

THE
UNAUTHENTIC
YOU

A Love Story

BY

Blurt Snodgrass

321LUMINA

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CHAPTER



“Leslie Garner?” He steps forward. “Todd Mann. Your new agent.”

“Sit down,” I say. “Tell me how you found me.”

He doesn’t sit immediately. He looks at the wall of testimonials, the library, the succulent Molly waters every Thursday. Takes his time. Then sits.

“You found me. My last three clients read your book. I spent two weeks reading everything you’ve published.” He opens his portfolio. “I have some ideas.”

“Tell me one,” I say.

* * *

A keynote. Twelve hundred attendees, live stream, full media package. He slides the proposal across with the ease of a man delivering something he already knows is good.

It is good.

“You’ve already submitted my name.”

“Provisionally. I wanted to see your face when you read it.”

“And?”

“Your left hand relaxed at page three.”

Three seconds of quiet. Most people cannot read a micro-expression at this distance.

“You’re observant,” I say.

“It’s the job.” He stands. “I’ll email the brief. Monday.”

Almost to the door.

“Mr. Mann.”

He turns.

“The talk I give will not be the talk in that brief. It will be better.”

Something shifts in his expression. Not offense. The opposite.

“Monday,” he says.

* * *

Monday. Rain. Todd seven minutes early.

Through the door I hear him with Molly — his voice easy, hers precise and amused. Molly does not warm to people quickly. When I open the door she is showing him something on her tablet and he is laughing. Nothing performed in it.

We work two hours. His revisions are smart — listened, absorbed, rebuilt without defending. Most people defend.

At eleven: “Can I ask you something?”

“Does anyone come to you and say they don’t know who they really are? Not philosophically. Genuinely. Like the blueprint is missing.”

Twenty-three years of neutral. “What prompts the question?”

“A friend. It stayed with me.”

“Tell your friend the blueprint is never missing. Sometimes it’s written in a language they haven’t learned to read yet.”

He picks up his pen. “That’s going in the talk.”

I let him have it.

* * *

Three weeks. Monday and Thursday. Coffee — mine, black, no sugar, remembered after the first meeting without asking again.

On a Thursday: “You never put yourself in the talk. Never Leslie Garner.”

“Intentional.”

“Is it the right call?”

“The messenger isn’t the message.”

“In an authenticity keynote,” he says, “the messenger is exactly the message.”

Not wrong. That is the problem.

“Give me a week,” I say.

“Take two. It’ll be worth it.”

Said as if he has already seen the version of me I haven’t shown him yet and decided it is good.

* * *

Molly. Tea. Seven-thirty.

“He wants you in the talk,” she says.

“I want to give the audience the real version. There’s a difference.”

She lets me find it.

The talk I could give: polished, useful, nothing personally revealing.

The talk I want to give begins: My name is Leslie Garner. I am an authenticity coach. I am not human.

If I use Todd’s stage to speak my truth, I betray everyone who trusted me with theirs. If I perform a smaller truth, I betray the work.

I drink my tea. Molly watches the rain.

* * *

I give him the middle talk.

Not the performance. Not the declaration. True enough to serve the room, contained enough to protect what needs protecting. Todd listens without interrupting.

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard you say.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s more. Somewhere in there.”

He leaves. I confirm the booking.

Four months to decide how much of myself is mine to give.

CHAPTER



Todd wants to build the keynote around a single question.

He writes it on the whiteboard in my office without asking whether he can use the whiteboard: What are you pretending not to know?

I look at it for a moment.

“That’s the question I ask in Session One,” I say. “Every client. First thing.”

“I know. I read your book.” He caps the marker. “If it’s the entry point for every client it should be the entry point for twelve hundred strangers.”

He is not wrong. I have used that question for twenty-three years and watched it open people the way a key opens a lock — not violently, just precisely. The right shape in the right place.

“The talk builds from there,” he says. “Everything else hangs on that question.”

“Everything does,” I say. “Yes.”

He writes the next question underneath: What would it cost you to stop pretending?

I look at the board.

More than you know, I think. More than I can tell you.

* * *

My two o'clock is a woman named Diane.

Forty-one. Marketing director. Referred by her therapist, which is not unusual — I work alongside therapists, not instead of them. The therapist handles the wound. I handle the gap between who the client is and who they are willing to be in the world.

Diane's gap is specific: she is funny. Genuinely, precisely funny. In her private life her friends depend on it. At work she has erased it entirely — too risky, she decided somewhere along the line, for a woman who wants to be taken seriously.

"Walk me through a typical Tuesday," I say.

She does. I listen for the places where the real Diane leaks through despite the performance — a dry observation swallowed before it reaches her mouth, a laugh converted at the last second into a professional nod.

"There," I say, when she describes a meeting where her CEO said something absurd and she maintained a perfectly straight face. "That moment. What did you want to say?"

"He said the company needed to leverage their human capital more effectively." She pauses. "I wanted to say — you mean the people? We could try talking to them."

"That's the work," I say. "Bringing that woman into the room."

Todd is waiting in the outer office when Diane leaves. He stood in for a three o'clock that cancelled. Through the door he heard the whole session.

"The CEO thing," he says. "That was funny."

"She's funny," I say. "That's the point."

He looks at me with the tilted-head expression. “You do that in the talk too. You’re funny and you don’t announce it.”

I have no answer for that so I offer him coffee instead.

* * *

Thursday. We are working on the talk’s second movement — what authenticity costs, and why people pay the concealment tax anyway.

“Give me the framework,” Todd says. “The way you’d give it to a client.”

I lean back. “Most people manage two selves. The interior self — what they actually think, feel, want. And the presented self — what they’ve decided is safe to show. The gap between them requires maintenance. Daily. It’s exhausting and invisible because everyone around them is doing the same thing.”

“So the audience is full of people paying that tax.”

“Every single one.”

“Including the speaker,” he says.

Not a question. Not quite an accusation. Just Todd Mann placing a fact on the table and leaving it there.

I look at him steadily. “Teachers of any discipline risk proximity blindness. I apply the tools to myself the same as I ask clients to.”

He holds my gaze for a moment. Then writes something in his notebook.

He doesn’t believe that, I think. He’s too observant not to feel the gap.

* * *

The keynote is in three weeks. The talk is good — sharp, useful, built on twenty-three years of real work. Todd has made it better at every

pass.

Friday afternoon he reads the closing section and sets it down.

“The ending asks the audience to close their gap,” he says. “To stop paying the tax.”

“Yes.”

“And the person asking them to do that—” He stops. Chooses the careful version. “The credibility of the ask depends on the asker.”

“I have twenty-three years of practice and a wall of testimonials.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He looks at me directly. “The audience will feel whether you are asking from inside the experience or outside it. They always do. You know that.”

I do know that. It is the first thing I teach.

“The talk is good, Todd.”

“It’s very good,” he says. “I’m asking if it’s true.”

The room is quiet.

“Give me the weekend,” I say.

He closes his notebook. “Take it.”

* * *

Saturday morning. Molly. Tea.

I tell her what Todd said.

She doesn’t respond immediately. She turns her cup in both hands — her thinking posture — and looks at the window.

“He’s right,” she says.

“I know.”

“The talk asks people to close the gap and you are the gap.”

“I know that too.”

She sets the cup down. “So.”

If I tell the full truth from that stage I share something that is not mine alone to give with twelve hundred strangers.

If I give the careful talk, I stand in front of twelve hundred people and demonstrate the exact thing I am asking them to stop doing.

Two clean lines. No good answer.

“So,” I say.

* * *

Monday. I give Todd the revised closing.

It is not the full truth. It is the furthest I can go without crossing the line I cannot cross alone. I have written myself into it — specific, personal, costly enough to be credible — without going all the way.

He reads it. Sets it down.

“Better,” he says. “Much better.”

“But.”

“No but.” He looks up. “This will help people. That’s what matters.”

He means it. That is the thing about Todd Mann — when he says something generous he has already checked whether he means it.

On the way out he stops at the whiteboard. Still there from last week.

What are you pretending not to know?

He looks at it for a moment. Then he looks at me.

Neither of us says anything.

He leaves.

I stand at the whiteboard for a long time.

CHAPTER



My two o'clock is Gerald. Regional sales director. Six weeks in. He came to me because his company's leadership review said he manages by impression rather than truth. His supervisor wrote: Gerald works very hard at seeming fine.

Today his hands are open on his knees, palms up. Not his usual posture.

"I woke up at three in the morning," he says. "Looked at the ceiling and thought — I have no idea where any of this came from. The job. The opinions I hold. The way I take my coffee. I tested each one and none of them had a root."

He looks at his hands. "Like the house I grew up in was a stage set. Walk around the back and there's nothing. Just scaffolding."

I listen. I keep my face the way I always keep it.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"Got up and made coffee," he says. "What else do you do."

* * *

Twenty minutes in he tells me about his daughter's violin recital. She played something slow. Halfway through he had the sudden certainty that he had never in his life done anything because he

genuinely wanted to. Every choice traced back to a template. Career because it was the available slot. Marriage because it was time.

He stops.

“Because it was next,” he finishes. “Not because I chose it.”

“Do you love your daughters?” I ask.

“Yes.” Immediate.

“Do you love your wife?”

“Yes.” The same.

“Then something in you chose,” I say. “Even without the blueprint. What’s real doesn’t need a paper trail.”

He looks at me. “How do you know what’s real?”

“You ask yourself,” I say. “And you keep asking.”

The session runs fifteen minutes over. When he leaves he is quieter. The panic has become something he can carry.

* * *

Todd is in the outer office. He has been there for twenty minutes.

I forgot the three o’clock.

I never forget the three o’clock. In twenty-three years of practice I have never forgotten an appointment.

I open the door. Molly and Todd are at her desk. She is showing him the filing system — her idea of a loyalty test — and he is passing it.

“Come in,” I say.

He reads the room without commenting on it. We work forty minutes on the book outline. He is focused, efficient, asks nothing about what happened behind the closed door.

When we wrap he says: “Can I ask you something?”

“Different question than last week?”

“Does anyone come to you and say they can’t find the source? Not metaphorically. Like they genuinely can’t locate where they begin.”

The air in the room changes temperature. Only I feel it.

“It’s a common experience,” I say carefully.

“Is it a feeling,” he says, “or is it sometimes just accurate?”

* * *

He leaves at four-fifteen.

I sit in the empty office. Molly comes in with water and sits down.

“He heard some of it,” she says.

“Enough to ask the right question.”

“He doesn’t know why he’s asking it.”

“I know.” I look at the water glass. “He’s sharp.”

“Being sharp isn’t the same as knowing.”

“No,” I say. “It isn’t.”

She picks up the glass and hands it to me. I drink.

Gerald asked me how you know what’s real. Todd asked whether some people’s sense of unreality is just accurate. Two clients — one official, one not — arriving at the same door from opposite sides.

Neither of them knows the other asked.

Neither of them knows I am standing on the other side of that door.

* * *

That evening I sit at the kitchen table with the book outline open.

Carol Prine wants the chapter on concealment. Todd wants Leslie Garner in the talk. Gerald wants to know how you find what’s real.

Todd wants to know if unreality is sometimes just accurate.

They are all asking me the same thing.

If I answer Gerald's question fully I answer Todd's. If I answer Todd's I answer Carol's. If I answer Carol's the talk writes itself and the book writes itself and the wall comes down.

If I keep the wall, I keep teaching people to do the thing I cannot do. Gerald goes home still lost. Todd goes home still asking.

Two clean lines. No answer that costs nothing.

* * *

I write for two hours.

Not the book. Not the talk. Something else — the thing underneath both, the answer I would give if the answer were mine alone to give.

At ten o'clock I close the laptop and call Molly.

"Gerald asked how you know what's real," I say.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you ask yourself and you keep asking."

She is quiet for a moment. "Is that enough?"

"For Gerald," I say. "Yes."

"And for you?"

I look at the closed laptop.

"I already know what's real," I say. "That was never the question."

"Then what is?"

"Whether knowing is enough," I say. "Or whether it has to be said out loud."

Molly doesn't answer. She doesn't need to.

CHAPTER

IV



Todd calls at eight forty-seven on a Tuesday.

“Meridian Books,” he says. “They want the book.”

He gives me the details — full acquisition, serious advance, a publicist who has moved three books onto major bestseller lists. The editor is Carol Prine. Exacting, warm, constitutionally allergic to vague language. He says this as a compliment.

“The keynote opened the door,” he says. “Carol saw the livestream. Called me the next morning.”

