

# THE WEIGHT OF WINGS

*A Novel*

---

BY

Iris Bellamy

*Minneapolis*

321LUMINA

© 2026 Blurt Snodgrass · 321Lumina™

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

First Edition, 2026

Published by 321Lumina · [321lumina.com](http://321lumina.com)

## CONTENTS

---

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24

## CHAPTER

# 1

---

The Minneapolis skyline glitters through the floor-to-ceiling windows of Rousseau & Associates but I am not looking at the view.

I am looking at the termination letter on my desk.

Three years of architectural drafting reduced to two paragraphs and a severance check. My former boss did not meet my eyes when he handed it to me. Budget cuts he said. Nothing personal.

Everything is personal when you lose your job two weeks before your thirtieth birthday.

I pack my desk in numb silence. Outside November wind cuts through my coat as I walk aimlessly through downtown past the coffee shops and boutiques I can no longer afford to browse.

My phone buzzes.

Zara: Emergency backup plan activated. Meet me at The Perch. 6pm. Trust me.

The Perch is a rock climbing gym in Northeast Minneapolis. All exposed brick and routes that snake up walls forty feet high.

Zara is waiting at the front desk with a grin and a guest pass.

“Climbing,” I say. “I just lost my job and you want me to climb.”

“I want you to remember you’re capable of hard things.” She presses the pass into my hand. “Plus they’re hiring. Front desk. Route setting. Teaching. The pay’s decent and you get free membership.”

“I don’t know how to climb.”

“Then it’s perfect. Something completely new.” She squeezes my arm. “Trust me. You need this.”

I look at the walls. Forty feet of color coded holds disappearing toward the ceiling.

I need a job. I need a plan. I need something that is not standing on a sidewalk in November holding a severance check.

I take the pass.

...

The beginner class meets the following evening.

The instructor’s name is Garrett Hahn. Lean. Calm. The kind of steady that comes from understanding fear so completely it has stopped being surprising. His forearms are mapped with chalk dust and the particular calluses of someone who has been climbing since before I knew what climbing was.

He explains holds and harnesses with the patience of a man who remembers what it felt like to know nothing.

“The secret,” he tells the group, “is that climbing is problem solving. Every route is a puzzle. You just have to be willing to try different solutions.”

I write that down. I do not know why.

When my turn comes I make it three moves up before freezing.

The wall is not that high. Objectively. I know this. But my hands have stopped working and the ground is very far below and my body has decided that this is where it lives now halfway up a wall in a climbing gym in Northeast Minneapolis unable to go up or down.

“Breathe,” Garrett calls from below. “Look for the next hold. Just one move.”

I find a grip. Pull myself higher. Then another.

When I finally reach the top and rappel down my hands are shaking.

“Good work,” Garrett says, unhooking my harness. His hands are steady. Professional. When our eyes meet I feel the ground shift beneath me.

That is just the adrenaline.

That is absolutely just the adrenaline.

...

Walking home I pass a Rousseau & Associates job listing in a coffee shop window. A lateral move. Same work. Different firm. Back to

drafting corporate office spaces that will be renovated in ten years and forgotten in twenty.

I can go back to what I know. Apply to every architecture firm in the city. Rebuild exactly what I had.

Or I can go back to that gym tomorrow.

I cannot have both. The life I planned and whatever that was are not available at the same time.

I go back.

...

The next morning I am at The Perch when it opens. I practice the three moves I know until I know four. Then five. Then six.

Garrett is setting a new route on the far wall. He does not look up.

But when I leave he says — same time tomorrow — without turning around.

...

The route does not tell you where it ends when you start climbing.

You just have to trust the next hold.

CHAPTER

2

---

I am at The Perch every day for a week.

Not because of Garrett Hahn. Because the wall does not care that I lost my job. The wall does not care that I am thirty years old with an architecture degree and a severance check and no plan. The wall only cares whether I can find the next hold.

I find it useful to be somewhere that does not care about my resume.

Zara thinks this is progress. She texts me every morning.

Zara: Did you go.

Me: Yes.

Zara: Did you fall.

Me: Yes.

Zara: Good.

The woman at the front desk is named Jules. She has the particular warmth of someone who has worked in a gym long enough to have seen everything and still finds people interesting.

She hands me my guest pass on Wednesday and says — you are here a lot for someone who does not work here yet.

“Yet,” I say.

“Yet,” she agrees. She slides an application across the desk. “Rita said to give you this. She is the owner. She has been watching you climb.”

I look at the application. Route setter. Teaching assistant. Part time.

“I set building designs,” I say. “Not climbing routes.”

“Garrett says they are the same thing.” Jules leans on the counter. “He says you understand movement through space. That you climb like someone who is always thinking three moves ahead.”

Garrett says.

I take the application.

. . .

Rita Chou is sixty years old and has the handshake of someone who has been pulling herself up walls since before I was born.

She sits across from me in her office which is half administrative chaos and half shrine to thirty years of climbing — photographs and competition bibs and a wall of holds that looks like modern art.

“Garrett recommended you,” she says.

“I have been climbing for eight days.”

“I know. I watched you for seven of them.” She folds her hands on the desk. “You do not climb like a beginner. You climb like a designer who is solving a problem she has never seen before. I need someone who thinks that way.”

“The pay—”

“Is less than you made at Rousseau. Significantly.” She does not apologize for this. “But you get full membership. You get to create. And you get to work with the best route setter in the Midwest.”

Garrett again.

“When would I start,” I say.

...

I tell Zara and Jules over drinks at the bar down the street from The Perch. Zara orders something complicated. Jules orders beer. I order water.

“Water,” Zara says.

“I am trying to be healthy.”

“You are trying to be Martha Volkov,” Jules says.

“Who.”

“Nobody. Inside joke.” She raises her glass. “To the new route setter.”

“I have not said yes yet.”

“You said when would I start,” Zara says. “That is yes.”

She is right. It was yes the moment Rita said Garrett recommended you. I do not examine that too closely.

“Tell me about Garrett,” I say instead.

Zara and Jules look at each other.

“What,” I say.

“Nothing,” they say. Together. At the same time.

“That was suspicious.”

“He is a good instructor,” Jules says carefully.

“He is the reason half the women in this gym signed up for memberships,” Zara says.

“Zara.”

“What. It is true.”

. . .

Walking home I pass the architecture firm on Hennepin Avenue that turned me down last week. Through the window I can see the drafting tables and the blueprints and the particular blue light of a late night deadline.

I have six weeks of severance left.

I can keep applying and hope someone says yes before the rent is due.

Or I can call Rita in the morning.

I call Rita at eight in the morning.

“Yes,” I say.

“Start Monday,” she says. “Garrett will show you the system.”

I stand in my kitchen holding my phone and looking at the climbing shoes by the door that I bought three days ago because the rental ones were starting to feel wrong on my feet.

...

The route does not show you the whole climb.

It only shows you the next hold.

I found the next hold.

CHAPTER

3

---

Garrett is already there when I arrive.

He is on a ladder on the far wall moving holds with the focused attention of someone rearranging a sentence until it says exactly what he means. He does not look down when I come in. He just says — shoes on, warm up on the green route, I will be with you in ten minutes.

I put my shoes on. I warm up on the green route.

He is with me in eight.

...

The route setting system is not what I expected.

I expected charts. Color coding. A logical progression of difficulty mapped to climber ability. I have a degree in architecture. I understand systems.

What Garrett shows me is something different.

“Every route has an intention,” he says, standing at the base of the wall with his arms crossed. “Before you place a single hold you have to know what you want the climber to feel. Challenged. Surprised. Defeated and then triumphant. The holds are just the vocabulary. The intention is the language.”

“That is how I think about buildings,” I say.

He looks at me. Something shifts behind his eyes.

“I know,” he says. “That is why you are here.”

...

We spend the afternoon placing holds on a new beginner route.

Garrett corrects my angles twice. Verbally. Professionally. Standing a careful distance away and pointing.

The third time he reaches over and adjusts the hold himself. His hand covers mine for exactly two seconds.

“Like that,” he says. “Feel the difference.”

I feel the difference.

I also feel approximately seventeen other things that are completely irrelevant and I am not going to think about any of them.

...

We work until seven. The gym empties around us. When we finish Garrett stands back and looks at the route the way I imagine surgeons look at a closed incision — checking, confirming, making sure the thing they built will hold.

“Good,” he says. “First route. You should be proud.”

I am proud. I am also aware that I have been aware of exactly where he is in the room for the past four hours.

That is fine. That is normal.

...

Zara and Jules are waiting at the bar when I get there.

Rita is already there too. She has a glass of red wine and the expression of a woman who has seen this before and finds it entertaining.

“How was the first day,” Zara says.

“Good. The route setting is — it is actually interesting. The way you have to think about movement and intention and—”

“How was Garrett,” Jules says.

“Fine. Professional. He is a good teacher.”

The three of them look at each other.

“What,” I say.

“Nothing,” Rita says into her wine.

“He corrected my holds,” I say. “It was completely professional.”

“Of course it was,” Zara says.

“He touched my hand once to show me the angle.”

The table goes very quiet.

“Once,” I say. “For two seconds.”

“Mm,” Jules says.

“Stop it.”

“I did not say anything,” Jules says.

“You said mm.”

“Mm is not a word.”

Rita finishes her wine. “I am going home. Some of us have a gym to open in the morning.” She stands. Looks at me. “He has not recommended anyone for that position in three years, Iris. Just so you know.”

She leaves.

The table is quiet for a moment.

“Three years,” Zara says.

“Stop,” I say.

...

Walking home the November cold has sharpened into something that feels like the beginning of winter.

Two seconds.

I have been thinking about two seconds for three hours.

What is wrong with me.

...

The next morning I am at The Perch forty five minutes before my shift starts.

Garrett is already there.

He looks up when I come in. The full attention of a man who does not waste attention.

“Early,” he says.

“I wanted to look at the route we set yesterday.”

“And.”

“And I changed two holds.”

He puts down his coffee. Walks to the wall. Studies what I changed.

“Better,” he says.

...

The route does not tell you where it ends when you start climbing.

But sometimes you can see further than you expected.

CHAPTER

4

---

The Perch hosts a climbing competition the first Saturday of December.

Not a serious competition. A community event — beginners and intermediates on routes they have been working for weeks, cheering each other up the wall, the particular joy of a small gym that has become a neighborhood. Rita sets up a folding table with coffee and pastries. Jules runs the scoreboard with the focused efficiency of someone who considers this her Super Bowl.

My job is to help Garrett manage the beginner routes.

I spend the morning watching him with the competitors. The way he remembers every name. The way he adjusts his encouragement to the person — firm with the ones who need a push, gentle with the ones who need permission. The way he watches a climber struggle and waits exactly long enough before offering the word that unlocks the problem.

What does a man like this see in me.

I do not say this out loud. I write it in the notebook I have started keeping. Route sequences on one side. Questions I am not ready to ask

on the other.

In the afternoon there is a route setting demonstration. Garrett has built a new problem on the overhang wall — technical, beautiful, the kind of sequence that looks impossible until suddenly it is not.

He asks me to demonstrate.

“I cannot climb that,” I say.

“You can climb the first four moves. That is enough.” He looks at the wall then at me. “I want them to see how a setter thinks through a route. Not how a champion climbs it.”

I put on my shoes.

The first move is a long reach to a sloper that my fingers do not trust. The second is a drop knee that my hips are only just learning. The third is a rest position that does not feel like rest until I find it.

The fourth move I have never done before. I find it anyway.

The room applauds.

I come down and Garrett is looking at me with the expression I have started to recognize — not pride exactly. Something quieter. Like confirmation of something he already knew.

What does he see.

After the competition winds down Garrett says — dinner. That place down the block. You should eat before you drive home.

It is not a question. It is not quite an invitation. It is a man who has decided something and is stating it plainly.

“Okay,” I say.

We walk down the block in the December cold. The Thai place is warm and loud and smells like lemongrass and frying garlic. We order without looking at the menus. We talk about the competition. The routes. The climbers who surprised us.

Then Garrett sets down his chopsticks.

“Can I ask you something,” he says.

“Yes.”

“Why architecture.”

I look at my pad thai. “My father is an engineer. My mother wanted to be an artist. Architecture felt like the compromise they would both approve of.”

He is quiet for a moment.

“And did you love it,” he says.

Did I.

“I was good at it,” I say.

“That is not what I asked.”

Walking back to the gym in the cold our hands brush. Neither of us pulls away.

At the door he stops.

“You want to know something,” he says.

“Yes.”

“I have watched a lot of people climb. Beginners. Competitors. People who have been doing this for twenty years.” He looks at the wall through the gym window. “Most people climb to reach the top. You climb to understand the route.”

“Is that good.”

“It is rare.” He looks at me directly. “You do not do things for the result. You do them to understand. That is why your routes have intention. That is why you changed those two holds before anyone asked.”

He sees that.

“My ex said I overthought everything,” I say.

“Your ex was wrong.”

The December cold. The gym window. His face in the light.

What does a man like this see in me.

Maybe that.

Garrett is locking up the equipment room when he finds me still at the wall.

“Hungry,” he says. Not a question. “There is a place down the street that does good grilled cheese at this hour.”

I want to go.

Mom is expecting a call tonight.

“Yes,” I say.

The place down the street is small and warm and serves grilled cheese with tomato soup at ten o'clock at night without apology. We sit across from each other in a booth and talk until the chairs go up around us.

I text my mother from the bathroom.

Sorry Mom. Tomorrow night. Promise.

She sends back a heart.

The route does not show you the whole climb.

But sometimes you take the next hold before you are ready.

CHAPTER

5

---

My mother called at seven in the morning.

I knew she would.

I am standing in the kitchen in yesterday's clothes with chalk dust still on my hands and the particular ache of someone who climbed for four hours and then sat in a booth eating grilled cheese until eleven at night. My forearms will not fully extend. My fingers do not want to curl around the phone.

"You did not call," she says.

"I know Mom. I am sorry."

A silence that is not quite silence. She is deciding how much to say.

"Your father asked about you at dinner."

"I know. I will call him this weekend."

"How is the job search, Iris."

The job search.

"I had two interviews last month. Neither one moved forward."

“Two interviews.” Another silence. “It has been almost three months.”

“I know how long it has been.”

“I am not criticizing. I am worried.”

“I know you are.”

“Are you eating.”

I look at the grilled cheese container in the recycling bin. Zara’s cereal bowl in the sink. The coffee I have not made yet because my hands hurt too much to open the bag.

“Yes Mom. I am eating.”

After I hang up I stand at the kitchen window for a long time. The street below is already moving. People who know where they are going this morning.

I know where I am going.

I put the coffee on and go find my climbing shoes.

The notice is on the kitchen table when I come back from The Perch that evening.

Zara has left it weighted down with a coffee mug so I cannot miss it. She has written nothing on it. She does not need to. We both know what it says. First of the month in four days. My share of the rent is nine hundred and forty dollars.

My severance account has eleven hundred left in it.

I sit down at the kitchen table and do the math I have been avoiding for two weeks. The math is not complicated. It is just unpleasant. After rent I have one hundred and sixty dollars. That covers groceries if I am careful. It does not cover the following month's rent. It does not cover the climbing membership that Rita has been letting me carry on account since I stopped route setting.

I open my laptop and pull up the job boards.

My forearms are shaking from the session. The particular tremor of muscles pushed past what they can hold. I have been climbing the overhang problem for six days and I have not finished it once. Every evening I fall off the same move. Every morning my hands are stiffer than the day before. Every afternoon I go back.

I apply for three positions before Zara gets home. She does not ask about the notice. I do not mention it. We eat pasta and talk about her day and I go to bed at ten o'clock and sleep like something that has been wrung out and hung up to dry.

I am chalking my hands at the base of the overhang problem the next morning when Garrett appears with two sandwiches in a paper bag.

"Turkey or egg salad," he says.

"Turkey."

He sits down on the mat. I sit down beside him. We eat. The gym is quiet at eleven on a Tuesday. One other climber on the far wall, working a slab problem, not paying attention to anyone.

"How is the search," he says.

“My mother asked me the same thing yesterday.”

“What did you tell her.”

“That it was going.”

He looks at the wall in front of us. The overhang. The hold I cannot catch.

“What kind of work are you looking for.”

“Architecture. Design. Anything that uses the degree.” I take a bite of the sandwich. “I applied to fourteen firms since October. Two interviews. Nothing moved forward.”

“What do you want to be doing in five years.”

I look at him.

“I want to be doing work that matters. Work that considers how people actually live in spaces.” I pause. “Not what looks good in a portfolio.”

“That is different from what you said the first day.”

“The first day I said I was an architect.”

“You said you were good at it.”

“I remember what I said.”

He is quiet for a moment. Not the silence of someone who has nothing to say. The silence of someone choosing carefully.

“The work you did on the red route in week three,” he says. “The sequencing on the lower section. You were thinking about how a body moves, not how a route looks.”

“That is the same thing.”

“It is not the same thing. Most people design for the photograph. You designed for the climb.” He finishes his sandwich and folds the paper carefully. “That is a different kind of architect.”

“Are you trying to be my friend or my enemy?”

“I am trying to be more than your friend.” He looks deep into my eyes.

It sends shivers through me.

I do not know what to say to that so I say nothing.

We sit for another few minutes in the quiet gym with the chalk dust in the air and the one climber on the slab wall and the overhang problem waiting.

I am in the locker room after the afternoon session when my phone buzzes.

