

MEMORY LIES BEST WHEN IT FEELS TRUE.

PROOF OF ABSENCE

PART ONE

A
PSYCHOLOGICAL
THRILLER

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**PROOF
OF ABSENCE**

*A Novel by
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CHAPTER ONE

The Kitchen

Mara held the cup with both hands, the way she always did when something had frightened her badly enough that she did not want anyone to notice. Elias remembered that detail with the sort of certainty he usually reserved for measurable things. It had never been about the cold. Mara disliked hot tea and would leave it untouched until the steam vanished, then fold her fingers around the ceramic as if warming herself on something already lukewarm. That night the cup was blue, dark at the base and lighter near the rim, with a pale crack in the glaze beside the handle.

Rain moved softly against the kitchen window, not in sheets, not violently, but in irregular taps that came and went with the wind. The old refrigerator clicked, hummed for a few seconds, then settled. A supermarket receipt was pinned beneath the strawberry magnet on the door. Someone had crossed Thursday out twice on the family calendar. The paint beside the back entrance had swollen into a small blister where damp had been getting in for years, despite the landlord's repeated promises to repair it.

Elias sat across from his sister and, for several seconds, felt nineteen again. That should have comforted him. Instead, it made him uneasy.

He knew what artificial familiarity could do to a person. He had spent nine years studying it, measuring it, correcting other people's certainty when certainty

arrived before evidence. A room did not need to be perfectly reconstructed to feel real. Give someone enough accurate details and the mind supplied the rest without permission. A certain lamp. A stain on a wall. The sound of plumbing in an old building. The particular scrape of a chair leg across cheap flooring. People did not notice themselves filling the gaps. They simply called the completed picture memory.

But this did not feel completed. It felt returned.

"Mara."

She did not look at him. Her hair was shorter than he remembered, ending slightly above her shoulders. The discrepancy annoyed him immediately because he knew how long her hair had been on October 17, 2011. She had cut it herself two months earlier with nail scissors over the bathroom sink, claiming hairdressers were a conspiracy designed to charge women thirty pounds for regret. Elias had told her it looked uneven. Mara had looked at herself in the mirror, tilted her head once, and replied that so did his face.

He remembered laughing. He remembered the hair gathering in the basin. He remembered their father shouting from the hall because she had blocked the drain. So why was it shorter here?

Elias shifted in the immersion chair, though inside the reconstruction his younger body remained perfectly still at the kitchen table. The system tracked his movement and corrected for it. There was no visible break in the scene.

Mara rubbed her thumb along the rim of the cup. Her eyes were swollen from crying. That detail was right. He had always trusted it because it lacked drama.

Mara had not been sobbing when he entered the kitchen. She had already done that privately. By the time he sat opposite her, she was embarrassed by the evidence left behind. Her nose was pink. The skin below her eyes looked raw. She kept swallowing before she spoke, as though every sentence needed to be pushed past something lodged in her throat.

"Mara," he said again.

She looked toward the window. A car went through the street outside, tyres disturbing water along the gutter. The sound faded toward Alder Road. Elias watched her closely. There were two small blemishes near her left eyebrow, one hidden badly beneath makeup. He had forgotten them. Or the system had invented them. That was possible.

Vela did not reproduce the past. It modelled the most statistically defensible version of it from available evidence. The distinction was repeated in every training session at Morrow and ignored by nearly every client within five minutes of putting on the headset.

Reconstruction is not recollection.

Elias had said those words to grieving husbands, accident survivors, police investigators, bereaved children, lawyers and therapists. He had said them so often that the sentence had become almost automatic. Now he found himself wanting Vela to break its own rule. He wanted it to remember.

"Say it," Elias whispered.

Mara turned toward him. Her expression was wrong. Not dramatically. Nothing distorted. No glitch passed over her face. Her eyes were level, her mouth relaxed, her brow slightly drawn. Anyone else would have

accepted it. Elias knew the expression. It belonged to an argument. Mara used to look at him that way when he had explained something obvious and expected gratitude for it.

"Eli," she said.

His fingers tightened around the arms of the chair. Nobody called him Eli anymore. Their mother had. Mara had continued after she died. Sometimes deliberately, when she wanted him to remember that there had been a version of him before he became careful about everything.

The system had her voice almost perfectly. Not merely the pitch or accent. It had the slight compression at the end of certain words, the faint Dunley vowel she had spent years trying to flatten after girls at school mocked it. There was a breath before his name.

Elias stared at her. This was the moment. He knew exactly what came next because he had replayed it in his own mind for fifteen years. Mara would glance toward the doorway first. Then she would lean forward. Then she would say, If I disappear, don't let them tell you I was sick.

Those words had survived everything else. Police interviews. His father's drinking. The funeral they never had. Newspaper articles that stopped appearing. Birthdays that became numbers. Every bad theory offered by strangers. Every blank year in which nothing happened and nobody called. The sentence remained.

Mara lowered the cup. She looked directly at Elias.

"You were never there."

He waited. Rain touched the window. Mara did not move.

"What?"

She looked down at the table. Elias felt his heartbeat in his throat, not fast yet, but heavy enough that each beat seemed to arrive separately.

"Repeat last dialogue," he said.

The kitchen froze. Rain became thin silver marks suspended against the window. Mara stopped with one thumb pressed against the cup. The refrigerator's low hum vanished mid-frequency, leaving the room unnaturally still.

A neutral voice answered from outside the scene. "Repetition unavailable. Dialogue generated from convergent source inference."

"Show confidence."

Numbers appeared around the room. Window geometry: 97.4 percent. Kitchen layout: 96.1 percent. Weather state: 89.8 percent. Mara Venn clothing: 72.3 percent. Ceramic vessel: 68.6 percent. Facial affect: 64.9 percent. Dialogue content: 41.2 percent.

Elias stared at the final number. Forty-one point two was not evidence. It was suggestion wearing a decimal place.

"Show alternate dialogue."

Three versions of Mara appeared briefly in the same chair, slightly out of alignment with one another. One looked toward the window. One stared at the table. The third faced Elias. Beside them appeared the system's highest-ranked alternatives.

You shouldn't have come.

I didn't tell you because you'd try to fix it.

You were never there.

Elias removed the headset.

The kitchen vanished so abruptly that he inhaled. Reconstruction Suite Four returned around him: white acoustic panels, grey carpet, a dark glass wall and a workstation arranged with the deliberate blandness of rooms designed for people undergoing emotionally difficult procedures. The sensor crown rested in his hands.

He looked at the clock. 11:47 p.m. Morrow's building had entered night mode twenty minutes earlier. Half the ceiling lights were off. Cleaning staff had finished the research floor. Beyond the glass wall, the corridor was empty.

His coffee stood beside the keyboard. He touched it. Cold. It had probably been cold for an hour. On the monitor, Vela waited beneath a pale status line.

RECONSTRUCTION PAUSED.

Below it: Resolve contradictory sources? Elias clicked No. The system asked whether he wanted to preserve the session. He clicked No again.

For a moment he remained sitting exactly as he was, headset on the desk, one hand resting beside the mouse. He could still hear Mara saying it. The voice was right. That bothered him more than the sentence.

Morrow maintained voice models for many reconstruction subjects, but Mara's archive contained enough authentic recordings that approximation should have been minimal. Elias knew her cadence. He knew where she breathed. He knew the way she shortened his name. Vela had reconstructed the wrong sentence in the right voice.

That was manageable. Systems made errors. People inside Morrow often talked about the company's

technology with a reverence Elias disliked, particularly marketing teams who described Vela as a way to "return people to forgotten moments." Elias corrected that phrase whenever he could. No one returned anywhere. The system built scenes from evidence. Sometimes those scenes were remarkably accurate. Sometimes they were convincing nonsense.

The internal taxonomy had names for dozens of failure modes: speaker contamination, temporal blending, visual interpolation, source dominance, emotional inference leakage, object substitution, environmental carryover. There were documents hundreds of pages long explaining how a perfectly reasonable output could still be false.

The explanation was probably there. He opened the evaluation panel. The reconstruction had used 6,218 source items.

Elias stopped.

That was too many.

His personal archive for Mara was extensive, perhaps embarrassingly so, but nowhere near that number. He had photographs, messages, family video, police records, two corrupted phone backups, weather data, archived local traffic footage, and whatever survived from old computers. He had not supplied six thousand usable sources.

Elias opened the source tree. A warning appeared. Some sources are restricted under legacy research policy.

He read the line twice. Legacy research policy. That classification had nothing to do with personal memory reconstruction.

He clicked the restricted branch. Access denied. He tried again with evaluator clearance. Access denied. A third attempt brought up a compliance warning. Elias sat back. Someone had attached internal research material to his personal memory profile. Either accidentally or deliberately.

He checked the reconstruction identifier. No obvious error. Subject: VENN, MARA. Primary observer: VENN, ELIAS. Event date: 17 OCT 2011.

The labels looked normal.

Elias opened the unrestricted sources. Property records first. Old photographs of the kitchen. A short video from Mara's fifteenth birthday. An insurance inspection showing the western wall. A photograph of Mara holding a wooden spoon at the camera like a weapon.

He paused on that thumbnail. She had been laughing. He remembered taking the picture. Or believed he did.

Elias closed it.

Weather data showed rain beginning at 8:53 p.m. Temperature eleven degrees. Wind northeast. Nothing unusual. He opened the timeline generated from his own historical statements. Subject self-report indicates arrival at residence approximately 21:35. Conversation with M. Venn estimated 21:42 to 22:18.

He stared at the phrase subject self-report. That meant him. His own police interview had helped construct the scene. Of course it had. He had told investigators about the kitchen dozens of times.

He opened the restored location record from the phone he had owned in 2011. October 17. 8:48 p.m.:

Dunley University west campus. 9:06 p.m.: Dunley University west campus. 9:31 p.m.: Dunley University west campus.

Elias stopped scrolling. The flat on Alder Row was nearly four miles away. He moved the timeline forward. 9:52 p.m.: west campus. 10:17 p.m.: west campus.

His jaw tightened.

Old location records were imperfect. Anyone working in reconstruction knew better than to mistake cellular association for precise GPS. Towers covered wide areas. Devices remained connected after users moved. Data could be delayed. Besides, a phone was not a person.

He had lost that particular handset twice during university. Once beneath a chair in the library. Once inside a shoe after a party whose logic had not improved with age. He checked outgoing messages. At 9:44 p.m., his phone had sent a text to Rebecca Holt.

Still here. Tell Lennox I'll send the citation list when I get home. Elias read it again. The wording sounded like him. That proved almost nothing. Someone could send a message from someone else's phone. A timestamp could migrate during archival conversion. Text databases were full of corruption.

He searched Rebecca Holt. A professional profile appeared. Historian. Teaching position in Vermont. A photograph loaded beside the entry. Elias remembered her. Not well, but enough. Red scarf. Smoked outside the humanities building. Corrected people's Latin. Once pronounced croissant in such an exaggerated French accent that Mara had asked whether Rebecca had been colonised.

He remembered telling Mara that story. He frowned. Had he told her before October 17? After? The memory offered no date.

He closed Rebecca's profile.

Next source. University access records. His student ID entered the west humanities annex at 6:51 p.m. A seminar had run from seven until nine. Legal Memory and Witness Reliability. Elias almost laughed. It sounded like something the system would invent if it had a sense of humour.

Entry logs meant little. People held doors open. Cards were borrowed. Exit records could be delayed. He checked the exit.

10:26 p.m.

Elias sat forward. That was harder. Still not impossible. He moved to financial data. At 9:58 p.m., his bank card had been used at Aster Café inside the west campus library. Black coffee. Almond biscuit. £3.80.

He stared at the receipt. He did not remember buying an almond biscuit. He rarely bought biscuits. For a second, something surfaced. Rebecca reaching across a table and breaking off half without asking. A white paper napkin. Someone tapping a pencil against a textbook nearby. The smell of over-roasted coffee.

Elias shut his eyes.

The scene weakened immediately. When he opened them, he could not tell whether he had remembered it or constructed it from the purchase record. That frightened him more than Vela's dialogue.

He moved to security footage. Four camera sources appeared. Three were public traffic systems. One belonged to Dunley University. The university clip

opened in black and white. Heavy compression. A fixed camera covering the west library entrance.

Timestamp: 22:10:54.

People moved through the frame. A woman in a long coat entered. Two students left together. Someone pushed a bicycle past the doors.

Elias watched.

Nothing.

At 22:11:31, a young man stepped out of the library carrying a book under one arm and a paper cup in the other. Elias froze the video. The man's face was turned partly away. He enlarged the image. Compression broke the features into squares.

"Native enhancement only," Elias said.

Vela sharpened edges without inventing missing pixels. The coat became clearer. Dark wool. Three buttons. A repair beside the right pocket, stitched with thread slightly too pale. Elias knew that coat. His aunt had repaired it after he caught the pocket on a metal fence. The same coat hung over the chair in his kitchen memory. Wet from the rain.

He resumed the footage. The nineteen-year-old man paused beneath the library awning. He placed the book on the stone ledge, lifted his coffee and drank. Then he turned his head. For two frames his face became visible.

Elias paused again.

There he was.

Nineteen years old. Thinner than he remembered being. Hair slightly too long around the ears. A healing cut on his lower lip. Elias touched his own mouth. He remembered that cut. He had split the lip during five-a-side football. Mara had laughed at him.

The thought appeared with immediate clarity. Mara leaning against the kitchen counter. You look ridiculous. Elias nearly smiled. Then stopped.

When had she said that? Before October 17? During the conversation? After? After was impossible. His mind tried to place it in the kitchen reconstruction. Mara looking at his lip. Mara smiling. Except she had not smiled in that memory.

Had she?

Elias looked back at the screen.

Timestamp: 22:11:33.

According to the statement he had given police, he had been sitting with Mara at that exact moment. He remembered the pressure of the wooden chair behind his knees. The rain against the window. The smell of wet wool. The refrigerator clicking off. Mara's fingers around the blue cup.

Yet the camera showed him four miles away. Elias opened the evidence side by side. Phone location. Campus access. Bank transaction. Security footage. Different systems. Different ownership. Different technical chains.

His first instinct was still to find the shared point of failure. He checked archive imports. Separate. Time-zone normalization. Correct. Daylight-saving conversion. Correct. The camera clock had a documented drift of eleven seconds. He corrected it manually.