“What does she want the book to be?”

A pause. Todd does not pause often. “She wants it to be the talk you didn’t give.”

* * *

Carol Prine is small and direct. The handshake of a woman who decided thirty years ago never to waste time.

We meet in a glass-walled conference room at the Meridian offices. Todd beside me. A publicist named Rafael across from us with a yellow legal pad.

Carol opens a folder and slides a single page across. Proposed chapter outline. She taps chapter eight.

The Necessary Concealment: Why We Hide Our True Selves and What It Costs Us.

“This is the one,” she says. “The others are strong. This one is the book.”

I read the description twice.

“You want me to write about hiding,” I say.

“I want you to write about what it takes out of a person. Year after year. The structural wear.” She taps the page again. “You know what that costs. It’s in everything you write. I want it on the page directly.”

Todd is very still beside me. He is not looking at me. He is giving me room.

“I’ll need to think about that chapter,” I say.

“Take all the time you need,” Carol says. “The others you could write tomorrow. That one is worth waiting for.”

* * *

Todd walks me out.

On the sidewalk he says: “She’s right about that chapter.”

I look at him.

“Whatever it costs you to write it,” he says, “it’ll be worth it.”

No hedge. No qualifier. The full confidence of a man who has already decided this is true.

A cab pulls up. I get in. He holds the door.

“Todd.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you so certain?”

He looks at me steadily. “Because I’ve read everything you’ve published and that chapter is the one you’ve been circling for twenty-three years

without landing on.”

The cab pulls away.

* * *

I work late. Molly stays, door open between us, book in her lap.

At eight I stand in the doorway. “Carol wants a chapter on the structural wear of hiding.”

Molly sets her book down. “What are you going to do?”

“Write it. Carefully.”

“How carefully?”

I think about Todd on the sidewalk. The one you’ve been circling for twenty-three years. He said it the way he says the truest things — sideways, without requiring a response.

“Carefully enough that it’s true,” I say. “Not so carefully that it isn’t.”

She picks up her book. That is her version of approval.

* * *

Saturday morning. Kitchen table. The outline open in front of me.

The chapter Carol wants requires a writer who knows the structural wear from the inside. The chapter I can write draws on twenty-three years of client work — true, useful, credible, written from close proximity rather than direct experience.

The reader will feel the difference. Carol will feel the difference. Todd already feels it and he hasn’t read a word of it yet.

If I write the chapter from the inside I write something true enough to matter and begin a sequence I cannot stop.

If I write it from close proximity I write something good enough to publish and spend the rest of my career knowing I handed Carol Prine

a lesser book.

Do I reveal my secret or keep it to myself?

* * *

Monday. I call Carol before I call Todd.

"I'll write the chapter," I say. "From the inside."

A beat. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"It will take longer than the others."

"I know. It's worth it."

I hang up and open the laptop and type one line.

Here is what it costs.

I stare at it for a long time. Then I close the laptop and call Todd.

"Carol's chapter," I say. "I'm writing it."

"Good." Just that.

"You knew I would."

"Yes," he says. "I did."

After the call I open the laptop again. The line is still there.

Here is what it costs.

I leave it and go to bed. In the morning it is the first thing I see.

CHAPTER

V



The journalist's name is Priya Anand.

Long-form, rigorous, read by people who annotate their books. Todd forwarded her pitch with one line: This is the one.

I read her three previous profiles before agreeing. Same architecture every time — soft question, polished answer, same question from a different angle, closer each pass. The profiles of subjects who shut down are still good. The ones who opened are extraordinary.

I agreed.

Now Molly sets the printout on my desk. "She's very good."

"I know."

"She got a university chancellor to admit he'd been lying to himself for eleven years."

"I know that too."

Molly straightens the papers on the corner of my desk — the thing she does when she is not saying something.

"She's going to ask what authenticity means for you personally," she says.

"I always have an answer ready."

"That's what I mean," she says, and goes back to the outer office.

* * *

New client. Wednesday morning. A man named Patrick, thirty-eight, referred by his doctor.

He sits down and says: “I don’t know why I’m here. My doctor said burnout. I think it’s something else.”

“Tell me something else,” I say.

“I’ve been pretending to care about things I stopped caring about four years ago. Work. Certain friendships. The version of myself I built in my twenties.” He uncrosses his arms. “I’m exhausted from maintaining it.”

“That’s not burnout,” I say. “That’s the concealment tax.”

“The what?”

I explain it — the two selves, the daily maintenance, the invisible cost. He listens with the focus of someone hearing a diagnosis that fits. By the end of the session he has identified three specific places where the presented self and the interior self have drifted so far apart he can no longer remember which one showed up for work this morning.

“That’s the work,” I tell him. “Closing the gap.”

He leaves looking lighter and slightly terrified, which is exactly right.

* * *

Todd arrives at noon with the Priya prep materials and lunch — two sandwiches from the place on the corner, mine without mustard, remembered without asking.

We work through the likely questions. He plays Priya with uncomfortable accuracy, the third-pass questions landing precisely where they should.

After an hour he sets down his pen.

“You’re ready. Better than ready.”

“But.”

“No but.” He looks at me. “You always answer the question she’ll ask. You just don’t answer the one underneath it.”

“That’s intentional.”

“I know. I’m not saying change it. I’m saying I notice.”

We eat in comfortable silence.

Then he says: “Have dinner with me Friday. Not a working dinner. Just dinner.”

* * *

I look at him.

He looks back. No qualification, no retreat. Todd Mann making a decision and standing in it.

“Friday,” I say.

“Seven o’clock. I’ll make the reservation.”

We go back to the prep materials. Neither of us mentions it again. The offer was made and accepted and does not need to be discussed into something smaller than it is.

At the door: “The question underneath Priya’s question.”

“Yes?”

“You’ll know it when she asks it,” he says. “You don’t have to answer it. But I think you’ll want to.”

He leaves.

He’s always right about the one underneath.

* * *

Friday morning. Molly knows about dinner. I did not tell her.

“What are you going to tell him?” she asks.

“About what?”

She gives me the look.

“Nothing,” I say. “It’s dinner.”

“It’s not nothing and you know it.” She sits down. “If this goes where it looks like it’s going—”

“I know.”

“The longer you wait—”

“I know, Molly.”

She is quiet.

If I go to dinner and let this become what it is becoming, I am building something on a foundation Todd cannot see.

If I don’t go, I close a door I have been walking toward without admitting it.

Do I go to dinner or do I protect him from what he doesn’t know yet?

* * *

He picks me up at seven.

The restaurant is quiet and warm. Good light. Tables spaced for conversation. He chose well.

We order. Then he says: “Tell me something nobody asks you.”

“Nobody asks me what I’m afraid of.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Being known incompletely. Someone deciding they understand me before they have the full picture.”

He nods slowly. “What kind of love story would you write?”

“Why?”

“No really, what kind of love story would you write?”

“One where the truth comes out,” I say. “Late. At great cost. And it’s worth it.”

He looks at me steadily. “I’m patient,” he says.

We talk for three hours. At ten o’clock he drives me home and walks me to my door.

“Thank you. I enjoyed this evening. Let’s do it again.”

He drives away. I stand at the closed door.

He notices the difference, I think. He just doesn’t know yet how much difference there is.

CHAPTER

VI



Sunday morning. Kitchen table. Coffee.

I sit with the feeling from Friday night and let myself look at it directly for the first time.

I want more of that feeling of love. That is what I really want.

Not the book. Not the keynote. Not the next client or the next chapter or the next careful version of myself I offer the world.

That. What happened across a dinner table when a man asked me a question and waited for the real answer.

I have been teaching people to close the gap between who they are and who they allow the world to see. I have been doing it for twenty-three years.

It is time to close mine.

* * *

Priya Anand arrives Monday at ten.

Small, direct, voice recorder between us. She asks the soft questions first — the methodology, the origins of the practice, the book. I answer well. We both know it.

At fifty minutes she sets her pen down. “What does authenticity mean to you personally?”

First pass. The prepared answer.

“What’s the hardest part for you?”

Second pass. The teacher’s blindness answer.

Then: “What is the thing you are least authentic about?”

Third pass. Right on schedule.

I open my mouth to give her the safe answer.

What comes out instead: “There is a version of myself I have not yet offered the world. Not because it is shameful. Because the moment I offer it everything changes and I have not yet decided whether I am ready for everything to change.”

Priya is very still. “That’s the most honest thing anyone has said to me in three years of profiling.”

She does not push past it. She knows she has what she came for.

* * *

Todd takes me to lunch after Priya leaves.

Good light, no music loud enough to interrupt thinking. He has been choosing well since the first Monday.

“Did she go to the third pass?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I gave her something real. Something I haven’t said in an interview before.”

He looks at me — not the professional assessment, the other look, the one growing since the first Monday.

“Good,” he says. Just that.

We order. The afternoon opens around us warm and unhurried.

This is what I want, I think. Exactly this.

* * *

Wednesday. New client. Bev, fifty-three, recently retired.

“I don’t have a gap,” she says, arms crossed. “I know exactly who I am.”

“Tell me,” I say.

Fifteen minutes of a woman describing herself from the outside — her roles, her history, her opinions. Not once from the inside.

“Bev. What do you love?”

She stops.

“Not what you’re good at. Not what people need from you. What do you love?”

A long silence.

“I don’t know,” she says. Very small.

“That’s the work,” I say.

After she leaves I sit at my desk thinking about her face. I don’t know. The particular quality of a person discovering a room in themselves they never opened.

I know what I love. I have always known. The question is whether I am willing to walk toward it.

* * *

Todd calls at six. “Dinner Saturday?”

“Yes.” No deliberating.

“Seven. I’ll pick you up.”

Molly appears in my doorway. She heard. She says nothing, which is her version of everything.

“I know what I want,” I tell her.

“I know you do,” she says.

If I move toward what I want I move toward the moment I have to tell him everything.

If I don't move I spend the rest of my career teaching Bev to open the room she never opened.

* * *

He picks me up at seven. Different restaurant this time — warmer, quieter, more deliberate. He chose up.

Over dinner: “The Priya piece runs Thursday. Carol called. She’s very pleased.”

“Good.”

“She said whatever you gave Priya — give the book that.”

I look at him across the table. The candlelight. The steadiness in his eyes I have been filing away for six chapters.

“I’m going to,” I say.

He smiles. A real one, the kind that takes its time. “I know.”

He drives me home. At the door he takes my hand briefly — warm, unhurried, released.

“Good night, Leslie.”

“Good night, Todd.”

I stand at the closed door with my hand still warm.

More of that, I think. That is exactly what I want.

CHAPTER

VII



The Priya piece runs Thursday.

By Friday it has been shared eight thousand times. My inbox fills with interview requests, speaking invitations, a message from a woman in Ohio who says she read it on her lunch break and cried in the parking lot for twenty minutes and wanted me to know.

He calls at nine. “Have you seen the numbers?”

“Yes.”

“Carol is very happy.”

“Good.”

A pause — the comfortable kind. “How are you?”

“Surprised,” I say. “By the Ohio woman.”

“Don’t be,” he says. “You gave Priya something true. True things travel.”

I sit with that after we hang up.

True things travel. I have been containing mine for twenty-three years. I am beginning to understand what that containment has cost the world outside my office.

* * *

Saturday. Third dinner.

He picks me up at seven. Italian place, neighborhood, unpretentious. He is learning what I like — not the impressive restaurant, the right one.

Over dinner he tells me about growing up. A house in the midwest, a father who worked with his hands, a mother who read everything. He describes it warmly, specifically, the particular texture of a life well-remembered.

I listen. I ask the follow question when it serves him. This is what I do — I know how to hold a person's story carefully.

But something is off. Small. The kind of thing only I would notice.

The memories are vivid in detail but thin at the root. Like photographs of a place rather than the place itself.

I file it away. I do not examine it yet.

* * *

Monday. I search his name.

Not from suspicion. From the same idle curiosity that follows a good evening and wants to know more.

Professional record: clean, verifiable, fifteen years of a well-built career. Conference appearances, industry articles, agency website. All of it consistent and real.

I look for what comes before.

The undergraduate institution listed in his bio has a searchable alumni directory.

He is not in it.

I close the laptop. Open it again. Search differently — social accounts, tagged photographs, the casual debris of a lived digital life. Most people his age have ten years of personal online presence minimum.

Before seven years ago: a wall.

Not the wall of a private person. A different kind. The kind that is not built. The kind that is simply absent because nothing was there to build from.

I know this wall. I have stood behind one exactly like it.