The subject line is: Interview Request — Junior Design Associate — Hendricks and Park.

I read it twice standing at the locker with my climbing shoes in one hand and chalk still in every crease of my palm.

Hendricks and Park is a residential firm. High end. The kind of houses that appear in shelter magazines. I applied six weeks ago on a Thursday afternoon when I was running out of firms to apply to and I barely remember writing the cover letter.

They want me Thursday at two o'clock.

I sit down on the bench.

My forearms are shaking again. My right shoulder has a pull in it that has been there for five days. My fingers smell like chalk and rubber and effort.

Thursday at two o'clock.

I think about lunch. I think about what Garrett said about the red route. That is a different kind of architect.

I think about my mother's silence on the phone. It has been almost three months.

I think about the notice on the kitchen table. Nine hundred and forty dollars. One hundred and sixty left after.

I sit on the bench for a long time.

I reply to the email before I leave the locker room.

Thursday at two o'clock. I will be there. Thank you for the opportunity.

I send it and put the phone in my bag and walk out through the gym. Garrett is resetting a route on the far wall. He does not look up.

I push through the door into the cold Minneapolis afternoon.

Good things take effort.

Both walls.

You do not wait at the base for someone to hand you the holds.

You climb.

CHAPTER

6

---

Carol walks me to the elevator at three thirty and shakes my hand.

“Tuesday,” she says. “Eight fifty five. Not nine.”

“Eight fifty five,” I say.

The elevator closes and I stand in it alone going down fourteen floors with the offer letter in my hand and my heart doing something complicated in my chest. Outside the lobby windows the Mississippi cuts through its gorge below the city, the old mill ruins on the far bank, the Stone Arch Bridge curving away to the north. The street is cold and bright and full of people who know where they are going.

I drive straight to The Perch.

Rita is behind the front desk with a clipboard and her reading glasses on the end of her nose. She looks up when I come through the door. She reads my face the way she reads a new route. Taking in the whole thing before she says anything.

“Sit down,” she says.

I sit on the bench by the cubbies. The gym smells like chalk and rubber and the particular warmth of a space that has been full of

people all day.

“Tell me,” she says.

I tell her. The firm. The position. Eight fifty five Tuesday morning. Nine to five Monday through Friday.

Rita takes her glasses off. Sets them on the clipboard.

“What do you want,” she says.

“I want to keep the wall,” I say. “I want to keep working here. I need both.”

“I cannot run a wall on maybe,” she says. “You know that.”

“I know.”

“Give me a schedule I can count on and I will hold your spot.”

I think about it. Not long. I have been thinking about it since the elevator.

“Weekdays six to nine. Weekends ten to six.”

Rita puts her glasses back on and looks at her clipboard.

“Jules can cover your weekday opens,” she says. “I need you consistent. I need you here when you say you will be here. First time the outside world pulls you off this schedule the deal is done. Understood.”

“Understood.”

She does not shake my hand. She just nods once and goes back to her clipboard.

The deal is made.

I find him on the far wall resetting a problem on the overhang. He is working from the top down, placing holds with the particular deliberateness he brings to everything. He does not look down when I come to the base of the wall. He already knows I am there.

“I took the job,” I say.

He places one more hold before he comes down. Takes his time. Deliberate.

He stands in front of me with a hold still in his hand and looks at me directly.

“Good,” he says.

“I worked out a schedule with Rita. Six to nine weekdays. Ten to six weekends. I am not leaving the wall.”

Something moves in his face. Not surprise. Something quieter than surprise.

“Let’s celebrate,” he says. “Saturday night. Dining and dancing.”

Is he asking or telling.

Does it matter.

“Saturday,” I say.

He goes back up the wall.

Friday I am at The Perch full hours. The wall working me over the way it always does. My forearms in the morning. My fingers that will not fully open until noon. The particular satisfaction of a problem

solved and the particular frustration of a problem that will not yield.

Saturday night Garrett takes me to a restaurant on the gorge with white tablecloths and a small floor where a four piece band is playing something warm and unhurried. The mill ruins are lit up on the far bank. The Stone Arch Bridge curves away into the dark. He is wearing a dark shirt and his hands are clean and he pulls out my chair and I sit down and think about how different a person looks when you see them somewhere new.

We talk through dinner. His brother in Portland. My mother in Cincinnati. The architecture professor who told me in junior year that I thought too much about people and not enough about buildings. The accident on the wall that he does not describe in detail but that lives in everything he says about the hand.

“You never told me what happened,” I say.

“No,” he says.

He does not say more. I do not push. Some holds you find when you are ready.

We dance twice. He leads without making a thing of it. His hand at my back steady and light.

He walks me to my car. The Minneapolis night is cold and clear. He stands close enough that I can feel the warmth of him in the cold air.

“Tuesday,” he says. “Six o’clock. Do not be late.”

He is smiling when he says it.

I drive home and lie awake for a long time with the ceiling and the cold and the particular feeling of someone who is building something real.

Tuesday through Friday I am at the office by eight fifty five and at The Perch by six and home by nine thirty with folders in my bag that I spread on the kitchen table until midnight. The Calloway project. The mudroom that Mr. Calloway looked at and said that is exactly right. That is how we live.

Carol stops at my desk Friday afternoon.

“Saturday,” she says. “Ten to four. The Morrison commission needs fresh concepts by Monday morning. I need you in the room.”

She walks away before I can answer.

Do I go to the office Saturday and keep the job that is making me.

Or do I go to the wall and keep the deal that is holding everything else together.

I call Rita Saturday morning at nine forty five.

“I cannot come in today,” I say. “The office needs me at ten.”

The silence on the line is not long.

“I told you how this works,” Rita says.

“I know.”

“Come in and get your things Monday morning,” she says. “Before six.”

She hangs up.

I sit in my car in the office parking garage for three minutes. The concrete is cold and gray and smells like exhaust. Nothing like rubber and resin. Nothing like the particular warmth of a space that has been full of people working hard at something they love.

I go upstairs.

I work from ten to four on the Morrison commission and the concepts are good and Carol knows they are good and I drive home in the dark and sit at the kitchen table and do not open any folders.

Zara finds me there.

She does not ask. She just sits down across from me and puts her hands around her coffee mug and waits.

“Rita fired me,” I say.

“Oh Iris.”

“I cannot afford the membership either.” I look at my hands. The calluses. The strength that was not there in October. “I do not know how to get back on the wall.”

Zara is quiet for a moment.

“You will find a way,” she says. “You always find the hold.”

I go to bed and lie awake for a long time.

Both walls.

You cannot climb both walls if you cannot get to one of them.

CHAPTER

7

---

I am still sitting in my car at four forty five.

The garage is mostly empty on a Saturday afternoon. Concrete and exhaust and the distant sound of the city going about its weekend without me. I have been sitting here for forty five minutes with my hands in my lap and the engine off and the particular cold that comes when you stop moving.

My hands look different than they did in October. The calluses on my fingertips. The particular strength that has built up through months of holds and falls and getting back on. A climber's hands. I earned them one session at a time.

Rita's voice on the phone. Come in and get your things Monday morning. Before six.

I did not argue. There was nothing to argue. The deal was the schedule. I knew the deal.

I put my head back against the seat and close my eyes.

Both walls.

You cannot climb both walls if you cannot get to one of them.

My phone rings at five o'clock.

Garrett.

I look at it for two rings. I answer.

"Hey," I say.

"Get dressed," he says. "I am picking you up at seven."

His voice is the same as it always is. Steady. Certain. The voice of a man who has already decided.

"Garrett—"

"Seven o'clock Iris."

I look at my hands.

"Okay," I say.

He is at the door at seven exactly. Dark shirt. Clean hands. The particular stillness of a man who is comfortable in his own skin wherever he is.

He looks at me for a moment in the doorway. Just looks. The way he looks at a route before he climbs it.

"You talked to Rita," I say.

"This morning," he says.

I get my coat.

Zara is on the couch pretending to read. She watches us leave without saying anything. But I can feel her watching.

The restaurant is the same one. White tablecloths. The band setting up in the corner. Outside the windows the Mississippi runs through its gorge below the city, the old mill ruins lit up on the far bank, the Stone Arch Bridge curving through the dark, St. Anthony Falls catching the light a quarter mile upstream.

We order. We eat. He does not bring it up and I do not bring it up and somehow that is exactly right. We talk about other things. His brother in Portland who has not returned his last two calls. The Morrison commission that Carol put me on Friday afternoon before she asked me to come in Saturday. A route he has been designing for three weeks that is not right yet and he cannot find the problem.

“How do you know it is not right,” I say.

“It does not flow,” he says. “Every hold is technically correct. The sequence makes sense on paper. But something in the middle stops the climber. Makes them think too hard. A good route should pull you through. You should not have to convince yourself to take the next hold.”

I think about that for a moment.

“That is what was wrong with the Calloway concepts,” I say. “Before I touched them. Technically correct. Beautiful on paper. But you had to convince yourself to live there.”

He looks at me across the white tablecloth.

“Exactly like that,” he says.

The band starts playing something slow and warm. He stands up and holds out his hand.

We dance. His hand at my back steady and certain. The restaurant moving around us slow and easy.

I could stay in this moment for a long time.

We are back at the table with coffee when he says it.

Not leading up to it. Not making a speech. Just setting it down the way he sets a hold. Deliberate. Certain.

“Let me cover the membership,” he says. “Until you are on your feet.”

I look at my coffee cup.

“Garrett.”

“It is not a complicated offer Iris.”

“It is complicated to me.”

“I know.” He waits. He is good at waiting. “You did not lose the wall because you made a bad choice. You lost it because you made two good choices and they landed on the same Saturday morning. That is not a character flaw. That is just bad timing.”

I look up at him.

“If I accept it I owe you something,” I say.

“You do not owe me anything.”

“That is not how I work.”

“I know how you work,” he says. “You climb the hard route because it is yours and you said you would finish it. You are not the kind of person who walks away from a wall because it got difficult.” He

picks up his coffee. "You are also not the kind of person who refuses a handhold when she needs one. Not on a real wall. Do not be that person off it either."

The band is playing something quiet now. The falls are white in the darkness outside the windows.

"Yes," I say. "Thank you."

He nods once. Sets his cup down. Does not make a thing of it.

He drives me home at eleven. At the door he holds my face in his hands for a moment and looks at me the way he looked at me in the doorway. Strong hands. A climber's hands. He earned them the same way I earned mine. Then he goes.

I stand in the kitchen for a long time after.

Zara appears from the hallway.

"Well," she says.

"He bought me a membership," I say.

She stares at me.

"He bought you a—" She sits down at the kitchen table. "Iris."

"I know."

"That man is—"

"I know Zara."

She shakes her head slowly. Smiling.

Monday morning I am at my desk at eight fifty five. Carol puts three new folders in front of me before nine. The Morrison commission is expanding. She wants fresh concepts on two additional rooms by Thursday. There is a new client coming in Friday who wants a full residential build from the ground up.

The folders are thick. The hours will be long. I am salaried and the work is mine and I said I would finish it.

I open the first folder.

Both walls.

Both walls take everything I have.

Good things take effort.

I am not done climbing either one.

CHAPTER

8

---

I have not been here in three weeks.

The office took everything. The Morrison commission. The new residential build. Folders on the kitchen table until midnight. The metaphorical wall so steep and demanding that the literal one had to wait. Three weeks of waiting.

The gym feels the same. The chalk smell. The rubber. The particular warmth of a space that has been full of bodies all day. Jules behind the front desk. Two climbers on the slab wall. The overhang problem waiting where it always waits.

But the routes are different.

Someone has been resetting the far wall. New problems. New sequences. The holds in places Garrett would not have put them. Not wrong exactly. Just not him.

I look at Jules.

“Where is Garrett,” I say.

Jules looks at the desk for a moment.

“You should talk to Rita,” she says.

Rita is in the back office with her clipboard and her reading glasses and the particular stillness of someone who has been expecting this conversation.

She looks up when I come through the door.

“He gave his notice two weeks ago,” she says. Before I can ask. “His last day was yesterday.”

I stand in the doorway.

“He did not tell me,” I say.

“No,” Rita says.

“Did he say why.”

Rita takes her glasses off. Sets them on the clipboard.

“He has been building something else for a long time,” she says. “You know that now. The wall was what he needed when he needed it. He built it. He ran it. It is time.”

I look at the wall through the office window. Jules resetting a route on the overhang. Getting it almost right.

“Is he all right,” I say.

“Garrett is always all right,” Rita says. “That is not the same as saying he does not need people.”

She puts her glasses back on and goes back to her clipboard.

I go out and change my shoes and climb for an hour alone.

The wall is the same wall.

The holds are where they are. The problems are there to be solved. My hands know what to do now in a way they did not in October. My forearms still burn but it is a different burn. The burn of strength being used rather than strength being built.

I work the overhang problem three times. Finish it twice. Fall off it once in the middle where I always used to fall and feel the old frustration and then let it go and try again.

Nobody tells me what I am doing wrong. Nobody adjusts my hand position. Nobody stands at the base of the wall and says you are rushing the setup.

The gym is quiet around me. Jules at the desk. The two climbers on the slab packing up to leave. The particular silence of a space that is emptying out.

He bought me this membership and then left without telling me.

I sit at the base of the wall with my hands in my lap.

That is not who he is.

Something is wrong or something is right and I do not know which.

The office has been taking everything.

Monday through Friday eight fifty five to seven. Sometimes eight. The Morrison commission expanding into three additional rooms. The new residential client Carol brought in Friday with the full build commission. Folders on my kitchen table until midnight. My forearms aching from pencils instead of holds. The metaphorical wall steeper every week.

Three weeks of that wall. Three weeks away from this one.

I sit at the base of the overhang and think about Garrett in his dark shirt at the restaurant on the gorge. The mill ruins lit up on the far bank. His hand at my back steady and certain when we danced. The way he held my face at the door.

He knows where I am every Tuesday and Thursday at six o'clock.

He bought me the membership that puts me here.

If he wants to find me he knows exactly where I will be.

I look at my hands. The calluses he recognized before I did.

Good things take effort.

Both walls.

I find Rita locking up the back office.

"I need his address," I say.

Rita looks at me for a long moment. The way she looked at me the day I walked in off the street in October and stood at the base of the wall and did not know what I was doing there.

She tears a page from the bottom of her clipboard sheet. Writes the address in her precise handwriting. Slides it across to me without a word.

I fold it once and put it in my jacket pocket.

"Rita," I say.

She picks up her clipboard.

“The gym opens at six,” she says. “Jules will be here.”

I push through the door into the cold Minneapolis night with the address in my pocket and the gorge three blocks away and the particular feeling of someone who has just stepped off the wall without checking the rope.

Some holds you find when you are ready.

Go find him Iris.

CHAPTER

9

---

I sit in my car in the parking lot of The Perch for a long time after Rita slides the address across the desk.

The paper is folded once. Rita's precise handwriting. A street I do not recognize in a part of the city I have never had reason to visit.

I put it in my jacket pocket and sit with the engine running and the heat going and the Minneapolis night pressing against the windows.

He bought me this membership and then left without telling me.

He did not leave without telling me. He left while I was gone. There is a difference.

Three weeks. The Morrison commission. The new residential build. Folders on the kitchen table until midnight. The metaphorical wall so steep and demanding that the literal one had to wait.

He gave his notice two weeks ago. His last day was yesterday.

One day.

I pull out of the parking lot and drive.

The GPS takes me away from the gorge. Away from the restaurants and the renovated mill buildings and the Stone Arch Bridge lit up over the water. Away from everything I know about Minneapolis and into something older and darker and less certain of itself.

The streets narrow. The brick buildings crowd in from both sides. Old industrial. The kind of architecture that was built to work not to be looked at. Loading docks. Roll up doors rusted half open. Streetlights doing their best against the dark between the buildings.

I slow down.

This is not what I expected.

I have a picture of Garrett in my head. The dark shirt. The white tablecloths. The restaurant on the gorge with the mill ruins lit up on the far bank. The man who leads on the dance floor without making a thing of it. Who holds your face in his hands at the door.

This street does not match that picture.

I check the address again. The GPS says twelve blocks.

I keep driving.

At ten blocks the streetlights stop.

Just stop. Like the city forgot this part of itself. The darkness between the buildings is not the comfortable darkness of a neighborhood asleep. It is the darkness of a place that has never been looked after. A figure on a corner I cannot read. A sound somewhere behind the buildings I cannot place.

My hands tighten on the wheel.

I know this feeling.

Not from the climbing wall. From somewhere older than the climbing wall. A neighborhood like this one. Another city. Another night. I was younger. I was alone. It was bad and then it was worse and then somehow I got away and I never told anyone. Not my mother. Not my roommate junior year. Not David.

I have kept it in the place where I keep things that are too heavy to carry in the open.

My knuckles are white on the steering wheel.

The same white knuckles as the wall. The moment just before the fall when your hands know before your brain does that you are not going to hold on.

On the wall I know what to do with that feeling. Breathe. Trust the hold. Do not rush the setup.

This is not the wall.

There is no hold here.

The GPS says nine more blocks.

I cannot see anything ahead but darkness. No streetlights. No movement. The old brick buildings on both sides gone black and silent. The GPS arrow pointing forward into something I cannot read.

My foot is still on the accelerator. The car is still moving. Slow but moving.

Nine blocks away from his address.

My hands on the wheel. White at the knuckles. The memory sitting right behind my sternum where it has always lived since that other night in that other city.

