deliberate exploitation, and cruelty," he said. "They appear to have exposed vulnerable people to real harm in order to discredit the technology through public tragedy. That matters."

The member nodded, relieved by the clean sentence.

Matt kept going.

"But they also exposed dangers my company and this country were already at risk of minimizing because the good uses were easier to describe in public than the bad ones. They were right about the scale of the privacy threat. They were profoundly wrong in how they chose to demonstrate it."

Not everyone at the dais liked that. Good.

A senator at the far end, who had been performing skepticism all morning as if it were a constitutional office, said, "You're not suggesting this committee should be grateful to terrorists."

"No," Matt said. "I'm suggesting that moral disgust is not a substitute for technical honesty."

The senator sat back.

That one, at least, would make a clip.

Questions came in waves after that.

Could the system ever be made fully secure?

No.

Could replay capability be separated legally from live clinical use?

Not in any stable way if the underlying signals existed in transferable form.

Should there be criminal penalties for unauthorized emotional capture and replay?

Yes.

Should the technology be destroyed entirely?

He answered that one more slowly.

"No," he said. "I don't think so. But I think it should survive, if it survives at all, only inside a regulatory structure severe enough to reflect what it actually is."

"Which is?" the chairwoman asked.

He looked at her.

"A dangerous intervention," he said. "Closer in legal seriousness to a controlled therapeutic drug than to consumer software. Limited to tightly controlled therapy, tightly controlled diplomacy, and narrowly supervised clinical contexts. No private ownership of replay hardware. No consumer market. No entertainment uses. No family package, no workplace package, no couples app, no domestic version, and no softer label for the same underlying use."

A few people in the back laughed once and then stopped when he didn't.

The chairwoman said, "That recommendation would effectively destroy the commercial future of Qualia Labs as currently constituted."

"Yes," Matt said.

He heard Shelby move behind him.

Or maybe he imagined it. It did not matter.

The chairwoman looked down at her notes, then back up. "Dr. Ashford, I want to ask you a question I believe the public is trying to answer through you. Not whether you think this technology has promise. Not whether it can be abused. We have heard both today. I want to know what you, as one of its creators, actually feel about it now."

There it was.

Not policy.

Not law.

The plain part.

The room seemed to recede slightly, as rooms sometimes did when the next sentence was already waiting somewhere lower than

rhetoric.

Matt thought of Marcus in the apartment with the receiver band beside him. Rachel in the chair. Tifa saying you owe the truth your protection. Piyush's pride in a child's terrible song. Shelby's hand flat on the table. The replay-board listings. The people who had felt helped. The people who had felt exposed. The whole impossible ledger.

Then he answered.

"I'm afraid of it," he said.

No flourish. No thesis wrapped around the statement to make it more manageable. Just the truth, plain enough to survive air.

The hearing room went silent in a way television almost never preserved correctly.

The chairwoman did not move to help him.

Good again.

He continued.

"I'm afraid of what it can do when it works," he said. "That's part of the problem. The therapeutic good is real. The diplomatic good is real. The fact that it can help is exactly why it can also be exploited so effectively. If it were merely useless, the danger would be smaller. But it reaches something fundamental in people. That makes the stakes higher, not lower."

He looked down briefly at his hands and then back up.

"I helped build it because I believed deeper understanding might reduce suffering. I still believe understanding matters. But I no longer believe access justifies itself. And I no longer believe the machine's future should be protected from the truth of what it has already become in the world."

No one interrupted.

He let the next sentence come without polishing it.

"We do not have a right to commercialize the human interior because we finally found a way to touch it."

The senator from Ohio said, quietly now, "So what are you asking this committee to do?"

Matt did not need to think about it anymore.

"Regulate it hard enough that most of the futures investors wanted for it die," he said. "Keep open only the futures that can be defended after what has already happened."

The chairwoman sat back.

In the pause that followed, the room lost some of its hearing-quality and became, for a second, only a group of people sitting in the presence of a sentence none of them would be able to treat as hypothetical again.

After that, the rest was process.

Staffers moving paper.

Members reserving the right to submit follow-up questions.

Counsel exchanging cards.

A second panel waiting in the wings.

But process, in Washington, was often simply the shape conviction took once it acquired staff.

By late afternoon, committee counsel had circulated draft language for emergency classification and restriction pending broader legislation. Therapeutic use only under licensed clinical supervision. Diplomatic use only under federal oversight and treaty-level controls. No consumer deployment. No private replay devices. Severe criminal penalties for unauthorized capture, transfer, sale, possession, or dissemination of emotional-state recordings. Mandatory audit structures. Restricted manufacturing. Chain-of-custody requirements closer to controlled substances than software.

Qualia's outside counsel objected in three registers. Shelby in two. Neither objected in Matt's name.

By evening the shape of the future had changed.

Not finally. Not in law's permanent sense. That would take months, maybe years, and politics could still humiliate everyone

involved in fresh directions. But the consumer horizon was dead. Anyone still using words like rollout now sounded like a person taking orders from a ghost.