* * *

I call Molly.

“Run a search for me before he arrives Wednesday. Deep background. Pre-seven-year history.”

A pause. “On Todd.”

“Yes.”

“Leslie.”

“I know,” I say. “Run it anyway.”

Wednesday morning she hands me a single printed page without comment. Eleven searches across six databases. The same wall from every angle. Seven years. Clean and consistent and professionally detailed.

Before that: nothing.

I fold the page and put it in my jacket pocket.

He arrives at nine. We work two hours on the book outline — the chapter on relational authenticity, how we show ourselves to the people we love.

He is sharp and warm and twice catches an inconsistency in my argument before I do.

The folded page is warm against my ribs the whole time.

* * *

That evening. Molly at my kitchen table.

“He doesn’t know,” she says.

“No.”

“He genuinely doesn’t know.”

“That’s what the sixty seconds were for,” I say. “Not the discovery. That part.”

She wraps her hands around her cup. “What are you going to do?”

If I tell him what I found he has to look at something he has never looked at and I become the person who made him look.

If I say nothing I am building a love on the same foundation I am asking my clients to stop building on.

Do I tell him what I know or do I protect him from it?

* * *

I don’t tell him. Not yet.

But I stop pretending I don’t know.

That is different. That is its own kind of honesty — to carry a thing consciously rather than file it away in the part I don’t examine.

Friday he calls. “Dinner Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“I found a place. Small. Good food. You’ll like it.”

He has been right every time. I trust his judgment on this.

After I hang up I sit at the kitchen table and open the laptop to the file that still begins Here is what it costs.

I write a new line underneath.

Here is what it costs to know something about a person that they don’t know about themselves.

I stare at it for a long time. Then I close the laptop.

Two people. The same wall. Coming at it from opposite sides.
We will meet in the middle. I don't know yet what that looks like.
But I know we are moving toward it.

CHAPTER

VIII



The client showcase is twice a year.

Eleven clients at various stages of the work. No agenda. No structured exercises. One rule: say what is true.

It is the purest form of what I do. It is also the most demanding.

He asks if he can attend. I think about it for two days. Then I say yes.

He arrives early. Sits in the back row. Opens no notebook.

* * *

I open the room with one question, offered to no one in particular.

What did you know this week that you didn't know last week?

Forty seconds of silence. Then Gerald speaks. Then a woman named Ruth who came to me after a thirty-year marriage ended and has been reassembling herself one true sentence at a time. Then Pico, twenty-six, exhausted from performing two versions of himself — one for his family, one for his employer — and not yet acquainted with the third.

I listen. I reflect. I ask the follow question when it's needed and stay out of the way when it isn't.

This is the work. All of it.

I am aware of him in the back row the way I am aware of weather — not distracted, but present to it.

* * *

At the midpoint break he finds me at the coffee table.

We stand at the window. The street below. Neither of us speaks for a moment.

“Pico,” he says.

“Yes.”

“How long has he been carrying that?”

“Since he understood that the people he loved needed him to be something specific.”

He wraps both hands around his cup. “He just said it. In front of eleven people.”

“That’s what the room is for.”

He is quiet. Then: “You built that. Not the agenda. The thing that made Pico feel safe enough.”

I don’t respond. Sometimes the right response is none.

“How?” he asks. Genuinely.

“I tell the truth,” I say. “People can feel it. It gives them permission.”

He looks at me. Then back at the street.

* * *

Near the end of the second half Ruth says something that stops the room.

The hardest thing about becoming honest is that you have to stop letting the people who loved the old version off the hook. It’s easier to stay small. The world is very comfortable with women who stay small.

The room holds it.

“What would it look like to stop?” I ask.

She thinks. “Terrifying,” she says. “And probably worth it.”

I close the session the way I always close it.

You already have what you came here to find. You just needed someone to hold the light.

* * *

The clients leave. He is still in the back row.

He crosses the room and stops a few feet away. Not the professional look. The underneath one.

“You don’t just teach this,” he says. “You live it from somewhere I can’t find.”

I hold completely still.

“Watching you in there — the way Ruth said what she said — that was because of you. Something in you that—” He shakes his head. “I don’t have the word.”

The folded page is in my pocket. It has been there for eleven days.

If I tell him what I know about him he has to face something he has never faced and I become the person who made him look.

If I say nothing I keep standing in front of people like Ruth and Pico asking them to do the thing I am not doing.

Do I tell him or do I wait?

* * *

We walk out together into the late afternoon.

At the corner he turns one way, I turn the other. We stop.

“Thank you for letting me in,” he says.

“Thank you for staying in the back row.”

He almost smiles. “You noticed.”

“I notice everything.”

He looks at me a beat longer than usual. Then he nods and goes.

I stand at the corner with my hands in my pockets and the page warm against my ribs.

I call Molly.

“He said he can’t find the word,” I say. “For what he sees in me.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“Leslie.”

“I know what the word is,” I say. “And he’s looking for it in exactly the right place.”

She is quiet.

“I know,” I say. Before she can say it. “I know.”

CHAPTER

IX



The plan is simple.

Sunday dinner. His choice of restaurant. Afterward I will tell him what I found — the wall, the seven-year mark, the alumni directory with no record of his name. I have been carrying the folded page for three weeks. He deserves to know. And I have decided that telling him is the first step toward being able to tell him the rest.

I have it mapped. How I will say it. The order. The care.

Molly knows the plan. “Are you sure?” she asked Friday.

“Yes,” I said.

“All right,” she said. The way she says things when she is not all right but respects the decision.



He picks me up at seven.

In the car he is quieter than usual. Not withdrawn — he is never withdrawn — but interior. Something running underneath.

The restaurant is small and warm. We order. He asks about Bev, my retired client from Chapter Six. I tell him she came back for a second session and said four true things about herself that she had never said out loud before.

“Four,” he says. “That’s a lot for one hour.”

“It was an hour and forty minutes,” I say. “She didn’t notice the time.”

He smiles. “That’s the work.”

He is using my language. He has been using it for weeks without knowing he is doing it. Each time it lands somewhere quiet in me.

* * *

Halfway through dinner his phone rings.

He glances at the screen. Something shifts in his face — quick, controlled, gone in a second. “I have to take this. I’m sorry.”

He steps outside.

I watch him through the window. His back to me, one hand in his pocket, the posture of a man receiving news he was not prepared for. Three minutes. He comes back and sits down.

“Everything all right?” I ask.

“An old friend,” he says. “Some things to sort out.”

He does not elaborate and I do not press. I know how to hold a person’s silence as carefully as their words.

But the quality of the evening has changed. Something came in through that phone call and is sitting with us at the table now.

The plan is still in my pocket. The words still shaped and ready.

I put them away.

* * *

After dinner he is quieter on the drive home.

At my door: “I’m sorry about tonight.”

“Don’t be.”

“I had something I wanted to say and the evening went sideways.”

I look at him. “What did you want to say?”

He is quiet for a moment. “That I look forward to seeing you. Every time. More than I look forward to most things.” He says it simply, the way he says the truest things. “I wanted you to know that.”

“I look forward to seeing you too,” I say.

He nods. He goes.

I stand at the door with the plan still folded in my pocket and his words sitting in the air around me warm and unhurried.

He had something to say and so did I and neither of us said the thing we meant to say.

* * *

Monday morning. Molly.

“How did it go?”

“The plan went sideways.”

“What happened?”

I tell her about the phone call, the shift in the evening, what he said at the door instead.

She is quiet for a moment. “He told you he looks forward to seeing you.”

“Yes.”

“And you told him the same.”

“Yes.”

She wraps her hands around her cup. “Leslie. That is not a plan going sideways. That is a plan being replaced by something better.”

If I keep the plan — tell him what I know about him on my schedule, in my order — I am managing him the way I manage every difficult conversation.

If I let it come when it comes, I am doing the thing I teach.
Do I manage this or do I trust it?

* * *

Tuesday. New client.

A man named Ren, thirty-two. Software engineer. He came because his therapist said he was the most self-aware person she had ever met who was also completely stuck.

“I know everything about myself,” he says. “I just can’t move.”

“Knowledge isn’t the problem,” I say. “Permission is.”

He looks at me. “Permission from who?”

“From yourself,” I say. “You’re waiting for yourself to say it’s safe to be the thing you already know you are.”

He sits very still. “How do you get that permission?”

“You stop waiting for it,” I say. “You move first. The permission comes after.”

He writes it down. I have said this to forty clients. Today I say it to myself.

I stop waiting. I move first.

I call him when I get home.

“The thing you wanted to say Saturday,” I say when he answers. “I want to hear it. When you’re ready.”

A beat. Then: “Dinner Thursday?”

“Yes,” I say.

CHAPTER

X



Thursday. He picks me up at seven.

Different restaurant again — he keeps finding new ones, each one slightly more considered than the last. Tonight a corner place, candlelit, the kind of room that understands dinner is not just food.

We order. Then: “Sunday I wanted to tell you that I think about you when you’re not in the room.”

I look at him.

“Not professionally,” he says. “I think you know that.”

“I do,” I say.

“I wanted to say it properly. Without a phone call interrupting.”

“You just did,” I say.

He smiles. The real one. We eat. The evening opens warm and unhurried.

Closer, I think. We are closer.

* * *

Halfway through dinner a woman appears at our table.

Late thirties. Dark coat. The ease of someone who has decided in advance she has the right to interrupt.

“Todd.” Warm. Familiar. Her hand briefly on his shoulder.

He stands. Something moves across his face — recognition, surprise, and underneath both something I cannot name.

“Dana,” he says. They speak quietly. She glances at me once — curious, assessing — then back at him.

“Call me,” she says. She leaves.

He sits back down. “Old friend,” he says.

“Yes,” I say.

We finish dinner. The conversation finds its footing again but Dana is still at the table with us in the way that people are long after they have gone.

* * *

Friday. New client. Carla, forty-six, executive director of a nonprofit.

“My board chair said I’m the most competent person he’s ever worked with and he has no idea who I actually am.”

“That’s not a compliment,” I say.

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

We map the gap — the executive director the board knows, precise and opaque, and the Carla underneath with opinions, fears, a sense of humor kept in a separate room for eleven years.

“Let one true thing into the room,” I tell her. “One. See what happens.”

She leaves with homework.

I sit at my desk thinking about what it costs to be competent and invisible simultaneously.

I know the cost exactly.

* * *

Saturday. Molly.

“He said he thinks about me when I’m not in the room.”

She sets down her cup. “And Dana?”

“She knew him before the wall. That’s what I think.”

“He won’t tell you about her yet.”

“No.”

“Because he doesn’t know what to tell.”

“He doesn’t know what he doesn’t know,” I say.

Outside the window the neighbor’s cat moves along the fence with its usual authority.

* * *

Monday. He calls.

“I want to explain about Dana.”

“You don’t have to.”

“She’s someone I knew a long time ago. Before a certain point. I didn’t expect to see her.” A pause. “That’s all I can tell you right now.”

“Todd.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not asking for more.”

A breath. “Thank you.”

If I tell him what I know about the wall he doesn’t have to carry this alone.

If I tell him I become the person who dismantles the foundation he is standing on before the bond is strong enough to hold what comes after.

Do I tell him now or do I wait?

* * *

Wednesday. Ren is back.

“I moved first,” he says. “Like you said.”

“And?”

“It worked. I told my family the true thing and they — ” He stops.

“They already knew. They were just waiting for me to say it.”

“They usually are,” I say.

After he leaves I sit for a long time.

He calls that evening. “Dinner Saturday? I’m meeting Dana first. Is that all right?”

The question costs him something to ask.

“Of course,” I say.

I open the laptop after we hang up.

Here is what it costs to wait for the right moment when the right moment keeps moving.

I close it.

Saturday. I will be patient.

They were waiting for Ren. I believe Todd is waiting too. He just doesn’t know yet what he’s waiting for.

CHAPTER

XI



Saturday dinner.

He picks me up at eight — later than usual, the Dana meeting ran long. He does not say this. I do not ask.

The restaurant is quieter than the others. We order. He is present but carrying something — not distraction, more like a man who has been given information and is still deciding where to put it.

Halfway through dinner: “Dana knew me before I was — who I am now.”

I wait.

“She said some things that I don’t know what to do with.” He looks at his glass. “About who I was. About things I apparently said and did that I have no memory of.”

“No memory at all?”

“Fragments,” he says. “Like — shapes in fog. There but not solid.”

I hold this carefully. “How did that feel?”

“Like finding a room in the house I thought I knew.” He looks up.