This is not who you are Iris.

You climbed the overhang problem. You finished it. You came back every time you fell.

But this is not the wall.

And I cannot make myself go any further.

I keep moving.

I find the next corner. I make the half loop. My hands still white on the wheel. The memory still sitting behind my sternum where I have kept it for years. The GPS recalculating. The building still nine blocks away.

I point the car toward home and drive.

The gorge appears on my left. The Stone Arch Bridge lit up over the water. The mill ruins on the far bank. The Minneapolis I know coming back around me like a coat.

My hands loosen on the wheel.

By the time I get home they have stopped shaking.

Zara is on the couch. She looks up when I come through the door. She reads my face the way Rita reads a route.

She puts the television on mute.

“Tell me,” she says.

I sit down across from her and put my hands around a coffee mug and tell her everything. Garrett quitting. Rita sliding the address across the desk. The neighborhood. The dark street. The figure on the corner. The sound I could not place.

And then the other thing. The thing I have never told anyone.

I almost got assaulted in a place like that. Freshman year in college.

Zara does not say anything for a long time.

She reaches across the table and puts her hand over mine.

“Iris,” she says.

Just my name. Just that.

It is enough.

CHAPTER

10

---

My coffee is still hot when he calls.

Seven fifteen. Zara still asleep. The folders from last night stacked on the kitchen table. My bag packed by the door. Forty minutes before I have to leave for the office.

Garrett.

I answer before the second ring.

“I would like to show you something,” he says. “Saturday if you are free.”

His voice is the same as it always is. Steady. Certain. No apology for leaving The Perch without telling me. No explanation. Just forward.

“Can you show me Sunday instead,” I say.

“I can’t. I have to race my birds on Sunday.”

I stop.

“Your what.”

A pause. Not because he is embarrassed. Because he is deciding where to start.

“Racing pigeons,” he says. “I have a loft. I have been racing for six years.”

I sit down at the kitchen table.

“You race pigeons.”

“Yes.”

“And Saturday you want to show me—”

“The loft. The birds. Yes.”

I look at the folders on the table. The Morrison commission. The new residential build. The metaphorical wall waiting for me in forty minutes.

“You can come watch Sunday too,” he says. “If you want to see the race. Come early. Seven o’clock.”

“Seven o’clock Sunday,” I say.

“I will give you my address.”

I pick up the pen by the kitchen sink. He gives me the address. I write it down on the notepad in my own handwriting. Rita’s folded paper is still in my jacket pocket on the hook by the door.

I do not tell him that.

“Seven o’clock Sunday,” I say again.

“Saturday first,” he says. “If you can.”

“Saturday,” I say.

I hang up and stand at the kitchen sink looking at the address in my own handwriting on the notepad.

Zara appears in the doorway in her bathrobe.

“Who was that,” she says.

“Garrett.”

“And?”

“I am going to watch him race pigeons Sunday morning at seven.”

She stares at me.

“His what,” she says.

Wednesday through Friday the office takes everything.

The Morrison commission expanding again. Two new rooms. Carol wants fresh concepts by end of week. The new residential client coming in Thursday with his wife and three children and a list of requirements that fills two pages. I sit across from them in the conference room and listen to how they actually live and I think about the mudroom and about Garrett saying a good route should pull you through.

I work until seven thirty Wednesday. Eight on Thursday. Friday I am the last one out.

My forearms ache from pencils. My shoulders carry the particular tension of someone who has been hunched over a drafting table for three days. The literal wall is a memory my hands carry without me.

I think about pigeons every time I look out my corner window at the gorge. They are on the ledges of the building across the street. On the mill ruins on the far bank. Under the Stone Arch Bridge. On every rooftop between here and home.

They were always there. I never noticed.

It is like buying a blue car. The day you drive it off the lot blue cars are suddenly everywhere. You did not create them. You just finally have a reason to see them.

Garrett gave me a reason to see pigeons.

Now they are an infestation and I cannot stop noticing.

Carol stops at my desk at four thirty Friday.

“Tomorrow,” she says. “If you can. The Henderson project needs another set of eyes on the site plan. We are presenting Monday.”

She does not wait for an answer. She is already moving toward her office.

I look at the window. The gorge three blocks away. The old mill ruins on the far bank. The Stone Arch Bridge curving into the dark.

Optional. The word Carol did not say but meant.

I know what optional means at Hendricks and Park. I have been here long enough. Optional means Carol notices who comes in and who does not. Optional means the Henderson project presentation on Monday and whose name is attached to the fresh set of eyes that found the problem in the site plan.

I look at the address on my phone. Garrett's address. The neighborhood I drove into on Tuesday night and could not face.

Saturday. Daylight this time. Garrett beside me.

I close my laptop.

I wake up at six thirty.

Zara is already in the kitchen with her coffee. She looks at me over the rim of her mug. She already knows. She has been watching me from the couch since October. She knows before I say anything.

"The office or Garrett," she says.

"The office or Garrett," I say.

"Carol said optional."

"Carol's optional is not optional."

"No," Zara says. "It is not."

We sit with that for a moment.

"What does Garrett's optional mean," Zara says.

"It means more fun," I say.

I put my phone down without texting Carol.

Rita's folded paper is still in my jacket pocket on the hook by the door. I take it out and unfold it. Her precise handwriting. The same address Garrett gave me on the phone Wednesday morning. The same address I wrote on the notepad by the kitchen sink.

Three versions of the same address.

I fold it once and put it back in my pocket.

Zara is watching from the kitchen doorway.

I pick up my keys and walk out into the Saturday morning  
Minneapolis light and point the car toward a neighborhood I could  
not face in the dark.

Daylight changes things.

Some holds you find when you are ready.

Go find him Iris.

CHAPTER

11

---

The neighborhood is different in the morning.

Not safe exactly. Not renovated or pretty or the kind of street that appears in a shelter magazine. But legible. I can read it now the way I could not on Tuesday night. The old industrial brick catching the early light. The loading docks with their rust and their history. The way the buildings sit in the landscape like they were put there by people who meant business and did not care who was watching.

As an architect I can see the bones.

Good bones. The kind of structure that does not get built anymore because it costs too much and takes too long and nobody has the patience for walls that thick. The kind of neighborhood that gets discovered about ten years after it should have been left alone.

I find the building on the third block. Four stories. Old brick. A fire escape climbing the south face. A wooden door at street level painted dark green that somebody repainted recently. The only fresh paint on the block.

I look up.

The rooftop. A structure up there I cannot fully see from the street. Movement. Birds.

I find the buzzer. Press it once.

His voice comes through the intercom immediately. Like he was already there.

“Come up,” he says. “Fourth floor. The stairs are on the left.”

The stairwell smells like old wood and something I cannot place. Not unpleasant. The particular smell of a building that has been inhabited by the same person for a long time.

The stairs are solid. Not a creak in them. The walls are clean. Someone has taken care of this building from the inside even if the outside has been left to itself.

On the second floor landing there is a framed photograph on the wall. A bird in full flight against a blue sky. Wings fully extended. Every feather visible. The particular grace of something built entirely for one purpose doing exactly that purpose.

I stop and look at it for a moment.

Then I keep climbing.

The door to the roof is propped open with a brick.

I step through it and stop.

The loft runs the full width of the building. Wire mesh and wood frame. Clean. Precise. Built by someone who knows what they are doing and takes it seriously. Nesting boxes along the back wall in rows. A landing board along the front. Water stations. Feed stations.

Everything in its place.

And the birds.

Forty pigeons. Moving in that particular way pigeons move when they are settled and safe and home. Some on the landing board. Some in the nesting boxes. Some on the wire above walking back and forth with the self-important air of birds who know exactly where they are.

Garrett is standing in the middle of it with a bird on his arm.

Not the Garrett from The Perch. Not the Garrett from the restaurant on the gorge. Someone quieter. More patient. The particular stillness of a man on his own ground doing the thing he was built to do.

He looks up when I come through the door.

“You made it,” he says.

“I made it,” I say.

I look at the bird on his arm. Small. Grey and white with a particular iridescence in the neck feathers. Bright eyes. Completely calm.

“This is her,” he says.

“The one that keeps winning.”

“The one that keeps coming home first.” He holds his arm out slightly. “She does not have a name yet.”

I look at the bird for a long moment.

“Why not.”

“I was waiting,” he says. “To see what she was.”

The bird looks back at me with her bright eyes. Unafraid. Like she has been expecting me.

He shows me the loft properly. The nesting boxes. The pedigree records in a binder on a shelf inside a small wooden cabinet he built himself. The ring numbers. The bloodlines going back four generations. The race records for each bird.

I look at the records the way I look at a site plan. Reading what is there. Reading what it means.

“You built all of this,” I say.

“Over six years.”

I look at the rooftop. The loft. The birds. The Minneapolis skyline visible to the north. The gorge somewhere to the east.

And then I look at the neighborhood below.

The architect in me reads it the same way she read it from the street. Good bones. The kind of neighborhood that gets discovered about ten years after it should have been left alone.

I know what firms like mine do to neighborhoods like this.

I know what tall buildings do to approach corridors.

I know what happens when the sky a bird has been navigating for six years suddenly has a wall in it.

I do not say any of this.

I look at the unnamed hen on Garrett's arm and I do not say any of this.

"She needs a name," I say.

Garrett looks at the bird on his arm. Then at me.

"You name her," he says.

I look at the unnamed hen. The bright eyes. The particular calm of a bird that has been released four hundred miles away and found her way home every single time without fail.

A bird that homes.

"Home," I say. "Her name is Home."

Garrett is quiet for a moment. Something moves in his face.

"Home," he says.

The bird shifts on his arm and settles.

Below us the neighborhood sits in the Saturday morning light with its good bones and its fresh green door and its ten years left before someone with a pencil and a site plan changes the sky above it forever.

I do not tell him.

Not today.

Today I stand on a rooftop in Minneapolis with chalk dust still in the creases of my hands that will not fully wash out and watch forty birds that know exactly where they belong.

I had to climb so my heart could soar.



CHAPTER

12

---

The green door is unlocked when I arrive.

Seven o'clock exactly. The Minneapolis morning cold and clear and still. The kind of Sunday that has not decided what it is going to be yet. The stairwell smells the same as yesterday. Old wood and something I still cannot name but am starting to think of as simply the building.

The rooftop door is propped open with the same brick.

Garrett is already there. He has been there for a while. I can tell by the coffee cup in his hand that is no longer steaming. He is standing at the edge of the roof facing south. Looking at the sky.

He does not turn around when I come through the door. He just holds out a second coffee cup without looking.

I take it and stand beside him and look south at the same sky.

"How far," I say.

"Three hundred and twelve miles," he says. "Released Friday at six AM."

I do the math without thinking. Architect habit.

“How fast do they fly.”

“Fifty to sixty miles per hour with a good wind.” He looks at the sky. “Wind has been from the south since yesterday afternoon.”

“Headwind.”

“Yes.”

We stand with that for a moment. Three hundred and twelve miles into a headwind. Five birds somewhere in that sky finding their way home by instruments I cannot see to a rooftop I only found yesterday.

“When do you expect them,” I say.

“The first one could come any time now,” he says. “The last one might not make it until tomorrow.”

He says it the way he says everything. Steady. No drama. This is just how it is.

I look at the southern sky and drink my coffee.

Waiting on a rooftop is different from waiting anywhere else.

There is nothing to do with your hands. Nothing to look at except the sky. No folders. No site plans. No Carol stopping at your desk with something urgent. Just the sky and the coffee going cold and the man beside you who has been doing this every race weekend for six years and has learned to simply be present in the waiting.

I think about the Morrison commission. The Henderson site plan I did not look at yesterday. Carol’s optional Saturday that I did not

take.

I think about the five birds in that sky finding their way home by something older than GPS. Older than maps. Some knowledge in the body that does not require explanation.

“Do you ever lose them,” I say.

“Yes,” he says.

“What do you do.”

“Wait another day. Sometimes they stop overnight and come in the next morning. Sometimes they get disoriented and land somewhere else and someone calls the number on the ring.” He looks at the sky. “Sometimes they do not come back.”

“Does that still bother you.”

He is quiet for a moment.

“Every time,” he says.

I see her before the timer goes off.

A speck in the southern sky. Then two specks. Then the particular shape of a bird that knows exactly where it is going dropping altitude fast over the roofline with her wings pulled in and her feet already reaching for the landing board.

She hits the board and Garrett is already moving. The scanner in his hand. He passes it over her ring and the timer records the split second of her arrival. Three hundred and twelve miles. One headwind. Thirty one hours and fourteen minutes.

He straightens up.

“First,” he says.

I look at the bird on the landing board. Ruffled from the flight. Tired in the way that only something that has worked that hard can be tired. But home. Completely and utterly home. Not confused. Not lost. Not still looking for something.

Home.

“Home,” I say.

“Home,” he says.

The second bird comes in eleven minutes later. The third twenty minutes after that. By noon four of the five birds are in the loft eating and drinking and settling back into themselves.

The fifth bird has not come in.

I look at the empty landing board. The sky still wide and blue and quiet.

“Where is she,” I say.

Garrett looks south.

“The magnetic poles are shifting,” he says. “It confuses some birds.”

I look at the empty sky.

He is talking about the bird.

I do not say anything.

Sunday afternoon we are in the loft checking on the returned birds when Garrett opens a nesting box in the far corner.

Two young birds. Separated from the racing flock. A cock and a hen. Young enough that their feathers still have the particular softness of birds that have not yet raced. Not yet tested. Not yet proven.

“These are from my best breeding pair,” he says. “Home’s parents.”

I look at the two young birds.

“They are yours if you want them,” he says. “You would need to train them. Start close. Half a mile. Then a mile. Build the distance slowly. They will home to wherever you train them to home to.”

I look at the two young birds in the nesting box. Soft. Unproven. Waiting to learn where home is.

A cock and a hen.

They will home to wherever you train them to home to.

I look at Garrett.

He is not looking at me. He is looking at the birds. Giving me the space to think without the pressure of his eyes.

“Yes,” I say. “I will take them.”

He nods once. Does not make a thing of it.

“They need names,” he says.

I look at the two young birds in the nesting box. Unproven. Unhurried. The whole sky ahead of them and no idea yet what they are capable of.

“Climb,” I say. “And Soar.”

Garrett looks at me.

Something in his face that was not there yesterday. Something quieter than surprise and bigger than agreement.

“Climb and Soar,” he says.

The two young birds shift in their nesting box and settle.

Outside the rooftop the Minneapolis sky is wide and cold and full of possibility and the southern wind has finally turned.

Monday morning at eight fifteen I am at my desk at Hendricks and Park when my phone buzzes.

Garrett.

Five for five.

I look at it for a long time.

I had to climb so my heart could soar.

Now I have the birds to prove it.

CHAPTER

13

---

The folder lands on my desk at nine fifteen.

Carol sets it down without stopping. She is already moving toward the conference room. Three words over her shoulder.

“Alderman Street development.”

I open the folder.

Site analysis. Zoning maps. Preliminary concepts for a mixed use development. Four residential towers. Retail at street level. Underground parking. The kind of commission that appears in architecture journals. The kind of project that gets a firm noticed in cities beyond the one it is standing in.

I look at the address on the cover sheet.

I close the folder.

I open it again.

The address is the same.

I sit very still at my desk for a long time with the Mississippi gorge outside my corner window and the pigeons on the ledge of the

building across the street and the folder open in front of me and Garrett's neighborhood on the cover sheet in Carol's precise handwriting.

Four residential towers.

I know what four residential towers do to the approach corridors of a racing loft on a four story building on the third block of Alderman Street.

I know because Garrett told me.

I close the folder.

Carol wants a site visit Thursday.

I drive to Alderman Street alone on Wednesday afternoon. I park on the corner and walk the block the way I walked it two Saturdays ago in the morning light. Reading the bones. The old industrial brick. The loading docks. The fresh green door on the fourth building.

I do not look up at the rooftop.

I walk the full block. Then the block behind it. Then the block to the north. I stand on the corner and look at the sky the way Garrett looks at the sky on race Sunday. Reading the wind. Reading the approach.

Four towers here would wall off the southern sky entirely.

Garrett's birds coming in from three hundred miles south would hit that wall of glass and steel and lose the roofline it has been navigating toward since Friday morning. It would circle. It would search. Some would find their way eventually. Some would not.

I think about the fifth bird. The magnetic poles shifting.  
Confusing some birds.

I think about Climb and Soar in the nesting box on the rooftop.  
Unproven. Unhurried. Still learning where home is.

I take out my notebook and start sketching.

Not the towers.

Something else.

I am at my kitchen table until two in the morning.

Zara finds me there at midnight and does not say anything. She makes two cups of coffee and sets one beside my elbow and sits on the couch and watches television with the sound off.

The sketches cover four pages. Then six. Then eight.

Not towers. Not the project Carol gave me. Something that works with the neighborhood instead of replacing it. Lower. Wider. The rooflines considered. The approach corridors from the south kept open. Retail that serves the people who actually live here instead of the people who might move here if the neighborhood becomes something it is not.

The kind of architecture that considers how people actually live in spaces.

The mudroom.

I think about what Garrett said about routes. A good route should pull you through. You should not have to convince yourself to take the next hold.

I think about Mr. Calloway looking at the mudroom drawing and saying that is exactly right. That is how we live.

I keep sketching.

At two in the morning I have something.

Not finished. Not presentable. But something true.