Matt stepped out of the hearing room as the building was emptying into that peculiar Washington dusk where every person looked either overimportant or under-slept and most were both.

Piyush caught up with him at the end of the corridor.

For a second neither spoke.

Then Piyush said, "You did it."

Matt looked down the long carpeted hall toward the elevators, the flags, the staff, the whole cumbersome machine of American self-correction grinding forward one memo at a time.

"I think I killed it," he said.

Piyush considered that.

"No," he said. "You killed what shouldn't survive."

Matt exhaled.

That was not comfort exactly. More like a sentence stable enough to stand near.

Shelby emerged from a side room a moment later with counsel still behind her. Her face was composed in the way faces became after public loss when they had not yet chosen whether grief or anger would do more work. She stopped in front of Matt.

For one second he thought she might argue with him here, in the corridor, under the cheap authority of fluorescent government light.

Instead she said, "You were honest."

He waited.

"It was catastrophic," she said. "And honest."

Then she walked past him before he could answer.

Outside, the air was cold in a way Los Angeles never learned how to be. Matt stood on the Capitol steps with his coat open and let it hit him anyway.

The city around him carried on with bureaucratic indifference. Cars. Staffers. Security barriers. The ordinary mechanics of a government deciding, belatedly and imperfectly, what kinds of power ought to cost more to use.

He thought of the machine not as object now but as territory that had just been fenced, mined, and reduced. A thousand imagined futures erased in one day. Good. Necessary. Sad.

He also thought, unexpectedly, of survival.

Not the company's.

Not his reputation.

The possibility that something useful might remain precisely because everything appetitive had been denied oxygen.

Therapy, where the work was already slow enough to deserve protection.

Diplomacy, where the cost of misunderstanding could be generations.

Clinical settings narrow enough to force humility.

Nothing casual. Nothing mass. Nothing frictionless. Nothing for sale.

The future investors had loved was gone.

The more human one might still be possible.

Piyush touched his shoulder once and then let the hand fall.

"Come home soon," he said.

Matt smiled, tired enough that smiling felt almost anatomical.

"I will."

As the sun went down behind the city and the hearing's language began its slow conversion into policy, precedent, and backlash, Matt felt no triumph.

Only fear, still.

And grief.

And the steadier thing underneath them: a willingness to let truth cost what it cost.

By the time he got into the car for the airport hotel, one fact had survived every argument, every question, every institutional instinct to reduce catastrophe into categories.

The machine would live.

But the future that had wanted to own it had died.

And for the first time since the lab, that felt less like failure than ethics.

Chapter 17 - Shame

Two days after Congress, Shelby drove to her father's apartment in the Valley and knocked before she had time to become strategic about it.

The building had the exhausted decency of places that had outlived whatever optimism first financed them. Small balconies. Railings repainted too many times. A courtyard with one stubborn jacaranda and a grill nobody had cleaned in months. Shelby stood outside unit 14 with sunglasses still on though the sun had already shifted past usefulness, and listened to movement on the other side of the door.

She had not seen him in four years.

She had seen versions of him, of course. Men in grocery aisles holding too still by the freezer section. Veterans at fundraising dinners with careful posture and watchful hands. Older men at crosswalks whose bodies still looked prepared for weather no one else could feel. But she had not seen her father in four years, which was long enough for memory to keep the worst parts bright and let the ordinary ones rot away.

The door opened.

He looked smaller than the house had once allowed him to be.

That was the first shock. Not frailty exactly. He was still broad through the shoulders, still carrying the old density in the wrists and jaw, but age had taken some jurisdiction back from him. His hair had gone mostly white. The skin beneath his eyes held the soft, damaged looseness of a man who had not always been kind to sleep. He was wearing a thermal henley under a flannel shirt and holding reading glasses in one hand.

He blinked once.

"Shelby."

His voice still had the ability to touch nerves before language reached them.

"I need you to come with me," she said.

He kept looking at her as if some part of him suspected this was not the actual event, only the rehearsal fear had been running in advance of it.

"Come with you where?"

"To the clinic."

He understood immediately. She watched that understanding move across his face with the old familiar sequence: suspicion first, then resistance, then the quick, involuntary flash of hurt pride behind both.

"The machine."

"Yes."

He looked past her into the parking lot as if a better answer might be parked there.

"I saw that hearing," he said. "The one with the scientist."

"I know."

"He said the thing was dangerous."

"He was right."

Her father laughed once without humor. "And this is your sales pitch?"

"It isn't a pitch."

He leaned one shoulder against the doorframe. For a second she saw, with abrupt and almost useless clarity, the man he might have been in a different life. Solid. Handsome in the durable American way. A person strangers asked to help lift furniture. A person children might once have run toward.

But the body kept its own record. Shelby could feel hers already counting exits.

He said, “Why now?”

Because Matt had told the truth in public and she had recognized the sound of something being cut loose.