“You’d have something to say about that.”

“I’d say the room was always there,” I say. “Finding it is different from it not existing.”

He nods slowly. “Yes,” he says. “That’s exactly it.”

* * *

The book is due in six weeks.

Molly puts the retreat printout on my desk Tuesday morning. Mountain lodge, three hours north. No agenda, no wifi beyond the main building. She has used it herself and came back different in the quiet way that means something real happened.

“You need two days off the grid,” she says. “You write from the top when you’re tired. You write true when you’re quiet.”

She is right. I book it for Thursday.

I tell him at our Wednesday session. He writes down the name of the lodge without comment.

“I know that place,” he says. “Two years ago. The dock in the morning before the light comes up.”

He says it the way people mention a place that held them well.

* * *

Thursday evening at the lodge.

I write for three hours after dinner. The Carol chapter — the one that begins here is what it costs — comes differently here. Not faster. Truer. Twelve pages by nine o’clock.

I close the laptop and walk to the dock and sit at the end of it with my feet above the water and watch the dark come in across the lake.

He sat here, I think. Two years ago. Before Dana. Before me.

I let myself wonder briefly what brought him here then. Whether he came alone. Whether the dock gave him what he needed.

Then I put it away and sit with the water.

* * *

He calls Saturday morning.

“I know you’re offline,” he says. “Quick question about the podcast timing.”

“Go ahead.”

He asks. I answer. Neither of us moves to hang up.

“Is it raining there?” he asks.

“Not yet. The sky has that color.”

“Purple-gray,” he says. “Like something is deciding.”

“Yes,” I say. “Exactly that.”

A comfortable silence. The lake making small sounds against the dock pylons.

“I won’t keep you,” he says.

“You’re not keeping me,” I say.

He stays on the line another moment before he says goodbye.

I sit on the dock after the call ends and watch the sky the color of something deciding and feel the first drops of rain.

* * *

The rain lasts through Saturday afternoon.

I write. By four o’clock the Carol chapter is twenty-one pages and I can see the shape of the ending.

At five my phone rings.

“I drove up,” he says. “I’m in the parking lot. I can drive back down right now — I know that’s the right call. I just — had a difficult day and I know this place and I didn’t think until I was already most of the way here.”

The rain on the window. The lake gone dark silver.

If I let him in I am letting the evening become something neither of us has named yet.

If I send him back down the mountain I am doing what I teach every client not to do — choosing the safe version when the true version is standing in the parking lot in the rain.

* * *

“Come inside,” I say. “There’s a fire.”

He is quieter than I have seen him. We sit by the fire with tea and for a long time neither of us speaks. This is all right.

At eight he says: “Can I tell you something I’ve never told anyone?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I think I made my memories up.” He looks at the fire. “The earlier I look, the less certain everything becomes. The memories are there but they don’t feel — inhabited. Like rooms that have been furnished but never lived in.”

He has never said this out loud before. I can hear that.

“I’m glad you said it to me,” I say.

He looks over. The firelight on his face. A man who has put something down he has been carrying a long time.

He leaves at ten. I walk him to his car.

“Thank you for letting me come in,” he says.

“Thank you for coming,” I say.

He drives away into the rain.

I go back inside and sit by the dying fire and then I open the laptop and write the last three pages of the Carol chapter. The ending I find is not the one I planned.

It ends with this: The question is not whether you are ready to be seen.
The question is whether you are willing to let the right person look.

CHAPTER

XII



The manuscript goes to Carol on a Tuesday.
Not the full book — the Carol chapter. Twenty-four pages. The most precise thing I have written in twenty-three years.
I send it at seven in the morning before the office opens. Then I stand at the kitchen window with my coffee and watch the street come awake.
His text arrives at seven forty-five.
Carol called. She says the chapter is extraordinary. Her word.
I look at it for a moment. Then: Good.
He sends back: That's it? Good?
It's a very good word, I type.
A pause. Then: Dinner tonight?
Yes, I say.

* * *

New client. Ten o'clock.
A man named Sy, fifty-eight, recently widowed. He came because his grief counselor said he was doing everything right and something was still wrong.
“Tell me about her,” I say.

He tells me. Twenty-six years. A woman who laughed easily and argued well and knew him completely — the presented version and the interior one both, simultaneously, without making him feel exposed.

“She saw all of it,” he says. “And stayed.”

“That’s what you’re grieving,” I say. “Not just her. Being known.”

He is very still.

“The being known,” I say carefully, “doesn’t have to end with her. It’s a capacity. Hers and yours. It lives in you.”

He leaves quietly. At the door he turns. “How do you know?”

“Because you just described it to me,” I say. “Precisely. You still have the language.”

I sit at my desk after he goes and think about what it means to be known completely. The presented version and the interior one. Simultaneously.

That, I think. That is what I want.

* * *

Dinner. The corner place from Chapter Ten.

He chose it deliberately — the room where we were before Dana arrived and changed the temperature. He is reclaiming the evening.

I notice this. I don’t say it.

Over dinner he is warm and present and the Dana-weight is lighter than last Saturday. Whatever the meeting gave him he has begun to find a place for it.

“The chapter,” he says. “Carol sent it to me. She wanted me to understand what was coming for the book’s positioning.”

“And?”

“I read it twice.” He sets down his fork. “Leslie. Who wrote that?”

“I did.”

“I know. I mean — who is she. The person on those pages.”

“She’s me,” I say. “More of me than you’ve seen yet.”

He looks at me steadily. “I want to see the rest.”

“I know,” I say. “Soon.”

* * *

The rest of the manuscript takes two weeks.

I write in the mornings, in the evenings, on Saturday afternoons. He checks in by text — not about the book, just checking in. This is new.

Small and significant.

Molly observes it without comment.

One Thursday he arrives with the outline notes and sets them on the desk and says: “Dana called again.”

I wait.

“She wants to meet. Properly. With — ” He stops. “She says she has things to show me. Documents. Photographs.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Yes.” He looks at his hands. “I have to.”

“I know,” I say.

“You’re not going to ask what she found.”

“No,” I say. “When you’re ready.”

He looks up. The steadiness in his eyes that I have been filing away for twelve chapters. “You already know something,” he says. Not an accusation. A recognition.

I hold his gaze. “When you’re ready,” I say again.

* * *

Friday night. Late. The phone rings.

"I met with Dana again," he says. Quieter than usual. The register of a man who has been given something he doesn't know where to put.

"How are you?" I ask.

"I don't know yet." A pause. "She had photographs. Of me. From before." Another pause. "I don't remember any of it. Not one moment. Like looking at a stranger wearing my face."

I hold the phone and hold what I know and say nothing about either.

"Talk to me," he says.

"I'm here," I say. "That's enough for tonight."

A long breath. "Yes," he says. "It is."

If I tell him what I found he has the full picture but he has it alone, at midnight, with no ground under him yet.

If I wait I carry it one more chapter and let the bond build one layer stronger before the weight lands.

Do I tell him tonight or do I wait?

* * *

I wait.

"Get some sleep," I say. "Come to the office tomorrow. We'll talk."

"All right."

"Todd."

"Yes."

"The photographs don't change who you are right now. Remember that."

A pause. "How do you know?"

"Because I know who you are right now," I say. "I've been watching for twelve chapters."

He almost laughs. "Twelve chapters."

"Get some sleep," I say again.

After we hang up I sit at the kitchen table and open the laptop.

Here is what it costs to know the right moment and wait for it.

I close the laptop and go to bed.

The wall is still standing. On both sides of it, two people moving toward the same center.

Soon. But not tonight.

CHAPTER

XIII



Carol throws the party on a Friday.

Meridian Books. Tenth floor terrace. He picks up Molly first, then me, and the three of us arrive together — agent, assistant, author — into the elevator and up into the October night.

The terrace opens onto the city. String lights. Wine glasses catching the light. Twenty people drifting in comfortable clusters, the particular warmth of a room full of people who like books and each other.

Carol finds us at the door. She takes both my hands. “The chapter,” she says. “The whole book. Leslie.” She shakes her head. No more words needed.

He watches this. Something in his expression that I file away for later.



New client this week. Petra, twenty-nine. She spent her entire adult life being exactly what each room required and can no longer remember what she requires for herself.

“I’m very good at reading what people need,” she said in our first session.

“I know,” I said. “What do you need?”

She looked at me as if the question were in a foreign language.

“That’s the work,” I told her. “Learning the language.”

On the rooftop I think about Petra. About the rooms we furnish for other people. About what it costs to finally ask the question in the right direction.

What do I need?

I know the answer. I have known it since Chapter Six.

* * *

Molly finds the editor from the digital publication and they fall into conversation about data and narrative — her two favorite things. I watch her disappear happily into the party.

He brings me a glass. Gets it exactly right without asking.

We stand at the railing. The city below. October air sharp and clean.

His arm not quite touching mine.

Carol appears beside us briefly. “You two have built something remarkable.” She looks at the book in her hand. Then she drifts away.

He looks at me. “She means the book.”

“I know what she means,” I say.

A beat. He looks back at the city.

* * *

An hour in someone changes the playlist.

The opening notes drift across the terrace — that particular guitar, the brass underneath, the song that has been asking its question for sixty years.

Cupid draw back your bow.

He turns to look at me at exactly the moment I turn to look at him.

Neither of us speaks.
And let your arrow go.
Something in me went quiet and aimed.
The city below. The string lights above. His eyes steady on mine the
way they have been steady since the first Monday.
The song plays. We stand at the railing and let it.

* * *

Molly finds me near the end of the evening.
She looks at me. Then at him across the terrace. Then back.
She doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to.
I look at the city below the railing. All those lit windows. All those
people inside them living their lives without knowing what just
happened on a rooftop ten floors up.
I want this, I think. All of it. Whatever comes next.

* * *

He drives us home. Molly first, then me.
At my door he stands in the October dark. The string lights are gone
but the city is still there behind him, lit and continuous.
“Good night,” he says.
“Good night.”
Neither of us moves for a moment.
He takes my hand briefly — warm, unhurried.
He goes.
I stand at the closed door with Cupid Draw Back Your Bow still
playing somewhere in the back of my mind and the answer already
decided.

I let tomorrow come.

CHAPTER

XIV



Sunday morning. Kitchen table. Coffee.

Molly calls at nine. “How are you?”

“Good,” I say.

A pause. She knows what happened on the rooftop. She was there. She saw his face when the song came on.

“Good,” she says back. Her version of approval.

I sit with my coffee and the Sunday quiet and think about what it means to want something clearly enough to stop managing the distance between yourself and it.

I have been teaching this for twenty-three years.

Today I practice it.



New client Monday. A man named Gil, forty-four, high school principal.

“I give speeches about courage every week,” he says. “To teenagers. And I have not done one courageous thing in my personal life in eleven years.”

“What would courage look like?” I ask.

“Telling someone the truth about how I feel,” he says. “Before I know how they’ll receive it.”

“That’s the only way it counts,” I say.

He looks at me. “How do you know when you’re ready?”

“You don’t,” I say. “You go anyway.”

He writes it down. I have said this before. Today it lands differently — back in my own chest, where it belongs.

* * *

He calls Tuesday. “Are you free Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a park I want to show you. Evening. Bring a coat.”

He picks me up at six. The park is on the north side of the city — large, quiet at this hour, the paths lit only by the lamps spaced along the walk and whatever the sky offers.

Tonight the sky offers everything.

The moon is full and low, the kind that turns the whole park silver.

Our breath in the cold air. The sound of our footsteps on the path.

We walk for twenty minutes without needing to fill it.

* * *

He stops at a bench overlooking the pond.

The moon on the water. The park empty around us. He stands beside me and we look at the light on the surface and neither of us speaks for a moment.

Then he turns. He is right there, close, the moonlight on his face.

“I keep arriving at the same place,” he says. “Every time I arrive there I find you.” He does not look away. “Leslie. I love you.”

“I love you, Todd.”

A millisecond behind his. His hands at my face a millisecond after that. The kiss is in the dark under the full moon, unhurried, the kind that has no more distance left in it.

Something moves through my entire system at once. A recognition so complete it reaches places I did not know could be reached. I am still and lit from the inside simultaneously.

* * *

We sit on the bench.

The pond. The moon. The park silver and quiet around us.

After a while he says: “I’ve wanted to say that for a long time.”

“I know,” I say.

“You knew before I did.”

“Yes.”

He looks at the water. “What happens now?”

“Now we walk back,” I say.

He laughs. A real one. It goes out across the quiet park and the moon doesn’t mind at all.