It changed nothing.

The location record could be wrong. The text message could be sent by someone else. The access card

could be borrowed. The bank card could be used by a friend. The camera could be misidentified.

All five being wrong in ways that placed him in the same location at the same time was no longer an explanation. It was faith. Elias became aware that he had been gripping the edge of the desk. He let go. His fingers were white at the joints.

He reached for the coffee, drank it cold and tasted almost nothing. Then something appeared at the bottom of Vela's source list. A file he had not noticed.

Video. No title. Date: October 17, 2011. Source owner: Mara Venn.

Elias stopped moving.

The file was marked with the same restricted classification as the hidden research sources.

He clicked it.

Access denied.

He tried evaluator credentials. Denied. Clinical audit. Denied. An internal message appeared: Unauthorised access attempts are logged and may trigger review.

Elias stared at the warning. Morrow possessed a video recorded by Mara on the night she disappeared. He had worked at the company for five years. He had spent considerably longer than that collecting every surviving fragment of his sister's life. Nobody had told him this existed.

He opened the metadata. Creation time: 21:47:08. Original device identifier unavailable. Ingestion date hidden. Archive provenance restricted. Duration: 06:14.

Six minutes. Fourteen seconds.

Elias looked at the paused security footage beside it. At 22:11 he was outside the west library. At 21:47 Mara

had recorded something at home. The kitchen conversation in his memory had supposedly begun five minutes earlier.

His breathing became shallow.

He clicked the video again. Denied. He looked for thumbnail extraction. Restricted. Audio analysis. Restricted. Transcript. Restricted. He tried searching for the file identifier in internal documentation.

Nothing.

Then, after several seconds, Vela populated one automatically generated field that had not loaded before.

Detected speakers.

MARA VENN: HIGH CONFIDENCE.

SECOND SPEAKER: NONE.

Elias stared at the words.

None.

He read them again. He checked the audio segmentation. Only one recognised voice. No overlapping speech. No second vocal profile. The reconstruction had placed him at the table. His memory placed him there. The camera did not. The phone did not. The bank did not. The university did not. And now the only surviving recording from inside the apartment said Mara had been alone.

Elias pulled the black notebook from his jacket pocket. He did not use digital notes for anything that mattered. He opened to a clean page and wrote the date.

16 October 2026.

He paused, then wrote: I remember being in the kitchen with Mara. The sentence looked childish on paper.

He added: Independent records place me at Dunley University. Then: Morrow possesses a restricted recording from Mara that night.

His hand stopped. There was one more thing to write. He did not want to. For almost a minute he sat with the pen touching the paper, listening to the building ventilation and the faint mechanical activity of machines continuing their work in rooms where no one was watching.

Finally, he wrote: The recording identifies no second speaker. He looked at the sentence until the handwriting seemed unfamiliar.

Then the monitor changed.

Not dramatically. No alarm sounded. No warning appeared. The video file had simply moved.

It was no longer visible in the source list. Elias blinked and scrolled upward. Nothing. He searched the identifier. No result. He reopened the session cache.

The file was gone.

The system still reported 6,218 sources. But one of them had disappeared from view. Elias checked the access log. His attempts were there. The file was not.

Someone had altered the permissions while he was looking at it. He turned toward the glass wall. The corridor outside remained empty. At the far end of the research floor, beyond two security doors, one office still had its lights on.

Dr. Lena Ors.

Elias looked back at the monitor. A new notification had appeared. Not from Vela. From Lena.

You're still here.

Nothing else. No question. No explanation. Elias read the message once, then again.

The timestamp was 11:59 p.m. He had not told her he was working late. He had not told anyone.

He slowly closed the notebook. On the frozen security footage, his nineteen-year-old self stood outside the university library beneath the awning, four miles from the kitchen he remembered perfectly. For the first time in fifteen years, Elias did not wonder what had happened to Mara.

He wondered who had taught him to remember being there.

CHAPTER TWO

Independent Records

At 12:07 a.m., Elias discovered that someone had changed the permissions on Mara's file eleven seconds before Lena sent her message. He checked the audit log three times because the first two readings produced different conclusions in his head. The first was that Lena had seen what he was doing and shut him out. The second was that he had expected Lena to be involved because her office light was visible, and was now forcing unrelated facts into a shape that rewarded suspicion. The third was less satisfying and therefore more useful: he did not have enough information.

The permission event showed no user name. That was not unusual for automated policy changes, but the timing sat badly with him. 23:58:49, visibility on the legacy source altered. 23:59:00, message from Lena. He copied both timestamps into his notebook and drew a line beneath them.

He did not write her name. A faint sound came from the corridor. Elias closed the audit window at once, then disliked himself for doing it. The glass door opened and a cleaning cart rolled past, pushed by a woman wearing headphones and blue gloves. She did not look into the suite. He watched her until she disappeared beyond the lift bank.

His pulse settled slowly.

There were better ways to behave than like a man already convinced he was being watched. Elias reopened the session data and exported the visible audit entries to a local encrypted drive. Morrow logged exports, but that problem belonged to tomorrow. He preserved the security footage too, then the transaction record, university access history and cellular timeline. When he finished, he checked the source count again.

6,218.

One hidden item, no visible reduction. He tried a crude test. He filtered the sources by owner name, selected Mara Venn, then excluded every category he could see. The result counter showed one remaining item, but the list appeared empty.

The video was still there.

Hidden, not deleted.

That distinction made him feel marginally better, which in turn annoyed him. The existence of inaccessible evidence should not have been comforting simply because someone had chosen not to erase it.

He closed the reconstruction session and stood. His knees had stiffened during the hours in the immersion chair. There was a faint red line around his left wrist where a sensor strap had been tighter than necessary. He rubbed it while looking toward Lena's office.

The light was still on. He could walk down there.

Ask her what legacy research had been attached to his sister. Ask why a restricted video had vanished from his view. Ask why she knew he was still in the building.

Lena would answer the third question first because it was the least important. She had a talent for doing

that without seeming evasive. Elias knew her well enough to hear the likely response.

Your badge is still active on the floor, Elias. Or perhaps: I saw the light.

Both could be true. Neither would answer what he actually wanted to know. He put on his coat.

It was not the coat from the security video. That one had been lost years ago, although Elias could not remember throwing it away. The present coat was charcoal, synthetic, lighter than it looked, and dry. He had taken the train to work under a clear evening sky.

The smell of wet wool remained in his nose. He stopped fastening the second button.

The reconstruction could have supplied scent from contextual inference. Vela had access to weather data. Rain, old wool coat, enclosed kitchen. It was exactly the kind of detail an immersive model could infer convincingly without direct evidence.

But Elias remembered the smell before Morrow existed. He had described it to Annie in 2019.

Had he?

The date surfaced because Annie had broken up with him two months later. He remembered the conversation in her apartment, her legs folded beneath her on a yellow chair. She had asked why he hated sleeping during rain. He had told her about the kitchen and Mara and the coat.

That memory felt solid.

He stood in Suite Four with one hand on his button and understood the trap. Every piece of evidence proving the kitchen memory had existed before Vela

merely pushed the question backward. It did not make the memory true. It only made it older.

His phone buzzed.

Lena again.

Coffee?

Elias looked toward her office.

A second message arrived.

Not therapy. Coffee.

He put the phone in his pocket without answering. When he left Suite Four, the corridor lighting increased automatically around him. Morrow's night system was designed to reduce electricity use without making late workers feel they were walking through an abandoned building. Light followed movement in soft zones, waking ahead of a person and fading behind them.

Tonight Elias found the effect unpleasant. Lena's office door stood open.

She was sitting cross-legged in one of the two visitor chairs rather than behind her desk, reading from a tablet. Her shoes had been kicked off beneath the low table. A white ceramic mug rested on the floor beside her.

She looked up as he approached.

"You ignored my offer."

"I considered it."

"And?"

"I'm still considering it."

Lena checked her watch. "You usually decide faster than that."

"That's what I'm trying to correct."

Something changed in her expression. Not alarm. Attention.

"Come in," she said.

Elias remained in the doorway. Lena Ors was thirty-nine and had the unnerving composure of someone who had learned early that other people's discomfort often became louder when given room. She rarely filled pauses. She did not use a soothing voice with patients, which was one reason Elias had trusted her when they first began working together. Reassurance, especially professional reassurance, often sounded to him like an attempt to move a person toward a conclusion before the evidence was ready.

Her office was warmer than the rest of the research floor. Books took up one wall, most of them real paper. A dying plant occupied the window ledge. There were no family photographs on the desk, no framed certificates, no inspirational quotations. Lena had once said that psychologists should be forbidden from displaying quotations because patients interpreted them as instructions.

Elias looked at the mug on the floor.

White.

"You ran something," Lena said.

It was not a question. Elias shifted his attention to her. "Why do you think that?"

"Because you've been in Suite Four for almost three hours and you look like you're trying to decide whether asking me a question will contaminate the answer."

"My badge tells you I've been there?"

"The floor occupancy system tells anyone with night access which suites are occupied. It doesn't tell me what you're doing inside them."

There it was. The harmless answer, supplied before he asked.

"And the message at eleven fifty-nine?"

"I was leaving. I saw your suite was still active."

Elias glanced toward the corridor behind him.

"You're not leaving."

"I made coffee."

"That's not the same thing."

"No. It isn't."

Lena placed the tablet face down on the chair beside her. "Are you going to keep interviewing me from the doorway?" Elias entered but did not sit.

"What is legacy research policy?"

Her face did not change enough for anyone else to notice.

Elias noticed.

The muscles beside her mouth tightened briefly, then released.

"Where did you see that?"

"You know where."

"If I knew where, I wouldn't ask."

"Mara's reconstruction."

The office became very still. Lena looked at him for several seconds.

"You used Vela on your sister."

"Yes."

"Without review clearance."

"Yes."

"Why tonight?"

Elias almost answered. The truth was that he did not know why tonight. He had been thinking about running the reconstruction for months. He had prepared the

archive, cleaned the source labels, built exclusion rules, then left the project untouched. This evening, after everyone else had gone home, he had opened it without deciding to.

He disliked actions without reasons. They felt like evidence withheld by his own mind.

"The date," he said.

Lena's eyes moved slightly.

"What about it?"

"Tomorrow is fifteen years."

"October eighteenth."

"Yes."

"Mara disappeared on the eighteenth."

"She was last seen on the seventeenth."

"By you?"

The question was quiet.

Elias felt it physically.

He looked at Lena.

She did not look away.

"Why did you phrase it like that?"

"Like what?"

"By you."

"Because you said last seen. I was clarifying whose account you meant."

"You know whose account I meant."

"I know what you've told me."

He felt anger arrive, clean and useful.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Turn grammar into diagnosis."

"I'm not diagnosing you."

"Then answer the question. What is legacy research policy?"

Lena leaned back in the chair. "It covers material created under research agreements that predate Morrow's current consent and access framework. Early clinical studies, university partnerships, prototype data, things that were never migrated into standard patient access."

"Why is any of it attached to Mara?"

Lena was silent for too long.

"I don't know."

Elias laughed once. It came out flatter than he intended.

"That was bad."

"What was?"

"The pause. If you don't know, you usually say it immediately."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"You've measured this?"

"Not yet."

The corner of Lena's mouth moved. It might have become a smile under different circumstances.

"Elias, if you've found restricted legacy data tied to a personal reconstruction, you need to stop accessing it until we know why it's there."

"That's what you would say if it were accidental."

"Yes."

"It's also what you'd say if it weren't."

"Also yes."

"Helpful."

"I'm not trying to be helpful. I'm trying to stop you from turning one anomalous result into a complete theory before sunrise."

"I have more than one result."

Lena waited.

Elias regretted the sentence immediately. He had not intended to show her the rest.

"What did you find?" she asked.

He looked at the mug on the floor again. White ceramic, no visible crack. A faint lipstick mark at the rim.

"My phone was on campus."

Lena did not move.

"The night Mara disappeared?"

"The night I remember being with her."

"Phones aren't people."

"That's what I said."

"Good."

"My student card was also there."

A slight pause.

"And my bank card. And a text sent from my phone. And a university camera."

Lena's hands were resting loosely in her lap. At the mention of the camera, her right thumb moved across the side of her index finger once.

A tiny motion.

Elias stored it.

"The camera shows you?" she asked.

"Clearly enough."

"At what time?"

"Ten eleven."

She looked toward the window.

"And you remember being at home then."

"I don't remember being at home generally. I remember the kitchen. I remember where I sat. I remember what Mara was wearing. I remember the cup she held. I remember the refrigerator turning off while she was speaking. I remember the smell of my coat because it was wet. I remember her telling me that if she disappeared I shouldn't let anyone say she was sick."

Lena's gaze returned to him.

"What colour was the cup?"

The question was so specific that Elias stopped.

"Blue."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

She nodded once, almost to herself.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why what?"

"Why ask about the cup?"

"Because you included it in a list of details you consider stable."

"You could have asked about the coat."

"You were already talking about the coat."

"Or the refrigerator."

"Would you prefer I had?"

Elias stared at her.

"Have you seen the reconstruction?"

"No."

"Have you seen Mara's file?"

Lena's face closed by a fraction.

There it was again.

"Which file?"

"The one that disappeared from my source list while I was looking at it."

"Elias."

"Video. October seventeenth. Six minutes fourteen seconds. Mara listed as source owner. One detected speaker. Her. No one else."

For the first time that night, Lena looked genuinely unsettled. It lasted less than a second.

"You opened it?"

"I couldn't."

Her shoulders lowered almost imperceptibly.

Relief.

Elias felt the anger sharpen.

"You know what it is."

"I know that if the system marked it restricted, you shouldn't be trying to get around the restriction."

"That isn't what I said."

"No."

"Do you know what it is?"

Lena stood.

She was barefoot. The detail made the movement oddly ordinary. She picked up her shoes but did not put them on, then walked to the small counter near the window where an electric kettle and coffee machine sat among stacks of paper cups.

"You need sleep," she said.

Elias remained where he was.

"That's insulting."

"It's physiological."

"It's also convenient."

"Both things can be true."

She poured coffee from a glass pot into a paper cup and held it out. Elias did not take it.

"Your memories aren't disappearing," Lena said.

He looked at her.

Something about the sentence felt prepared.

"I didn't say they were."

"No. You said records contradict one of them. That's different."