Because the lawyers were upstairs at Qualia already trying to price scarcity.

Because every year since she was nineteen he had sent her some clean little birthday message as if chronology itself might eventually wear her down.

Because she had spent half her adult life saying she wanted him to understand what he had done and the other half wanting, more secretly, to understand what had made him into the kind of man who could come home and turn a kitchen into a border crossing.

She said only, “Because if you ever meant any of those messages, come with me.”

He went still.

She knew he knew which messages.

Happy Birthday.

Merry Christmas.

Thinking of you.

The polite little postcards of unfinished damage.

He looked down at the glasses in his hand, then back up at her.

“Do I get to say no?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“And if I do?”

Shelby shrugged once. “Then I drove to the Valley for a very disappointing conversation.”

That got the smallest possible movement at the corner of his mouth. Not a smile. The memory of one.

“You always did come armed,” he said.

“I learned from the household.”

The line landed. Good.

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, some decision had already been made lower down than argument.

"Give me five minutes," he said.

The drive back took forty-three minutes and contained almost no useful language.

He asked once whether she was still living in the Hills house. She said yes. She asked once whether he was still seeing the VA therapist he had mentioned in one of his messages two years ago. He said yes. After that they let the freeway do the work of adjacency.

From the passenger seat, he looked older than he had in the doorway.

That was the second shock.

Not because light had changed. Because stillness had. Men like her father had once been made legible by motion. Anger. Pacing. Doors. Cabinets. The kinetic grammar of a body refusing helplessness by assigning it to everyone else in the room. But sitting beside her in afternoon traffic, saying nothing, he looked less like force than consequence.

He smelled faintly of coffee, wool, and the medicinal detergent used in institutions that expected old age before it arrived. No whiskey. That too hurt more than Shelby had anticipated. Sobriety did not repair chronology. It only removed one alibi.

By the time they reached Qualia, the building no longer looked to Shelby like a startup with conscience language. It looked like a facility trying, belatedly, to become honest about what it handled.

Temporary federal guidance had changed the atmosphere faster than architecture could. Security had doubled. The new access logs sat on rolling stands like blunt moral reminders. Every device entering the floor now had to be tagged, registered, and surrendered again on exit. Doors that had once opened with frictionless little chimes now paused, verified, and then released with a heavier sound.

Her father took one look at the checkpoint and said, "Jesus."

"Yes," Shelby said. "That has been the general tone of the week."

Rosa met them in the restricted clinic corridor wearing navy scrubs under a gray cardigan and carrying a clipboard thick enough to insult venture capital mythology.

She nodded once to Shelby's father, then at Shelby.

"Before we do anything," Rosa said, "both of you need to hear this the same way. This is a therapeutic family-trauma session under temporary restriction. Not a demonstration. Not a private exception. Not a chance to win an old argument with better equipment."

Shelby said, "Understood."

Rosa looked at her as if she regarded the phrase as, at best, provisional.

Then she turned to her father.

"And you," she said, "can stop the session at any point. If you reach overload, I stop it whether you want me to or not. We are not here to produce revelation. We are here to tell the truth at a dosage your nervous systems can survive."

Her father gave the smallest nod.

He had become unusually formal in the corridor. Shelby recognized the old military reflex in it immediately: uncertainty translated into obedience so the body would not have to admit fear.

Rosa handed over the forms.

He read them more carefully than most legislators probably read the laws they voted on.

Shelby signed hers in under ten seconds. When Rosa took the clipboard back, she said, "Today you are not management."

"Reassuring," Shelby said.

"Try to deserve it."

Room B had been stripped down since the restrictions came in. No decorative screens. No outreach brochures. No branded language trying to soften the fact of intervention. Just the two chairs, the headsets, the sensor lines, the muted monitoring wall beyond the

glass, and a side table with water that no one ever wanted until after.

Her father stood in the doorway without entering.

Shelby could almost feel the old instinct in him trying to solve the room by force of skepticism.

"You can leave," she said.

He looked at her.

"Is that what you want?"

"No."

That answer seemed to steady him more than reassurance would have.

He came in.

Rosa explained the protocol twice. Short directional transfer first. Shelby would receive while her father oriented toward the emotional reality of the home as he had made it. If both consented afterward, they would reverse. No speeches during the link. No attempts to force memory. No heroic endurance contests. Stop signal available at all times.

Her father looked at the headset in his hands.

"Will I see things?" he asked.

"No," Rosa said. "Not images. Not scenes. The machine doesn't do that."

"Then how do you know what it means?"

Rosa's expression altered by half a degree.

"Usually," she said, "you know."

That was apparently answer enough.

Shelby sat in the receiver chair first.

Across from her, her father lowered himself into the other seat with the old carelessness of a man trying not to signal that his joints had begun filing complaints. Rosa adjusted the contacts at his temples, checked the neck sensors, verified the baseline, and stepped back to the console.