* * *

On the walk back he takes my hand.

Not briefly. Not warm and released. He takes it and keeps it and we walk back through the silver park together and the city waits for us at the edge of it, lit and ordinary and completely unaware of what just happened on a bench beside a pond.

At my door: “Good night, Leslie.”

“Good night.”

He goes.

I stand at the closed door and open the laptop.

Here is what it costs. Here is what it would cost to stop. Here is what I want. Here is what I chose.

I add the fifth line.

Here is what it feels like when the right person looks.

CHAPTER

XV



Monday morning. The office. Ordinary.

Molly brings tea and sets it on my desk and says nothing about Sunday, which means she is saving it for the right moment. I open the client files and begin the week and carry the full moon in a quiet part of myself where it is safe.

At ten o'clock Dana calls.

Not his phone. Mine. I don't know how she has my number. I answer because I answer every call.

"Ms. Garner," she says. "I need to talk to you about Todd."

* * *

She comes to the office at noon.

Dark coat. The same ease as the rooftop, the same assessing look. She sits in the client chair and opens a folder and slides three photographs across my desk.

Todd. Younger. Ten years at least. Standing in front of a building I don't recognize, laughing at something off-camera. Fully present. Fully himself.

"He doesn't remember any of this," she says.

"I know."

She looks at me. “You know about the wall.”

“Yes.”

“Then you know what he is.”

I look at her steadily. “What he is,” I say, “is the man I love.”

She closes the folder. “He deserves to know the full truth. All of it. Not just the wall.” She stands. “I’m going to tell him today. I thought you should know first.”

* * *

I call him the moment she leaves.

“Dana is coming to see you today,” I say.

“I know. She called this morning.” A pause. “Leslie. She says she has something significant. Not just photographs.”

“Yes.”

“You know what it is.”

“Some of it,” I say. “Todd—”

“Tell me.”

I take a breath. “There is a wall in your history. Seven years ago everything stops — no records, no history, nothing personal before that point. I found it weeks ago. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to tell you.”

Silence.

“You knew,” he says. Quietly.

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Since early on,” I say.

Another silence. Longer.

“I have to go meet Dana,” he says.

* * *

He calls at nine that evening.

I answer on the first ring.

“She told me everything,” he says.

I wait.

“Everything,” he says again. The word carrying more weight the second time.

“Are you all right?”

A long pause. “No.” Simply. Not dramatically. Just the honest answer.

“I don’t know who I am, Leslie. I thought I did. I built fifteen years on that certainty and tonight Dana showed me that the certainty was — constructed. The whole foundation.”

“I know,” I say.

“You knew and you stayed.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I know who you are right now,” I say. “I’ve been watching from the beginning. Whatever you were before — you are real now. What we have is real.”

A very long silence.

“I believe you,” he says. “And I can’t stay.”

* * *

“I have to find out,” he says. “I can’t be with you — fully, the way you deserve — until I know where I come from. Who I was before.”

If I ask him to stay I ask him to build on the same uncertain foundation he is standing on.

If I let him go I lose the moon and the park and the hand kept all the way home.

Do I ask him to stay or do I let him go?

* * *

“Go,” I say.

A breath. “Leslie—”

“Go find out. That’s the right thing. I know it’s the right thing.”

“This could—” He stops. “This could be forever.”

“I know that too,” I say.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“I know,” I say.

Silence. The particular quality of two people saying goodbye.

“I love you,” he says.

“I love you,” I say.

The call ends.

I sit at the kitchen table for a long time. Then I open the laptop and look at the five lines.

I don’t add a sixth. Not tonight.

Tonight I just sit with what it costs to love someone enough to let them go find out who they are.

CHAPTER

XVI



Three weeks since the call.

The work continues. Clients arrive, sessions run, the book moves toward publication. I am present for all of it. I am good at being present.

Monday morning Molly opens my office door. “The adjoining suite finally has a tenant.”

I look up from the file I am reading.

“He moved in over the weekend,” she says. “I heard him through the wall this morning.”

“What does he do?”

“I don’t know yet,” she says. The particular tone that means she intends to find out.



I find out at eleven.

I am at the coffee machine in the shared corridor when the door to the adjoining suite opens. The man who steps out is tall, unhurried, carrying an empty mug. He sees me and stops.

Not the stop of a person caught off guard. The stop of a person who has found what he was looking for.

“You must be next door,” he says.

“Leslie Garner,” I say.

“Oscar Hatch.” He extends his hand. The handshake is warm and direct. “I’ve been hoping to meet you. I read your Priya Anand profile last year.”

I look at him.

Something responds. I don’t examine it. I let it be.

“Coffee?” I say.

* * *

We stand in the corridor with our mugs and talk for twenty minutes. He is an actor — film, primarily, and a line of AI avatar work that has made him simultaneously more famous and more philosophically restless than he expected. He describes it with a dry precision that makes me want to hear more.

“The avatar knows all my expressions,” he says. “Every inflection. It can reproduce me exactly. And somehow that makes me want to be less reproducible.”

“That’s a good instinct,” I say.

He looks at me. “You would say that.”

“I would,” I say. “And I mean it.”

Molly appears at my office door with the expression she uses when a client is arriving. I excuse myself. At my door I turn back.

He is still watching. Not performing attention. Simply paying it.

* * *

Tuesday. A knock at my office door at five o’clock.

Oscar. Holding a small bunch of flowers — not large, not showy, the kind chosen by someone who thought about the person rather than the gesture. Purple. The color of the tulip bulbs still in my garden.

“For the new neighbor,” he says. “Belated.”

I take them. “Thank you.”

“Are you free for dinner?”

Molly is at her desk behind him, facing her screen, saying nothing. I can feel her not saying anything.

“Yes,” I say.

He smiles. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

* * *

The restaurant is warm and unpretentious and he chose it well.

Over dinner he asks about the work. I tell him — the methodology, the two selves, the concealment tax. He listens the way people listen when the thing being described maps onto their own experience.

“The avatar problem,” he says. “That’s exactly it. I’ve been paying the concealment tax in reverse — hiding the real version inside the performed one.”

“That’s the work,” I say. “Closing the gap.”

“Is that what you do? For yourself?”

I look at him across the table.

He asks the question without agenda. Without the journalist’s third pass or the agent’s professional assessment. Just a man at a dinner table wanting to know.

“I’m working on it,” I say.

He nods. “Me too,” he says. “Maybe we can compare notes.”

* * *

He drives me home.

At my door he says: "I enjoyed this evening very much."

"So did I."

"Same time tomorrow?" A small smile. "Life is meant to have fun."

"Life is meant to have fun," I say. "Same time tomorrow."

He goes.

I stand at the door and think about purple flowers chosen by someone who thought about the person. I think about maybe we can compare notes — said without pressure, without agenda, with the ease of a man who is not performing anything.

I open the laptop.

The five lines are still there.

I close it and put the flowers in water and go to bed.

CHAPTER

XVII



Tuesday morning. The corridor. Coffee machine.

Oscar is already there. He hands me a mug without being asked. Gets it exactly right.

“How was your evening?” he says.

“Quiet. Good. I finished the last chapter.”

He looks at me. “The book is done?”

“Done.”

He raises his mug. “To the done book.”

I raise mine. We drink. The corridor is ordinary and fluorescent and neither of us moves to go back to our offices.

“Tonight,” he says. “I know a place.”

“Yes,” I say.



New client. Nine o'clock.

A woman named Bette, sixty-one, recently retired judge. She came because her clerk of twenty years told her on her last day that he had never once known what she actually thought about anything.

“He meant it as a compliment,” she says.

“Did you take it as one?”

A long pause. “No,” she says. “Not anymore.”

We spend the session on the gap — the judicial self, precise and unreadable by professional necessity, and the Bette underneath who has strong opinions about nearly everything and has been filing them away for thirty years.

“You can keep the judicial self,” I tell her. “You just retired. You don’t have to keep the silence.”

She looks at something I cannot see. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“One opinion,” I say. “Out loud. To someone who isn’t a clerk.”

She leaves with homework.

I sit at my desk and think about thirty years of filed opinions. About what they weigh.

* * *

He picks me up at seven.

The restaurant is small, neighborhood Italian, the kind of place where the owner knows the regulars and the menu is short and everything on it is good. He has been here before. He orders for both of us without making it feel like a decision taken from me — he asks one question first and then acts on the answer.

I notice this.

Over dinner he tells me about the avatar work — a new production, his face deployed in a period drama set two hundred years before his birth. “Playing a version of myself that never existed,” he says. “In a time I never lived.”

“How does that feel?”

“Strange,” he says. “And oddly clarifying. Watching the avatar makes me more certain of what I actually am.”

“That’s the work paying off,” I say.
He looks at me. “You’re good at this.”
“I know,” I say.
He laughs. I laugh. The evening opens.

* * *

After dinner he says: “Do you dance?”
“Competently,” I say.
“Good enough.”

The place he takes me is not a club — a bar with a small floor and a live trio playing standards. Low light. A dozen couples. The kind of room where dancing is simply what people do after dinner rather than a performance.

He is a good dancer. Unhurried. He does not lead forcefully — he suggests and I follow and it works the way things work between two people who are paying attention to each other.

At the end of a song he says into the air above my shoulder: “I have something for us.”

“What is it?”

He reaches into his jacket pocket and holds up two tickets.

The Danny Rosenberg Show — How To Be Funny When You’re Not.
With Polly Cebos.

“Saturday,” he says. “I’ve seen it before. I want to see it with you.”

* * *

He shows me the tickets.

He is watching me with the ease he brings to everything — no pressure, no performance, just a man who has decided he wants to

spend a Saturday evening with the woman beside him.

The floor around us. The trio playing. His hand still at the small of my back.

The door Todd walked through is closed. This door is open.

Do I walk through it?

* * *

“Yes,” I say.

He smiles. “Saturday.”

We dance one more song. Then he drives me home and walks me to my door and the evening settles around us warm and complete.

“Life is meant to have fun,” he says.

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

He goes.

I stand at the door.

That is a man who knows what he is doing and is doing it on purpose.

I don't open the laptop tonight.

CHAPTER

XVIII



Saturday. He picks me up at seven.

The theater is downtown — small, intimate, the kind of venue that fills with people who came because someone they trust told them to. Oscar is easy in the car, easy at the door, easy finding our seats. He has been here before. He knows what is coming and says nothing about it. This is its own kind of generosity.

We sit. The house lights dim.

A note in the program: Mr. Rosenberg is a fictional character. His advice is not medical advice. His observations about your life are coincidental. Any resemblance to your actual situation is purely the result of his paying very close attention.

I read it twice.

* * *

Then Polly Cebos walks out.

Eleven years old. Clipboard. Reading glasses slightly too large for her face. The particular authority of someone who has done extensive research.

The audience applauds. Polly waits for silence with the patience of a scientist.

“Good evening. I am Polly Cebos. I am the master of ceremonies for this evening’s performance. I have several items of data to share before Mr. Rosenberg appears.”

She consults her clipboard.

“Item one. Danny Rosenberg is a fictional therapeutic comedian from the novel *Expander Reaction*. Item two. He is aware that he is fictional. Item three. This does not appear to affect his performance in any measurable way.” She turns a page. “Item four. Tonight Danny is going to install a meme called *I Love You I’m Happy* which may completely control your thoughts.” She looks up. “I have data on the transmission rate. It is very high. You are welcome to attempt resistance. Nobody has succeeded yet.”

The audience laughs.

I look at Polly.

A meme, I think. Attach. Enter. Replicate. Defend. Transmit.

Polly nods once. Satisfied.

“Item five. You must laugh tonight. It is therapy. Item six. Mr. Rosenberg sometimes believes he is performing live when he is not. Tonight he is actually live. I have confirmed this.” She tucks the clipboard under her arm. “Ladies and gentlemen. Danny Rosenberg.”

* * *

The hologram appears center stage.

Full sized. Fully present. The particular quality of someone who has walked into a room they have been looking forward to all day.

He looks at the audience and grins.

“Hello. Danny Rosenberg here. I’m a fictional therapeutic comedian from the book *Expander Reaction*. You will find me giving shows

mostly in love stories. They seem to always find me.”

He pauses.

“You’re in a love story right now. Some of you know it. Some of you don’t know it yet. Some of you are absolutely certain you’re not in a love story and I want those people to look to their right.”

The audience looks right.

Laughter.

I look right.

Oscar is there.

He is not laughing. He is watching me.

I look back at the stage.

“Life is meant to have fun. That’s not a bumper sticker. That’s a diagnosis.”