"Then what are you telling me?"

Lena kept the cup extended between them.

"I'm telling you that one night of conflicting evidence doesn't establish that fifteen years of memory are false. It establishes that you have conflicting evidence. Nothing more."

"And the video?"

"You haven't seen the video."

"You have."

Her eyes remained on his.

She lowered the coffee.

Elias knew before she spoke that she was not going to answer.

"Go home," Lena said.

He gave a small nod.

"All right."

She seemed surprised by how easily he agreed.

That was useful too.

Elias turned toward the door.

"Elias."

He stopped.

"Don't run another reconstruction tonight."

He looked back. "Because I'm tired?"

"Because the first one has already changed what you're looking for."

"That's what evidence does."

"No," Lena said. "That's what fear does. Evidence changes what you know. Fear changes what you notice."

Elias considered that.

"You should put that on your wall."

For a moment she smiled.

Then he left.

The lift took forty seconds to arrive. Elias spent thirty-eight of them looking at his reflection in the brushed steel doors without quite meeting his own eyes. When they opened, he stepped inside and pressed the lobby button.

At floor twelve, the lift stopped.

No one entered.

Elias waited.

The doors remained open for several seconds, revealing an empty corridor in the administrative wing. Motion lighting brightened one section at a time, extending away from the lift. Then a person crossed at the far end.

Too far to identify. Dark clothes. Walking quickly. Elias leaned toward the opening.

The person was gone.

The doors began to close. He put out a hand and stopped them.

There was no reason to get out.

He got out.

The corridor smelled faintly of floor cleaner and overheated electronics. Most offices were dark. The administrative wing contained compliance, legal,

procurement and internal security. Elias had almost no reason to come here during ordinary work.

The movement had been near the records suite.

He walked toward it.

At the end of the corridor, a security door showed a small green light. Locked, but active.

Elias checked his phone.

12:21 a.m.

A cleaning cupboard stood open beside the door. Empty trolley. Blue gloves on a shelf. He thought of the cleaner who had passed Suite Four.

Then noticed something on the floor. A small rectangle of white paper lay near the wall.

He bent and picked it up.

Not paper.

A thermal label, the kind Morrow's archive printers produced for sealed physical evidence bags. Most of the text had been torn away, but one line remained.

VENN, M.

Beneath it was a date.

18 OCT 2011.

Elias stood alone in the corridor holding the label between two fingers. The records-suite reader flashed red once.

Then green.

The lock clicked open from the other side.

CHAPTER THREE

The Other Side

The records-suite door opened three inches and stopped against the weight of its hydraulic closer. Elias remained in the corridor with the torn archive label between his fingers, waiting for someone to appear. For a moment he heard only the faint electrical hum from inside, then a shoe nudged the door wider and Celia Dain stepped through carrying a grey storage case against her hip.

Celia ran Morrow's risk and compliance division with the air of someone who had accepted years ago that everybody eventually became paperwork. She was forty-six, compact, silver beginning at both temples, and dressed at half past midnight as if she had a morning hearing in ten minutes. Her eyes went first to Elias, then to the label in his hand. Neither movement was hurried.

"You are on the wrong floor," she said.

"Apparently not."

She shifted the case to her other hand. "Give me that." Elias glanced at the label. VENN, M. The date beneath it remained clear. "What is it?"

"A damaged inventory sticker you found outside a restricted records room."

"That's a description."

"It is also the amount of information you're entitled to at twelve twenty-two in the morning."

Celia held out her hand. Elias had met her perhaps eight times in five years, usually after a reconstruction had become legally inconvenient. She never raised her

voice, and Elias had once watched her make three senior executives reverse a decision simply by asking each of them to sign their names beneath it. The technique worked because people preferred collective mistakes to personal ones.

He placed the label on her palm. Her thumb covered Mara's initial immediately.

"Was this printed tonight?" he asked.

Celia looked at him. "Go home, Elias."

"That is the second time I've been told that in ten minutes."

"Then the consensus is unusually strong."

"What is in the case?"

"Something that isn't yours."

"Does it concern Mara Venn?"

The question altered nothing in Celia's face. That was more impressive than Lena's control because Celia did not appear to be controlling anything.

"Your sister's legacy records are subject to restrictions you are not authorized to override," she said. "You accessed a private reconstruction using a system not approved for personal use, then attempted to enter material outside your clearance. Those actions will be reviewed in the morning. If I were you, I would stop creating additional things for people to review."

"Morrow had a file on her before Morrow existed."

"You don't know that."

"Legacy research. October eighteenth, 2011. Her name on an archive label. A source inside Vela that disappeared while I was looking at it. I know enough."

For the first time Celia's attention sharpened. "Disappeared?"

"Its permissions changed."

"While you were in the session?"

"Yes."

"Did you copy anything?"

Elias almost said no. The word reached the back of his teeth and stayed there. Lying to Celia would be foolish. Telling her about the photographed screen would be worse.

"I took notes," he said.

It was true.

Celia studied him for another second, then used her badge to lock the records-suite door. "Don't delete them. Don't alter them. Don't send them to anyone."

"That sounds like an instruction you give before seizing something."

"It sounds like preservation procedure."

"Will you tell me whether Morrow had contact with Mara in 2011?"

"No."

"Because you can't?"

"Because I won't answer a question from a man who has been awake too long and has already violated policy in pursuit of his missing sister. Those facts do not make your question invalid. They make this the wrong setting for an answer."

She moved past him toward the lifts. Elias turned.

"Celia."

She stopped.

"Why are you here?"

"I work here."

"At midnight with a physical archive case."

"Some of us have hobbies."

"Lena's upstairs. You're here. Mara's file vanishes from my screen. That is a lot of insomnia in one building."

Celia looked back at him. "You are very good at finding patterns. You are less good at remembering that patterns are not intentions."

Then she walked away.

Elias waited until the lift doors closed behind her. He looked once at the locked records suite, then returned to the stairwell rather than the lift. He did not know whether the cameras inside Morrow recorded audio, and the fact that he had begun thinking about cameras that way annoyed him.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The pavement shone under sodium streetlights, and the cold air made the back of his neck ache after the warmth of the building. Elias walked two blocks before ordering a car because he did not want the pickup point attached to Morrow's entrance in a commercial location log. Halfway through entering the address he noticed what he was doing and nearly cancelled it. Instead he typed an intersection near his flat.

He lived in a narrow third-floor apartment above a bakery that began work at four every morning. Usually the smell of bread woke him before his alarm. Tonight the stairwell smelled of yeast and detergent. He checked the lock twice before entering, then stood in the kitchen without switching on the main light.

His notebooks occupied one shelf above the small dining table. Black covers, cheap paper, dates written in white pencil on the spines. He trusted them more than cloud storage, less because paper could not be changed

than because changing it required a body in a room. Ink left pressure. Pages tore. Someone had to touch the evidence.

He found the notebook from 2011. The first half contained university notes. The second became increasingly dominated by Mara after she disappeared. Phone numbers. Police names. Dates of reported sightings. Train schedules. Lists of hospitals and shelters. Elias sat at the table and turned pages slowly until he reached October seventeenth.

There was no entry about the kitchen. He had expected one. The absence should not have mattered because he had not kept a daily diary, but after fifteen years the memory had become so central that some part of him believed the notebook ought to bend around it.

October eighteenth began with a single line written at 7:20 a.m. Mara not in room. Dad says probably school early.

At 9:05:

School says absent.

At 9:18:

Call police again if no answer by 10. There were no dramatic sentences. No intuition. No retrospective warning. The handwriting became smaller as the day progressed, crowded with practical instructions.

Elias turned backward.

October seventeenth contained seminar notes until 8:36 p.m. Several quotations from Professor Lennox. A list of sources Rebecca was supposed to send him. At the bottom of the page, in a different pen, one final line:

Aster, 9:55. Rebecca still owes me £1.90.

Elias sat perfectly still.

The almond biscuit.

He looked toward the dark window over the sink. His reflection was faint enough to ignore. He had written himself into the cafe.

The kitchen memory remained intact anyway. He could close his eyes and enter it. The blue cup. Mara's swollen eyes. Rain. Wet wool. Even now the physical memory of the chair seemed more convincing than the ink in front of him.

He turned the page beneath the cafe note and found an impression in the paper where something had been written on the removed sheet above it. The page itself was blank, but pressure marks crossed the surface at an angle.

Elias took a pencil from the drawer, hesitated, then shaded lightly across the paper.

Letters emerged.

Not all of them. Enough. DON'T LET THEM CORRECT YOU.

Below it, separated by several lines:

3:12

He stared at the marks until the bread ovens downstairs switched on with a distant metallic thump. He did not go home after Lena left. He told himself he was waiting for the building to empty, though the research floor had been empty for nearly an hour. What he was really doing was trying to decide whether the message from Lena had been a warning, a kindness, or the sort of ordinary observation that became sinister only after a person had begun arranging the world around a fear. He hated that there were now three

plausible interpretations and no clean way to eliminate two of them.

He reopened the access record for Mara's video. The visible entry was gone, but the session cache still held a residual pointer, a meaningless string of characters attached to a timestamp. Elias copied the string into his notebook by hand. Then he wrote the time beside it, underlined it once, and resisted the urge to underline it again. Digital evidence could be edited. Paper could be lost. Neither deserved worship. The point was redundancy.

At 12:38 a.m. he walked to the break room and found Lena's mug beside the sink. It was white with a black line drawing of a brain on one side and a coffee stain on the other. He knew she was still somewhere on the floor, yet her office door had been closed when he passed it. The hallway cameras were recessed into the ceiling every twenty feet. Elias had spent years ignoring them. Now he counted seven between Suite Four and the lifts.

His phone vibrated. Ivo had sent a photograph of a bowl of noodles and the caption: IF YOU ARE STILL AT WORK I WILL REPORT YOU TO WHICHEVER AUTHORITY HANDLES SAD MEN. Elias stared at it long enough to feel something like affection, then typed that he had already left. The lie came easily. He disliked that too.

He returned to Suite Four and searched the employee directory for the phrase legacy research policy. Nothing useful appeared. He tried the internal compliance glossary. The definition was deliberately broad: records created under predecessor clinical

programs, restricted by consent, litigation, or third-party privacy. There was a contact listed for escalation. Dr. Lena Ors.

Elias leaned back and closed his eyes. He could picture Lena across from him in dozens of evaluation rooms, always with a paper notebook rather than a tablet. He had once respected that habit because it resembled his own. Now he wondered whether he had copied it from her. The thought was absurd, but absurdity had begun to lose its usefulness as a category.

A cleaning cart rattled somewhere on the floor below. He opened Mara's police file again, not because he expected a new answer but because old documents were easier to tolerate than new uncertainty. The first report described her as seventeen, five feet four, brown hair, green eyes, last seen wearing a dark coat and carrying a canvas backpack. He knew the wording almost by heart. Farther down, an officer had written that the family reported a history of emotional instability. Elias had spent fifteen years hating that phrase.

He searched for who had supplied it. The line was unattributed. In a follow-up interview his father denied calling Mara unstable. Elias's own statement used the opposite language. She is frightened, not ill. The family doctor had provided no diagnosis. Yet the phrase remained in the summary and then propagated into later documents, newspaper reports, and the final missing-person bulletin. A sentence with no clear author had become official truth because enough systems repeated it.

Elias felt the first sharp edge of anger he had experienced all night. Anger was useful. It narrowed things. He printed the page, folded it once and put it inside his notebook. Then he requested the audit history for the missing video file. The system displayed a spinning icon for six seconds before returning an error: record unavailable under current permissions.

He tried a different route, searching not for the file but for the action performed on it. At 11:58:41 p.m., a permissions object had been refreshed. The account name was masked, but the action had originated from the clinical network. Lena's office sat on the clinical network.

He stood and walked there before he could talk himself out of it. Her office was unlocked. The light he had seen from the corridor came from a desk lamp. Lena was not inside. On the table lay a closed laptop, two patient folders and a paperback novel face down beside an empty glass. Elias did not enter. He stood at the threshold and looked at the room as if the arrangement of objects could tell him whether a person had betrayed him.

On the wall behind Lena's desk hung a photograph he had never noticed. A group of twelve people stood outside a low brick building beneath a sign that had been partly cropped. Most of the faces were unfamiliar. Lena was there, younger, hair tied back, not smiling. Beside her stood a man Elias recognized from Morrow's corporate history: Adrian Rohe, years before Morrow existed.

The visible letters on the sign read FALL... CLIN.... Elias raised his phone automatically, then stopped. He

had just lied to Ivo about leaving. He had just told himself paper mattered because systems could be changed. Photographing Lena's office would create a record on a device Morrow could audit. He took out the notebook instead and sketched the placement of the letters like a ridiculous detective in a cheap crime serial.

When he returned to Suite Four, the corridor lights dimmed another level. He sat, opened a clean page and wrote three facts: Mara attended Fallow Clinic. Lena had worked at Fallow. Morrow possessed restricted material from Mara's final night. He left space between each line, as though the blank paper could keep him from turning them into a story too soon.

For the next hour he tested mundane explanations. Perhaps Fallow had donated records to Morrow when it closed. Perhaps Lena's role was administrative. Perhaps Mara's treatment files were restricted because she had been a minor. Each explanation worked until he placed it beside the hidden video and the permissions change. He could make the pieces innocent individually. Together they refused to stay that way.

At 2:54 he finally shut the workstation down. The black monitor reflected his face before it went fully dark. He looked exhausted and older than thirty-four. He thought of Mara at seventeen asking not to be described by other people's conclusions. Then he thought of a sentence he had said to clients hundreds of times: the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. He had always disliked how often people used it to protect beliefs from contradiction.

Tonight the phrase felt personal. He put on his coat and found himself checking the pocket for a tear that

had been repaired fifteen years earlier. This coat was newer. Different fabric. No repair. He knew that. Still, his fingers searched for the seam before he could stop them.

Elias checked the wall clock.

3:11 a.m.

One minute later, his phone rang. The caller ID displayed no number.

He answered without speaking.

For three seconds there was only static. Then a woman's voice said, very softly, "You shouldn't have run it."

The call ended.

CHAPTER FOUR

Baseline

Elias did not call the number back because there was no number to call. He did not contact the police because the sentence contained no threat, and he did not call Lena because doing so would tell her the anonymous caller had frightened him. Instead he wrote the exact time, duration and wording in the notebook, photographed the call log with an old instant camera he kept for physical documentation, and placed the developing print face down on the table.