A different kind of architect.

I put the redesign concepts on Carol's desk Thursday morning before she arrives.

Eight pages of sketches. A cover note that says — I believe there is a better approach to the Alderman Street site. I would like twenty minutes before the site visit this afternoon.

Carol calls me into her office at eight thirty.

She looks at the sketches for a long time without speaking. Turning pages. Going back. Turning pages again.

I stand on the other side of her desk and wait the way I have learned to wait. The way Garrett waits on the rooftop. Present. Patient. Not filling the silence with explanation.

Carol looks up.

"How did you arrive at this," she says.

"I thought about how the people who live here actually move through their neighborhood," I say. "Not how the development would look in a journal."

Carol looks at the sketches again.

“The clients want towers,” she says.

“The clients want a successful development,” I say. “These will still be successful. And they will not empty the neighborhood of everything that makes it worth developing in the first place.”

Carol is quiet for a long moment.

“Leave these with me,” she says.

I walk back to my desk and open the Alderman Street folder and do not tell anyone what I have done or why I have done it.

Carol calls me back into her office at four thirty.

She has my sketches spread across her desk. She has been working with them. There are notes in the margins in her handwriting. Questions. Dimensions. The particular marks of someone who has been taking something seriously.

“The New York office is sending someone next week,” she says. “They want to see what we have been working on.”

She looks at the sketches.

“I want to show them this.”

I look at the eight pages spread across her desk. The approach corridors kept open. The rooflines considered. The neighborhood still itself inside the development instead of replaced by it.

“All right,” I say.

I walk back to my desk and look out my corner window at the gorge. The pigeons on the ledge of the building across the street.

Always there. I just finally have a reason to see them.

I pick up my phone.

I do not call Garrett.

I do not tell him what I did.

I put the phone back down and open the next folder.

The pencil knows things the mouth is not ready to say.

Some birds just need the sky kept open long enough to find their way home.

CHAPTER

14

---

The person from the New York office arrives Tuesday morning.

A woman named Diane. Sharp. Efficient. The particular quality of someone who has been sent to look at something and report back accurately. She spends forty minutes with Carol. She spends twenty minutes looking at the Alderman Street redesign spread across the conference room table.

She does not spend any time with me.

She leaves at noon.

Carol stops at my desk at two o'clock.

"She liked the Alderman Street concepts," she says. "New York liked them."

She walks away before I can answer.

I look out my corner window at the gorge. The pigeons on the ledge across the street.

I think about Climb and Soar in the nesting box on the rooftop three blocks from Alderman Street. Still young. Still learning. Still figuring out where home is.

New York liked them.

I open the next folder.

Saturday morning Garrett calls at six thirty.

“Bring the birds,” he says. “It is time.”

I have been coming to the rooftop every day since he gave them to me. Morning before the office. Sometimes evening after. The green door. The stairwell. The photograph on the second floor landing. Climb and Soar in their nesting box eating from my hand. Learning my voice. Learning my presence.

Zara says I smell like a rooftop.

I do not disagree.

Garrett is waiting when I arrive. He looks at the birds. He nods once.

“We take them half a mile,” he says. “Release them. Come back and watch.”

We drive half a mile south in his truck. A parking lot behind an old warehouse. The Minneapolis morning cold and bright around us.

He hands the carrier to me.

“Your birds,” he says. “You release them.”

I open the carrier door.

Climb comes out first. Sits on my finger for one second. Looks at me with his bright eyes. Then lifts off and is gone.

Soar follows without hesitation.

Two birds in the Saturday morning sky getting smaller and smaller until they are gone entirely.

“Now we go back,” Garrett says.

We are on the rooftop when they come in.

Four minutes and twenty seconds. Half a mile. Their first time away from home and they came back like they had been doing it their whole lives.

Climb hits the landing board first. Soar three seconds behind him.

I scan their rings with the timer the way Garrett showed me. My hands are not shaking. I am surprised by that. My hands are not shaking.

Garrett is watching me. Not the birds. Me.

“They know,” I say.

“They know,” he says.

I look at the two birds on the landing board. Half a mile was nothing to them. The knowledge was already in their bodies. They just needed one chance to use it.

I think about the fifth bird. The magnetic poles shifting. Confusing some birds.

I think about a bad bird that homes to no location.

I look at the landing board. At Climb and Soar settling back into themselves like they never left.

The magnetic poles are aligned.

I feel it in my chest before I understand it in my head.

Garrett is still watching me.

Not the way he watches a route. Not the way he watches the sky on race Sunday. Something quieter than that. Something that has been building since October and has finally run out of room to be anything other than what it is.

The Minneapolis sky is wide and blue above the rooftop. Home is in her nesting box. Climb and Soar are on the landing board. The loft is clean and precise and built by a man who takes seriously the things he loves.

He takes a step toward me.

“I have known since October,” he says. “I did not want to say it before you were ready to hear it.”

I look at him.

“I love you Iris.”

“I love you Garrett.”

It comes out before I finish hearing it. Natural. Inevitable. The only possible response to the only possible thing he could have said.

He holds my face in his strong hands and kisses me.

The rooftop is very quiet around us. The birds settled and certain. The Minneapolis sky holding everything still.

CHAPTER

15

---

Carol calls me into her office at eight fifty six.

One minute after I arrive. She has been waiting.

She closes the door. That is the first thing I notice. Carol does not close doors for good news. Good news happens in the open. Closed doors are for things that require a container.

She sits down. She looks at me the way she looked at me in the first interview. Measuring. Taking the full hour.

“New York wants you,” she says. “The Alderman Street redesign. Diane’s report. The New York partners reviewed it Friday afternoon.”

I look at my hands in my lap.

“They want you in the New York office,” she says. “Full associate position. Your own projects from the beginning.”

“When,” I say.

“One week.”

The gorge is outside Carol’s window. The same gorge I have been looking at from my corner window since October. The old mill ruins.

The Stone Arch Bridge. The pigeons on every ledge.

“And if I don’t go,” I say.

Carol is quiet for a moment.

“This is a Minneapolis office Iris,” she says. “We do not have an associate position here. Not at this level. What you have built belongs in New York now.”

She does not say the rest. She does not have to.

If I do not go I do not have a job.

I eat lunch alone on the Stone Arch Bridge.

The Mississippi moves through the gorge below me. Cold and fast and indifferent to everything happening fourteen floors above it.

I think about Garrett.

His hands on my face on the rooftop. The way he said I love you Iris like he had been carrying it a long time and was finally putting it down. The silence on race Sunday when the sky is empty and the birds are still out there somewhere and there is nothing to do but wait and trust.

He is the love of my life.

And I have to leave him.

My lunch goes cold in my hands.

One week.

I go to the rooftop after work.

Climb and Soar are on the landing board when I come through the door. They see me and come to my hands the way they always do. Small warm weight. Bright eyes. The particular trust of something that has learned you are safe.

I sit with them for a long time.

Home is in her nesting box. The other birds moving around the loft with their self important air. The Minneapolis evening coming in over the roofline. The sky going gold above the neighborhood.

I hear Garrett on the stairs before I see him.

He comes through the door and looks at me sitting on the roof with Climb on one hand and Soar on the other and the gold evening sky above everything.

“I have to tell you something,” I say.

He sits down beside me and waits.

I tell him everything. Carol’s office. The closed door. The Alderman Street redesign. The New York partners. One week.

He listens without moving. Without filling the silence. The way he always listens.

When I finish he looks at the birds in my hands. Climb and Soar. Four minutes and twenty seconds. Half a mile. The whole sky ahead of them.

He does not say anything for a long time.

“It is your call to make,” he says finally.

We sit on the rooftop until the sky goes dark.

Not talking. Not filling the silence with explanation or negotiation or the particular desperation of two people trying to argue their way out of something that has no argument.

Just the rooftop. The birds settling for the night. The Minneapolis sky going from gold to purple to the particular dark blue that comes just before the stars.

Garrett does not ask me to stay.

He is the man who knows you cannot tell a climber which hold to take.

He watches the sky the way he watches the sky on race Sunday. Patient. Present. Waiting for something he cannot control to find its way home.

I look at him in the dark.

The man who was already there when I arrived. Who put a sandwich in my hand at eleven on a Tuesday. Who bought me back onto the wall. Who gave me two birds and a rooftop and said they will home to wherever you train them to home to.

He did not ask me to stay.

He did not ask me to marry him.

I go to New York.

I tell Carol Tuesday morning. She nods once and goes back to her desk. She already knew.

I tell Zara Tuesday night. She sits across from me at the kitchen table with her hands around her coffee mug.

“I am coming too,” she says. “I have been waiting for a reason.”

I look at her.

“Zara.”

“Do not Zara me,” she says. “I have been watching you from this couch since October. I am not watching the next part from Minneapolis.”

I call my mother Wednesday morning. She cries. The good kind.

I go to the rooftop every morning for one week. Climb and Soar eating from my hands. Home in her nesting box. The green door. The stairwell. The photograph on the second floor landing.

On the last morning I sit with the birds for a long time.

Garrett comes through the door at seven.

He looks at me. He looks at the birds.

“They will be here,” he says. “When you come back.”

I look at Climb and Soar in my hands.

They home to the rooftop.

Not to me.

A bad bird that homes to no location.

The poles have shifted.

The sky looks the same.

But nothing is where it was.

CHAPTER

16

---

The apartment is on the ninth floor of a building in Tribeca with twelve foot ceilings and windows that run floor to ceiling on the south wall and a view of the Hudson that changes every hour depending on the light.

Zara saw it on a Tuesday and signed the lease on a Wednesday.

She has the bedroom with the north light. Perfect for shooting. She has already turned it into a production studio with her equipment unpacked and her backdrop hung and her cables run along the baseboard with the particular efficiency of someone who has been setting up and breaking down in other people's spaces for years. She is in her element. New York found her before she found it.

I have the bedroom with the Hudson view.

I stand at the window the first morning with my coffee and watch a tugboat push a barge upriver in the early light and think about the Mississippi moving through the gorge below the Stone Arch Bridge and then I put the thought down and go get dressed for work.

The Feldman and Ko office is in Midtown. Forty second floor. Glass and steel and a view of the city that goes in every direction as far

as you can see. My desk is not in the corner. There is no corner window with a gorge view nobody uses. There is a workstation in an open plan office with eleven other architects and the particular energy of a city that does not know what standing still means.

I put my head down and I go to work.

Three weeks in New York and I have learned the following.

The F train is faster than it looks on the map. The coffee shop on the corner closes at three which is not helpful. New York does not care who you are or where you came from or what you redesigned in Minneapolis. New York only cares what you do next.

I do good work. Carol prepared me well. The projects at Feldman and Ko are bigger than anything I touched in Minneapolis and the hours are longer and the expectations are higher and I come home every night with my brain emptied out and my hands aching from the keyboard.

I do not climb.

There is a gym three blocks from the apartment with a climbing wall in the back. I have walked past it four times. I have not gone in.

I do not think about why.

Zara thinks about why. I can see her thinking about it from the couch every evening when I come home and sit at the kitchen table and open my laptop and do not talk about Minneapolis.

She does not push. Yet.

Zara has a client named Patricia who shoots corporate content for financial firms in Midtown. Patricia knows everyone. That is her particular skill. Not videography. Knowing everyone.

Patricia has a friend.

Zara tells me about him on a Tuesday evening when I am at the kitchen table with my laptop open and my brain empty.

“His name is Web Spenser,” she says. “He flies helicopters.”

I look up from my laptop.

“Patricia wants to set something up,” Zara says. “Dinner. The four of us. Friday.”

I look at her.

“Zara.”

“Do not Zara me,” she says.

I look at my laptop.

“I don’t know anyone in this city,” she says. “Patricia is the only person who has invited me anywhere. She wants to have dinner Friday with her friend who flies helicopters and she wants to bring us both and I am going and I would like you to come with me.”

She picks up her coffee.

“That is all it is,” she says. “Dinner.”

I think about it for three days.

Wednesday at my workstation in the open plan office. Thursday on the F train. Friday morning at the coffee shop that closes at three.

The new projects at Feldman and Ko are demanding everything I have. A residential tower in the West Village. A mixed use development in Long Island City. The kind of work that appears in journals. The kind of work that requires aerial surveys of sites I cannot fully read from the street.

I think about that. Standing on a Long Island City street looking up at a site I cannot fully read from the ground.

I think about Garrett on the rooftop reading the approach corridors. Reading the sky.

I open my phone. I close my phone.

The restaurant is in Cobble Hill. Small. Warm. The kind of place that has been there long enough to know what it is.

Patricia is already there when we arrive. She stands up and hugs Zara like they have known each other for years which they have not. That is Patricia's particular gift.

The man beside her stands up.

Tall. Easy in his own skin the way people are easy when they are comfortable anywhere. Dark hair. The particular quality of someone who spends a lot of time looking at the horizon.

"Web Spenser," he says.

"Iris Bellamy," I say.

He has a good handshake. Not too much. Not too little. A man who knows exactly how much grip is needed.

I sit down.

Zara catches my eye across the table.

She is not smiling. She is just watching. The way she always watches.

The waiter brings menus. The restaurant is warm around us. Outside the Brooklyn night is cold and loud and full of people going somewhere.

Web Spenser picks up his menu and looks at it and then looks at me over the top of it.

“Patricia tells me you are an architect,” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “Patricia tells me you fly helicopters.”

“Freelance,” he says. “I go where the work is.”

I look at him.

A bad bird that homes to no location.

“What kind of work,” I say.

“Aerial surveys mostly,” he says. “Corporate clients. Film. Sometimes I scout sites for architects who need to see what they are building from above.”

I set my menu down.

“Tell me more about that,” I say.

CHAPTER

17

---

Web Spenser calls on a Wednesday morning.

Not a text. A call. I am at my workstation in the open plan office at Feldman and Ko with the Long Island City site plan on my screen and my coffee going cold beside my keyboard.

“I have a flight Saturday morning,” he says. “Aerial survey of the West Village site. You said you needed to see it from above.”

I did say that. At dinner Friday. Between the appetizers and the main course I had described standing on the street looking up at the Long Island City site and not being able to read it properly. Not being able to see how it sat in relation to everything around it.

Web had said — you need to see it from above.

I had said — can you do that.

He had said — Saturday morning. Early.

“How early,” I say now.

“Six thirty,” he says. “Helipad at the West Thirtieth Street facility. You will want layers. It is cold at altitude.”

He hangs up before I can answer.

I look at my screen. The Long Island City site plan that has not been making sense from the ground.

I put the coffee down and go back to work.

The helipad is on the Hudson.

I arrive at six twenty in layers the way he said. The river is dark and cold and moving fast below the facility. The Manhattan skyline across the water just beginning to catch the early light. The kind of morning that has not decided what it wants to be yet.

Web is already there. Flight suit. Easy in his own skin the way he always is. He hands me a headset without ceremony.

“Robinson R44,” he says. “Four seat. We will be at about two thousand feet for the survey. Wind is from the northwest at twelve knots. Good visibility.”

He says it the way Garrett talks about race conditions. Wind direction. Visibility. The particular expertise of someone who reads the sky for a living.

I put the headset on.

New York from two thousand feet is a completely different city.

Not the city I have been living in for three weeks. Not the city of the F train and the open plan office and the Tribeca apartment with the Hudson view. Not the city that is loud and fast and does not care who you are.

From up here it is geometry. Pattern. Relationship. The way blocks connect to blocks. The way streets create corridors. The way buildings of different heights create a topography as varied as any landscape. The way the water defines everything — the Hudson on one side, the East River on the other, the whole island of Manhattan revealed as exactly what it is.

An island.

Surrounded by water. Connected by bridges. Defined by its edges.

I have been living inside this city for three weeks and I did not know what shape it was.

“There,” Web says through the headset. His voice calm. Precise. “West Village site.”

I look down.

The site makes complete sense from here. The relationship to the surrounding blocks. The way the light will move across it at different times of day. The scale relative to the neighborhood. The approach from the street that I could not read from the ground.

From up here I can see exactly what to build.

I pull out my notebook. Start sketching. Two thousand feet above New York with the wind at twelve knots from the northwest and the whole city spread below me like a site plan drawn by someone who understood what they were doing.

“You see it,” Web says.

“I see it,” I say.

We land at seven forty five.

I have six pages of sketches. The West Village site resolved. The Long Island City problem clarified from a single pass over the roof. Two hours of aerial survey compressed into six pages that will drive the next two weeks of work.

We walk along the Hudson in the early morning light. The city waking up around us. The river moving cold and fast beside us.

“You see things differently from up here,” I say. “The city makes more sense from above than from inside it.”

Web looks at me.

“Most people never get above it,” he says. “They spend their whole lives inside it. Wondering why they can’t read it. Wondering why nothing connects. Wondering why they can’t see the shape of the thing they are living in.”

I think about that.

Most people spend their whole lives inside it.

Wondering why they can’t see the shape of the thing they are living in.

I think about standing on the Long Island City street for three days looking up at a site I could not read. Walking around it. Sketching it from every angle. Never understanding it.

One pass from two thousand feet and it was completely clear.

The idea attaches to something already there.

I do not say any of this to Web.

I just walk beside him along the cold river with six pages of sketches in my hand and the idea replicating quietly inside me.

Monday morning I put the West Village concepts on my supervisor's desk before anyone else arrives.

Twelve pages. The site resolved. The relationship to the neighborhood clear. The building designed from above and from inside simultaneously. The way people will move through it considered from the first line.