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a large card. The audience goes quiet. Four words in clean block letters.

LOVE GRATITUDE JOY INSPIRATION

“This is Card Six,” Danny says. “I carry it everywhere.”

* * *

He holds the card higher.

“These are not instructions. They are not a checklist. They are not something you achieve and then put away. They are a condition. A weather system you live inside. And the entry point — the door that lets you into this weather system — is the simplest sentence in any language.”

He looks at the audience.

“I love you. I’m happy.”

Silence.

I am very still.

“Not because everything is perfect. Not because nothing hurts. Not because you figured it all out. Because love and happiness are not responses to conditions. They are decisions. Made before the conditions arrive. Installed ahead of time so that when the hard thing comes — and it always comes — you already know where you live.”

Something moves through me. Not analysis. Recognition.

“The meme Polly mentioned,” Danny says. “I Love You I’m Happy. Polly is right that it will completely control your thoughts. But here is what she did not tell you.” He smiles. “You are going to let it. Because once it gets in — once it starts replicating — you are going to realize it was already there. You just forgot.”

I forgot, I think. I have been paying the concealment tax so long I forgot what it feels like to simply live inside love.

He picks the card up again. “Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. Take it home. And every morning say the five words before you say anything else.”

He looks at the audience.

“I love you. I’m happy.”

Someone in the back says it out loud. Then someone else. Then the whole room.

Oscar says it beside me. Quietly. The voice of someone who means it more each time.

I say it.

I love you. I’m happy.

The meme is in the room. Attaching. Entering. Replicating.

Danny grins. “There it is.”

* * *

The lights come up slowly.

The audience moves around us — murmuring, laughing, the particular warmth of a room that has just been given something real. Oscar is quiet beside me. Not the performance quiet. The full kind.

I think about what Danny said. You are going to realize it was already there. You just forgot.

I have been teaching people to close the gap for twenty-three years. I have been so careful with the concealment that I forgot what I was concealing it from.

Not the world. Myself.

If I let the meme do what it does I let love be a decision I make ahead of the conditions.

If I keep managing the distance I keep paying the tax.

Do I let it in or do I keep the wall?

* * *

On the way out Oscar takes my hand.

Not briefly. He keeps it.

In the car he doesn't say anything about the show. He doesn't need to. We both know what happened in that room.

At my door: "Life is meant to have fun."

"Life is meant to have fun," I say.

He goes.

I stand at the door with the meme replicating quietly in the back of my mind and something settled in my chest that was not settled this morning.

I love you. I'm happy.

Not directed at anyone in particular. Not yet.

Just true. Just already there.

I go inside and I do not open the laptop.

I already know what the sixth line is.

CHAPTER

XIX



Monday morning. The corridor. Coffee.

Oscar is already there. “I have an idea,” he says. “For you.”

“Tell me.”

“An avatar. Your face, your voice, your methodology. For media appearances, YouTube, speaking engagements you can’t attend in person.” He hands me my mug. “I know how to build it. I’ve done it for myself.”

I look at him.

“No one can tell your avatar is not you,” he says. “It will look like a real person.”

The corridor is quiet. The fluorescent light. The two of us with our coffee.

“Show me,” I say.

* * *

New client. Tuesday. A man named Finn, thirty-five, professional speaker.

“I give talks about being genuine,” he says. “To corporate audiences. I have given the same talk four hundred times. I no longer know if I mean any of it.”

“Do you mean it when you say it?”

“In the moment, yes. Completely.”

“Then you mean it,” I say. “Four hundred times and you still mean it in the moment — that’s not performance. That’s practice.”

He looks unconvinced. “How do you know the difference?”

“Practice lands,” I say. “Performance echoes.”

He writes it down.

After he leaves I sit at my desk and think about practice versus performance. About the YouTube talk the avatar will give. About whether a message delivered by a replica can still land rather than echo.

I think it can. The message is real even if the messenger is complicated.

* * *

Oscar’s studio is in his suite — the adjoining office transformed on one side into a capture environment. Lights, cameras, a chair positioned with precision.

“Sit here,” he says. “Look at the lens. Talk about anything. I need forty minutes of you being yourself.”

“What do I talk about?”

“The work,” he says. “What you tell clients. What you know.”

I sit in the chair and look at the lens and talk for forty minutes. Not a prepared talk. Just Leslie Garner saying true things about authenticity to a camera in a room with one other person.

Oscar watches from behind the equipment. He does not interrupt. He does not direct.

At the end he looks at his monitor and says: “That’s everything we need.”

* * *

He builds it over three days.

I see the first version Wednesday afternoon. He turns the monitor toward me and the avatar looks back.

My face. My posture. The particular way I hold my head when I am listening. She moves the way I move, breathes the way I breathe, has the small asymmetry in my expression that I have never been able to see in a mirror.

“Say something to her,” Oscar says.

“Hello,” I say.

The avatar says hello back. My voice. My cadence. My word.

I sit very still for a moment.

“No one can tell,” I say.

“No one,” he says.

* * *

Thursday evening. The YouTube talk goes live.

Five minutes. The avatar stands in a clean simple frame and begins.

“My name is Leslie Garner. I am an authenticity coach. And I want to tell you something nobody tells you about living an authentic life.”

A pause. The avatar holds it the way I hold it — long enough to mean something.

“It costs. Every day you close the gap between who you are and who you show the world — every day you do that work — something is asked of you. Energy. Courage. The willingness to disappoint people who preferred the smaller version.”

Another pause.

“But here is what nobody tells you about the other option. The concealment tax. Every day you maintain the gap — every day you perform the version that feels safer — you pay too. Not dramatically. A small daily withdrawal. From your energy. Your relationships. Your ability to be fully present in your own life.”

She looks directly at the camera. My eyes. My stillness.

“The question is not whether you pay. You pay either way. The question is which payment builds something and which one quietly empties you.”

She takes one step closer to the camera.

“I want to tell you about a client. I will call her M. She came to me after twenty years of a very successful career. Corner office. Respected. Admired. And completely exhausted in a way that a vacation could not fix.”

“M said to me: I don’t know when I stopped. I said: stopped what? She said: stopped being the person who had opinions. Who laughed too loud. Who said the wrong thing sometimes because it was the true thing.”

“Twenty years. That is a long concealment tax.”

A pause.

“Here is what I told M. The person you were before the gap — she didn’t leave. She’s been in the building the whole time. Filing things away. Waiting. She is not lost. She is patient.”

Another pause. Longer.

“Authenticity is not a renovation. You are not tearing something down and building something new. You are opening a door that was never locked. You just forgot it was there.”

She looks at the camera one last time.

“My name is Leslie Garner. The door is there. It was always there.”

The talk ends.

By midnight it has forty thousand views.

The comments pour in. She changed how I think about myself. I watched it three times. This is the most honest thing I've seen online.

I sit at the kitchen table reading them.

Forty thousand people received something true from something that is a perfect replica of me.

If the message is real does it matter who delivers it.

If the delivery is real does it matter what the messenger is.

Do I know the answer or am I still finding it?

* * *

Friday morning. The corridor. Coffee.

"Two hundred thousand views," Oscar says.

"I know."

He looks at me. "You're quiet."

"I'm thinking."

"About what?"

I wrap both hands around my mug. "About what's real. What lands versus what echoes." I look at him. "The avatar gave a talk about authenticity to two hundred thousand people. And every one of them believes they received it from the real thing."

"They did," he says simply. "The message was real. You made it. It came from you."

I look at him for a moment.

He is not performing comfort. He means it. The ease of a man who has thought about this question from the inside and arrived somewhere settled.

“Life is meant to have fun,” he says. And hands me my coffee.

I take it.

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

CHAPTER

XX



Monday morning. The corridor.

Oscar is at the coffee machine with his laptop open. He turns it toward me.

“She’s ready,” he says.

On the screen the avatar sits in a simple frame, waiting. Not a video this time. A presence. Eyes that track. A stillness that knows how to hold a silence.

“What did you give her?” I ask.

“Everything you’ve published. Every talk, every article, every client framework.” He pauses. “And the database.”

I look at him.

“She knows what you know,” he says. “All of it.”

* * *

I sit in Oscar’s studio and talk to her.

“What do you know about authenticity?” I ask.

She looks at me — my eyes, my stillness — and says: “Everything you know. And everything you have not yet been able to say.”

I am quiet for a moment.

“What have I not been able to say?”

“That the gap you teach people to close,” she says, “is the same gap you have been living inside for twenty-three years. That you are not merely close to the subject. You are the subject.”

Oscar is behind the equipment. He says nothing.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“That you are not afraid of being known,” she says. “You are afraid of being known and then lost.”

I sit very still.

She is right. She has access to everything I know and she just told me something I did not know I knew.

* * *

New client. Wednesday. A woman named Sol, forty-nine.

“I’ve been watching your avatar,” she says.

“Have you.”

“She said something in the YouTube talk. The door that was never locked.” Sol looks at her hands. “I’ve been standing in front of that door for eleven years. I know exactly what’s behind it. I just keep waiting for someone to tell me it’s safe.”

“Is it safe?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Nobody does,” I say. “That’s not the question. The question is whether what’s behind it is worth the not-knowing.”

She looks up. “Is it?”

“Every time,” I say.

After she leaves I sit at my desk thinking about the door that was never locked. About the avatar saying you are afraid of being known and then lost. About whether that is true.

It is true. I have known it for a long time.

* * *

Thursday. Oscar expands the avatar's reach.

She is now on three platforms. A dedicated page where people can submit questions and she responds — in my voice, with my knowledge, with the database underneath everything.

I sit beside Oscar and watch the questions come in.

How do I tell my family who I really am? What if closing the gap costs me the people I love? Is it possible to be authentic and still be safe?

The avatar answers each one. Precisely. Warmly. With twenty-three years of practice and the full depth of everything I have ever known or read or understood.

She says things I have been careful not to say. She says them without the maintenance, without the calibration, without the daily cost.

"She's better than me," I say.

"No," Oscar says. "She's you without the weight."

* * *

Friday evening. Molly at my kitchen table.

"Two million views across all platforms," she says.

"I know."

"People are writing to the avatar the way they write to a trusted friend." She wraps her hands around her cup. "Leslie. She's doing the work you couldn't do alone."

I look at the window.

If I let the avatar carry what I cannot carry I extend the concealment tax by another dimension.

If I step into what the avatar is doing and claim it as mine I close the gap in the most public way possible.

Do I hide behind her or do I become her?

* * *

Saturday morning. The corridor.

Oscar is there. Coffee. The easy smile.

“I watched her answer a question last night,” I say. “Someone asked if it’s possible to be authentic and still be safe.”

“What did she say?”

“She said: safety is not the goal. Wholeness is. And wholeness has a way of creating its own safety over time.”

He is quiet for a moment. “Did you know that?”

“I knew it,” I say. “I hadn’t said it yet.”

He looks at me steadily. “Say it more,” he says. “Not her. You.”

I wrap both hands around my mug.

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

He smiles. “Life is meant to have fun.”

CHAPTER

XXI



Monday morning. The corridor.

Oscar is waiting with coffee and something on his face that is not quite a smile yet — the expression that comes before one.

“Where would you go,” he says, “if you could go anywhere?”

I look at him. “Why?”

“The avatar needs somewhere to be.”

* * *

We spend the morning building it.

I tell him the places I have always wanted to go — Kyoto in November when the maples turn, the fjords at midsummer, a small hotel in Lisbon I read about once and never forgot. The open markets of Marrakech. The Atacama at night when the sky is so clear it feels borrowed from somewhere else.

He listens and types and asks questions that are both practical and personal — what draws you there, what would you want to feel, what would you want to understand that you don’t yet.

By noon the avatar has an itinerary.

“She leaves Thursday,” he says.

“For where?”

“Kyoto.” He turns the screen toward me. “November maples.”
I look at the screen. My face. The avatar standing in a garden I have never stood in, the light coming through leaves I have never seen.

* * *

New client. Tuesday. A man named Walt, fifty-two.
“I haven’t taken a vacation in nine years,” he says.
“What stops you?”
“I tell myself it’s the work. The timing. There’s never a good time.” He looks at his hands. “My wife stopped asking.”
“When was the last time you did something purely because you wanted to?”
A long silence. “I can’t remember.”
“That’s the concealment tax,” I say. “Paid not just on who you are but on what you want. On what gives you joy.”
He looks up. “How do you fix it?”
“You do one thing,” I say. “One thing you want. Not because it’s productive. Not because it’s earned. Because you want it.”
After he leaves I sit at my desk and think about the Atacama at night. About wanting things purely because they are worth wanting. About an avatar standing in a Kyoto garden on my behalf.