At 3:26 he began testing his own phone. He checked forwarding settings, recent permissions, installed certificates and the small collection of diagnostic tools Morrow employees used when dealing with compromised reconstruction devices. Nothing obvious appeared. By four he had convinced himself the call might have been routed through any number of ordinary services. By five he had disproved three of his own theories and created seven worse ones.

The bakery opened at six. Someone downstairs laughed loudly enough for Elias to hear the shape of the laugh through the floorboards. The normality irritated him. He showered, changed his shirt twice because the first smelled faintly of the previous night's building ventilation, then returned to Morrow before eight.

Ivo Chen was already at his desk with headphones around his neck and a bowl of cereal balanced on a stack of equipment manuals. He looked at Elias for half a second and pushed the bowl away.

"You look medically unnecessary."

"Good morning."

"No, genuinely. You look like a demonstration of why mammals sleep."

Elias placed a printed session summary on his desk. "I need a clean-room test of Vela." Ivo looked at the pages, then at Elias. "For what?"

"Source contamination. Dialogue generation. Legacy cross-linking."

"That is three separate bad mornings."

"Can you do it?"

Ivo took the printout. He was thirty-one and wore shirts that always seemed purchased for a slightly different person. Today's was too large at the shoulders. "Is this related to why compliance sent a reminder at seven fourteen titled Unauthorized Personal Reconstruction Is Still Unauthorized?"

"Possibly."

"Excellent. I like plausible deniability before breakfast."

They moved to a test suite on the eighth floor, disconnected from production archives and populated with synthetic case files designed specifically to provoke errors. Ivo chose a benchmark memory involving a family dinner assembled from photographs, home audio and contradictory witness interviews. The scene had been run thousands of times during development.

"Baseline first," Elias said.

"I know how my job works."

"I know."

"Then trust me in a way visible to others."

Elias almost apologized. Instead he folded his arms and watched the diagnostics. The first reconstruction produced the expected uncertainty around seating order and the color of a woman's blouse. The second intentionally removed a source recording. Vela lowered dialogue confidence. The third introduced corrupted timestamps. Vela flagged temporal conflict rather than smoothing it.

No invented certainty. No restricted material. No unexplained source growth. Ivo ran six more cases.

"Model is boring," he said. "Boring is what we pay it for."

Elias leaned toward the screen. "Search my evaluator ID against legacy indexing. Metadata only."

Ivo stopped moving.

"That would be the moment in this conversation where you tell me why."

Elias showed him the photographed source count and the vanished-file identifier but withheld Mara's video metadata. Ivo's humor thinned as he read.

"Six thousand two hundred eighteen?"

"My archive had less than half that."

"Legacy branch adds sixteen hundred. Institutional adds another thousand. That's not a rounding error."

"Can you search the index?"

"Not without leaving a footprint shaped like both our careers."

"Metadata only."

"Still footprints. Smaller shoes."

Ivo looked through the glass at the empty corridor, then typed a query into an internal reliability console. The system returned no records for ELIAS VENN. He

tried VENN, E. Nothing. He searched the numerical evaluator ID.

One result appeared.

The record title was blank.

Creation year: 2018.

Status: archived.

Access class: clinical continuity.

Ivo frowned. "That's not possible."

"Why?"

"Your employee identifier wasn't issued until 2021."

Elias felt the room narrow slightly. "Could the ID have been reused?"

"Not this one. They're generated from employment cohort plus sequence. Your first two digits literally mean 2021."

"Then somebody linked an older record to the new ID."

"Maybe."

Ivo opened the relationship graph.

The screen went blank.

A second later the console displayed ACCESS TERMINATED BY POLICY SERVICE.

"Did you do that?" Elias asked.

"I was about to ask you."

A notification appeared on Ivo's workstation.

RELIABILITY EXCEPTION 17-B. CONTACT SYSTEMS GOVERNANCE.

Ivo leaned back. "That is a very polite way for the building to say stop." Elias looked at the timestamp. 8:43 a.m.

"Who gets notified?"

"Governance. Compliance. Probably Celia. Depending on severity, chief clinical."

"Lena."

"You say that like you're hoping it's someone else."

Elias did not answer.

Ivo turned his chair. "What exactly happened in the reconstruction?" Elias considered lying. Ivo noticed.

"That's never encouraging," Ivo said.

"Mara told me I wasn't there."

Ivo's expression changed. He knew the missing-person story in the way most Morrow employees did, as a fact people had learned not to mention near Elias. "But you remember being there."

"Yes."

"How strongly?"

"Strongly enough that I can tell you the refrigerator compressor stopped six seconds before she spoke."

"And records say?"

"Campus. Four miles away. Multiple independent sources."

Ivo rubbed both hands over his face. "Okay. That's ugly."

"There was also a source video owned by Mara. One detected speaker. It vanished after I tried to open it."

"That's uglier."

"Someone called me at 3:12 this morning and said I shouldn't have run it."

Ivo lowered his hands.

For once, he did not make a joke.

"Elias, who knew you were going to use Vela?"

"No one."

"Who knew after?"

"Lena. Celia. Whoever monitors policy."

Ivo looked toward the corridor again. "Then either somebody has very fast gossip, or somebody was watching the session while it happened." A soft tone sounded from Elias's phone.

New calendar invitation.

Clinical Review, 9:30 a.m.

Organizer: Dr. Lena Ors.

He accepted.

Ivo stared at him. "You didn't even think about it."

"Thinking wouldn't change the meeting."

"No, but it gives fear a healthy little place to live."

Elias gathered the printouts.

Before he reached the door, Ivo said, "One more thing."

Elias turned.

By eight the next morning Elias had slept for ninety-three minutes and showered twice. The second shower happened because he stood beneath the water after the first one and realized he could not remember washing his hair. He did not count that as evidence of anything except exhaustion, which was a diagnosis he was willing to accept without argument.

Ivo arrived carrying two coffees and a paper bag that smelled of eggs. He set one cup in front of Elias, studied him for a moment, then moved it six inches farther away. 'You look like someone who should earn caffeine through responsible disclosure.'

'You texted me a bowl of noodles at one in the morning.'

'That was responsible disclosure. It disclosed noodles.' Ivo sat and opened the bag. 'Tell me why we're

hiding in Validation Two before Celia discovers I have a professional death wish.'

Elias told him about the vanished video, leaving out Lena's office and the photograph on the wall. The omission bothered him because Ivo was the only person he had chosen to involve. It also felt prudent. Elias could no longer tell when prudence became the first step toward lying to everyone.

Ivo listened without interrupting, which was unusual enough that Elias watched him instead of the console. When the story ended, Ivo peeled the paper from a breakfast sandwich and said, 'I hate three things about this.'

'Only three?'

'I'm prioritizing. One, files don't vanish from an immutable evidence index. They can become invisible to you, but the object remains. Two, if a permissions refresh happened while you were reading it, someone or something was watching the access event. Three, you saying something disappeared while you looked at it has the general flavor of a person I would normally advise to sleep.'

'I slept.'

Ivo looked at him. 'That answer had legal-defense energy.' They began with a baseline test. Ivo created a temporary reconstruction subject from his own data, selecting an ordinary dinner six months earlier. Receipts, photographs, a restaurant reservation, two messages and location records gave Vela enough material to build a modest scene. Elias watched from the evaluation console while Ivo complained that the system had made his shirt too blue.

'It was teal,' Ivo said.

'Your shirt is not the scientific issue.'

'Accuracy begins at the shirt.'

They tested permissions. Ivo changed an access rule from another workstation. The file disappeared from Elias's view exactly as Mara's had, but the audit layer showed the change immediately, including the operator account. He changed it back. The object returned. No mystery. No intelligence hiding in the machine. Just permissions behaving as designed.

Then they tried a legacy-tagged test object from a training archive. Ivo could see the container metadata but not the protected contents. Elias could see less. That difference was expected. What was not expected was that Elias's user profile carried an additional policy inherited from an identifier neither of them recognized.

Ivo stopped joking.

'Read it out,' Elias said.

'I'm reading it.'

'Then say something.'

'I am trying not to say something stupid.' Ivo enlarged the record. 'Your employee identity maps to a legacy subject identity. That's not supposed to happen. Staff accounts and subject accounts are separated even when the same human is both.'

'Could migration have merged them?'

'Could? Yes. Should? Absolutely not. Do I want to find the engineer responsible and make them explain this to me in a locked room? Also yes.'

The identifier began with VENN_E_18, followed by a string of characters and a parent reference. Elias copied

it into his notebook. The year sat there more loudly than the rest.

2018.

He had not joined Morrow until 2021.

'What was I doing here in 2018?'

Ivo did not answer because Elias had asked the question like a demand, and there was no one in the room who could satisfy it. Instead he opened the employee history. Elias's official record showed a start date in March 2021, exactly as he remembered. No contractor badge. No internship. No visiting researcher credential.

They searched archived visitor access. The first query returned nothing. The second returned a permission error. Ivo frowned, changed syntax, and ran it against a cold-storage index that had not yet been migrated into Vela. Five entries appeared under Elias's name, all from 2018. Three had no building listed. One referred to Calder Avenue. The final entry simply read CLINICAL ANNEX.

Elias could not remember Calder Avenue. He wrote it down anyway.

Ivo looked at the entries for a long time. 'There are two versions of your relationship with this company. The HR version, where you arrived in 2021, and whatever this is.'

'Maybe someone used my name.'

'Maybe. But the legacy identity has a biometric hash.'

Elias looked at him.

Ivo's voice became quieter. 'Yours.' The room seemed to narrow, although nothing moved. Elias opened his notebook and wrote: I was physically authenticated by a

Morrow predecessor system in 2018. Then, after a moment: I do not remember this.

Ivo watched the pen. 'You know writing something down doesn't make it safer.'

'No.'

'You do it anyway.'

'Yes.'

'Fair.'

They spent another forty minutes tracing the parent reference. Most queries terminated at authorization walls. One returned a corrupted header. Ivo recovered fragments of the original label by reading the raw migration map rather than the current database. His shoulders went still as the letters resolved.

Ivo pointed at the closed console. "The 2018 record. Its parent identifier wasn't Morrow."

"What was it?"

"FALLOW-CLINICAL."

The name meant nothing for almost a second. Then Elias remembered Mara's medical history.

Fallow Clinic.

The place she had attended after their mother died. He had not thought about it in years.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Missing Person

Lena's office looked different in daylight. The view behind her showed Dunley under a pale October sky, office roofs and railway lines stretching east toward neighborhoods Elias knew more by archival maps than by recent visits. The white mug from the night before had been washed and returned to her desk. Elias noticed the absence of lipstick on the rim and disliked himself for noticing.

"You involved Ivo," Lena said.

"I ran a technical baseline."

"With Ivo."

"He's the reliability engineer."

"He's also now part of an internal review he didn't ask to join."

"He did ask why."

"That is not the same thing."

Elias sat opposite her. Celia occupied the chair by the window with a tablet on her lap. No one had offered coffee. Lena folded her hands. "This isn't disciplinary, despite what Celia's presence suggests."

"My presence suggests adults," Celia said.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

Elias looked from one to the other. "Fallow Clinic."

Lena's fingers became still.

Celia did not react.

"Mara attended after our mother died," Elias continued. "Grief counseling. Sleep problems. I

remember family sessions. Maybe three. Morrow has legacy research indexed under Fallow Clinical. My evaluator profile links to a 2018 continuity record with the same parent identifier. Explain that."

"You accessed metadata after being instructed not to," Celia said.

"That isn't an explanation."

"No. It's a fact relevant to the conversation."

Lena leaned forward. "What do you remember about Fallow?"

"A converted townhouse near the university hospital. Too many plants. A waiting room with orange chairs. Mara hated one of the therapists."

"Name?"

Elias searched memory. "Dr. Pritchard. Maybe."

"And me?"

He looked at her. "What about you?"

"Do you remember seeing me there?"

The question landed with such precision that Elias knew she had not improvised it.

"You were twenty-four in 2011."

"Twenty-four isn't invisible."

"I met you at Morrow."

"When?"

"When I joined."

"What year?"

"2021."

Lena nodded once.

Elias felt a pressure behind his eyes. "Why are you asking questions you know the answers to?"

"Because I'm trying to establish what you remember before other records change your confidence."

"My confidence is already changing."

"Exactly."

Celia placed the tablet on her knee. "The Fallow program was one of several research partnerships whose data eventually became part of Morrow's historical archive. That fact is not secret, though the underlying participant records remain protected."

"Was Mara a research participant?"

"I can't confirm another person's clinical status."

"She's my sister."

"Privacy law does not become sentimental because a person is missing."

Elias looked at Lena. "Can you confirm it?"

"No."

He stood.

"Sit down," Lena said.

"Why?"

"Because you came here for answers and you're about to leave because you don't like the first boundary."

"I came because you scheduled a review."

"You accepted in four seconds."

He stared at her. Ivo had noticed the same thing. The building measured everything. Lena slid a printed copy of his original missing-person statement across the desk. "I want you to read this without checking any other source. Tell me what feels wrong."

"You already know what feels wrong. It says I was at home."

"Read it."

Elias remained standing, then sat again and took the pages. The transcript was familiar from the previous

night. Detective Harrow's questions, his nineteen-year-old answers. Around ten fifteen. Kitchen. Mara upset. Warning about people saying she was sick.

He turned the page.

A paragraph he had skimmed before caught his attention. HARROW: Had Mara attended Fallow Clinic recently?

VENN: Not for months. She stopped because they kept trying to make Mum part of everything. HARROW: Did she say anything about a Dr. Ors?

Elias stopped reading.

The next line had been redacted in the digital copy he had seen the previous night. On the paper Lena had given him, it was visible. VENN: Lena? She said Lena believed her.

Elias looked up.

Lena's face had lost some of its professional neutrality.

"You knew Mara."

"Yes."

Celia exhaled quietly.

"How well?"

"I was a junior clinical researcher at Fallow. I worked with a team evaluating memory-based grief interventions. I met Mara during the program."

Elias heard every word and understood none of them in the correct order.

"You've known this the entire time."

"Yes."

"Five years."

"Longer."

"And you let me talk to you about her as if you'd never met her."

"You rarely talked about her."