"No one owes anyone continuation," she said. "If I say stop, we stop. If either of you says stop, we stop."

Shelby nodded.

Her father did too.

The link settled with the familiar edge of déjà vu.

Shelby had spent years imagining what might come through him first if the machine ever did this work honestly. Rage, perhaps. Or grievance. Or the old masculine panic that preferred damage to smallness. Some armored variation of self-pity. Maybe even pain, if pain had survived long enough in him to remain legible under its disguises.

What came instead was shame.

Not the public kind, not the theatrical modern kind that still expected witness, mitigation, and a path back to reputation. This was older and meaner than that. An inward collapse so complete it barely qualified as feeling toward another person at all. The body's conviction that it had become poisonous in a room where it had once wanted to be loved.

Shelby felt, with disorienting immediacy, the recoil in it. The wish not to confess but to disappear before the child's face could fix the truth permanently. Beneath it ran other structures: terror too proud to call itself terror, humiliation converted into command, the urge to numb before the self could fully register what it had done. The next-morning knowledge that apology would again be smaller than damage. The knowledge too that the apology would be offered anyway because ritual was easier than change.

It was not innocence.

That mattered.

The machine did not transfer thoughts or scenes, but the shape of the state was coherent enough that she understood something she had spent years alternately demanding and refusing.

He had known.

Not continuously. Not cleanly. Not with the disciplined honesty required to stop. But he had not been blind. Divided, defended, wrecked, intoxicated, self-deceiving, yes. But not blind.

She had wanted the hidden architecture of damage.

Shame, it turned out, was the blueprint.

When Rosa ended the first transfer, Shelby was still breathing too shallowly to be angry.

Her father looked worse.

The headset remained on him, but his face had changed. He had gone pale under the skin. One hand was gripping the armrest so hard that the tendons stood out along the wrist.

Rosa asked, "Continue?"

Shelby looked at him.

For a second she thought he would refuse and preserve, one final time, the old household logic by which the approach to truth counted as sufficient labor and the truth itself could therefore be postponed.

Instead he said, very quietly, "Yes."

The second setup took less time.

Shelby became the sender. Her father the receiver.

She did not have to manufacture anything. She only had to stop editing.

Rosa gave the signal.

The link settled again.

Shelby oriented toward the house.

Not the furniture. Not the floorplan. The atmosphere.

The preemptive listening. The body learning the weather of a key in a lock. The sick intelligence of footsteps. The skill of becoming smaller before being asked. The way a child could monitor her mother's face and know, from the angle of the jaw or the speed of a plate set down too carefully, whether the night was still salvageable.

Fear moved out of her not as accusation but as habitat.

Old fear. Repeated fear. Fear that had stopped waiting for an event and become structure instead. Fear that made praise feel unstable and silence feel busy. Fear that taught the body to prepare before the mind knew for what. Fear so early it had once existed without language.

Her father jerked as if something had struck him under the ribs.

His right hand tore halfway toward the headset.

Rosa said, immediately, "We can stop."

"No."

The word came out of him broken.

He was already halfway out of the chair. Shelby saw the whole old mechanism gather in him: flight dressed as refusal, refusal dressed as anger, anger ready in a second to become jurisdiction again.

Then he looked at her.

Really looked.

Not at the founder, the valuation, the television face, the daughter in expensive clothes who had learned to arrange power around herself so that no room could become a trap again. At her.

Something in him gave way.

He sat back down.

Rosa let the link run three seconds more and then cut it.

The silence afterward had weight.

Shelby removed the headset and set it carefully in her lap. Across from her, her father had both hands over his mouth.

He was crying without disguise.

Shelby had seen him drunk. Enraged. Belligerent. Performatively tender in the mornings after. Ill once, briefly, in a hospital bed when she was twenty-three and not yet ready to let illness do public-relations work for character.

She had never seen him cry like this.

He lowered his hands.

"You were afraid," he said.

His voice had gone thin, almost young with shock.

Shelby said nothing.

He shook his head once as if the motion might rearrange the facts into something less final.

"You were afraid of me."

"Yes," Shelby said.

He looked down at the floor between them.

"I knew I was angry," he said. "I knew I drank too much. I knew..." He stopped. The sentence did not want to continue in language built for self-report. "I didn't understand it as fear. Not like that."

Shelby heard herself answer before strategy could improve it.

"That's because you were the weather."

He flinched.

Good, she thought, and then hated the satisfaction instantly because it was too small for the room.

Rosa stayed where she was at the console, present enough to make collapse impossible, distant enough to let them fail without audience.

Her father wiped at his face with the heel of one hand. "I'm sorry" arrived and failed in him twice before he got it out whole. "Shelby, I am sorry."

She had heard those words from him before.

Not often. But enough to mistrust the phrase as a genre.

This time was different in only one way and therefore in every way.

There was no defense attached to it.

No weather. No war story. No drink. No bad year. No story about pressure or men or memory or not knowing how to come home. Only the naked moral fact, at last undiluted by explanation.