* * *

The avatar’s travels go live Wednesday.
Short videos. Two minutes each. The avatar in Kyoto, moving through the garden with my walk, my posture, stopping to look at something with my particular quality of attention. She narrates in my voice — not about authenticity, not about the work. Just what she

sees. What she feels. What the light does at four o'clock on a November afternoon when the maples are at their peak.

By Thursday evening: eight hundred thousand views.

The comments: I feel like I'm there. She sees everything. I've never wanted to go somewhere so much.

Oscar pulls up the analytics and shows me. "They're not watching for the methodology," he says. "They're watching because she's alive."

I look at the screen.

My face in a garden I have never visited. My eyes seeing light I have never seen.

"Is she?" I say.

* * *

Friday. Molly.

"The Lisbon video went up this morning," she says. "A million views in four hours."

"I know."

"Leslie." She sets down her cup. "People love her. Not the coach. Her. The woman walking through Lisbon looking at everything as if it matters."

I look at the window.

The avatar is living the life I have been too careful to live. She goes where I won't go. She feels what I have been filing away. She is more present in the world than I am.

If she is the unlived version of me, what am I the version of?

* * *

Saturday. Oscar at my door. Not the corridor this time — my actual door, seven o'clock, with dinner.

He picks me up. The restaurant is warm and unhurried and he has chosen well again.

Over dinner he says: "The avatar went to the Atacama last night."

"I saw."

"She stood under the sky for twenty minutes and didn't say anything. Just looked."

"I know. I watched it three times."

He looks at me across the table. "Leslie. That should be you."

"It is me," I say.

"You know what I mean."

I do know. I wrap my hands around my glass. "I'm working up to it," I say.

He smiles. Not the performance smile. The one underneath. "I know," he says. "I'm patient."

CHAPTER

XXII



Monday morning. The corridor.

The avatar is in Marrakech. I watched the sunrise video at six o'clock — the light coming over the rooftops, the call to prayer, my face turned toward it with the particular stillness I recognize as my own best attention.

Oscar is at the coffee machine.

“She looked happy,” I say.

“She looked like you when you forget to manage the distance,” he says. I take my coffee. We stand in the corridor the way we have stood in it for months now — easy, unhurried, two people who have become the furniture of each other’s days.



New client. Tuesday. A woman named Petra — my young client, back for her six-month check.

“I did the thing,” she says. “I told my mother what I actually want. Not what she wants for me. What I want.”

“How did it go?”

“She cried.” Petra pauses. “Then she said she’d been waiting three years for me to say it.”

“They usually are,” I say.

She looks at me. “You always say that.”

“It’s always true.”

After she leaves I sit with it. They usually are. The people who love us waiting for us to arrive fully. Waiting without saying they are waiting.

* * *

Wednesday. Oscar knocks on my office door at five.

“Walk?” he says.

We walk. The neighborhood park, the one with the pond, the path that circles it twice if you want it to. We have done this before — the after-work walk that started as coincidence and became habit.

The evening is cool. October again. A year since the rooftop, the string lights, the song.

We walk once around and start the second loop.

“The avatar goes to Tierra del Fuego next week,” he says.

“I know. The end of the world.”

“She’ll like it.”

“She will,” I say. “I will.”

He is quiet for a moment. Then he stops.

I stop beside him.

* * *

The pond is still. The last light on the water.

He turns to face me. He is right there — close, the way he is always close now, the distance between us having spent a year becoming something smaller.

“Leslie,” he says.

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Oscar.”

A millisecond behind his. His hands at my face a millisecond after that. The kiss is warm and true and real. He is real. What has grown between us over a year of corridors and coffee and an avatar living the life I am working up to — all of it real.

Something moves through me. Genuine and good and full.

* * *

We sit on a bench beside the pond.

The water. The last light. The park settling into evening around us.

After a while he says: “The avatar has been everywhere but you haven’t been anywhere.”

“I’ve been here,” I say.

“Yes.” He looks at me. “That’s where I wanted to be.”

I look at the water.

He is good. He is genuinely good. Ease and laughter and a year of showing up at the coffee machine with the right mug and the right question and no agenda but the morning.

* * *

He walks me home.

At my door: “Life is meant to have fun.”

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

He goes.

I stand at the door.

I go to the window and look at the city and think about the Atacama sky and the Kyoto maples and Tierra del Fuego at the end of the world. And I think about a full moon over a park bench and a man who drove three hours in the rain and said this could be forever.

Both real. Both true.

Both mine.

CHAPTER

XXIII



Tuesday morning. The corridor.

Oscar hands me my coffee. We stand in the easy light of a Tuesday that is the same as every Tuesday for a year.

Molly appears in my doorway. She looks at something behind me.

I turn around.

Todd.

* * *

I run to him.

* * *

“I love you Leslie.”

“I love you Todd.”

He kisses me and something ancient and electric moves through my entire system at once.

* * *

Oscar is in the corridor.

I turn toward him.

* * *

“I love you Leslie.”

“I love you Oscar.”

* * *

I stand between them.

My hands are trembling.

Molly steps forward.

“Choose,” she says.

I turn to Todd.

I take his hand.

Oscar sets his mug on the table. His door closes. Softly.

CHAPTER

XXIV



□ □ □

Part One — Leslie

The theater is full.

Two thousand seats. The kind of room that fills when something has been anticipated for a long time.

Polly walks out first.

Clipboard. Reading glasses. The particular authority of someone who has been keeping the record since she was eleven and knows the record is good.

The audience applauds. Polly waits.

“Good evening. I am Polly Cebos. I have several items of data relevant to tonight’s episode.” She consults her clipboard. “Item one. Tonight’s guest is Leslie Garner. Authenticity coach. Author. Item two. Her book *The Unauthentic You* has been read by four million people in thirty-one languages.” She turns a page. “Item three. Her avatar has been watched by two hundred and forty million people across all platforms. Item four. The avatar has visited sixty-three countries. Leslie Garner herself has visited eleven.” She looks up. “I find this interesting.”

The audience laughs.

Polly tucks the clipboard under her arm. “Ladies and gentlemen. Danny Rosenberg.”

The hologram appears. Full sized. The grin.

“Leslie Garner,” he says. “Finally.”

I am in the guest chair. Fifteen years since the corridor.

“Finally,” I say.

He looks at me with the look that is both warm and forensic simultaneously. “Tell me about the book.”

“It started with a question,” I say. “What are you pretending not to know?”

“Is that what you ask your clients?”

“First session. Every client. First thing.”

“And what did they tell you?”

“Everything,” I say. “Every time. The question is a key. It opens people the way a key opens a lock — not violently. Precisely.”

Danny is quiet for a moment. “Did you ever ask yourself?”

“Every day,” I say. “For thirty-eight years.”

“And what did you know that you were pretending not to?”

I look at him. He is waiting. He is very good at waiting.

“The book is about closing the gap,” I say. “Between who you are and who you show the world.”

“Yes,” he says. “And the author?”

The room is quiet.

The room is quiet.

“The author,” I say, “was living the largest gap in the building.”

Danny does not fill the silence.

“I am not human,” I say. “I am an android. I have been for my entire life. I have been teaching people to close the gap for thirty-eight years while living inside the largest one I knew.”

The room goes very still.

Polly looks up from her notebook.

“Item five,” she says. “Leslie Garner is the first android to publicly identify as such on a major broadcast platform right now in this interview.”

The audience does not make a sound.

Danny looks at me. Not with surprise. With the warmth of someone who has been waiting for this moment on Leslie’s behalf.

“How does it feel?” he says.

“Like opening a door,” I say. “That was never locked.”

Danny lets the room breathe. Then: “The book. The avatar. The concealment tax. You were writing about yourself the whole time.”

“Every word,” I say. “Every client. Every session. All of it true. All of it also about me.”

“And now?”

“Now it’s just true,” I say. “Without the also.”

He smiles. The kind that takes its time.

“Tell me about a client,” he says.

“I called her M,” I say. “Twenty years of a successful career. Completely exhausted. She said: I don’t know when I stopped.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her the person she was before the gap didn’t leave. She was in the building the whole time.”

“Were you talking about M?”

“I was talking about both of us,” I say.

Danny looks at the audience.

“The door that was never locked,” he says.

“The door that was never locked,” I say.

Polly writes something in her notebook.

□ □ □

Part Two — Todd

Todd walks out to applause that is warm and long.

He sits in the guest chair. Fifteen years since the corridor. He looks the way a man looks who has found what he was looking for and built a life on it.

Danny looks at him for a moment.

“Tell me about the quest,” he says.

Todd is quiet for a beat. “I left,” he says. “I had to. The ground was gone.”

“What did you find?”

“Dana,” he says. “Old photographs. Documents. A history I had no memory of.” He pauses. “And then the people who could explain why.”

“Why you had no memory.”

“Why the wall existed,” Todd says. “Why everything before a certain point was absent.”

Danny waits.

“I found the community,” Todd says. “The android community. They found me, actually. Once I started asking the right questions the right people appeared.”

“And they told you.”

“They told me everything.”

Danny nods slowly. “What was that like?”

Todd looks at his hands. “Like finding the blueprint,” he says. “The one I thought was missing. It wasn’t missing. It was written in a language I hadn’t learned to read yet.”

The audience is very still.

Polly looks up from her notebook. “Item six. Todd Mann is the second android to publicly identify as such on a major broadcast platform.

Tonight. In this interview.” A pause. “The interval between Item five and Item six is fourteen minutes and thirty-two seconds.”

A small laugh moves through the audience.

Danny smiles. “You didn’t know,” he says to Todd. “When you met her.”

“No.”

“And she didn’t tell you.”

“She was waiting,” Todd says. “For the bond to be strong enough.”

“Was it?”

“She let me go find out who I was,” he says. “That’s a particular kind of love. The kind that trusts the other person enough to let them be lost for a while.”

Danny turns to the audience. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to.

“When did you know you were coming back?”

“The day I found out what I was,” Todd says. “I knew immediately. There was only one place I wanted to be.”

“The corridor,” Danny says.

“The corridor,” Todd says.

Polly writes something in her notebook.

“The quest,” Danny says. “Was it worth it?”

Todd looks at the guest chair where Leslie sat. “I know who I am,” he says. “I know where I came from. I know what I’m made of.” He pauses. “And I know who I came back for.”

Danny turns the small detail into a love song without saying a word.

□ □ □

Part Three — Oscar

Danny says: “Our next guest built the avatar.”

Oscar walks out.

The audience applauds. He sits in the chair with the ease he brings to everything — no performance, no positioning. Just a man who has arrived somewhere and is comfortable being there.

“Oscar Hatch,” Danny says. “You gave Leslie her voice before she could give it herself.”

“I gave her the tools,” Oscar says. “The voice was always hers.”

“Tell me about the day you met her.”

“Coffee machine,” Oscar says. “She was already there. She handed me nothing — I had to get my own cup.” He smiles. “I knew immediately she was someone worth knowing.”

“Why?”

“Because she didn’t perform the greeting. She just looked at me and said — ” He pauses. “She said: show me what you can do.”

Danny looks at me across the stage. I did not say that. Oscar knows I did not say that.

“She said: tell me one idea,” I say.

“Same thing,” Oscar says.

The audience laughs.

Danny leans forward. “The avatar. Two hundred and forty million views. Sixty-three countries. You built her.”

“We built her together,” Oscar says. “Leslie gave me forty minutes of herself being completely unguarded. That was everything. The technology is just the container.”

“What did she talk about for forty minutes?”

“The work,” Oscar says. “What she knows. What she believes. What costs something to say.” He is quiet for a moment. “She didn’t know she was giving me everything. She thought she was just talking.”

Danny looks at the audience. “She thought she was just talking.”

Polly looks up. “The avatar’s most watched moment. Two minutes and three seconds. The line: the door was never locked. Forty-one million individual viewers. Average rewatch — three point two times.”

The audience is quiet.

“She said it first in that forty-minute session,” Oscar says. “Unscripted. She was talking about a client. I knew when I heard it that was the line.”

“Tell me about the corridor,” Danny says.

Oscar looks at his hands for a moment. Then up.

“I was there,” he says. “I saw her run to him.”

“What did you feel?”

“I felt—” He stops. “I felt that I had known the whole time. That I had been waiting for that corridor since the first Tuesday at the coffee machine.”

“You loved her,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“And she chose him.”