"That's your defense?"

"No."

"Did you see her on October seventeenth?"

Celia spoke before Lena could. "Don't answer that." Elias turned on her. "Why?"

"Because this meeting is no longer a clinical check-in."

"It never was."

Lena ignored Celia. "I saw Mara during the week she disappeared."

"Which day?"

"Elias."

"Which day?"

Lena looked toward Celia, then back. "I am not going to answer that yet." The yet was worse than refusal.

Elias stood again. This time nobody told him to sit.

"Your memories aren't disappearing," Lena said.

He stopped at the door. The sentence from the previous night.

She continued, quieter. "Something is making you doubt them. That does not mean the memories are all false. It means doubt is now part of the evidence, and you need to handle it with the same discipline you handle anything else."

"Did Mara think Fallow was changing her memories?"

Lena's eyes held his.

She did not answer.

Elias understood the answer anyway.

CHAPTER SIX

Alder Row

The building on Alder Row had been painted yellow. Elias stood across the street with his hands in his coat pockets and felt irrationally offended by it. The brick had been brown when he lived there, stained almost black beneath the gutters. Someone had replaced the front door, removed the iron railing and turned the narrow ground-floor storage room into a bicycle cage. The number 46 appeared in clean brass beside an intercom where there had once been six separate bells labeled in pen.

He had not been inside for thirteen years. The current owner, a woman named Priya Shah, answered after Elias rang twice. He had emailed that morning claiming he was working on a family-history project and wanted to photograph original architectural features. It was not exactly false. He hated that the distinction came so easily now.

Priya was in her early fifties and wore paint on one sleeve. "You said your family had the second floor?"

"Third. Rear flat."

"Come up. We knocked through two of them in 2020. Don't be alarmed if your childhood has an island kitchen now."

"I was nineteen when we left."

"Then don't be alarmed if your late adolescence has an island kitchen."

The joke made him like her immediately, which complicated the guilt. Upstairs, the old corridor had

vanished. The Venn flat and the unit next door were now one broad apartment filled with plants and pale wood. Elias recognized the position of the windows before anything else. His body turned toward what had been the kitchen without conscious instruction.

The wall was gone.

Priya pointed. "This whole section used to be two rooms. We found three layers of wallpaper and a dead mouse inside the partition, so that was charming." Elias walked to the approximate location of the kitchen table.

The window remained.

Same proportions. Same low sill. The outside drainpipe had been replaced, but the neighboring roofline matched his memory.

He closed his eyes.

Rain.

Blue cup.

Mara's foot moving beneath the table.

The refrigerator clicking off.

He opened his eyes again.

"Do you know what happened to the old fixtures?"

"Some went to salvage. Why?"

"There was a refrigerator here."

Priya smiled. "I assume so."

"White. Tall. Made a clicking noise when the compressor stopped."

"I'm afraid I didn't keep its biography."

Elias smiled despite himself. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for being strange in a place you used to live. That's the entire point of visiting places you used to live."

She left him alone while she took a phone call in another room. Elias measured distances with his steps. Window to former table, seven feet. Table to refrigerator, approximately four. Back door, now sealed behind cabinetry, to chair position, less than three.

Something felt wrong.

He stood where his younger self had sat in the reconstruction. The wet coat had hung over the chair to his right. He remembered smelling the wool strongly when the refrigerator stopped.

But the back door had been immediately behind that chair. If he had arrived in the rain and removed his coat, he would have hung it on the hooks beside the door. The hooks had always been there because his father complained whenever bags ended up on chairs. Elias could see them in old property photographs.

Why put the coat on the chair? Because the reconstruction needed it close enough for him to smell.

The thought arrived before he could stop it. He photographed the room from several angles, then asked Priya whether she had any records from the renovation. She produced a folder containing survey photographs. One showed the old wall before demolition. The refrigerator was still present, abandoned by a previous tenant.

Elias stared at it.

"Can I photograph this?"

"Sure."

The refrigerator was not the one he remembered. Different handle. Different freezer configuration. A cheap silver model, not white.

"Was this here when you bought the place?"

"Yes. Dead as a coffin. Took three men to get it downstairs."

"Do you know how old it was?"

"No idea."

Elias searched the image metadata. 2019. Eight years after Mara disappeared. Appliances changed. Nothing surprising.

Still, his confidence had become hungry for discrepancies. He thanked Priya and walked the neighborhood for nearly an hour. The cafe on the corner had become a pharmacy. Mara's secondary school had replaced its gates. The small grocery where she stole expensive marmalade samples had closed. Ordinary change. Nothing conspiratorial.

On Mercer Lane, he found a charity shop and saw a blue ceramic cup in the window. His body stopped before his mind did.

The cup was not identical. Lighter blue. No crack. Different handle.

He went inside anyway.

The shop smelled of dust and fabric softener. An elderly volunteer wrapped the cup in newspaper after Elias paid two pounds for it.

"Gift?" she asked.

"No."

"Replacement?"

He looked at the cup in her hands.

"Maybe."

Outside, he unwrapped it and held it with both hands. Mara's hands appeared around it in memory.

Then another image interrupted.

A white cup.

Mara holding a white cup in a room Elias did not recognize. The image lasted less than a second.

He nearly dropped the one he was holding. A bus passed, sending a gust of cold air along the pavement. Elias leaned against the shop window and tried to recover what he had seen.

White walls.

A chair.

Mara older than seventeen.

No.

Priya Shah watched Elias stand in the center of her kitchen with the wary patience of someone who had agreed to help a stranger and was beginning to regret the moral impulse. She had bought the Alder Row flat five years earlier, renovated most of it herself, and kept photographs of the work because, as she explained, contractors became much more honest when you could show them exactly what they had broken.

The original floorboards were gone. The yellow cabinets had been painted charcoal. The wall between the kitchen and dining room had been opened, creating a space Elias's memory rejected on sight. Yet the window remained. So did the small uneven corner where the sill had been cut around a pipe.

'You keep looking at that spot,' Priya said.

'There used to be a radiator.'

'There still is. Other side of the wall now.'

'No. It was under the window.'

She opened a folder on her tablet and scrolled through renovation photographs. The earliest image, taken the day she received the keys, showed a narrow

kitchen with peeling cabinets and a radiator mounted on the east wall, not beneath the window.

Elias zoomed in. 'Maybe the previous owner moved it.'

'The pipework says it's been there since dinosaurs.'

He almost corrected her, then stopped. Priya noticed.

'You're here because of your sister, right?'

The question made him look at her.

'I googled the address after you called. Sorry. I wanted to make sure you weren't going to murder me in a historically significant kitchen.'

'Reasonable.'

'It didn't say much. Missing girl. Old articles.' Priya's expression softened in a way Elias disliked because softness often preceded reassurance. Instead she said, 'Do you want to know what I found under the cabinets?'

She led him to a utility cupboard and took down a transparent storage box. Renovation debris had been sorted into labeled bags: old keys, coins, a child's plastic bracelet, screws, fragments of tile. Priya removed a small envelope. 'This was behind the kickboard. I kept it because it looked personal.'

Inside was a strip of four photo-booth pictures. Elias recognized Mara immediately. She was perhaps fifteen, hair tied up, pulling faces at the camera. Beside her sat a girl he did not know. In the first image they were serious. In the second Mara crossed her eyes. In the third the unknown girl kissed Mara's cheek while Mara laughed. In the fourth both had disappeared from frame except for the tops of their heads.

Elias had never seen the photographs. On the back, in Mara's handwriting, were three words: KEEP THE UGLY VERSION.

His thumb rested over the final word.

'Does that mean something?' Priya asked.

'I don't know.'

It was the first honest answer he had given her since arriving. Priya let him keep the strip after he photographed it beside a ruler and wrote a receipt for the transfer because Elias insisted. She watched him sign both copies. 'You do this for everything?'

'Things get disputed.'

'Do you dispute your groceries?'

'Sometimes.'

She laughed, then realized he might not be joking. Elias walked through the flat again, trying not to force memories into the new geometry. In the hallway he stopped before a shallow indentation in the wall. A telephone table had stood there. He remembered Mara sitting on it despite their father's warnings, one foot against the skirting board, talking to someone on the landline after midnight.

'There used to be a table here,' he said.

'Maybe. There were marks when I moved in.'

For once the physical evidence agreed with him. Relief arrived so quickly that he was ashamed of it. He asked whether Priya had photographs of the window from outside before renovation. She searched and found one. Elias enlarged the image. Across the street, the upper floors of another building were visible. A narrow balcony faced the Venn kitchen almost directly.

'Who lives there?'

Priya followed his finger. 'No idea. Mostly rentals.' He stepped closer to the glass and looked across. The balcony was empty now except for a folded chair and a dead plant. In 2011 someone could have seen the kitchen from there. He immediately disliked the thought because it arrived with too much narrative convenience.

'You all right?' Priya asked.

'Yes.'

'That was quick.'

Elias looked at her.

'The answer. People who are all right usually need a second.'

He almost smiled. 'Occupational hazard.' Before leaving, he asked to use the bathroom. He did not need it. He wanted sixty seconds alone to examine the photo strip under neutral light. Mara's handwriting looked genuine. The ink had bled slightly into the old coating. The unknown girl wore a small enamel pin shaped like a moth. Elias felt he had seen it somewhere but could not place it.

He put the photographs carefully into his notebook. On the way back to the kitchen, he passed a framed picture of Priya and two friends. One of them had her eyes closed. Priya had displayed it anyway. KEEP THE UGLY VERSION, Mara had written years earlier, as if instructing herself not to polish something into a better story.

At the window Elias looked across the street once more. The empty balcony remained empty. He told himself he was being watched because the idea now existed, not because anything supported it.

Then he noticed the curtain move in the flat beneath the balcony. A person stepped back before Elias could see the face.

He crossed the kitchen in three strides and looked down at the street. No one emerged. Priya asked what was wrong. Elias said nothing, because he did not know yet whether he had seen evidence or simply movement.

That part made no sense. He closed his eyes and waited for the image to return.

Nothing.

When he opened them, his phone showed a new message from an unknown number.

There was no text.

Only a photograph.

It showed Elias standing inside Priya Shah's apartment fifteen minutes earlier, facing the old kitchen window. The photograph had been taken from across the street.

CHAPTER SEVEN

White Cup

Elias did not look around immediately. The instinct to turn toward every window, doorway and parked car felt too much like obeying the photographer. Instead he enlarged the image on his phone while standing with his back against the charity shop glass.

The photograph had been taken from the opposite side of Alder Row through the branches of a plane tree. Priya's third-floor window was visible behind him. Elias stood in profile inside the former kitchen, one hand resting on the sill. The resolution was good enough to show the seam of his coat and the shape of his ear, but the image contained no useful reflection, no obvious metadata and no identifying background beyond the street he was already standing on.

He saved a local copy, disabled network access and checked the message properties. The sender address resolved to an anonymous relay that would retain no subscriber information longer than twenty-four hours. Whoever had sent it either understood privacy infrastructure or had read one of the first ten search results on the subject. Elias refused to grant expertise where ordinary caution would do.

He crossed the street only after a full minute. The place from which the photograph had likely been taken was occupied by a bus shelter and two parked delivery vans. A cafe farther down had an exterior camera. He went inside, bought a coffee he did not want and asked

the manager whether their security system covered the pavement.

"Depends why," the manager said.

"Someone photographed me from outside."

"That illegal?"

"Probably not."

"Then probably not my problem."

Elias showed his Morrow identification without explaining what Morrow had to do with anything. The manager's posture changed slightly. Reputation was a form of access control. Ten minutes later they were reviewing footage in a cupboard office behind sacks of coffee beans. Between 12:36 and 12:48, pedestrians crossed the likely camera angle seventeen times. A courier stopped by the shelter. A woman pushed a pram. A man in a dark cap stood near the tree for nearly four minutes while looking at his phone.

The cafe camera caught him only from behind. At 12:43 he raised the phone toward Priya's window.

Elias paused the frame.

Average height. Dark rain jacket. Light trainers. A grey messenger bag.

Nothing distinctive.

"Know him?" the manager asked.

"No."

"Ex?"

Elias looked at him.

"You have the face of somebody whose ex would photograph him from a bus stop."

"I don't know what that means."

"Neither do I. Sounded right."

Elias copied the clip with permission and left. He did not notice the white cup until he was halfway to the station. The photograph on his phone showed only his upper body and the window. Yet at the lower edge, almost outside the frame, a pale circular shape reflected in the glass behind him. It could have been a ceiling fixture from Priya's apartment. It could have been a bowl on the island.

Or a cup.

He zoomed until pixels broke apart. A memory returned with no warning.

White ceramic between Mara's hands. Fluorescent light. Her hair tied back. She was older, not seventeen. Twenty-three, perhaps twenty-four. There was a small scar near her chin he did not remember from childhood.

Someone said, Are you sure you want him here? Mara answered, He'll come anyway.

The image collapsed.

Elias stopped in the middle of the pavement as people moved around him. He did not know where the memory belonged.

He did not know if it belonged anywhere. His phone rang. This time the caller was Ivo.

"Please tell me you're not currently breaking into anything," Ivo said.

"I'm outside."

"That is not a no."

"What happened?"

"I found the cup."

Elias tightened his grip on the charity-shop bag. "What cup?"

"The one from your reconstruction. You sent me the rendered object model last night when you exported the session diagnostics. I ran it through object provenance because apparently I enjoy losing access privileges."

"And?"

"Come back."

"Tell me."

"The glaze pattern is catalogued."

Elias said nothing.

Ivo continued. "Not just the color. The crackled edge, the cobalt gradient, the handle profile. It's an Ashfield Ceramics model called Harbor Blue."

"Fine."

"It entered production in 2016."

The street noise seemed to move farther away.

"You're certain?"

"Company catalogue, trade listings, archived retailer pages. First public sale March 2016. No earlier prototype images I can find."

Elias looked down at the cheap blue cup he had bought minutes earlier. "Vela could have substituted a later object."

"Yes."

"Object substitution is common when source images are poor."

"Also yes."

"So it doesn't prove anything."

"Elias, I'm agreeing with you. You sound disappointed."

He was.

A simple system error would have been useful. It would have contained the problem inside Vela. Instead

the later cup created another question. If Vela had introduced a 2016 object into a 2011 scene, why did Elias remember the same cup before ever running the reconstruction?