"I made home feel dangerous to you," he said.

Shelby felt something move under the ribs that was not forgiveness and not exactly grief. More like the first honest loosening after a muscle had mistaken vigilance for identity over many years.

"Yes," she said.

He nodded, crying openly now. "I know."

That, more than the apology, was what altered the room.

Not I'm sorry.

I know.

She had wanted him to understand.

Here it was.

And because the machine had done its work in the narrow, brutal way it could, she also understood something she had not let herself hold for long without contempt.

The shame she had felt in him had not been invented for the session. It had lived there already, badly metabolized, turning to rage when it needed a doorway, turning to drink when it needed dark. The damage in him did not excuse the damage he had done. But it gave it contour.

Context, at last, without acquittal.

She said, "I know you were in pain."

He looked up at her with such startled misery that for a second he seemed far older than his years.

Then he said, "That didn't give me the right."

"No."

"No," he said again, and this time the repetition was not insistence. It was acceptance.

Rosa came in only then, not with comfort but with water, grounding questions, the plain clinical rituals that kept revelation from pretending it had replaced care.

Name five present facts. Chair. Window. Wool sweater. Cold

air from the vent. The ridiculous little hum of the sensor rack. Her father answered like a man learning how to re-enter a room he had once assumed he owned.

When Rosa finally stepped back out to file the session record, Shelby and her father sat alone for the first time without the machine between them.

Neither rushed to spend the silence.

At last he said, "I don't expect you to forgive me."

"Good," Shelby said.

He gave a raw little laugh that broke midway through.

She looked at him, really looked this time, and saw not only the man from the house but also the smaller, poorer, more frightened thing underneath him that had never learned another grammar for pain except distribution.

It did not make her sentimental.

But it did make cruelty feel unnecessary.

"I'm not interested in pretending the house was fine," she said. "I'm not interested in making this one session do the work of twenty years. But I also don't want the rest of my life to consist of us mailing each other holidays like diplomats from hostile states."

He nodded once, slowly, as if speed here would count as disrespect.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Shelby considered the question.

It was strange how little appetite remained in it now for victory.

"Coffee next week," she said. "One hour. In public. Sober."

He looked at her as if she had handed him some object he was afraid to break by agreeing too quickly.

"Okay," he said.

"And if you start rewriting the past, I leave."

"Okay."

"And if I want to leave, I leave."

"Okay."

"And you don't text me Happy Birthday like a man checking a smoke detector."

This time the laugh he gave was almost whole.

"Okay," he said again.

Shelby drove him back to the Valley after sunset.

At his apartment building, he sat for a moment with the engine still running and both hands resting on his knees.

"I'm glad you came to get me," he said.

She kept her eyes on the windshield. "I know."

He nodded once, as if the answer was fair, then opened the door.

Before getting out, he said, "You looked angry on television."

Shelby almost smiled.

"I was."

"Good," he said. "Some things should scare people."

Then he stepped out into the lot and shut the door with surprising gentleness.

Back at Qualia, Conference Room A was still lit.

Of course it was.

Disaster did not reduce the work of people committed to retaining upside. It only clarified their vocabulary.

Shelby stood outside the glass for a moment and watched the meeting before entering.

Three lawyers. Two board members on screen. One banker who had begun using the word restricted in the tone other men once used for luxury. A deck on the monitor titled POST-REGULATORY STRATEGIC PATHWAYS.

She knew exactly what was inside before the first slide advanced.

Scarcity premium.

Federal contracts.

Diplomatic exclusivity.

High-margin clinical licensing.

Private family reconciliation for those rich enough to rename privilege as urgency.

Nothing mass-market anymore. Fine. Then something rarer, cleaner, more expensive. An empire built out of moral seriousness instead of glossy consumer appetite. The same appetite in a better suit.

One of the lawyers was saying, "The restriction environment actually strengthens defensibility if we reposition the core asset as a tightly regulated premium intervention—"

Shelby opened the door.

The room stopped.

She took her seat, set down her bag, and looked at the screen until the title slide became embarrassing for everyone involved.

Then she said, "No."

The banker tried to smile. "I'm sorry?"

"You're trying to preserve the company by turning limit itself into the product."

One of the board members on video said, "Shelby, with respect, we're trying to preserve value."

She looked up at the screen. "Yes. That's the problem."

The room went careful.

Another lawyer leaned forward. "What exactly are you proposing?"

Shelby had spent years using control to make sure helplessness never got the first move again. Money. Terms. Special shares. Board architecture. Timing. A thousand adult instruments for ensuring that if pain entered the room, it would at least have to negotiate.

Old talent. Genuine talent.

Useful too.

She said, "Draft the transfer."

No one moved.

She continued.