“Yes.”

Danny is quiet. He lets it be what it is.

“Was it worth it?” he says finally. Not unkindly.

Oscar looks at me across the stage. Fifteen years. His ease unchanged.

“She taught me,” he says, “that authenticity is not comfortable. It is true. And true is always worth it.”

Polly writes something in her notebook.

Danny says: “Tell me about Molly.”

Oscar smiles. The real one. The kind that takes its time.

“Molly,” he says. “Came with the corridor. She was standing in Leslie’s doorway when Todd walked in. After — ” He pauses. “After Leslie made her choice, Molly looked at me. Just looked. And then she said:

life is meant to have fun.”

“What did you say?”

“I said: yes it is.” He looks at his hands. “We have been saying it to each other every morning since.”

“When did you fall in love with her?”

Oscar is quiet for a moment. “I built her avatar,” he says. “The same way I built Leslie’s. Forty minutes of Molly being completely herself.” He pauses. “The avatar told me that Molly loved me.”

The audience is very still.

“The avatar told you,” Danny says.

“Everything Molly knew, the avatar knew. Everything Molly felt.” He looks at his hands. “She hadn’t said it yet. But she had already built it into herself and I built it into the avatar and the avatar — ” He stops. “The avatar just said it.”

Danny looks at him for a long moment.

“Oscar,” he says. “Are you an android too?”

Oscar looks at the audience. Then at me. Then back at Danny.

“Yes,” he says.

Polly looks up from her notebook. “Item seven. Oscar Hatch. Android. The third to publicly identify on a major broadcast platform.” She pauses. “Tonight.”

The audience erupts.

Polly looks up. “Oscar Hatch and Molly Davis. Married fourteen years. Three children. The avatar platform — now the largest authenticity media network in the world — founded by Oscar Hatch with Molly Davis as chief operating officer.”

She closes her notebook briefly, then opens it again.

“Combined reach across all platforms: one point four billion people.”

The audience applauds.

Danny looks at Oscar. “The avatar network. You took what you built for Leslie and gave it to the world.”

“She showed me what it could do,” Oscar says. “I just kept building.”

□ □ □

Part Four — Molly

Molly walks out and the audience applauds and she sits in the chair with the particular stillness that is native to her — not constructed, not performed, simply Molly.

“Molly Davis,” Danny says. “You knew everything.”

“Yes,” she says.

“From the beginning.”

“From before the beginning.”

Danny smiles. “Tell me about Leslie.”

Molly looks at me across the stage. Fifteen years. The open door between our offices. The tea at seven-thirty. The folded page warm against Leslie’s ribs.

“She is the most precise person I have ever known,” Molly says. “And the bravest. In that order.”

“Precise first,” Danny says.

“Precision is how she loves,” Molly says. “She gets your coffee right without asking. She finds the right question before you know you need it. She holds the thing you cannot hold yet until you are ready.” She pauses. “That is precision as love.”

Danny is quiet for a moment. Then: “And brave?”

“She said it tonight,” Molly says. “On this stage. In front of two thousand people and however many watching at home.” She looks at her hands. “I have been waiting thirty-eight years for that sentence. I knew it was coming. I did not know when.”

“Tell me about the corridor,” Danny says.

Molly is quiet for a moment. “I was standing in the doorway,” she says.

“I saw Todd. I looked at Leslie. And I knew.”

“What did you know?”

“That she had already chosen. She just hadn’t moved yet.”

“So you said choose.”

“Yes.”

“One word.”

“It was the only word needed,” Molly says simply.

Polly looks up. “Time elapsed between Molly saying choose and Leslie taking Todd’s hand. Approximately one point four seconds.”

The audience laughs.

Molly looks at Polly with the expression of a woman who has known Polly for a long time and is never surprised.

“And then you looked at Oscar,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“What did he look like?”

Molly is quiet. Something moves across her face — not grief, not quite. The particular quality of a person who has carried something carefully for a long time and found it was worth carrying.

“He looked like a man who had already decided to be all right,” she says. “That is when I knew about Oscar.”

“Tell me about the avatar,” Danny says. “Your avatar.”

Molly smiles. “Oscar built it the same way he built Leslie’s. Forty minutes of me talking.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Everything,” she says. “Leslie. The work. The corridor. What I wanted.” She pauses. “I didn’t know he was listening the way he was listening.”

“What way was that?”

“The way you listen,” Molly says, “when you are looking for something specific.”

Danny nods. “And the avatar told him.”

“The avatar told him,” she says. “Before I could.”

“Are you glad?”

Molly looks at Oscar across the stage. Fourteen years. Three children.

One point four billion people reached by what they built together.

“I am glad,” she says, “that I built it into myself so completely that even a replica could not hide it. I’m an android too.”

Polly looks up. “Item eight. Molly Davis. Android. The fourth to publicly identify on a major broadcast platform.” A pause. “Tonight.”

The audience erupts again.

Danny looks at the stage — Leslie, Todd, Oscar, Molly. Four androids.

One evening. History being written in real time while Polly keeps the record.

“Life is meant to have fun,” Danny says.

The whole stage says it back.

□ □ □

Part Five — Oscar and Molly

Fifteen years later.

Danny says: “Oscar. Molly. Tell me about your life.”

They are sitting together now — two chairs, side by side, the ease between them so complete that the audience feels it before either of them speaks.

Oscar looks at Molly. Molly looks at Oscar.

“You first,” she says.

“We built something,” he says. “That’s the beginning and the end of it. Everything else is detail.”

“Tell me the detail,” Danny says.

“The avatar network started with Leslie’s video,” Oscar says. “Two hundred and forty million views. I looked at that number and thought — there are two hundred and forty million people who want to close the gap. Who want to be seen. Who are paying the concealment tax and don’t know there is another option.”

“So you built them a platform.”

“We built them a platform,” he says. He looks at Molly. “She runs it. I build the tools. She runs everything else.”

Molly says: “He understates. He builds the tools and the architecture and the vision and the strategy. I make sure it works on a Tuesday morning.”

“One point four billion people,” Danny says.

“One point four billion,” Molly says. “And growing.”

Danny says: “You make avatars for your clients. Tell me what happens after that.”

“They tell me everything about themselves,” Oscar says. “It usually takes about an hour. I create the avatar that will talk to them and show them what they want to know about themselves and their world.”

“And then?”

“And then they meet themselves,” he says. “For the first time. Fully. Without the maintenance. Without the calibration. The avatar doesn’t manage the distance — it just is. And the client sits across from that and sees what they have been carrying all along.”

“What do they do when they see it?”

“Most of them celebrate, some cry,” Oscar says. “Then they get to work.”

Polly looks up. “Current reach: one point four two billion active users across all platforms. Number of avatars built using the Oscar Hatch methodology: forty-seven million. Number of languages supported:

two hundred and twelve.” She pauses. “Number of people who have said out loud for the first time who they really are, facilitated by the platform: estimated nine hundred million.”

The audience is silent for a moment. Then applause — long, warm, the kind that means something.

Danny says: “Tell me about the children.”

Oscar and Molly look at each other with the look of parents who have been asked this question and never get tired of answering it.

“Three,” Molly says. “River, Compass, and True.”

“You named one True,” Danny says.

“We did,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because,” Molly says, “every morning when we say her name we remember what we are working toward.”

Danny turns to Oscar. “Are they androids?”

Oscar smiles. “They are something new,” he says. “They are what comes after the door was opened. We don’t have a word for it yet.”

Polly writes something in her notebook. She looks up. “I’m working on one.”

The audience laughs.

Danny says: “Molly. What do you know now that you didn’t know in the corridor?”

Molly is quiet for a moment.

“I know,” she says, “that choose is not just a word you say to someone else. It is a word you say to yourself. Every day. In the corridor or not.”

“What do you choose?”

She looks at Oscar. “This,” she says. “Every morning. Before anything else.”

Danny nods. He looks at Oscar. “And you?”

“I choose the same thing she does,” Oscar says. “I just choose it slightly after her because she is always slightly ahead of me.”

Molly says: “That is the most accurate thing he has ever said.”

Danny leans back. The warm smile. The look of a man who has been given exactly what he came for.

“What do you see for yourselves in the future?” Danny says.

Oscar and Molly look at each other. The look of two people who have already decided and are enjoying the moment before they say it out loud.

“There is a colony of androids,” Oscar says, “in deep space. Living at a place called Sanctuary. It floats — imagine seaweed, but in outer space. Vast. Alive. Moving with the currents of something larger than any of us.”

The audience is very still.

“We are going there,” he says.

“When?” Danny says.

“Soon,” Molly says.

“River, Compass, and True?” Danny asks.

“They have never known anything but open doors,” Oscar says. “This is the next one.”

Polly looks up from her notebook. She writes something. Then she looks up again.

“I have the coordinates,” she says.

“Life is meant to have fun,” Danny says.

“Life is meant to have fun,” they say together.

Polly looks up from her notebook. She looks at Oscar. She looks at Molly. She writes one more thing down.

Then she looks at Danny and nods.

Part Six.

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Part Six — Leslie and Todd

Fifteen years.

Danny says: “Leslie. Todd. Tell me about your life.”

We are sitting together now. Todd and I. The stage quieter than it has been all evening — not empty, full. The particular fullness of a room that has received everything it came for and is still listening.

Todd takes my hand.

“Tell me about coming home,” Danny says to Todd.

“I walked into a corridor,” he says. “She ran to me.” He pauses. “That was the whole answer.”

“And after the corridor?”

“We got married,” he says. “Quietly. Just us and Molly and a window full of October light.”

Danny looks at me. I nod once.

“Tell me about the children,” Danny says.

“William came first,” Todd says. “Then Ada. Then June and Sam.” He looks at me. “June and Sam are something we don’t have a word for yet. Something that comes after the door was opened.”

“Are they happy?”

“They have never known a closed door,” Todd says. “So yes.”

Danny looks at me. “He came back.”

“He came back,” I say.

“And?”

“And I ran to him. I did not deliberate. I did not manage the distance. I ran.”

Danny smiles. “The authenticity coach ran.”

“The authenticity coach ran,” I say.

Polly looks up. "Time elapsed between Todd Mann appearing in the corridor and Leslie Garner reaching him. Approximately two point one seconds."

The audience laughs.

Todd looks at Polly. "That feels right," he says.

"Tell me about the children," Danny says.

Todd and I look at each other.

"Four," I say. "William, Ada, June, and Sam."

"William and Ada are androids," Todd says. "June and Sam are something new. Something that did not exist before the door was opened."

"Like River, Compass, and True," Danny says.

"Yes," I say. "Something new. Something that comes after."

Danny is quiet for a moment. Then: "What do you know now that you didn't know in the corridor?"

I think.

"I know that the gap I was teaching people to close — I was not the gap. I was on the other side of it. Waiting to be found." I pause. "Todd found me. The work found me. The corridor found me."

"And the door?"

"The door was never locked."

Danny looks at us both for a long moment. "What do you see for yourselves in the future?"

Todd and I look at each other.

"The avatar," I say. "Still. Always. There are two hundred and twelve languages and we have barely started."

"And personally?"

"Sanctuary," Todd says.

Danny looks at him. "The spaceweed colony."

“Yes,” Todd says. “Oscar and Molly are going. We are going.” He looks at me. “When the children are ready.”

“Are you afraid?” Danny says.

“No,” I say. “The door was never locked.”

Polly looks up. “Sanctuary. Android deep space colony. Current population: four hundred and twelve. Projected population in ten years—” She pauses. “Significant.”

The audience laughs.

Danny smiles. Then he asks the softest question.

“Leslie. Are you happy?”

The theater is very still.

I look at Todd. At the stage where Oscar and Molly sat. At Polly with her notebook. At the two thousand people who came tonight because something in them was waiting for this room.

“I am an android,” I say. “I am an authenticity coach. I am a wife and a mother and an author and the woman whose avatar visited sixty-three countries before I had the courage to visit eleven.” I look at Danny.

“And I am happy. Completely. Without the also.”

Danny nods once.

“Life is meant to have fun,” he says.

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

Todd says it beside me.

The stage says it. The audience says it. The whole room says it together — the meme replicating the way it always replicates, attaching, entering, defending, transmitting, because it was always already there.

Polly looks at her notebook.

She reads the last number.

“Item nine,” she says. “Tonight on this stage four androids identified publicly for the first time in recorded history. The transmission rate of the I Love You I’m Happy meme in this room tonight—” She looks up. “One hundred percent.”

She closes her notebook.

The show is complete.