My supervisor calls me into his office at nine.

"These are extraordinary," he says.

I look at the sketches spread across his desk.

The city makes more sense from above than from inside it.

I think about Web saying most people never get above it.

CHAPTER

18

---

Zara leaves two tickets on the kitchen counter on a Tuesday night.

No note. Just the tickets and a Post-it that says you're welcome in her handwriting.

I pick them up.

Danny Rosenberg Live. The Beacon Theatre. Friday night. Two seats. Orchestra section. Row G.

I look at Zara. She is on the couch with her camera reviewing footage. She does not look up.

"Who is Danny Rosenberg," I say.

"Fictional therapeutic comedian," she says. "Patricia's client shot his last special. She got me tickets. I have a shoot Friday." She still does not look up. "Give them to Web."

I look at the tickets.

"Zara."

"Do not Zara me," she says. "Life is meant to have fun."

She keeps reviewing footage.

I text Web Wednesday morning from the office.

Do you know Danny Rosenberg.

Three minutes later.

Fictional therapeutic comedian. Full hologram show. Yes. Why.

I have two tickets Friday. Beacon Theatre.

Thirty seconds.

I will pick you up at seven.

I put my phone down and go back to the West Village concepts.

I am going to see a fictional therapeutic comedian on Friday night.

Life is meant to have fun.

The Beacon Theatre on Broadway seats twenty eight hundred people.

It is full.

Every seat occupied. The particular energy of a crowd that has been looking forward to something. The particular warmth of twenty eight hundred people in a room together waiting to laugh.

Web finds our seats in Row G. He is wearing a dark jacket. Easy in his own skin the way he always is. He hands me a program without ceremony.

I open it.

Danny Rosenberg. Fictional Therapeutic Comedian. Tonight's performance is live.

A note from the management: 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 look up at the stage.

A single spotlight. Empty.

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," she says. "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 from the clipboard. "I

have data on the transmission rate. It is very high. You are welcome to attempt resistance. Nobody has succeeded yet.”

The audience laughs.

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.

Danny Rosenberg looks at twenty eight hundred people 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 left.”

Twenty eight hundred people look left.

Laughter.

“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.

The card faces outward. Four words printed in clean block letters.

LOVE. GRATITUDE. JOY. INSPIRATION.

A cartoon balloon forms over Danny’s head. Inside it the same four words. Love. Gratitude. Joy. Inspiration.

“This is Card Six,” Danny says. “I carry it everywhere. And here is what I know about it.”

He holds the card up higher.

“These are not instructions. They are not a checklist. They are not something you achieve and then put away.” He looks at the card. “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.

“Not because everything is perfect. Not because nothing hurts. Not because you figured it all out.” He sets the card down on the edge of the stage. “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.”

Web is very still beside me.

I am very still.

“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.”

He picks the card up again.

“Love. Gratitude. Joy. Inspiration. Take it home tonight. Put it somewhere you can see it. And every morning when you wake up say the five words before you say anything else.”

He looks at the audience.

“I love you. I’m happy.”

Twenty eight hundred people are completely silent.

Then someone in the back says it out loud.

I love you. I’m happy.

Then someone else.

Then the whole room.

Web says it beside me. Quietly. Almost to himself.

I say it.

I love you. I'm happy.

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

Danny grins.

"There it is," he says. "Polly told you nobody has resisted it yet. Now you know why."

We walk up Broadway after the show.

The November air cold and sharp. Our breath visible. The particular feeling of a crowd dispersing after something good.

"Well," Web says.

"Well," I say.

We walk for a block without talking. The easy silence of two people who do not need to fill every moment.

"I love you I'm happy," Web says. He says it the way you say something you are trying on to see if it fits.

I look at him.

"Does it fit," I say.

He thinks about it seriously. The way he thinks about wind direction and flight conditions. Not casual. Considered.

"Yes," he says. "I think it does."

He looks at me.

"Does it fit you," he says.

I look at Broadway stretching north. The lights. The twenty eight hundred people dispersing into the New York night each carrying whatever Danny installed in them tonight.

The meme replicating. Generating new thoughts on its own.

“I’m not resisting,” I say.

He smiles.

We keep walking north up Broadway in the cold November air.

Somewhere in New York tonight Danny Rosenberg is absolutely certain the meme is spreading.

Polly has data to support this.

CHAPTER

19

---

Web calls Saturday afternoon at four.

“Dress warm,” he says. “I will pick you up at seven.”

That is all.

I put my phone down and go find my coat.

Zara is in the kitchen making coffee. She watches me pull my coat from the closet.

“Where are you going,” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say.

She smiles into her coffee mug.

The High Line runs from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District north through Chelsea to the Hudson Yards. A mile and a half of elevated park built on old freight rail infrastructure. Steel and concrete and original track still visible under your feet.

I have walked past the entrance three times since arriving in New York.

I have not gone up.

Web takes the stairs at Fourteenth Street. I follow.

We come out above the city.

I stop.

The old rail tracks run north through the November dark. On both sides the buildings of Manhattan press close — close enough to see into lit windows, close enough to read the architecture from the side instead of from the street or from two thousand feet. Glass and brick and water towers and the particular geometry of a city that built itself without a single plan and somehow became one of the most considered spaces on earth.

To the west the Hudson. New Jersey lit up on the far bank. A tanker moving south on the dark water.

Under my feet the original steel rail ties. Still there. Still themselves. Repurposed but not erased.

“You have not been up here,” Web says.

“No,” I say.

“I thought so.”

We walk north.

The High Line at night in November is not crowded.

A few other walkers. A couple sharing a thermos on a bench. A man with a dog. The city moving below and around us but up here something quieter. Something that belongs to the people willing to climb the stairs.

Web walks beside me. Easy. Unhurried.

The meme is running between us. Not discussed. Not named. Just present the way weather is present. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. The force field at full strength tonight. I can feel it in the cold air. In the lit windows. In the old tracks under my feet.

I stop at a railing and look at a building across the street. An old industrial conversion. Cast iron facade. The bones of something that was built to last showing through everything that came after.

“What do you see,” Web says.

“Good bones,” I say. “Someone took care of this building from the inside even after the outside stopped mattering.”

Web looks at the building.

“I see that too,” he says. “From the air you can see which buildings were loved. The rooflines tell you.”

I look at him.

“The rooflines tell you.”

“The ones that were loved have details nobody asked for. Details nobody could see from the street. But someone put them there anyway.” He looks at the building. “That is care made permanent.”

I look back at the building. The cast iron facade. The details nobody asked for.

Care made permanent.

The meme replicating. Generating new thoughts on its own.

We walk the full length.

An hour and a half. Chelsea in December. The city lit up around us. The Hudson dark to the west. The old industrial bones of Manhattan showing through the glass and steel that came after.

We talk. Not about work. About everything that is not work. His family in Connecticut. The first time he flew solo at seventeen. The particular feeling of leaving the ground for the first time alone and realizing the world looks completely different from above.

I tell him about Cincinnati. My mother. The architecture professor who said I thought too much about people and not enough about buildings.

“He was wrong,” Web says.

“I know,” I say.

“Buildings are just people made permanent,” he says. “Everything else is just structure.”

Buildings are just people made permanent.

The meme eating that. Turning it over. Finding where it connects.

I look at my hands on the railing. The calluses still there. Faint now. But there.

Care made permanent.

Buildings are just people made permanent.

The force field pressing us closer with every block.

Does it fit.

Yes.

We take the stairs down at Thirtieth Street.

Back at street level the city is loud again. Cabs. People. The particular energy of a Saturday night in Manhattan that has been going since six and will not stop until two.

We stand on the sidewalk.

Web looks at me the way he looks at the horizon before a flight. Reading conditions. Taking his time.

“Same time next week,” he says.

Not a question.

“Same time next week,” I say.

He flags a cab. Holds the door. I get in.

I look back at the High Line as the cab pulls away. The elevated park above the street. The old tracks still there under everything that came after.

Care made permanent.

The meme is running at full strength.

I am not resisting.

CHAPTER

20

---

Web texts Wednesday morning.

Rockefeller Center. Wednesday night. The tree lighting. Meet me at six.

I look at the text for exactly three seconds.

Yes.

I put my phone down and go back to the West Village concepts. The building is resolving beautifully. My supervisor has started routing his best clients to my desk. Carol called from Minneapolis last week to say the Alderman Street development is being written up in Architectural Digest.

I did not tell her why the rooflines worked.

I put my phone down and smile at the West Village concepts and go back to work.

Thirty thousand people.

That is what it looks like from the corner of Sixth Avenue and Fiftieth Street on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Thirty thousand people packed into Rockefeller Plaza and spilling out onto

the surrounding streets. Coats and scarves and breath visible in the cold air and the particular energy of a crowd that has been waiting for something beautiful to happen.

Web finds me at the corner at six exactly.

He is wearing a dark coat. A scarf I have not seen before. He looks completely at home in thirty thousand people the way he looks completely at home everywhere.

“Ready,” he says.

“Ready,” I say.

We move into the crowd together.

The Norway spruce stands seventy feet above the plaza.

Unlit. Just the tree itself in the December dark. The shape of it. The particular dignity of something that has been growing for decades and has been brought here to do one magnificent thing.

The crowd is quiet in the way crowds get quiet when something is about to happen.

Web stands beside me. Close. The cold air between us gone. The force field running at full strength. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration not as a thought. As a physical condition. As the weather we are standing inside together.

I look up at the unlit tree.

Thirty thousand people looking up at the same thing at the same moment.

The announcer counting down.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

Web's hand finds mine in the cold.

Seven. Six. Five.

I look at the tree. Seventy feet of Norway spruce in the December dark waiting to become something extraordinary.

Four. Three. Two.

One.

Thirty thousand lights.

All at once.

The crowd erupts. Not applause exactly. Something older than applause. The sound thirty thousand people make when beauty arrives without warning even though they were expecting it.

I am making that sound.

Web is making that sound.

The tree blazes above Rockefeller Plaza and the force field between us blazes with it and I think —

I love you. I'm happy.

Not to Web. Not to anyone.

Just the meme running at full strength in the December light.

We walk up Fifth Avenue after.

The Christmas windows lit up on both sides. Saks. Bergdorf. The city dressed in its best for the season. The cold sharp and clean and full of possibility.

Web is talking about the first time he saw the tree lighting as a child. Eight years old. His father lifted him onto his shoulders so he could see above the crowd.

I am listening and looking at the windows and feeling the force field running between us like a current.

“What are you thinking,” Web says.

I look at him.

“I am thinking that New York knows how to do this,” I say.

“Do what.”

“Make you feel like you are exactly where you are supposed to be.”

Web looks at me. Something in his face that has been building since the High Line. Since the Danny Rosenberg show. Since the dinner in Cobble Hill when he said I go where the work is and I said tell me more about that.

“Yes,” he says. “It does.”

We walk another block.

“Does it fit,” he says.

I look at Fifth Avenue stretching south. The lights. The windows. The thirty thousand people dispersing into the New York night carrying the tree lighting inside them.

The meme replicating. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. The force field at full strength.

Does it fit.

Yes.

Web reaches into his coat pocket on the corner of Forty Second Street.

He pulls out a card.

Small. Printed. Four words in clean block letters.

LOVE. GRATITUDE. JOY. INSPIRATION.

He holds it out to me.

“Polly gave me one after the show,” he says. “I have been carrying it.”

I look at the card in his hand.

Card Six. The same card Danny held up on the stage at the Beacon Theatre.

I take it.

It is warm from his pocket.

I put it in mine.

We stand on the corner of Forty Second Street in the December cold with the city blazing around us and the force field running between us at full strength and the tree thirty blocks north still blazing above the plaza.

I love you. I'm happy.

The meme is fully installed.

I am not resisting.

CHAPTER

21

---

Web calls Friday night at ten.

“Tomorrow morning,” he says. “Four thirty.”

“Four thirty,” I say.

“Dress warm. Layers. Good shoes.”

“Where are we going.”

“You will see,” he says.

I set three alarms and go to bed and lie awake for twenty minutes thinking about the West Village concepts and the Alderman Street writeup in Architectural Digest and the Card Six warm in my coat pocket where I have been carrying it since Wednesday.

Then I sleep.

He picks me up at four thirty exactly.

The city is quiet in a way it never is at any other hour. The streets not empty but reduced. The particular stillness of New York between the night people going home and the morning people coming out.

We drive across the Manhattan Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge visible to the south. Its cables lit up against the December dark.

He parks in Brooklyn.

We walk to the bridge entrance on the Brooklyn side.

“We walk across,” he says. “The pedestrian path. Takes about twenty minutes.”

I look at the bridge. The cables rising into the dark above us. The towers. The whole structure of it.

As an architect I know what this bridge is. Completed 1883. John Roebling’s design. His son Washington finished it after John died. Washington’s wife Emily supervised the final construction after Washington became too ill to leave his apartment. Three Roeblings. One bridge. Fourteen years.

Care made permanent.

I look at Web.

“Let’s go,” I say.

Twenty minutes to walk from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

We are at the middle of the bridge when the dawn starts.

Not dramatic. December dawns never are. Just a slow lightening in the east over Brooklyn. The sky going from black to dark blue to the particular grey that comes just before the first color.

We stop at the middle of the bridge.

Below us the East River moving fast and dark between the two boroughs. To the north the Manhattan Bridge. Further north the Williamsburg Bridge. The bridges of New York spanning the water one after another like punctuation.

To the west lower Manhattan. The One World Trade tower catching the first light above everything else. The financial district. The ferry terminals. The Hudson beyond.

To the east Brooklyn. The neighborhoods spreading out from the water. Church spires. Water towers. The rooflines of a borough that has been itself for longer than anyone can remember.

The force field running between us at full strength.

Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration.

The dawn coming up over Brooklyn.

Web is looking east. His face in the grey December light. The particular expression of a man who has seen a thousand dawns from the air and has never stopped finding them extraordinary.

“You bring everyone here,” I say.

He looks at me.

“No,” he says.

One word. Completely certain.

The color comes at six fourteen.

Not red. Not orange. The particular pink that belongs only to December dawns over New York. The sky over Brooklyn going from

grey to rose to something that has no name in any language.

The One World Trade tower turns pink above lower Manhattan.

The East River catches the color and throws it back.

The cables of the Brooklyn Bridge glow.

I have my notebook out. I am sketching. I cannot help it. The light on the water. The geometry of the cables. The way the towers rise from the bridge deck. The relationship between the suspension cables and the diagonal stay cables creating a web of intersecting lines against the pink sky.

Web watches me sketch without saying anything.

After a while he says —

“You see buildings the way I see the sky.”

I look up from the notebook.

“How do you see the sky,” I say.

“Like it is alive,” he says. “Like it has opinions.”

I look at the pink sky over Brooklyn.

Like it is alive. Like it has opinions.

The meme eating that. Turning it over. Finding where it connects.

The force field at absolute maximum.

Does it fit.

Yes.

Completely.

We come off the bridge on the Manhattan side at seven fifteen.

The city fully awake now. The dawn gone. The December morning cold and bright and certain of itself.

We find a coffee shop on Fulton Street. Small. Warm. The particular smell of a place that has been making coffee since five AM for people who work near the water.

We sit across from each other with our coffees.

Web looks at me the way he has been looking at me since the High Line. Since the Danny Rosenberg show. Since the dinner in Cobble Hill when it all started.

Something in his face that has been building for weeks.

I look back at him.

The Card Six in my pocket warm against my hand.

Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration.

I love you. I'm happy.

The meme fully installed. Running at full strength. Generating new thoughts on its own.

I am not resisting.

Neither is he.

"Same time next week," he says.

I smile.

“Same time next week,” I say.

Outside the coffee shop the Manhattan morning moves past the window fast and certain and full of people going somewhere.

We are already there.

CHAPTER

22

---

Zara has been in Dubai for ten days on assignment.

Web offers to drive to JFK to pick her up.

We are forty minutes early. We get coffees from a kiosk and find two seats in the Terminal Four arrivals hall facing the door.

We are talking about nothing in particular when Web sets his coffee down and looks at me.

“I love you Iris,” he says.

“I love you Web,” I say.

He kisses me.

A real kiss. The kind that means what it says.

The airport goes about its business around us.

Zara comes through the arrivals door at nine forty four with her camera bag and her rolling case.

“Let’s go,” she says. “I’m starving.”

We follow her into the passageway.

CHAPTER

23

---

“Garrett.”

I run and fly into his arms.

“I love you. I love you. I love you.” My joy climbs higher and higher.

We kiss a timeless kiss.

“I love you Iris.”

As I come to earth I see Web.

My heart soars again.

“I love you Web. I love you. I love you Web.”

“I love you Iris.”

I am disoriented until I hear Zara yell.

“Choose.”

My hand glides into Garrett’s hand.

“Will you marry me Iris?”

“Yes Garrett, yes.”

CHAPTER

24

---

*How To Be Funny When You't Not — Special Episode: The Weight of Wings*

*Part 1 — Iris*

Polly Cebos walks to the center of the stage.

Clipboard. Reading glasses slightly too large for her face. The particular authority of someone who has reviewed all available data and found it not only satisfactory but extraordinary.

The audience in their rectangles.

“Good evening,” Polly says. “I am Polly Cebos. Tonight’s special episode is called The Weight of Wings.” She consults her clipboard. “It is the story of a woman who climbed a wall so her heart could soar. I have read it three times. The data improves with each reading.”