"Ivo," he said, "did the system choose the cup from my self-report?"

"Checking."

Keyboard sounds came through the phone.

Then nothing.

"Ivo?"

"The cup object is not sourced from the 2011 scene."

"Where is it sourced?"

"Legacy reconstruction asset. 2018."

Elias closed his eyes.

White cup.

Older Mara.

He opened them again.

"Asset owner?"

"Redacted. But there's a session tag."

"Read it."

Ivo hesitated.

"CONTINUITY VENN-E."

Elias stood beneath a clear October sky holding a blue cup that had not existed when his sister disappeared and understood, for the first time, that the object in his most trusted memory might have come from somewhere he had actually been.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Confidence

Lena refused to discuss the 2018 asset until Elias completed a formal cognitive evaluation. He accused her of bargaining with medical information. She said she was refusing to add new material to an already destabilized autobiographical account without first establishing a baseline. Celia, copied on the exchange, sent only one line: I agree with Dr. Ors.

By three that afternoon Elias sat in a consultation room with no immersion equipment, no cameras visible and a paper cup of water he had not touched. Lena placed a stack of printed cards between them.

"This isn't a competence test," she said.

"Then don't score it."

"Everything gets scored. The score isn't the purpose."

"That sentence should worry you."

"It does."

The answer arrived without defensiveness, which made it difficult to use against her. Lena began with ordinary memory prompts. His childhood bedroom. His first school. His mother's funeral. University orientation. The morning Mara was reported missing. Elias answered in short factual descriptions and stopped whenever she asked what he felt.

"You keep converting emotional questions into spatial ones," Lena said after he described the church seating instead of the funeral.

"Spatial details are easier to verify."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I know."

She set one card aside. "Tell me about your mother making breakfast." Elias almost laughed. "Which breakfast?"

"Any one you remember."

A scene came quickly. Helen Venn at the stove in a faded red dressing gown, burning toast while listening to a radio presenter complain about train strikes. Mara sat at the table with cereal. Elias was fourteen and late for school. His mother turned, holding a butter knife, and said, If you miss that bus I'm not driving you.

He described it.

"How confident are you?" Lena asked.

"Eighty percent."

"Why not higher?"

"The dressing gown may have been blue."

"Why?"

"There is a photograph of her wearing a blue one around that period."

"Anything else?"

"The radio program ran weekdays. The bus schedule fits. Mara would have been twelve."

Lena watched him. "You just audited breakfast."

"You asked for confidence."

"Yes. I wanted to see how you produce it."

She slid a blank card toward him. "Now the kitchen. No reconstruction. No notes. Tell me the first five details that come without searching." Elias looked at the card.

"Blue cup. Rain. Mara's left sock slipping at the heel. Wet wool from my coat. Refrigerator stops before she speaks."

"Confidence?"

"Cup, ninety-nine. Rain, ninety-five. Sock, eighty. Coat, ninety. Refrigerator, ninety-five."

"You know the cup could not have existed."

"The specific model could not have existed. The memory of a blue cup could still be correct."

"Good."

He disliked the approval.

Lena continued. "What color was the cup in Mara's original source evidence?"

"I haven't seen it."

"Exactly."

"You have."

She ignored that. "What happens if I tell you it was white?"

The room changed.

Not physically. His attention simply reorganized around the water cup near his hand. White paper. White ceramic from the flash of older Mara. The white mug in Lena's office.

"Was it?" he asked.

"I asked what happens if I tell you."

"My confidence changes."

"Even without evidence."

"Because you have information I may not."

"Which means confidence is partly social."

"Everything is partly social if you define the category broadly enough."

"Do you trust me?"

The question was so direct he took longer than he wanted.

"Professionally?"

"That isn't an answer."

"It is a boundary."

Lena leaned back. "Fine. Do you believe I would knowingly give you false information about Mara?"

"Yesterday I would have said no."

"Today?"

"You knew her and concealed it for five years."

"I did not introduce a false fact."

"You let me maintain one."

"Which one?"

"That you had never met her."

"Did you ever ask?"

Elias stared at her.

Lena's expression softened, though not apologetically. "I'm not saying that to absolve myself. I'm asking because omissions become memories too. We infer the shape of what people never told us. Later we experience the inference as if somebody said it aloud."

Elias thought of the line from Mara that he could hear but could not locate: You look ridiculous.

"Is that what happened to the kitchen?"

"I don't know."

"You keep saying that."

"Because there are things I don't know and things I am not permitted to tell you. Those are different categories. I am trying not to blur them."

"Then label them."

For the first time Lena looked tired. "You think labels keep categories clean. They don't." She removed one final card from the stack. It contained a photograph.

A children's playground. Summer. Two boys near a climbing frame. A girl on a swing partly cut off by the image.

Elias recognized it instantly.

"Havers Park. I was nine. Mara was seven. Owen took the picture."

Lena's gaze sharpened. "Owen who?"

"March. He lived two streets over."

"Tell me about him."

Elias looked at the photograph again. Owen March. Freckles. Broken front tooth. Claimed his father was a pilot although Elias later learned he repaired airport baggage equipment. They had built a fort in an abandoned garage. Owen hated peas. Owen moved away when they were eleven.

The details came in a cluster so rich that Elias almost felt relief.

"Why?"

Lena did not answer.

He looked up.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You reacted."

"I asked you to describe him."

"Do you know Owen?"

"No."

"Then why include this photograph?"

Lena took the card back. "Because the image came from your 2018 continuity file." Elias felt the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"The original photograph," Lena said, "has no metadata identifying anyone named Owen March."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't there."

"No. It doesn't."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing yet."

Elias stood.

Lena's voice followed him. "That is exactly the problem."

He stopped.

"What is?"

"You hear uncertainty as accusation."

Elias turned back toward the photograph. The boy near the climbing frame had his face turned away. He could still remember Owen laughing.

He could remember the broken tooth. He could remember a voice saying, Keep the ugly version, Eli. The clean one is always wrong.

But that was not something Owen used to say.

That was Mara.

Or he thought it was.

CHAPTER NINE

Owen March

By six that evening Elias had assembled everything he could find about Owen March. The collection contained almost nothing.

No school enrollment under that name within twenty miles of Dunley during the relevant years. No pediatric registration. No local address matching the street Elias remembered. No archived youth football roster. No birthday invitation among the papers his father had kept. No family photograph with a caption. Search engines returned several men of the right approximate age, none with any connection to Elias's childhood.

Absence from records did not establish nonexistence. Elias repeated this to himself until the sentence became irritating. Children could be registered under different surnames. Families moved. Digital archives were incomplete. His own primary school had lost an entire year of administrative data during a migration in 2004.

So he called people.

His father answered on the seventh ring.

"If this is about your boiler, I told you the pressure valve."

"It's not the boiler."

"Then I'm less useful already."

Gabriel Venn had spent the years after Mara disappeared shrinking his life in ways Elias had never been able to forgive. He moved to a coastal town,

stopped reading news about missing persons and developed a vocabulary for avoiding his daughter's name without appearing to avoid it.

"Do you remember Owen March?" Elias asked.

A pause. "Who?"

"My friend when we lived near Havers Park. Freckles. Broken front tooth. His family moved when I was eleven."

"You had a friend called Oliver."

"Oliver Dane. Different person."

"There was that boy from the garage."

"Owen."

"Maybe. I don't remember his name."

"Did his father work at the airport?"

"Half the neighborhood worked at the airport."

"Did Mara know him?"

His father sighed. "Elias, what is this?"

"I'm checking something."

"You're always checking something."

"Do you remember him or not?"

"I remember you coming home covered in paint after breaking into a garage you had no business being in. There were two boys. Maybe three. I do not remember a dental chart."

Elias closed his eyes. "Thanks."

"Is this about Mara?"

The question surprised him.

"Why would it be?"

"Because everything you check this hard is eventually about Mara."

Elias ended the call ten seconds later, after promising unconvincingly to visit before Christmas. He

contacted Oliver Dane next. They had not spoken since university. Oliver remembered the garage and remembered another boy, but thought his name had been Tom.

"Tall kid?" Oliver asked. "Always had sweets?"

"No. Owen was short."

"Then I don't know."

"You were in the photograph at Havers Park."

"Mate, I was nine. I was in lots of parks."

Elias sent him the image. Three minutes later Oliver replied.

That's me by the climbing frame. Other kid looks like Simon Kells maybe. Simon Kells existed. Elias found school records, a current dental practice in Leeds and a public photograph from a charity run. Simon had freckles as a child and a chipped front tooth visible in an old class picture.

Elias stared at the class photograph for a long time.

He remembered Simon too.

A quiet boy. Good at mathematics. Lived with his grandmother. Never joined them at the garage.

Unless he had.

The boundary between Owen and Simon seemed to move when Elias looked directly at it. He returned to the Havers Park photograph. The boy's face was not visible enough to identify. Yet Elias had spent decades attaching Owen to him with absolute confidence.

He opened the 2018 continuity metadata Ivo had copied before access was terminated. The photograph's asset entry included an audio association.

VOICE ANCHOR 17.

Elias should have stopped.

Instead he used an old local analysis package to examine the tiny cached waveform that had survived in the export. Eight seconds of speech, heavily compressed.

He played it.

A man's voice said, "Try not to improve it. If it's ugly, keep the ugly version."

Elias listened again.

Not Owen.

Adult voice.

Familiar.

He increased clarity without generative repair. The consonants sharpened. The voice belonged to Jonah Quill, a former Morrow engineer Elias had met only twice during industry conferences.

Or perhaps that was wrong too. He searched his email archive for Jonah. The earliest visible correspondence dated 2020, a short exchange about reconstruction bias. Yet the 2018 asset appeared to contain Jonah's voice linked to a childhood photograph.

Elias sent one message.

Did we know each other before 2020? Jonah replied fourteen minutes later.

Who gave you this address?

Elias typed back.

You did. 2020 memory conference. The response came almost immediately.

Don't contact me through Morrow systems.

Then a second message.

And stop using Vela on yourself. The search for Owen March began as an attempt to prove that at least one childhood memory could survive contact with evidence. Elias chose Owen precisely because the

memories were ordinary. No trauma. No Mara. No clinic. Owen had been a boy from primary school who collected bus tickets, hated bananas and once convinced Elias that a teacher's glass eye could record children misbehaving.

Elias remembered sitting beside him during a school assembly. He remembered Owen's handwriting, large and slanted. He remembered a scar across Owen's left knuckle from a dog bite. He could not remember Owen's parents, which seemed normal. Childhood friendships were often intense and administratively invisible.

School records contained no Owen March. Elias searched alternate spellings. March, Marsh, Marche. Owen, Ewan. Nothing. Class photographs showed children he recognized around the places where Owen should have been, but no face produced the internal click of recognition he expected.

He called the school office under the pretext of verifying alumni records for a research project. The administrator, a woman who sounded as though she had spent thirty years being asked unreasonable questions by adults who believed childhood was centrally archived, told him records before 2005 were incomplete. 'We have registers on microfilm if you want to come stare at names until your eyes fall out.'

Elias went.

The school smelled smaller than he remembered. Floor polish, old radiators, cooked vegetables from a kitchen he could not see. Children moved through the corridor in fluorescent jackets. He felt absurdly large among the low hooks and narrow doors.

The administrator introduced herself as Mrs. Bell and placed two boxes of microfilm on a table. 'Don't steal anything. People become nostalgic and suddenly think theft is genealogy.' For three hours Elias searched year registers. His own name appeared. Mara's appeared two years later. Simon Kells appeared in the same class as Elias. A boy named Owen Mercer attended for one term but was six years older. No Owen March.

Mrs. Bell returned with tea and watched him copy names into his notebook. 'Found your ghost?'

'Maybe the name is wrong.'

'Memory is excellent at getting the shape right and the label wrong. My husband spent twenty years calling a holiday cottage Rosebank. It was Rosecroft. Drove there every summer.'

Elias did not want folk wisdom. He wanted records. Still, he wrote Simon Kells beside Owen March because one old class photograph showed Simon sitting where Elias remembered Owen sitting. Simon had dark hair, a narrow face and, when enlarged, what might have been a scar on his left hand.

He found Simon online working as an insurance surveyor in Leeds and called before he could overthink the ethics. Simon answered on the fourth ring, suspicious until Elias named the school. Then his voice brightened with the instant intimacy people granted childhood acquaintances they had not thought about in decades.

'Venn? Jesus. You were the kid who corrected teachers.'

'Not all of them.'

'You corrected Mr. Harris on the capital of Kazakhstan during parents' evening.'

Elias had no memory of that. 'Do you remember Owen March?'

A pause. 'Who?'

Elias described him.

Simon laughed. 'Mate, that's me and Callum mixed together.'

'What?'

'Bus tickets were me. Banana thing was Callum Price. Glass-eye story, that was definitely me. I got detention for it.'

'Dog bite scar?'

'I've got a scar.' Simon sounded amused. 'Not dog. Smashed a greenhouse playing football. My mum still mentions it every Christmas.'

Elias looked at the photograph on the table. Simon's hand was partly visible.

'Did anyone call you Owen?'

'Not unless they were very confused.'

'March?'

'No.'

'Do you remember a teacher or therapist named Owen March?'

The amusement left Simon's voice. 'Therapist? No. Why?'

'Nothing. I'm checking something.'

'About Mara?'

Elias went still. 'Why would you ask that?'

'Because your sister went missing and you disappeared from everyone's life for a while. People remember things, Elias.'

That sentence unsettled him more than it should have. Simon told him something else. After Helen Venn died, Elias had begun spending lunches in the school counseling room even though he was too old for the primary school by then. Mara was still enrolled there, and Elias sometimes collected her. The counselor's name had been Mr. Marchant.

'First name?' Elias asked.

'No clue.'

Mrs. Bell found the personnel ledger. Peter Marchant, educational psychologist, visiting service. Years employed: 2007 to 2009. Elias stared at the name. March. A professional who worked with memory and grief. Simon's face. Callum's dislike of bananas. One childhood person assembled from several real sources.

He should have felt relief. There was an explanation. Instead he remembered Owen leaning close during assembly and saying, very distinctly, When people don't know the answer, they make the answer feel familiar.

No child had spoken like that. Elias wrote the sentence down.