"All core patents, hardware designs, and operating rights into an irrevocable public-benefit trust. Mission-locked. Therapeutic, diplomatic, and tightly controlled clinical use only. No consumer commercialization under any future label. No licensing to entertainment, employment, family lifestyle platforms, defense contractors, or adjacent shell entities pretending not to be those things. Independent clinical and public-interest oversight. No ownership concentration sufficient to route around the spirit of the restriction framework."

The banker stared. "That would destroy enterprise value."

"Yes."

The lawyer said, carefully, "Shelby, as chair and controlling shareholder, you can make a move like that, but once drafted it will be effectively irreversible."

"That is why I am making it."

The board member on video said, "Investors will sue."

"Then they'll sue."

"You're talking about surrendering your own supervoting control."

"Yes."

"And your ownership position."

"Yes."

"For nothing?"

Shelby thought of her father with both hands over his mouth. Matt in Washington saying he was afraid of it. Marcus with the band beside him. Rachel in the chair. Piyush in the kitchen making breakfast inside ordinary mortal love. Every appetite that had gathered at the edge of the machine the second it proved useful.

"Not for nothing," she said. "For limits."

One of the lawyers, to her credit, stopped arguing first.

She opened a clean document and said, "If we do this, we need language airtight enough that future boards can't sand it down into premium access."

Shelby nodded.

"Exactly."

The drafting took three hours.

She stayed for every line.

Not because she distrusted the lawyers, though she usually did on principle. Because this was the real work now. Not invention. Not launch. Not story. Boundary.

At 11:18 p.m., the final version was ready for execution.

The trust would hold what mattered. The company could continue in reduced form to service the lawful framework, but it would no longer own the future in the way investors had once imagined. Shelby's control rights would disappear into the structure the moment she signed. No future Shelby, no hungrier board, no quieter market cycle would be able to wake one morning and decide the human interior was once again a growth category.

The lead lawyer slid the papers toward her.

Shelby picked up the pen.

Some acts only worked if they arrived already accomplished.

The first time she had used that principle, she had pushed the world open.

Now she used it to close the part that should stay closed.

She signed once for the transfer.

Once for the voting rights.

Once for her resignation as chair.

When it was over, the room did not applaud.

Good.

Applause would have insulted the scale of what had just been refused.

Shelby handed the pen back and sat very still for a moment with her name drying on the page.

She had expected to feel diminished.

Instead she felt, not clean exactly, but correctly burdened.

Outside the conference room the building had gone nearly silent. Somewhere on a lower floor a door closed. Somewhere else a refrigerator motor clicked on and held its tone. The machine, in its restricted rooms, remained real. Dangerous. Useful. Bounded.

For the first time since the lab, Shelby understood that relinquishment was not the opposite of power.

Sometimes it was the only proof that you had finally stopped worshipping what you could do.

Chapter 18 - Uncle Matt

By the time the jacarandas came back, the Empathy Engine had become difficult to use in all the ways Matt had once begged for and later learned to call merciful.

The trust Shelby built from the ruins of Qualia had made convenience almost impossible. Sessions required licensed clinicians, government oversight when the cases crossed borders, chain-of-custody rules severe enough to offend nearly everyone, and forms whose main virtue was that they slowed the hopeful down long enough to make some of them honest. Recorded emotional files still existed, but inside locked systems, under audit, with criminal penalties hanging over them like weather. Most proposed uses died in committee. Good. Many deserved to.

The country lost interest faster than it had fallen in love. There were no more glossy magazine covers about empathy at scale. No more investors talking about emotional infrastructure as if the phrase belonged in polite society. The machine survived in a handful of hospital wings, federal programs, and tightly supervised clinics where the work remained stubbornly uncinematic. A few therapy cases went well enough to justify the bureaucracy. One diplomatic session in Geneva had helped two ministers stop speaking in inherited certainties long enough to grieve in the same room. A veterans' trauma unit in San Diego had reported outcomes that were not miraculous, only meaningful, which Matt had come to regard as the more adult category.

He worked three days a week for the trust under a title grander than the work itself: scientific director for clinical safeguards.

Mostly he said no.

No to couples who wanted revelation without patience.

No to wealth disguised as urgency.

No to universities that wanted prestige, startups that wanted adjacency, philanthropists who wanted their names attached to human depth, and journalists who kept asking whether the machine had failed because it had become boring.

When he said yes, he did so more slowly now, in rooms with clinicians he trusted and cases narrow enough to deserve the risk. The work no longer felt like invention. It felt like stewardship, which was less flattering and much closer to love.

He thought of Marcus often.

He thought of Rachel too, though with less fear now. She was back working, not publicly grateful, which was one of the reasons he loved her. When she texted, it was usually to complain about scheduling, union notes, or the criminal aesthetic poverty of most streaming platforms. Once, a month earlier, she had sent him a picture of a location scout's folding chair with his name misspelled on tape and the message: history remains incompetent. He had laughed out loud in the office and then spent the rest of the afternoon approving nothing.

He still thought of Tifa, but not as a locked door anymore.