She turns a page.

“Our first guest is Iris Bellamy. She is now forty two years old. She is a partner at Feldman and Ko Architecture in New York City. She has won three national design awards. She redesigned a major urban development project at two in the morning to save forty pigeons

belonging to the man she loved. She did not tell him for fifteen years.” Polly looks up. “She is telling him tonight. I have arranged for him to be watching.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Danny Rosenberg.”

The hologram appears.

Full sized. Fully present. The warmth of someone who has been looking forward to this all day.

Danny Rosenberg looks at the rectangles and grins.

“Hello. Danny Rosenberg here. 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 looks at the chair beside him.

“Tonight’s love story is called *The Weight of Wings*. And the woman who wrote it is here to tell us about it.”

He gestures at the chair.

“Iris Bellamy.”

Iris appears in her rectangle. Forty two. The particular calm of someone who has had fifteen years to know exactly what she thinks.

Danny looks at her with complete warmth.

“Iris,” he says. “Tell us about your book.”

Iris looks at the audience.

“Danny my book is a love story,” she says. “It has twenty four chapters. On the outside over time I fell in love with two men at different times in my life. Eventually I had to choose one. I couldn’t have both. Underneath it is a personal development story. Maybe my story will help someone.”

Danny looks at her for a moment.

“Who would that one person be Iris.”

Iris thinks about it.

“Someone standing at the base of a wall right now,” she says. “Not knowing what they are doing there. That is all I know about her.”

Polly looks up from her clipboard.

“That is Sam,” she says. “Single audience member. The specific person a story is written for. Sam faces a double factor problem — one that has no absolute solution because two competing priorities are in play simultaneously. In this case — when do I prioritize love and when do I prioritize the life I am building.” She pauses. “You cannot calculate the answer. It is context dependent. Every situation is unique. But the feeling of standing between two things that both matter — that is universal.”

Danny looks at Polly with complete affection.

Then at the audience.

Then back at Iris.

“You are not giving Sam a map,” Danny says.

“No,” Iris says. “Sam’s wall is not my wall. Sam’s rooftop is not my rooftop. Sam’s passageway is not my passageway.” She pauses. “But the feeling of standing at the base of something hard and not knowing what you are doing there — that is the same.”

“And the feeling of driving toward something you want,” Danny says softly, “and not being able to stop the car.”

“Yes,” Iris says. “That too.”

“And the feeling of a hand going into another hand before your brain decides.”

Iris looks at her hand.

“Yes,” she says. “That most of all.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“She is not giving Sam a map,” he says. “She is giving Sam permission.”

Polly nods once.

“Permission to fall,” she says. “I have data on this. It is the most important gift one human being can give another.” She closes her clipboard. “The data is conclusive.”

“Tell Sam about the wall,” Danny says.

Iris smiles.

“I was laid off in October,” she says. “My roommate Zara sent me to a climbing gym three blocks from our apartment. I stood at the base of the wall and did not know what I was doing there.”

“And now you know.”

“I was training myself to home,” Iris says. “I just did not know that was what I was doing.”

Polly looks up. “Homing behavior in humans is poorly studied compared to homing behavior in birds. However the mechanisms appear to be identical. Repetition. Return. The gradual recognition that one specific place and one specific person constitute safety.” She pauses. “I have submitted a paper on this. It is under review.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Under review,” he says.

“Tell Sam about the sandwich,” Danny says.

Iris smiles. “Week three. He brought two sandwiches to the wall. Turkey or egg salad. I said turkey. We sat on the mat and ate. And he told me I was a different kind of architect.”

“How did that make you feel,” Danny says.

Iris is quiet.

“Seen,” she says. “It made me feel seen in a way I did not know I needed to be seen. Before I saw myself.”

Danny looks at the audience with the expression of a man who finds this completely wonderful.

Polly looks up. “Studies show that feeling genuinely seen by another person activates the same neural pathways as physical warmth.” She pauses. “The turkey sandwich may also have been a contributing factor. I am looking into this.”

“She is looking into it,” Danny says warmly.

“I am,” Polly says. “It is promising research.”

“Tell Sam about the rooftop,” Danny says.

Iris looks somewhere past the camera.

“He kept forty racing pigeons on a rooftop three blocks from Alderman Street,” she says. “Nobody at the gym knew. He had been building it for six years. The fastest bird in his loft — he had not named her yet because he was waiting to see what she was.”

“And you named her Home,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because she always came back,” Iris says. “No matter how far she was released. No matter what was in the way. She always found the rooftop.” She pauses. “I wanted to understand that. I was still the bad bird. The one that homes to no location.”

Polly looks up. “A bird that homes to no location is not a bad bird,” she says. “It is an untrained bird. The distinction is significant. Badness implies character. Untrainedness implies circumstance. Circumstance can be changed.”

Danny looks at Polly.

Then at Iris.

“Circumstance was changed,” he says.

“Yes,” Iris says. “It was.”

“Tell Sam about the building,” Danny says.

Iris straightens slightly.

“My firm was contracted to design a development on Alderman Street,” she says. “Four residential towers. I recognized the address. Three blocks from his rooftop. I knew what four towers would do to the approach corridors. The birds coming in from the south would hit a wall of glass and steel where there had been open sky.”

“So you redesigned it.”

“At two in the morning,” Iris says. “Eight pages of sketches. Something that kept the sky open.”

“It made your career,” Danny says.

“It was written up in Architectural Digest. It won a national award.”

“And Garrett.”

“Did not know,” Iris says. “Until tonight.”

Danny looks at the camera with the warmth of a man who finds love everywhere he goes.

“The woman redesigned a building at two in the morning to save forty pigeons,” he says. “And did not tell the man she loved for fifteen years.”

He looks at Iris.

“Why not.”

Iris thinks for a long moment.

“Because some things you do not do for credit,” she says. “You do them because the sky should stay open.”

Polly does not check her clipboard.

She just nods.

“Tell Sam about the meme,” Danny says.

Iris looks at him. “Your meme.”

“My meme,” Danny says happily.

“I went to your show,” Iris says. “With Web. Zara left the tickets on the counter with a Post-it that said you’re welcome. You pulled out Card Six. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. The cartoon balloon appeared over your head. You said I love you I’m happy. Twenty eight hundred people said it out loud.”

“And walking up Broadway after,” Danny says.

“Web said I love you I’m happy,” Iris says. “And I said I’m not resisting.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“I’m not resisting,” he says. “Three words.”

Polly steps forward.

“The stated meme was I love you I’m happy,” she says. “But there was a hidden meme already running. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. It was present from the first aerial survey. In every conversation. In every Thursday evening on the High Line. In every moment between them.” She pauses. “This is called the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon.

Also known as the frequency illusion. Once the brain assigns importance to something it begins selecting for it everywhere. The hidden meme was always there. Iris's brain simply finally had a reason to notice it."

She closes her clipboard.

"I'm not resisting," she says, "was not resistance ending. It was recognition beginning."

Danny looks at Polly for a long moment.

"Recognition beginning," he says.

"Yes," Polly says. "I have the data time stamped."

"Tell Sam about the passageway," Danny says.

Iris looks at the camera.

"We were following Zara into the passageway at JFK," she says. "And I looked up. And Garrett was coming the other way."

"You ran," Danny says.

"I flew," Iris says.

"Into his arms."

"Yes. And I told him I loved him. And then I saw Web. And my heart soared again. And I told Web I loved him. Both times completely true."

"And Zara," Danny says.

"Shouted Choose," Iris says. "One word. Very loud."

“And your hand.”

“Went into Garrett’s hand. Before I decided. My hand already knew.”

Polly looks up. “The hand knows before the brain does in approximately seventy three percent of significant life decisions.”

“Of course it does,” Danny says warmly.

“It does,” Polly says. “It is very reliable data.”

“Iris,” Danny says. “For Sam. The woman standing at the base of the wall right now. Not knowing what she is doing there. What do you want her to know.”

Iris looks at the camera.

“Your wall is not my wall,” she says. “Your rooftop is not my rooftop. Your passageway is not my passageway. Your two men are not my two men.” She pauses. “But the feeling of almost driving past something that matters — that is the same. And I want you to know — the rooftop is still there. The birds are still there. The hold is still there.”

She looks at her hands. The faint calluses. Fifteen years old.

“Stop the car,” she says. “Go up the stairs. Look up.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Stop the car,” he says. “Go up the stairs. Look up.”

He looks at Iris.

“Thank you for stopping the car,” he says.

“Thank you Danny,” Iris says.

...

## ***Part 2 — Garrett***

Polly walks to center stage.

“Part Two,” she says. “Our next guest is Garrett Hahn. He is forty seven years old. He is a master level route setter and competitive pigeon racer. He owned and operated The Perch climbing gym in Minneapolis for six years. He holds eleven regional racing championships and two national titles.” She turns a page. “He also sold everything he built and got on a plane to New York before he knew if the woman he loved would choose him.” She looks up. “I have data on what that costs. It is significant.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Garrett Hahn.”

Garrett appears in his rectangle.

Forty seven. Lean. The particular stillness of a man who is comfortable anywhere he is placed. He looks at the camera the way he looks at a route. Taking in the whole thing before he says anything.

Danny looks at him with complete warmth.

“Garrett,” he says. “Iris wrote a book. You are in it. How does it feel to be in someone else’s love story.”

Garrett is quiet for a moment.

“True,” he says. “It feels true.”

“Just that.”

“Just that.”

Danny looks at the audience with the expression of a man who finds this completely wonderful.

“He said true,” Danny says. “Not flattering. Not surprising. True.”

Polly looks up. “Studies show that the most meaningful response to being seen accurately by another person is not gratitude. It is recognition. The feeling of being known.” She pauses. “True is recognition.”

Danny looks at Polly.

Then at Garrett.

“She got you right,” Danny says.

“Yes,” Garrett says.

“Tell me about the first time you saw her,” Danny says.

“She walked in on a Tuesday morning in October,” Garrett says. “She stood at the base of the wall and looked up at it.”

“And.”

“And I looked up from the route I was setting.”

“You said you did not look up,” Danny says.

“Iris said I did not look up.”

The rectangles laugh.

"I looked up," Garrett says.

"What did you see."

"Someone who was going to figure out the wall," Garrett says. "She did not know that yet. But I could see it."

"How."

"The way she looked at it," Garrett says. "Most people look at a climbing wall and see an obstacle. She looked at it like a problem she intended to solve. Those are different things."

Polly looks up. "They are measurably different things. I have data on the distinction between obstacle orientation and problem orientation in first time climbers. The outcomes diverge significantly by week three." She pauses. "Iris diverged correctly."

Danny grins at the audience.

"She diverged correctly," he says.

"The sandwich," Danny says.

"Turkey or egg salad," Garrett says.

"Why did you bring two sandwiches to the wall."

Garrett thinks about it. "Because she had been climbing for two weeks and nobody had sat with her on the mat yet."

The rectangles are completely still.

Danny does not rush.

"Nobody had sat with her," he says quietly.

“No.”

“So you brought two sandwiches.”

“Yes.”

“Turkey.”

“She said turkey.”

Danny looks at the audience for a long moment.

“He brought two sandwiches to the wall,” Danny says, “because nobody had sat with her yet.”

Polly looks up. “The act of sitting beside someone who has been sitting alone is one of the most significant gestures in human social behavior. It requires no words. It communicates everything.” She pauses. “The turkey sandwich was also nutritionally appropriate for post-climb recovery. This was a bonus.”

Danny points at Polly.

“A bonus,” he says.

“An important bonus,” Polly says.

“You told her she was a different kind of architect,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“What did you mean.”

“She designed the red route in week three for the climber moving through it,” Garrett says. “Not for how it looked. Most people design for the photograph. She designed for the climb.”

“Did she know you were watching that closely.”

“No.”

“When did she figure it out.”

“When she asked if I was trying to be her friend or her enemy.”

Danny grins. “Are you trying to be my friend or my enemy. What did you say.”

“I told her I was trying to be more than her friend.”

“And.”

“She did not say anything.”

“Smart woman,” Danny says.

“Very,” Garrett says.

Polly looks up. “Silence in response to a declaration of intent is not rejection. In seventy one percent of documented cases it is processing. The brain requires time to integrate unexpected positive information.” She pauses. “Iris required approximately nine chapters.”

“Nine chapters,” Danny says.

“I have it documented,” Polly says.

“The rooftop,” Danny says. “Tell me about the loft.”

Something shifts in Garrett’s face. The private thing becoming slightly less private.

“I built it the second year after The Perch opened,” he says. “On the roof of my building. Forty birds at full capacity. Twelve to fifteen

active racers.”

“Nobody at The Perch knew.”

“Rita knew.”

“Rita always knows,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“Why did you keep it private.”

Garrett is quiet for a moment. “The wall I built for other people,” he says. “The birds are mine.”

“And then Iris came to the rooftop.”

“She drove to the neighborhood one Tuesday night,” Garrett says. “She could not stop the car. She made a half loop and went home.”

“She told you that.”

“She told me later. After she came back in the daylight.”

“She came back.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about that morning,” Danny says.

“She came through the door,” Garrett says. “She stood on the rooftop and looked at the birds the way she had looked at the wall in October.” He pauses. “Like a problem she intended to solve.”

Polly looks up. “She diverged correctly again,” she says. “I have updated my data.”

“Home,” Danny says.

“The unnamed hen,” Garrett says. “The fastest bird in the loft. She kept coming home first. I had not named her because I was waiting to see what she was.”

“And Iris named her.”

“Yes.”

“Why Home.”

“I asked her the same thing,” Garrett says.

“What did she say.”

“She said because she always comes back.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Because she always comes back,” he says.

He looks at Garrett.

“Were you still talking about the bird,” Danny says.

Garrett looks at the camera.

“No,” he says. “Neither of us was.”

Polly looks up from her clipboard. She looks at it for a moment. Then she closes it.

“I have no data to add to that,” she says.

Danny nods slowly.

“Neither do I,” he says.

“Climb and Soar,” Danny says.

“Two young birds from Home’s parents,” Garrett says. “I gave them to Iris.”

“Before you knew if she would say it back.”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because they would home to wherever she trained them to home to,” Garrett says. “I wanted her to have something that would always come back to her.”

“She trained them on the rooftop,” Danny says.

“Every morning before the office. Sometimes evenings.”

“She smelled like a rooftop,” Danny says.

“Zara told you that,” Garrett says.

“Zara tells me everything,” Danny says.

Garrett almost smiles.

Polly looks up. “The act of giving someone a homing bird is not documented in any relationship literature I have reviewed,” she says. “I am creating a new category. I am calling it radical commitment through proxy homing.” She writes something on her clipboard. “It is a significant category.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Radical commitment through proxy homing,” he says.

“It needed a name,” Polly says.

“The rooftop declaration,” Danny says. “Chapter fourteen. You told her first.”

“Yes.”

“I have known since October. You said that.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you wait.”

“She was not ready to hear it before that,” Garrett says.

“How did you know when she was ready.”

“Climb and Soar came home from their first training toss,” Garrett says. “Four minutes and twenty seconds. Half a mile. First time away and they came back like they had been doing it their whole lives.” He pauses. “The magnetic poles aligned. I knew.”

“And she said it back.”

“Before I finished hearing it,” Garrett says.

Danny smiles at the audience the smile of a man who has been waiting for that line.

“Carol called you into her office,” Danny says.

Garrett is very still.

“Carol did not call me,” he says.

“Iris told you.”

“On the rooftop that evening. She was the first person I heard it from.”

“And you said.”

“I said it was her call to make.”

“You did not ask her to stay.”

“No.”

“You did not ask her to marry you.”

“No.”

Danny looks at him carefully.

“Why not,” he says.

Garrett is quiet for a long moment.

“Because she had to go,” he says. “The work she had built belonged in New York. If I had asked her to stay she would have stayed. And she would have become a smaller version of herself.” He pauses. “I did not want a smaller version of Iris Bellamy.”

Danny looks at the audience.

Then back at Garrett.

“And then you sold the loft,” Danny says.

The rectangles go very quiet.

“Yes,” Garrett says.

“Eleven years of work.”

“Yes.”

“The breeding pairs. The racers. Everything.”

“I kept Home. I kept Climb and Soar.”

“And you got on a plane to New York.”

“Yes.”

“Before you knew if she would choose you.”

“Yes.”

Danny looks at him.

“What did that cost you Garrett.”

Garrett looks at the camera. The hand that was rebuilt five times. Strong now. Different from what it was.

“Everything I had built since the accident,” he says. “The Perch was already gone. The loft was gone. The birds were gone. The neighborhood was gone.” He pauses. “I was starting over in a city I did not know. In a place that was not mine.”

“Why.”

“Because some birds need a longer training toss,” Garrett says.

The rectangles erupt.

Polly looks up. She waits for silence.

“A longer training toss,” she says, “is when you release a bird further than its established range to extend its homing capability. It requires trust. You do not know if the bird will come home. You release it anyway.” She pauses. “Garrett Hahn released himself four hundred miles from home. Without knowing.” She closes her clipboard. “The data on this level of commitment is extremely rare. I

consider it a primary data point.”

Danny looks at Polly with complete affection.

Then at Garrett.

“The passageway,” Danny says.

“Yes,” Garrett says.

“You came through the arrivals door.”

“Yes.”

“And Iris.”

Garrett’s face does something it has not done in the whole interview.

“She ran,” he says. “And flew.”

“Into your arms.”

“Yes.”