That evening, back at Morrow, he searched the phrase across archived therapy transcripts. One result appeared in a file he could not open. The visible speaker field read L. ORS. He was still staring at it when his secure message window opened by itself with an incoming request from an external address. The sender name was Jonah Quill.

Elias stared at the screen. He had not told Jonah about Vela.

A third message appeared with an address and a time. Tomorrow. 10 a.m. Come alone. Bring paper, not a device.

The address belonged to a laundrette on the south side of Dunley. Elias wrote it in his notebook.

Beneath it he wrote Owen March, then Simon Kells, then Jonah Quill. He looked at the three names until he could no longer tell which one belonged in which part of his life.

CHAPTER TEN

Proof of Absence

At 7:18 the next morning Elias used a physical key to open an archive cabinet in Morrow's older research library. The key had been issued years ago and, unlike his electronic badge, did not report every movement to a central log. He had slept for two hours, dreamed of the kitchen without Mara in it, and decided before waking that he would see the original video.

The decision frightened him less than how settled it felt. He had no access to the restricted file itself, but Vela's source record included a historical accession number. Physical materials from early programs were sometimes mirrored on optical storage because the original researchers distrusted cloud migration. Elias knew this from a preservation project in 2022.

Cabinet H contained Fallow-era media. He found the accession sequence after twelve minutes.

A transparent archival sleeve held an optical disc with handwritten text across the center.

MV 17/10 FINAL HOME.

No name. No explanation.

His hands began to tremble only after he removed it. Elias carried the disc to an offline preservation terminal. The machine took nearly a minute to recognize the format. A directory appeared containing one video and a checksum document dated 2012.

He clicked the video.

The kitchen appeared.

Not reconstructed.

Recorded.

The image was low resolution and badly angled, apparently captured from a device propped near the fruit bowl. Part of the frame was blocked by a glass jar. The colors leaned green. Rain patterned the window behind Mara.

She sat at the table.

Alone.

Elias stopped the video before she spoke. He looked at the cup.

White.

Plain white ceramic.

No blue glaze. No crack near the handle. Mara held it with both hands.

He pressed play.

For the first twenty seconds she said nothing. She wiped beneath one eye with the heel of her hand, looked toward the hallway, then adjusted the device. Her face moved close to the lens.

"Is it recording?"

She looked offscreen.

No one answered.

Mara sat again.

Elias knew every part of her face and suddenly felt he had known none of it. The girl in the video seemed both younger and more composed than the Mara in his memory. She was frightened, yes, but something else existed beneath it. Anger. Purpose.

She looked directly at the camera.

"Eli, if you're watching this, don't do the thing where you decide you've already worked out what I mean."

Elias inhaled sharply.

The line was entirely new. Mara continued. "I know what they wrote. I know what Dad thinks. I know what you think, because you keep telling me in your very calm voice like calm makes it true. I'm not sick. I'm not saying I'm fine. Those aren't the same thing."

She glanced toward the hallway again.

"Fallow has records. There are copies. Lena knows some of it. I don't know what she'll do. I don't know who she works for more, me or them. Maybe that's unfair."

Elias leaned closer to the screen. Mara rubbed her thumb along the white cup.

The exact gesture from his memory.

"If I disappear," she said, and stopped.

Elias's throat closed.

She tried again.

"If I disappear, don't let them tell you I was sick."

The sentence struck him not because it differed from his memory but because it did not.

Same words.

Same pause before sick.

Same downward movement of her eyes. His memory had preserved it perfectly.

Only he had not been there to hear it.

Mara continued speaking.

"And don't make this into something you did. You weren't here tonight. You couldn't have stopped anything tonight because you weren't here. I need you to remember that, okay?"

Elias gripped the edge of the desk.

You weren't here tonight.

The reconstruction had condensed it.

You were never there.

Mara looked toward the doorway. A sound occurred off camera.

The front door opening.

She stood quickly.

For several seconds the image showed only the empty kitchen and the white cup on the table. Footsteps moved through the hall. A woman's voice said something too faint to understand.

Mara returned to the frame. She was no longer alone.

Only part of the second person appeared at first: a dark sleeve, one hand resting on the back of the chair. Mara looked upward at her.

"Did you bring it?" Mara asked.

"Yes."

Elias knew the voice.

Lena.

Twenty-four years old, but unmistakable. The younger Lena entered the frame carrying a folded raincoat and a small canvas bag. Her hair was longer. Her face was thinner. She placed both items beside Mara.

"Pember is still clear," Lena said. "The nine fifty-seven was cancelled, so we use the ten twenty-six."

"And after?"

"You call when you're safe. Not before."

Mara nodded.

Elias stopped breathing.

The ten twenty-six.

His university card showed him leaving campus at 10:26.

A coincidence, perhaps.

But the number echoed.

Mara picked up the canvas bag.

"What about Eli?"

Lena looked toward the recording device. For one terrible second Elias felt as if she were looking at him across fifteen years.

"He can't know yet," Lena said.

Mara closed her eyes.

"He'll hate me."

"Maybe."

"Helpful."

"You asked me not to lie to you."

Mara gave a small laugh. It was not the frightened girl Elias remembered.

It was Mara.

Funny at the worst possible moment. She lifted the white cup, drank what remained, then carried it to the sink.

Before leaving the frame, she returned once more to the camera.

"Eli," she said, "please don't turn me into a dead person just because you can't find me."

The video ended.

Elias remained seated in front of the black screen. He could hear blood moving in his ears.

Mara had left voluntarily.

Lena had helped her.

And fifteen years ago, less than twenty-four hours after that recording, Elias had told police he had been sitting in the kitchen while Mara warned him she might disappear. He had not exaggerated a detail.

He had not confused a date. He had remembered a conversation that had taken place between his sister and a camera.

His memory contained her exact words, her exact movements, the weather, the room, even the gesture of her thumb against the cup. Only one thing had been added.

Him.

Elias reached for his notebook, then stopped. On the black monitor, faintly reflected, someone was standing in the doorway behind him.

He turned.

Lena did not enter the room.

Her face was pale.

"How much did you watch?" she asked.

Elias looked at her for several seconds.

"All of it."

Lena closed her eyes.

Not from surprise.

From recognition.

As if this had happened before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Legacy

Lena remained in the doorway until Elias removed the disc from the preservation terminal and placed it back in its sleeve. Neither of them spoke while he did it. He wanted the ordinary sounds to remain ordinary: the plastic tray sliding shut, the low fan inside the terminal, the click of the archival case. Anger was easier to manage when it had objects around it.

"You helped her leave," he said.

"Yes."

No qualification. No careful language.

"Where did you take her?"

"Pember Station."

"And after that?"

"I don't know where she went that night."

"You said she would call when she was safe."

"She did."

Elias looked at her. "So you did know."

"I knew she was alive. That is not the same as knowing where she was."

"For how long?"

Lena came into the room and closed the door behind her. "You are asking fifteen years of questions as if one answer will become a staircase to the next. It won't. Some of what I can tell you is mine to tell. Some is Mara's. Some belongs to other patients."

"She was seventeen."

"Yes."

"You helped a seventeen-year-old disappear and said nothing to the police."

"I gave the police information that did not reveal where she had gone."

"That's not what I asked."

"No. I did not tell them I drove her to Pember."

Elias felt the old fury he had aimed for years at unknown kidnappers, incompetent investigators and his father searching for a new target. Lena stood close enough to receive it and did not step back.

"Do you know what he became?" Elias asked. "My father. Do you know what I became?"

"Yes."

The answer stopped him.

"What does that mean?"

Lena looked toward the disc. "It means I saw more of it than you remember."

He said nothing.

"The recording is restricted because it was entered into Fallow evidence after Mara left," she continued. "Not because Morrow created it. Fallow's research partnership later transferred archived materials into the systems that became Morrow. The legal chain is ugly. The technical chain is worse."

"Why did she leave?"

"Because she believed the clinic was changing how patients remembered things."

"Was it?"

Lena's pause was smaller than before. "Sometimes."

"Deliberately?"

"Not in the way you mean."

"How do you know what I mean?"

"Because everyone asks the same frightening question first. Did we implant memories? No. We reconstructed incomplete ones. We used family photographs, interviews, recordings and guided imagery to help grief patients revisit periods they couldn't access clearly. The theory was that coherent autobiographical memory reduced distress."

"And?"

"It did."

The simplicity of the answer unsettled him. Lena continued. "Patients slept better. Panic scores fell. Some returned to work. Families reported improvement. But people also began remembering inferred details as if they had witnessed them. A flower vase generated from a photograph would appear in a later verbal memory. A sentence suggested as one possible version would return months later as exact dialogue."

Elias thought of the blue cup.

"Mara noticed."

"Mara documented it."

"And you believed her."

"Eventually."

"What happened before eventually?"

Lena looked down. "I told her memory was reconstructive. I explained source confusion. I did what trained people do when a seventeen-year-old recognizes something that threatens the premise of your work. I gave her vocabulary until the vocabulary sounded like an answer."

That was the first thing Lena had said that sounded like guilt rather than disclosure.

"She recorded herself before sessions," Lena said. "Details. Clothing. rooms. Conversations. Then after. She kept finding movement. Not dramatic changes. Small ones. The kind you would normally dismiss as ordinary memory variation."

"But they weren't ordinary."

"Some probably were. That's what made it difficult."

Elias sat again. He felt exhausted in a way sleep would not correct.

"Why didn't you tell me this five years ago?"

Lena looked at him for a long time. "Because you asked me not to."

Elias almost smiled. "No."

"Yes."

"I met you in 2021."

"No," Lena said. "You remember meeting me in 2021."

The room seemed to lose depth.

"When did we meet?"

"2017."

"That's impossible."

"It isn't."

"I was at Halden University in 2017."

"Partly."

"I have employment records."

"So do I."

"Then show me."

"Not yet."

Elias stood so quickly the chair struck the wall.

Lena did not flinch.

"Stop saying not yet."

"Then stop asking me to pour six years of missing context into a mind that is already trying to replace uncertainty with the first coherent explanation available."

"You think I'm unstable."

"I think you're frightened. Those are not the same thing."

"And I think you've been lying to me."

"Those can both be true."

He hated her for the sentence because it sounded like something she had said before. On his way out, Elias returned the disc to the cabinet. His hand paused over the sleeve before he closed the drawer.

MV 17/10 FINAL HOME.

Beneath it, in smaller handwriting he had missed before, were two letters.

LO.

Lena Ors.

Or something else.

By then Elias no longer trusted initials.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vale Street

The address came from a memory Elias had never considered important. He was eight or nine, walking home with Mara from Havers Park after an argument with Owen. They stopped outside a narrow red-brick house on Vale Street because Mara wanted to steal a flower from the front garden. Elias remembered the number painted on the gate: 312.

The memory surfaced while he was searching old Fallow property records, and once it did, the number would not leave him alone. 312 Vale Street did not exist.

The street ended at 286. Elias checked historical maps. It had always ended there. No renumbering, no demolished extension, no wartime block removed from modern plans. He searched property archives, postal databases and city planning records until the impossible address became almost insulting.

Then he removed the street name and searched only the number against places linked to Morrow.

312 Calder Avenue.

Former address of a research annex leased by Morrow from 2016 to 2019. Elias stared at the result.

The building had been demolished for apartments two years earlier, but planning photographs remained online. Narrow red brick. Small front garden. Black iron gate.

He knew it.

Not from childhood.

His body recognized it anyway. The reaction was physical before it was narrative: pressure behind his nose, a tightening in his forearms, the strange sense that his next step had already happened. He closed the image and opened it again. The feeling returned.

At noon he went there. The new apartment block occupied most of the old footprint. A construction hoarding remained along one side, plastered with advertisements for gyms and meal delivery. Elias walked around the perimeter until he found the surviving brick wall of the neighboring property. From that angle, he could reconstruct where the old entrance had been.

A memory came.

He was standing at the black gate in rain. Not childhood rain. Adult rain. His hands were larger. He wore the dark coat with the repaired pocket.

Someone inside the building buzzed him in. The image disappeared before he crossed the threshold.

Elias leaned against the hoarding and wrote everything immediately. No interpretation. No labels such as memory or hallucination. Just sensory content. Black gate. Rain. Right hand on buzzer. Coat. Smell of cigarette smoke from next property. Woman says, third floor.

He underlined woman once.

A site worker approached from behind the hoarding. "You all right?"

"Yes. Did you work on the demolition?"

"No, mate."

"Do you know what was here?"

"Offices, I think. Why?"

"I used to know someone who worked there."

Another lie that could still be true. Back at Morrow, Ivo had found historical network diagrams for Calder Avenue. The building contained three reconstruction rooms, a small clinical suite and a secure archival lab. The project name had been scrubbed from most visible records.

One floor plan survived in a facilities ticket. Room 3C included a note: Replace acoustic panel after subject impact.

The date was August 2018. Elias touched the screen. "Subject impact?"

"Could mean somebody punched a wall," Ivo said. "Could mean somebody moved furniture into it. Facilities people write like they're protecting themselves from court."

"Can you find who booked the room?"

"Already tried. Calendar archive says restricted clinical."

"Anything else?"

Ivo hesitated, then opened another file. "There was a coffee machine on the third floor."

Elias looked at him.

"I know that sounds stupid. It is stupid. But maintenance records list supplies. Cups too."

He enlarged an invoice.

ASHFIELD CERAMICS, HARBOR BLUE, 12 UNITS.

Delivery date: May 2018.

Vale Street had not existed in his childhood, at least not in the form he remembered. The row of narrow brick houses was real, but the number attached to his memory was wrong. Number 312 belonged to a

converted office building on the other side of Dunley, built years after Elias believed he had visited it as a boy.

He and Ivo went there on a grey Tuesday afternoon under the excuse of checking legacy hardware storage. The building directory listed solicitors, a physiotherapy practice and two empty suites. The third floor had been stripped for renovation. At the end of the corridor, behind a temporary plywood wall, an old brass plaque remained fixed to the plaster.

CALDER CLINICAL RESEARCH ANNEX.

Ivo photographed it. Elias did not.

'This is becoming a theme,' Ivo said.

'What?'

'You refusing to use the camera while making me use mine.'

'I trust your phone more than mine.'

'That is either touching or very stupid.'

A building manager named Mr. Dube let them into the former clinical rooms after Ivo produced a Morrow facilities request that Elias suspected had been written creatively. Most of the internal walls were gone, but Room 3C remained intact because asbestos had been found above the ceiling.