They texted occasionally. Photos of ordinary weather. A joke about hospital coffee. A picture once of tomatoes from her small backyard garden, to which Matt replied with a level of admiration usually reserved for sacred art. The fact of her life no longer accused his own. It simply existed beside it, warm and complete and outside his custody. That, too, felt like grace.

On Saturday afternoon Lina texted the family thread, which had quietly become a fact of Matt's life six months earlier.

Griffith at four. Kids need running room. Bring nothing unless you have fruit.

Piyush replied with a photo of Nikhil already wearing one shoe and no pants.

Mira, now allowed a monitored phone on weekends, wrote:

please tell uncle matt to come because papa brings boring snacks.

Matt looked at the word uncle on the screen for half a second longer than the message required.

Then he went to the market and bought nectarines.

The afternoon at Griffith Park had the expensive, casual beauty Los Angeles occasionally managed by accident: long grass browned at the tips, eucalyptus shadows, parents pretending not to hover, the observatory white against the hill as if some better civilization had once passed through and left architecture behind. Children crossed the playground in waves of temporary allegiance. Dogs negotiated diplomacy more effectively than most governments. The air smelled faintly of sunscreen, cut fruit, and dust warming itself toward evening.

Matt spotted them before they saw him.

Lina was kneeling on the blanket trying to extract a container lid from the moral logic of an overpacked picnic bag. Piyush stood a few yards away near the play structure with both hands on his hips, already wearing the expression of a father counting children without wanting anyone to notice the counting. Mira was halfway up a climbing wall with the serene competence of a person who had recently decided fear should be privately managed. Nikhil was in the wood chips below, shouting something about speed that did not survive its own enthusiasm.

Matt raised the bag of nectarines as he approached.

Lina looked up first. “Good,” she said. “Real fruit. I married beneath my standards in produce.”

Piyush turned. “This is slander. I brought grapes.”

“You brought them yesterday,” Lina said.

“They remain grapes.”

Matt set the bag down on the blanket. “I see the marriage is stable.”

“More stable than your snack philosophy,” Lina said.

Then, without pause or ceremony, she handed him the small folding knife from the picnic bag and pointed at the fruit container. "Can you cut those while I rescue the napkins from whatever Nikhil has made of them?"

It was not the request itself that moved him. It was the lack of performance around it. She did not ask as if granting him participation. She asked because he was there and therefore part of the labor.

Matt took the knife. "Yes."

"Also keep an eye on Mira if she decides gravity is a colonial construct," Lina said, already half turned away.

"Understood."

He sat on the blanket, rinsed the nectarines from the water bottle as well as one could in a park, and began cutting them into uneven slices with the concentration of a man aware that domestic usefulness was partly just the willingness to be assigned things.

Nikhil saw him first.

"Uncle Matt!"

The child came at him with full-body commitment, stopping only at the last second because six-year-olds still regarded collision as a negotiable detail.

Matt put the knife safely aside and caught him under the arms.

"You've grown," he said.

Nikhil considered this. "Yes."

"Dangerous news."

"I can tie my shoes now," Nikhil announced, with the grave pride of a man declaring statehood.

From the climbing wall, Mira shouted, "He still sings while he does it."

"That's called technique," Nikhil yelled back.

Matt laughed and set him down. "Show me later."

"Okay."

Nikhil ran off again before the agreement could acquire administrative burden.

Piyush came over and stood beside the blanket while Matt finished the fruit.

For a minute they said nothing. The children supplied enough sound for a larger civilization.

Then Piyush asked, "How many people did you disappoint this week?"

Matt considered. "Twenty-one, if you count the neurologist who thinks federal restriction is a personal insult to innovation."

"Do you count him?"

"Spiritually, no."

Piyush nodded. "Reasonable."

Matt handed him a nectarine slice.

Piyush took it, chewed, and looked out toward the playground. "Any yeses?"

"Two."

"Good ones?"

Matt leaned back on one hand.

"One maybe," he said. "A woman and her sister in palliative care. We approved a short session because they kept missing each other in language and time was doing what time does."

Piyush winced softly. "That sounds brutal."

"Probably."

"Useful?"

Matt watched Nikhil attempt to climb the wrong side of a ladder with absolute confidence.

"I think so," he said. "At least useful enough to justify the room."

Piyush nodded as if that were now, correctly, the highest category.

They stood in companionable quiet after that.

It had taken Matt longer than he liked to admit to understand that Piyush was one of the central facts of his life. Not because they had built something together, though that mattered. Not because he admired him, though he did. Because Piyush had remained. Through launch, scandal, grief, testimony, and all the smaller humiliations between. He had remained in the unflashy way only certain people did: by calling, cooking, telling the truth, making room, and refusing both idolatry and abandonment.

Mira dropped from the final ledge and walked over to the blanket with the composed exhaustion of a person pretending exertion had been an intellectual choice.

"Is there water?" she asked.

"There has always been water," Lina said, handing her a bottle.