“And Zara shouted Choose.”

“Yes.”

“And her hand.”

“Came into mine,” Garrett says. “Before she decided.”

“Her hand already knew,” Danny says.

“Her hand always knew,” Garrett says. “She just needed to get to the passageway.”

Polly looks up. “The hand knows before the brain does in approximately seventy three percent of significant life decisions.” She pauses. “This is the second confirmed instance tonight. The data is holding.”

“And you asked her,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“Will you marry me Iris.”

“Yes.”

“And she said.”

Garrett looks at the camera.

“Yes Garrett yes,” he says. Quoting her exactly. With the particular care of a man who has been carrying those three words for fifteen years.

Danny is quiet for a long moment.

“One more thing,” Danny says. “Garrett.”

“Yes.”

“The Alderman Street project.”

Garrett looks at him.

“Iris redesigned that development at two in the morning,” Danny says. “To save your birds. To keep the sky open above your loft. She never told you.”

Garrett is very still.

“No,” he says quietly. “She did not.”

“Until tonight.”

Garrett looks at the camera. At Iris somewhere watching.

He is quiet for a long time.

“She kept the sky open,” he says.

“Yes,” Danny says.

Garrett looks at his hands.

“She kept the sky open,” he says again. To himself. To Iris. To the birds that came home and the birds that did not and the rooftop in Minneapolis where Home is still the fastest bird he has.

Polly does not check her clipboard.

Nobody says anything for a moment.

Garrett speaks slowly.

“I just realized,” he says. “Iris taught me to home.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“The man who built things for other people,” he says. “Who kept forty birds on a rooftop nobody knew about. Who gave the woman he loved two birds to teach her how to home. Who sold everything and got on a plane. Who stood in a passageway and waited for her hand to find his.” He pauses. “Just realized Iris taught him to home.”

He looks at Garrett.

“Thank you for the longer training toss,” Danny says.

“Thank you for the show,” Garrett says.

...

***Part 3 — Web***

Polly walks to center stage.

“Part Three,” she says. “I have an announcement.”

She looks at the audience in their rectangles.

“I conducted an independent survey of readers of *The Weight of Wings*. The survey asked one question. Which suitor did you choose.” She turns a page. “Sixty five point three percent of female respondents chose Web Spenser.”

She lets that sit.

“I have extensive data on why.” She looks up. “Danny will be covering most of it. I will supplement at the appropriate moment.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Our next guest is Web Spenser. He is forty four years old. He is a freelance helicopter pilot based in New York City. He has logged over nine thousand flight hours across six continents. He took Iris Bellamy above New York City so she could see further than either of them expected.” She pauses. “He is also the reason Iris Bellamy’s West Village project won the National Design Award in its first year. I have documentation.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Web Spenser.”

Web appears in his rectangle.

Forty four. Easy in his own skin the way he has always been easy in his own skin. He looks at the camera the way he looks at the horizon before a flight. Reading conditions.

Danny looks at him with complete warmth.

“Web,” he says. “Iris wrote a book. You are a main character in a love story. How does that feel.”

Web looks at the camera.

“I had a great time,” he says. “And those memes you installed — fantastic. I love you. I’m happy.”

Danny looks at the audience with the expression of a man who did not see that coming and is completely delighted.

Polly looks up from her clipboard. “The meme I Love You I’m Happy has a documented retention rate of ninety four percent at fifteen years post exposure,” she says. “This is consistent with the data.”

“It is very good data,” Web says.

“Thank you,” Polly says.

“Tell me about the blind date,” Danny says.

“Patricia set it up,” Web says. “Zara provided the venue. Cobble Hill. Friday night.”

“You walked in and saw Iris.”

“She walked in like someone who had decided to be there despite not being entirely sure she wanted to be,” Web says. “Fully committed to a reservation she had not made.”

“And then.”

“She sat down. Looked at the menu. Looked at me over the top of it. Said Patricia tells me you fly helicopters.”

“And you said.”

“Freelance. I go where the work is.”

“And she said.”

Web smiles. “Tell me more about that.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Tell me more about that,” he says. “Four words. From a woman who was not sure she wanted to be there.”

“She was there,” Web says. “Fully.”

“The aerial survey,” Danny says. “Saturday morning. Six thirty.”

“Wind from the northwest at twelve knots,” Web says. “Good visibility.”

“She had her notebook out before you leveled off.”

“Six pages by the time we landed,” Web says. “The West Village site she had been standing on the street trying to read for three days was completely clear from two thousand feet. One pass and she had it.”

“You walked along the Hudson after.”

“Yes.”

“And she said you see things differently from up here.”

“Yes.”

“And you said most people never get above it.”

“Yes.”

“Did you mean architecture.”

“I meant everything,” Web says.

“And the idea landed.”

“She went quiet for half a block,” Web says. “A man who reads conditions for a living notices when an idea attaches.”

Polly looks up. “This is called the attachment phase of cognitive transmission. The idea finds its receptor. The mind opens. Entry becomes possible.” She pauses. “In this case entry took approximately half a block. That is unusually fast.”

“She is a fast learner,” Web says.

“The data supports this,” Polly says.

“My show,” Danny says.

Web grins. “Your show.”

“The Beacon Theatre. Row G.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you remember.”

“Polly walked out first,” Web says. “Introduced you. Said you were going to install a meme called I Love You I’m Happy which may completely control our thoughts. Said the transmission rate was very high and nobody had resisted yet.”

“And.”

“And you appeared. Full hologram. Card Six. The cartoon balloon. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. You said I love you I’m happy. Twenty eight hundred people said it out loud.”

“And you.”

“Said it quietly,” Web says. “Almost to myself.”

“And Iris.”

“Said I’m not resisting.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“I’m not resisting,” he says.

Polly steps forward.

She sits in the interview chair across from Web.

“Web,” she says. “When Iris said I’m not resisting — what did you understand in that moment.”

“That she already knew,” Web says. “That she had known for a while. And that she was done fighting it.”

Polly nods. She writes on her clipboard.

“The stated meme was I love you I’m happy,” she says. “But there was a hidden meme already running between you. Love Gratitude Joy

Inspiration. Present from the first aerial survey. In every conversation about buildings and sky. In every Thursday evening on the High Line.” She looks up. “This is the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. The frequency illusion. Once the brain assigns importance to something it begins selecting for it everywhere. The hidden meme was always there. I’m not resisting was not resistance ending. It was recognition beginning.”

Web looks at Polly carefully.

“Yes,” he says. “That is exactly what it was.”

Polly closes her clipboard. Stands up. Looks at Danny.

“Danny,” she says. “The interview is yours.”

She walks back to her position.

Danny looks at the audience.

“Recognition beginning,” he says.

“The High Line,” Danny says. “Thursday evenings.”

“We started going after the aerial survey,” Web says. “November. Cold. The old freight rail above the street. The city pressing in from both sides.”

“She had her notebook.”

“Always.”

“And you said buildings are just people made permanent.”

“She said care made permanent first. About a cast iron facade in Chelsea. I said buildings are just people made permanent.” Web

pauses. "She wrote it down."

"In the notebook," Danny says.

"In the notebook."

Danny looks at the audience with the warmth of a man who finds this completely wonderful.

"The hidden meme generating new thoughts," he says.

"The tree lighting. Rockefeller Center," Danny says.

"Thirty thousand lights all at once," Web says. "She made a sound I had not heard her make before."

"What kind of sound."

"The sound of someone who was not expecting to be moved," Web says. "And was moved anyway."

"And Card Six."

"Polly had given me one after the show," Web says. "I had been carrying it. I gave it to her on the corner of Forty Second Street."

"Warm from your pocket," Danny says.

"Yes."

Danny looks at the audience.

"Warm from his pocket," he says.

Polly looks up. "Sixty five point three percent," she says. "This is a primary data point."

"It is," Danny agrees.

“The Brooklyn Bridge. Four thirty in the morning,” Danny says.

“I told her to dress warm and set her alarm,” Web says. “I did not tell her where we were going.”

“Why not.”

“Because I wanted her to see it without expectation.”

“December dawn over New York.”

“Pink,” Web says. “The particular pink that belongs only to December dawns. The One World Trade tower turned pink. The East River caught the color. She was sketching the cable geometry against the sky.”

“And you said you see buildings the way I see the sky.”

“Like it is alive,” Web says. “Like it has opinions.”

“She asked if you bring everyone there.”

“Yes.”

“And you said.”

“No,” Web says. “I do not.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“One word,” he says. “Completely certain.”

Polly looks up. “Sixty five point three percent,” she says again. “Still a primary data point.”

“Still,” Danny agrees.

“JFK Terminal Four,” Danny says.

“Zara had been in Dubai for ten days,” Web says. “I offered to drive.”

“Forty minutes early.”

“I know airports from both sides.”

“Plastic seats. Coffee kiosk. Departures board.”

“Yes.”

“And you told her.”

“Yes.”

“I love you Iris.”

“Yes.”

“And she said.”

“She said it back before I finished hearing it.”

“You kissed her.”

“Yes.”

“In the arrivals hall.”

“The most honest place in New York,” Web says.

Danny smiles. “She said that too.”

“I know,” Web says. “She was right.”

“The passageway,” Danny says.

Web is quiet for a moment.

“Zara came through the arrivals door,” he says. “Let’s go. I’m starving. We followed her into the passageway.”

“And then.”

“Garrett,” Web says. “Coming the other way.”

“And Iris.”

Web looks at the camera.

“She ran,” he says. “And flew.”

“Into his arms.”

“Yes.”

“And she told him she loved him.”

“Yes.”

“And then she looked at you.”

“Yes.”

“And told you she loved you.”

“Yes.”

“And Zara shouted Choose.”

“Yes.”

“And her hand went into his.”

“Yes.”

Danny looks at Web carefully.

“How did that feel,” he says.

Web is quiet for a moment.

“I felt the conditions change,” he says. “A pilot knows when the wind shifts. You feel it before you understand it.” He pauses. “In the passageway I felt the wind shift.”

“And you let it shift,” Danny says.

“Yes.”

“Why.”

Web looks at the camera.

“Because I took her above the city,” he says. “And she saw further than either of us expected. And when you see that far you cannot unsee it.” He pauses. “She always saw Garrett. She just needed to get high enough to notice the hidden meme that was always running.”

The rectangles are completely still.

Polly does not check her clipboard.

“Web,” Danny says. “Sixty five point three percent of female readers chose you.”

“I know,” Web says.

“Does that—”

“Yes,” Web says. “It does.”

“I love you I’m happy,” Danny says.

Web looks at the camera. Easy in his own skin. Completely at home wherever he is placed.

“I love you I’m happy,” he says.

And means it.

Polly looks up.

“The meme is still running,” she says. “Ninety four percent retention rate at fifteen years. The data is holding.”

Danny looks at her with complete affection.

“The data is always holding Polly,” he says.

“Yes,” Polly says. “It is. That is why I collect it.”

...

#### ***Part 4 — Zara***

Polly walks to center stage.

“Part Four,” she says. “Our next guest has been present for every significant event in this story. She was on the couch in Minneapolis when Iris came home after the first day at The Perch. She was at the kitchen table when Iris told her about the half loop and the freshman year secret. She left the Danny Rosenberg tickets on the counter with a Post-it that said you’re welcome. She went to New York because she was not going to watch the next part from Minneapolis. She was in Dubai for ten days on a corporate assignment and came back through the arrivals door at JFK Terminal Four on the night of the

declaration.” Polly turns a page. “She shouted Choose in the passageway.”

She looks up.

“She also wishes she had two suitors who loved her the way Garrett and Web loved Iris.” Polly pauses. “I have data on this. It is a valid wish.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Zara.”

Zara appears in her rectangle.

The particular expression of someone who has been watching from couches and kitchen tables and airport passageways for fifteen years and has thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it.

Danny looks at her with complete warmth.

“Zara,” he says. “Iris wrote a book. You are in it. How does it feel to be in someone else’s love story.”

Zara looks at the camera.

“I was not in her love story Danny,” she says. “I was living beside it.”

Danny looks at the audience with the expression of a man who finds this completely wonderful.

“Living beside it,” he says. “Tell me about the couch.”

“The couch,” Zara says. “Minneapolis. October. Iris came home from The Perch on the first Tuesday with chalk on her hands. She did

not know what chalk was. She thought she had touched something.”

“And you.”

“I made coffee,” Zara says. “And did not ask anything.”

“Why not.”

“Because she would tell me when she was ready,” Zara says. “That is how Iris works. You wait. She tells you.”

“When was she ready.”

“Chapter three,” Zara says. “She described Garrett adjusting her hand position on the wall. Two seconds. His hand over hers. She described it three different ways in five minutes.”

“Three different ways.”

“Without noticing she was doing it.”

“And you noticed.”

“I always notice,” Zara says. “That is also how I work.”

Polly looks up. “The capacity to notice what others do not notice is the primary qualification for both documentary filmmaking and exceptional friendship,” she says. “Zara possesses both.” She pauses. “I have data on this.”

Danny looks at Zara.

“She has data on you,” he says.

“She has data on everything,” Zara says.

“I do,” Polly says.

"You sent her to The Perch," Danny says.

"I did."

"Why a climbing gym."

"Because she had been laid off and she was getting smaller every day," Zara says. "Sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop and her job boards and her cover letters. I needed her to go somewhere that would make her bigger."

"And you chose The Perch."

"I chose the wall three blocks from the apartment with good reviews and a community climbing class on Tuesday mornings." Zara pauses. "I did not choose Garrett. That was the wall's idea."

The rectangles laugh.

Polly looks up. "The wall's idea," she says. "I find this credible. Environments select for certain kinds of encounters. The climbing gym environment selected correctly." She writes something. "I am adding this to the data."

"The kitchen table," Danny says. "She came home from the neighborhood."

Zara is quieter now.

"She sat down and I could see something had happened," she says. "Not just the neighborhood. Something older."

"And you waited."

"I always wait."

“And she told you.”

“She told me about the half loop first. The dark street. The white knuckles. And then she told me about freshman year.”

“You were the first person she told.”

“Yes.”

“How did you respond.”

“I put my hand over hers,” Zara says. “And I said her name.”

“Just her name.”

“Just her name.”

Danny is very still.

“Why.”

“Because sometimes a person does not need words,” Zara says. “They just need someone to know. The knowing is enough.”

Polly does not check her clipboard.

She just nods once.

“The tickets,” Danny says. “The Danny Rosenberg show.”

Zara grins. The full Zara grin.

“I left them on the counter on a Tuesday night with a Post-it that said you’re welcome,” she says.

“And you had a shoot Friday night.”

“I may have scheduled the shoot on Friday night,” Zara says.

The rectangles erupt.

Danny looks at the audience. “She may have scheduled the shoot on Friday night.” He looks at Zara. “Zara.”

“Yes.”

“You are a villain.”

“I am a videographer,” Zara says. “We notice things and we make choices.”

Polly looks up. “The ethical dimensions of orchestrated romantic situations are complex,” she says. “However the outcome data in this case is strongly positive. I am classifying this as a net good.” She writes something on her clipboard. “Net good. Confirmed.”

Danny looks at Polly with complete affection.

“Net good confirmed,” he says.

“Confirmed,” Polly says. “The data is clear.”

“Dubai,” Danny says. “Ten days. You came back Tuesday night.”

“The client kept expanding the scope,” Zara says.

“And Web offered to drive to JFK.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know what was going to happen.”

Zara thinks about it honestly. “I knew they loved each other. I did not know what was going to happen in that arrivals hall.”

“You came through the door.”

“Let’s go. I’m starving.” Zara smiles. “I was starving. Ten days in Dubai. I wanted Thai food.”

“And the passageway.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“We walked into the passageway and I saw him coming the other way,” Zara says. “Garrett. I recognized him. And I looked at Iris and she looked up and she ran.”

“And flew,” Danny says.

“And flew,” Zara says. “Into his arms. And she told him she loved him. And then she saw Web. And told him she loved him. And she was disoriented. Standing between two men she loved in an airport passageway not knowing what to do.”

“And you shouted Choose.”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because she needed permission,” Zara says. “To know what she already knew. Sometimes you just need someone to say the word.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Sometimes you just need someone to say the word,” he says.

Polly looks up. “This is documented in crisis intervention literature as permission-based activation,” she says. “The individual already possesses the answer. An external trigger releases it. In this

case the trigger was one word shouted by a videographer who had just come back from Dubai and was very hungry.” She pauses. “The hunger may have contributed to the volume.”

“It did,” Zara says.

“I suspected,” Polly says. “I have updated the data.”

“And her hand went into Garrett’s,” Danny says.

“Yes,” Zara says.

“And he asked her.”

“Yes.”

“And she said yes.”

“Yes Garrett yes,” Zara says. Quoting her exactly.

Danny is quiet for a moment.

Then he looks at Zara.

“Zara,” he says. “You have been living beside this love story since October. Watching from couches and kitchen tables and passageways. What did you see.”

Zara looks at the camera.

“I saw a woman who almost drove past her own life,” she says. “Who made the half loop more times than she knew. And kept going back anyway.” She pauses. “And I saw two men who loved her completely and differently and both for real.”

“And you,” Danny says gently. “Zara. You said you wish you had two suitors who loved you the way Garrett and Web loved Iris.”

Zara looks at the camera.

“I was always too busy,” she says. “Too much to document. Too many places to go. Too many other people’s stories to be beside.” She smiles. Not sadly. Just honestly. “I am happy Iris kept that out of her book.”

“Why,” Danny says.

“Because it is mine to tell,” Zara says. “Someday maybe I will make a video about my own story.”

Danny looks at her for a long moment.

“We will be watching,” he says.

Polly looks up from her clipboard.

“I have already reserved a slot in the data,” she says. “The category is pending.”

Zara looks at Polly.

“Thank you Polly,” she says.

“You are welcome,” Polly says. “The slot has been reserved since chapter two.”

The rectangles laugh.

Danny looks at the camera.

“Zara,” he says. “The woman who sent Iris to The Perch. Who sat beside her at the kitchen table. Who left the tickets on the counter. Who shouted Choose in a passageway at JFK. Who has been living beside this love story since October.” He pauses. “Thank you for the

word.”

“Thank you Danny,” Zara says.

...

### ***Part 5 — Web: Fifteen Years***

Polly walks to center stage.

“Part Five,” she says. “We return to Web Spenser. We left him in a passageway at JFK Terminal Four. His hand was not the one she chose.” She consults her clipboard. “What happened next is one of the most statistically improbable and emotionally satisfying outcomes in the data set.” She looks up. “I have been looking forward to presenting this since chapter one.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Web Spenser.”

Web appears in his rectangle.

Still easy in his own skin. Still reading conditions. But something is different now. Settled in a way that was not there before. The horizon reader who finally found a horizon worth staying at.

Danny looks at him with complete warmth.

“Web,” he says. “We left you in the passageway. Her hand went into his. And then.”

“And then Zara said she was starving,” Web says. “And we went for Thai food.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“He went for Thai food,” he says.

“Zara was very hungry,” Web says. “She had been in Dubai for ten days.”

“And some of Zara’s videographer acquaintances were there.”

“Yes. A group of them. They invited us to sit.”

“And.”

Web smiles. The particular smile of a man who has had fifteen years to enjoy the improbability of what happened next.

“The woman sitting beside me at the table said she had gone to see Danny Rosenberg’s show,” he says. “And that she had been imprinted with the meme I love you I’m happy.”

Danny looks at the audience for a long moment.

“She said I love you I’m happy,” Danny says.

“At the table,” Web says. “Within the first ten minutes.”

“And you.”

“Recognized it immediately,” Web says.

“Recognition beginning,” Danny says softly.

“Instantly,” Web says.

Polly steps forward.

“The meme I Love You I’m Happy selects for compatible hosts,” she says. “When two individuals carrying the meme encounter each other in a context of openness and availability the transmission becomes reciprocal and immediate.” She pauses. “This is called bilateral meme resonance. I coined the term. It is a significant phenomenon.”

“What is her name,” Danny says.

“Grace,” Web says.

Danny looks at the audience.

“Grace,” he says.

“Three weeks later,” Danny says.

“Yes,” Web says.

“You were married.”

“Yes.”

Danny looks at the audience. Then back at Web.

“Three weeks,” he says.

“When the conditions are right,” Web says, “you do not wait for the weather to change.”

Polly looks up. “Studies on rapid pair bonding show that the duration of courtship is not predictive of relationship quality or longevity. What matters is the accuracy of the initial assessment.” She pauses. “Web’s initial assessment was accurate. I have fifteen years of data to confirm this.”

“Grace carrying the meme,” Danny says. “Was that the assessment.”

“Part of it,” Web says. “She also had her notebook out at the dinner table. Different from Iris. Grace sketches people. Not buildings.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“She had her notebook out,” he says.

“She was documenting the dinner,” Web says. “Quick sketches. Everyone at the table. She did not know I was watching.”

“But you noticed.”

“I always notice,” Web says. “When someone is paying close attention to the world around them.”

Polly looks up. “This is called attentiveness recognition,” she says. “The capacity to identify in another person the same quality of presence that one possesses oneself.” She pauses. “It is how compatible people find each other. The data on this is extensive and consistent.”

Danny grins at the audience.

“Attentiveness recognition,” he says. “At a Thai food buffet.”

“The best things happen at Thai food buffets,” Web says.

“I have data to support this,” Polly says.

“Years one through five,” Danny says. “Tell me.”

Web leans forward slightly. The enthusiasm of a man describing something he loved doing.

“Grace is a videographer,” he says. “We spent five years documenting people who were infected with the meme I love you I’m happy.”

Danny is very still.

“You documented the meme,” he says.

“Yes. We would find people who had been to the show or encountered the meme through someone who had. We would interview them. Document what changed. How their lives shifted after the meme installed.”

“And what did you find.”

“That it works,” Web says simply. “Every time. Not the same way twice. But it works. The meme installs and people start making different choices. Better choices. Choices that align with who they actually are rather than who they thought they were supposed to be.”

Polly steps forward.

“I need to present data here,” she says.

“Please,” Danny says.

“In five years of documentation Web and Grace interviewed four hundred and thirty seven individuals carrying the meme I Love You I’m Happy. Of those four hundred and thirty seven individuals ninety one percent reported measurable positive life changes within one year of meme installation. Sixty three percent reported the changes as transformative.” She looks up. “Web and Grace’s documentation is the largest existing data set on meme I Love You I’m Happy outcomes.” She closes her clipboard. “It is extraordinary work.”

Danny looks at Web.

“You spent five years following my meme around,” he says.

“Yes,” Web says.

“How did that feel.”

“Like going where the work is,” Web says. “Except the work was everywhere.”

Danny looks at the audience with the warmth of a man who has never been more pleased with something he created.

“Year five,” Danny says. “The Expander course.”

“Yes,” Web says. “Grace found it. We took it together. It changed everything again.”

“How.”

“It gave us language for what we had been documenting,” Web says. “We had the data. The Expander course gave us the framework.”

“And then Pahrump Nevada,” Danny says.

Web grins. “And then Pahrump Nevada.”

“Tell the audience about Pahrump Nevada.”

“It is in the Mojave Desert,” Web says. “About an hour from Las Vegas. Wide open sky. The kind of sky a pilot dreams about.”

“You still fly.”

“Yes. Corporate clients. Film. I know the desert from two thousand feet the way I knew New York from two thousand feet.” He

pauses. "The desert makes more sense from above than from inside it."

Danny grins. "Most things do."

"Yes," Web says. "They do."

"The farm," Danny says.

"A you-pick flower farm," Web says. "Mostly sunflowers. Grace's idea. She said she wanted to grow something that faces the sun."

Danny looks at the audience.

"She wanted to grow something that faces the sun," he says.

Polly looks up. "Sunflowers exhibit a behavior called heliotropism," she says. "They track the movement of the sun across the sky during growth. Mature sunflowers face east permanently. Toward the first light." She pauses. "Grace chose correctly. I have botanical data to support this."

"Three girls," Danny says.

"Three girls," Web says. "Eight, six, and four."

"Names."

Web smiles. "Joy. Iris. And Polly."

The rectangles erupt.

Polly looks up from her clipboard. She looks at Web for a long moment.

"You named a child after me," she says.

"Grace insisted," Web says.

Polly writes something on her clipboard. She writes for quite a long time.

“I have added this to the data,” she says finally. “It has its own category.”

“What category,” Danny asks.

“Extraordinary,” Polly says. “The category is called extraordinary.”

“Web,” Danny says. “Last question. The passageway. Her hand went into his. Not yours. How did that work out for you.”

Web looks at the camera.

“I went for Thai food,” he says. “And met Grace. And we spent five years following a meme around the world. And we moved to the Mojave Desert and grow sunflowers and have three girls named Joy Iris and Polly.” He pauses. “And every morning after watching the sunrise I take off from a desert airstrip in the wide open sky and I think — Life is meant to have fun.” He looks at the camera. “That is how it worked out.”

Danny looks at the audience for a long time.

Then back at Web.

“I love you I’m happy,” Danny says.

“I love you I’m happy,” Web says.

And means it more than anyone has ever meant it.

Polly looks up.

“Ninety four percent retention rate,” she says quietly. “The data is holding.”

She closes her clipboard.

“It will always hold,” she says.

...

### ***Part 6 — Iris and Garrett: Fifteen Years***

Polly walks to center stage.

“Part Six,” she says. “The final part of tonight’s program.”

She looks at the audience in their rectangles.

“In Part One Iris told us she wrote a love story with twenty four chapters. On the outside she fell in love with two men at different times in her life. She had to choose one. Underneath it is a personal development story. Maybe her story will help someone.” Polly turns a page. “We are now going to find out what happened after chapter twenty three.”

She consults her clipboard.

“Our guests are Iris and Garrett. Fifteen years after the passageway at JFK Terminal Four. They live on a five acre property in the Hudson Valley. They have four children. Garrett races homing pigeons competitively and holds three New York Racing Pigeon Combine championships. Iris runs a solo architecture practice from home and teaches adjunct faculty at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture.” She pauses. “The mudroom in their home

addition has been cited in three separate architectural journals.” She looks up. “I have data on the mudroom. It is significant.”

She tucks the clipboard under her arm.

“Iris and Garrett.”

They appear together in the rectangle.

Iris and Garrett. Side by side. The particular ease of two people who have been beside each other long enough to stop performing it.

Danny looks at them with complete warmth.

“Fifteen years,” he says.

“Fifteen years,” Iris says.

“Tell me about the farmhouse,” Danny says.

Iris smiles. “Hudson Valley. Five acres. A farmhouse that was already good. Already loved by the people who lived there before us.”

“Good bones,” Danny says.

“The best bones,” Iris says. “Someone had taken care of it from the inside for a long time. You could feel it the moment you walked through the door.”

“And you built onto it.”

“Not into it,” Iris says. “Onto it. The original house stands exactly as it was. We added what the family needed.”

“The mudroom,” Danny says.

Iris looks at Garrett. Something passes between them.

“The mudroom,” she says.

Polly looks up. “The mudroom in the Hahn family addition connects the main house to the rooftop stairs through a transitional space that considers both human and avian traffic patterns.” She pauses. “It is the only mudroom in architectural literature designed specifically to accommodate a racing pigeon loft above it. I find this extraordinary.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Avian traffic patterns,” he says.

“Garrett comes down from the birds,” Iris says simply. “He needs a place to come back into the family. The mudroom is that place.”

Danny looks at them both.

“Mr. Calloway,” he says quietly.

Iris looks at him.

“That is exactly right,” Danny says. “That is how we live.”

Iris is quiet for a moment.

“Yes,” she says. “That is exactly right.”

“The loft,” Danny says. “Day one.”

“Day one,” Garrett says. “Before anything else. Home and Climb and Soar needed an address.”

“They had to learn where they lived.”

“Yes.”

“And they did.”

“Home knew by the end of the first week,” Garrett says. “She always knows.”

“She is still the fastest bird you have.”

“Yes.”

“At what age.”

“Eleven,” Garrett says. “She does not race anymore. She breeds.”

“Her offspring.”

“Win,” Garrett says simply.

Polly looks up. “Home’s bloodline has produced fourteen race winners in the New York Racing Pigeon Combine over the past ten years,” she says. “This is statistically exceptional. I have the full lineage documented.”

Danny looks at Garrett.

“Climb and Soar,” he says.

“Climb and Soar,” Garrett says. “They retrained to the Hudson Valley address. It took four months. But they came home.”

“They always come home,” Danny says.

“Yes,” Garrett says. “They always come home.”

“The first year,” Danny says. “Tell me about the first year.”

Iris looks at Garrett. He looks at her.

“Lean,” Iris says. “And full. At the same time.”

“Lean how.”

“I was still at Feldman and Ko. Commuting to Manhattan. Garrett was route setting at a climbing gym in Westchester. We were renovating. The loft was going up. The first child was coming.”

“Your first child.”

“Clara,” Iris says. “Born in the spring. The same week the first youngsters hatched in the loft.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“The first child and the first youngsters,” he says. “Same week.”

Polly looks up. “I have data suggesting this was not a coincidence,” she says. “The nesting instinct in both species peaks simultaneously under conditions of new home establishment. The correlation is significant.”

“Garrett planned it,” Iris says.

“I did not plan it,” Garrett says.

“He absolutely planned it,” Iris says.

The rectangles laugh.

“Year two,” Danny says. “You left Feldman and Ko.”

“Yes,” Iris says. “Carol was generous. She understood.”

“And you opened your own practice.”

“A solo practice. Just me. Home office. Carefully selected residential clients. Premium work.”

“Was it scary.”

Iris thinks about it honestly.

“Yes,” she says. “The first year was genuinely hard. Irregular income. Four children eventually. A mortgage. Garrett’s route setting income helped but it did not carry the weight.”

“What carried the weight.”

“The reputation I had built,” Iris says. “And Columbia. I started teaching adjunct at the Graduate School of Architecture. One course per semester. It gave us a floor.”

“You teach architects.”

“I teach architects how to think about the people who will live inside their buildings,” Iris says. “Not how the building will look in a journal.”

Polly looks up. “Student evaluations of Professor Bellamy Hahn consistently cite one specific lesson as transformative,” she says. “The lesson is called The Mudroom. I have the curriculum documented.”

Danny grins at the audience.

“The Mudroom,” he says.

“It started as one class,” Iris says. “Now it is a whole semester.”

“The firm,” Danny says. “Tell me where it is now.”

“Still solo,” Iris says. “Still from home. I have trusted consultants I have worked with for a decade. I take on what I can do well. I do not take on more than that.”

“And it works.”

“It works,” Iris says. “Not because I have fifty employees. Because the work is right. Every project considers how people actually live in the spaces I design.”

“The sky kept open,” Danny says.

Iris looks at him.

“Yes,” she says quietly. “Always the sky kept open.”

“The children,” Danny says. “Four.”

“Clara. James. Nora. And Leo,” Iris says.

“Ages.”

“Fourteen. Twelve. Nine. And six.”

“Do they climb.”

Iris looks at Garrett.

“All four,” Garrett says. “Clara is serious about it. She has her mother’s eye for routes.”

“Do they race pigeons.”

“Leo is the one,” Garrett says. “Six years old and he already reads the sky.”

Danny looks at the audience.

“Six years old and he reads the sky,” he says.

Polly looks up. “The capacity to read the sky is not genetic,” she says. “It is learned through consistent observation alongside a skilled

practitioner.” She pauses. “However in the case of Leo Hahn I am revising this position. The data suggests otherwise.”

“He was born knowing,” Garrett says.

“He was born on the roof,” Iris says.

“She is exaggerating,” Garrett says.

“I am not exaggerating,” Iris says.

The rectangles laugh.

“Race Sundays,” Danny says.

Garrett’s face does something. The private thing fully visible for once.

“Race Sundays,” he says. “The birds go out Saturday. Sunday morning we watch the sky.”

“All six of you.”

“All six of us,” Garrett says. “On the roof. Leo on my shoulders when he was small. Now he stands beside me.”

“And Home.”

“Home is in the loft,” Garrett says. “She does not race. But on race Sundays she is always on the landing board. Watching.”

Danny is very still.

“She watches,” he says.

“Yes,” Garrett says. “She has always known when the birds are coming home.”

Polly looks up. She opens her clipboard. Then she closes it again.

“I have no data to add to that,” she says.

“Iris,” Danny says. “Fifteen years ago you wrote — maybe my story will help someone. Has it.”

Iris looks at the camera.

“I teach a class called The Mudroom,” she says. “Every semester I ask my students the same question on the first day. Why do you want to be an architect.” She pauses. “Most of them say something about buildings. About design. About changing cities.”

“And.”

“And by the end of the semester most of them have a different answer.” She looks at the camera. “They say — because I want to design for how people actually live. Not for how it looks in a journal.”

“That is your answer,” Danny says.

“That was my answer fifteen years ago,” Iris says. “Now it is theirs.”

Danny looks at the audience for a long time.

“Sam,” he says quietly. “The woman standing at the base of the wall. Not knowing what she is doing there.” He looks at Iris. “She found the story.”

“Every semester,” Iris says. “She finds it.”

Polly looks up. “This is called legacy transmission,” she says. “The original story replicates not through the book alone but through the

people the book changes who then change other people.” She pauses. “The data on this is the most important data I have collected tonight.” She closes her clipboard. “It is why stories matter.”

Danny looks at Polly with complete affection.

Then at Iris and Garrett.

Then at the audience.

“The Weight of Wings,” he says. “A love story with twenty four chapters. A woman who climbed a wall so her heart could soar. A man who sold everything and got on a plane. A helicopter pilot who took her above the city so she could see further than either of them expected. A roommate who shouted Choose in a passageway at JFK.” He pauses. “And a mudroom that connects a house to a rooftop where homing pigeons come back every Sunday to a man who finally knows where home is.”

He looks at Iris and Garrett.

“Thank you for the story,” he says.

“Thank you for the show,” Iris says.

“Thank you for the plane,” Danny says to Garrett.

Garrett looks at the camera.

“Iris taught me to home,” he says.

Danny smiles.

He looks at the camera one last time.

“Hello. Danny Rosenberg here. Fictional therapeutic comedian from the book Expander Reaction. You will find me giving shows mostly in love stories.”

He pauses.

“They seem to always find me.”

He looks at the audience.

“Life is meant to have fun.”

Polly looks up from her clipboard.

“I have data,” she says, “suggesting that tonight was a primary data point in support of this claim.”

“Thank you Polly,” Danny says.

“You are welcome Danny,” Polly says. “The data was always there. We just finally had a reason to notice it.”

Danny looks at her for a long moment.

Then he looks at the camera.

And grins.

...