Mira drank half of it, then looked at Matt. "Did you really turn down a TV interview because they wanted you to say empathy is the future?"

Piyush groaned. "Who told you that?"

"You did," Mira said.

"I live in a hostile information environment."

Matt took a nectarine slice for himself. "Yes, I turned it down."

Mira considered that. "Why?"

He thought briefly about offering the adult answer. Regulatory optics. Cultural overreach. The stupidity of slogans near dangerous tools.

Instead he said, "Because most things that matter get worse when people start talking about them like they've solved being human."

Mira absorbed this with the serious politeness children sometimes showed adults when deciding whether a statement deserved future use.

"That sounds annoying," she said finally.

"Very," Matt said.

"Okay." She took another slice of fruit. "Uncle Matt, can you come

watch Nikhil do the monkey bars before he dies on them?"

Piyush said, "What an excellent sentence."

But Matt was still looking at the title she had used without irony, apology, or trial-period caution.

Uncle Matt.

No one at the blanket seemed to notice it as an event.

Which was precisely why it felt real.

He stood. "Yes," he said.

The monkey bars proved survivable. Nikhil crossed half of them, dropped early, and demanded that everyone admire the strategic nature of the choice. Mira disputed the classification. Lina mediated with the fairness of a minor judge. Piyush pretended not to keep count of how many times his son nearly introduced his face to bark chips. Matt got sent twice to retrieve the abandoned water bottle, once to hold a sweatshirt, and once to inspect a beetle with adequate seriousness.

At some point Lina handed him sunscreen without looking and said, "Can you get the back of his neck? He thinks hats are oppression."

Matt said, "A principled stance."

"An expensive one," Lina replied.

Nikhil endured the sunscreen with the stoicism of a child who had already learned that affection often arrived disguised as inconvenience.

The sun lowered gradually into that specific late Los Angeles gold which made even tired parents look briefly like people in a better-funded memory.

Mira and Nikhil ran back toward the grass beyond the playground where a loose game was forming out of children with no shared rules and enormous faith in momentum. Lina sat on the blanket folding containers back into the picnic bag with battle-tested efficiency.

Matt drifted a little away from the blanket then, not out of distance

but because the children were easier to see from the rise beside the path.

Piyush joined him a moment later.

Below them, Mira was trying to impose structure on the game. Nikhil was resisting any concept that might reduce speed. Another child had decided the point was yelling. The arrangement seemed stable enough.

Piyush folded his arms.

"You know," he said, "when Mira first called you Uncle Matt, Lina and I assumed the title would dissolve under exposure to reality."

Matt watched Nikhil veer gloriously off course. "A fair prediction."

"It was," Piyush said. "And yet."

Matt smiled.

The old version of himself might have felt the need to answer that moment with wit or deflection, some graceful proof that intimacy had not yet fully cornered him. The impulse rose now only faintly, like a habit no longer convinced of its own necessity.

So he said what was true.

"I'm trying to deserve it."

Piyush looked at him, then back at the children.

"You mostly do," he said.

The sentence landed with the unshowy force of something that had not been designed as comfort and therefore could be trusted.

For a while they stood without speaking.

Below them the children kept playing in widening, collapsing alliances. Lina called out a warning about the slope. Somebody ignored her and survived. The observatory caught the last serious light. A helicopter passed so far off it became only part of the sky's machinery.

Matt thought, not for the first time, that the strangest thing about

peace was how undramatic it often looked from the outside.

No revelation.

No repaired past.

No vindication large enough to make a story kneel before it.

Tifa had not returned to him, nor should she have. Marcus was still dead. Rachel still carried what had happened to her, though she carried it now with more company. Shelby had not undone damage so much as stop feeding it. The machine remained dangerous. Love remained slow. The world remained itself.

And yet.

He was here.

Not absolved. Not triumphant. Not cured of being a person. Only here, in the late light, with a family that had not been his and then, gradually, had become one of the central forms of his life.

Self-forgiveness, he had discovered, did not feel like acquittal.

It felt more like laying down the private prosecution after years of mistaking it for moral seriousness.

Beside him, Piyush made a small sound that might have been laughter.

Nikhil, somewhere below, had started singing again. The words did not fully carry uphill, but the tune had the heroic structure of instructions. Mira shouted at him to run faster or more carefully or both. Lina called them in two minutes too early because experience had taught her that every family departure required warning shots.

Matt watched them with the steady attention he once reserved for crisis.

Nothing in the afternoon asked to be scaled.

Nothing wanted to become proof.

The day did not need to mean more than itself.

That, finally, was one of the meanings.

Piyush nodded toward the field. “We should probably go rescue

them from sunset."

"Probably."

Neither moved yet.

Below them, Mira broke into a sprint. Nikhil chased after her, singing his own pursuit into existence. Lina stood from the blanket and lifted a hand. The grass, the evening, the city beyond the trees, all of it held for one brief ordinary moment without asking to be improved.

Matt stood with Piyush at Griffith Park and watched the children play.