Elias stopped in the doorway. The room was wrong and familiar at once.

There was no childhood wallpaper. No low bookcase. No narrow bed beneath the window as he remembered. Instead the room contained mounting rails for clinical equipment, two-way observation glass and a floor outlet where a chair had once been bolted. Yet the proportions matched a memory he had carried for years of sitting in a friend's bedroom while rain moved over a skylight.

'You know this place,' Ivo said.

'I know a different place with these dimensions.'

'That's not a sentence people should have to say.'

Mr. Dube opened an old storage cupboard and showed them boxes left by previous tenants. Most contained cables and obsolete networking gear. One held ceramic cups wrapped in newspaper. Cheap staff kitchenware, he said, probably abandoned during the move.

Elias reached in and stopped before touching anything.

Blue glaze.

Ivo saw his face. 'Which one?'

Elias pointed.

The cup had a dark cobalt base, lighter rim and a fine pale line beside the handle where the glaze had separated during firing. Not a crack. A manufacturing variation. Ivo pulled on nitrile gloves from his bag because Ivo carried nitrile gloves in situations where normal people carried mints. He lifted the cup and rotated it under the fluorescent light.

'Could be similar.'

'It's the same pattern.'

'You remember a pattern from a reconstruction.'

'I remember it from before the reconstruction.'

Ivo did not argue. That was worse. On the bottom was a maker's stamp: Harbor Blue Ceramics, series 16-B.

Elias searched the manufacturer. The line had launched in March 2016. Five years after Mara disappeared.

He sat on the edge of the bare windowsill. Somewhere in the building a drill started, stopped, then started again. He stared at the cup in Ivo's gloved hand.

'Maybe Vela substituted it from later source material.'

'Sure.'

'Object contamination. We see it constantly.'

'We do.'

'Then why are you looking at me like that?'

Ivo placed the cup carefully on a sheet of clean paper. 'Because your first reconstruction report, the one you wrote before Vela generated the scene, describes the cup as blue with a pale mark beside the handle.'

Elias looked up.

'I checked while you were staring at the wall,' Ivo said. 'That report is dated 2014.'

Two years before the cup existed. For several seconds neither of them spoke.

Elias forced himself to separate the claims. He remembered a blue cup in 2011. He documented a blue cup in 2014. A physically matching cup appeared in a clinical facility in or after 2016. The impossible part was not that Vela had borrowed an object. The impossible part was that Elias had described the future object before it existed.

Unless the 2014 report had been altered. He asked Ivo to pull the original file checksum. It matched a cold-storage backup created in 2015. Not absolute proof, but enough to make simple tampering unlikely.

Mr. Dube returned carrying a ledger. 'You wanted old tenants? Calder Annex signed out in 2019. Before

that, some memory outfit used these rooms. Morrow something.' Ivo and Elias exchanged a look.

'Can we see the ledger?' Elias asked.

The manager shrugged. 'It's boring enough to be public.' Visitor names from 2018 filled three pages. Elias found his own near the bottom.

VENN, E. 14 AUG 2018. CLINICAL PARTICIPANT.

His signature sat beside it. He knew the slope of the V. He knew the way he crossed the final n too low. He had signed the page himself.

The room tilted, not physically but in the way attention can make a space lose its dimensions. Elias touched the paper with one finger.

'I was here.'

Ivo did not say maybe.

'Yes.'

In the storage box, the blue cup waited among eleven others. Elias felt his stomach drop.

The blue cup had been in Calder Avenue.

Not in Mara's kitchen.

"You were there," Ivo said quietly.

Elias did not answer.

The memory of 312 Vale Street had not invented a building from nothing. His mind had taken a real adult location and moved it backward into childhood. He had always believed childhood memories degraded because they were old.

What if some were younger than he was?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Continuity

Ivo found the title at 4:06 p.m.

CONTINUITY PROCEDURE, VENN, ELIAS.

It appeared not inside the restricted clinical record but in a dependency list attached to obsolete software. The procedure itself remained inaccessible. Its support files did not. There were thirty-two asset identifiers, seven environmental profiles, four voice anchors and one object set called KITCHEN-A.

Elias read the list without touching the mouse.

"Open the environmental profiles."

"Read-only cache," Ivo said. "If governance notices, I'm blaming you with charisma."

"You don't have charisma."

"Then this is serious."

The first profile contained room impulse measurements from Calder Avenue Suite 3C. The second contained audio samples from Alder Row, recorded in 2011. Refrigerator compressor. Window under rain. Floorboard movement. Door latch.

Elias felt something cold move through him.

"They had the refrigerator sound."

Ivo looked at the waveform. "Apparently."

"The exact refrigerator in my memory."

"If this is the source, yes."

"Where did they get it?"

The accession record pointed to Fallow Clinic. Mara's home recording project had included environmental audio.

The 2018 continuity procedure combined the adult Calder Avenue room with sensory assets from the Venn apartment.

Elias sat back.

"Show KITCHEN-A."

The object set contained table geometry, window dimensions, strawberry magnet, calendar, wall damage, white ceramic cup and a substitution asset added later.

HARBOR BLUE CUP.

Added: 12 AUG 2018.

Added by: VENN, E.

Elias read his own name.

"Could that be an evaluator tag?"

Ivo did not answer immediately. "Could be."

"But?"

"Asset additions usually show the operator, not the subject. Your modern employee ID is linked to it, but the original local identifier is still in the raw metadata."

He rotated the screen slightly.

EV-042.

"Does that mean anything?" Elias asked.

"Not to me."

It meant something to Elias. His old university research participant number had been 042 in a memory study he volunteered for during postgraduate training.

He had reused the number as a private code for years. Bicycle lock. Storage box. The password to an encrypted drive that he later stopped using. He had added the blue cup.

The conclusion seemed unavoidable and absurd.

"Why would I build my own kitchen memory?"

Ivo's expression became careful. "Maybe you didn't. Maybe you worked on the asset set."

"For a procedure named after me."

"Yes, that part is less encouraging."

A file in the voice-anchor list opened automatically when Elias selected the object set. A woman's voice filled the speakers.

"Again. Start before the refrigerator stops."

Lena.

Then Elias's own voice, younger but unmistakable.

"I know where it starts."

"Knowing isn't the same as accessing."

"Don't use that voice with me."

"Which voice?"

"The one where you're already writing the note."

A chair moved.

Elias heard himself breathe.

Then the refrigerator recording began.

Click.

Low motor hum fading away.

Rain.

His younger voice whispered, "She's holding the cup wrong."

The audio ended.

Elias did not move.

Ivo slowly removed his hands from the keyboard as if the machine might accuse him of something.

"You heard that," Elias said.

"Yes."

"I was there."

"In 2018."

"Doing what?"

Ivo looked at the procedure title.
Continuity.
Neither of them said the word.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After That

Lena agreed to show him one memory and no more.

"Not a reconstruction," she said. "A source clip from 2018. You will watch it once. You will not pause, repeat or enhance it."

"Why?"

"Because repetition is part of the problem."

They sat in a small consultation room without immersion hardware. Celia waited outside, visible through the glass. Elias disliked the arrangement until he realized it was meant to protect Lena as much as him.

The clip opened on a childhood photograph of Havers Park. The same climbing frame. The same two boys. An adult voice asked Elias to describe the scene. Elias's recorded voice answered from off camera.

"Owen took the picture. Mara's on the swing. I'm behind the camera, no, wait, that doesn't work."

A younger Lena said, "Good. Keep the contradiction."

"I hate when you say good after I fail."

"You haven't failed. You noticed the structure can't support your first account."

The camera angle widened.

Elias appeared on screen at twenty-six. He was thinner, unshaven, wearing a grey sweatshirt. A blue cup sat on the table beside him. The sight of it made his throat tighten.

Recorded Elias looked exhausted but not confused.

"Run the house next," he said.

Lena's voice answered, "Not yet."

"Stop controlling the order."

"The order is the procedure."

"Then the procedure is annoying."

The video cut to a rendered childhood street. Elias recognized 312 Vale Street immediately. His younger self spoke over the scene. "We walked past it after Havers. Mara stole a flower."

"Check age cues," Lena said.

"I'm nine."

"Hands."

The camera view dropped.

Adult hands.

Elias on screen swore softly.

"Good," Lena said again.

"There it is."

"Don't repair it."

"I know."

"Elias."

"I know."

The scene froze.

Recorded Elias removed the headset and pressed both hands over his face. When he lowered them, he looked at Lena.

"How many?"

"We don't know."

"How many memories have contamination?"

"We don't know."

"That's becoming your religion."

The clip ended.

Present-day Elias stared at the blank screen.

"What happened after that?"

Lena's face changed.

He recognized the question from the day before, when she had asked whether he remembered what followed a childhood reconstruction.

"You became distressed."

"That's vague."

"You accused us of contaminating more memories than we could demonstrate. You tried to leave. Then you came back an hour later."

"Why?"

"Because you wanted to continue."

"And then?"

Lena looked toward the glass where Celia waited.

"Do you remember what happened after that?"

"No."

"Good."

The word made Elias stand.

"You said that before."

"I know."

"Why is it good?"

Lena's composure cracked just enough for him to see fear beneath it. "Because after that you asked us to do something I still don't know whether I should have agreed to."

"What?"

"I am not telling you in this room."

"Then where?"

"When we have the full consent record and someone independent present."

"You're protecting yourself."

"Yes," Lena said. "And you. Those aren't mutually exclusive."

Elias walked to the door. Behind him Lena said, "You asked for the blue cup."

He stopped.

"Why?"

"You said the white one belonged to Mara."

Elias turned.

Lena looked down at her hands.

"You wanted something in the memory that belonged only to you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jonah Quill

The laundrette on Isbell Road had six machines, four plastic chairs and no apparent reason to be open at ten on a Wednesday morning. Jonah Quill sat between two dryers reading a newspaper printed on actual paper. He had grown a beard since Elias last remembered seeing him and wore a black wool coat despite the overheated room.

"Phone," Jonah said without greeting.

"Left at home."

"Watch?"

Elias removed it and placed it in the coin tray of an unused washer.

"Anything else that talks?"

"I do occasionally."

Jonah folded the newspaper. "That became less funny after Morrow." Elias sat opposite him. "You knew me before 2020."

"Yes."

"When?"

"2016."

The answer arrived like a slap delivered without anger.

"Where?"

"Morrow research annex. Calder Avenue. You were consulting on evidentiary reconstruction. Officially. Unofficially you were looking for your sister."

"I didn't work for Morrow in 2016."

"You keep saying sentences like records can't embarrass you."

"I have contracts from Halden University."

"You had both. Morrow paid through a university partnership. You spent two days a week with us, sometimes five when you lied to your supervisor."

Elias opened his notebook. Jonah watched the movement.

"Still paper," he said.

"Apparently I had reasons."

"You had many reasons. Some were even good."

"Tell me about Continuity Venn-E."

Jonah's face hardened. "No."

"Then why ask me here?"

"To tell you to stop digging through Morrow systems before they decide you're a data-exfiltration problem rather than a former patient."

"Former patient."

"Participant, subject, patient. Pick whichever word hurts least."

"Was I treated?"

"You volunteered."

"For what?"

Jonah looked toward the dryers. A red shirt moved in slow circles behind glass.

"You already know the early research was about reconstructed memory. What Lena probably hasn't told you is how the success metric changed."

"Narrative stability."

Jonah looked back sharply. "Where did you hear that?"

"I haven't."

The phrase had simply appeared in his mind. Jonah's expression told him that mattered.

"In the beginning," Jonah said, "we measured factual fidelity against known sources. Then clinicians noticed patients with coherent reconstructions did better, even when fidelity was lower. Lower anxiety, fewer intrusive symptoms, better sleep. So somebody created Narrative Stability. The more consistently a patient accepted a reconstruction, the better the outcome score looked."

"Acceptance became accuracy."

"Not officially. That's how bad systems survive. Nobody writes the monstrous sentence. They build five reasonable sentences that add up to it."

"Mara found this."

"Mara was the first person I met who understood the machine better by refusing to trust it."

Elias's pen stopped. "You knew her."

"Briefly."

"Before she disappeared?"

"Yes."

"You helped her copy files."

Jonah looked away.

That was answer enough.

"Was she alive in 2018?"

Jonah stood.

Elias did too.

"Sit down," Jonah said. "You have the same terrible habit you had at twenty-six. Standing doesn't make the question larger."

"Answer it."

"I won't."

"Because she's alive?"

"Because you made me promise not to answer that question if you ever asked it without remembering why you told me not to."

Elias felt the laundrette tilt slightly, though nothing moved.

"I made you promise."

"Yes."

"When?"

"September 2018."

Jonah reached inside his coat and removed a small envelope. "You gave me this too. Said if you came back asking the wrong questions, I should wait until you found Pember on your own. You have, apparently."

Inside the envelope was a single photograph. Elias stood outside Pember Station in 2018. Lena was beside him. Between them was a woman with her face turned away from the camera.

The woman wore a green sweatshirt. Jonah had chosen the laundrette because nobody stayed long enough to notice anyone else. At ten in the morning the dryers turned behind them with a steady mechanical rhythm, shirts and towels lifting and falling through circles of glass. A woman near the window read a paperback while three machines completed different versions of the same task.

Elias arrived nine minutes early. Jonah arrived thirteen minutes late and did not apologize. He wore a charcoal coat, carried a folded newspaper and looked nothing like the photographs attached to old Morrow patents. His hair had gone almost completely grey at the temples. He had the contained impatience of someone

who had spent years explaining technical problems to people who preferred ethical ones to remain abstract.

'Phone,' Jonah said.

Elias placed it on the plastic table between them.

'Off.'

'It is.'

'Battery?'

'Not removable.'

Jonah gave him a look. 'Progress.' Elias put the phone in a metal service locker and turned the key. Jonah watched until the door closed, then sat opposite him. 'Lena know you're here?'

'No.'

'Rohe?'

'No.'

'Good. That means either you're finally learning or nobody trusts you enough to ask.'

Elias disliked him immediately, which was useful. Distrust came more naturally when affection was absent. Jonah unfolded the newspaper but did not read it. 'You found Continuity.'

'A label.'

'Labels are where companies put crimes until legal decides on better nouns.'

'Was it a memory implantation project?'

Jonah's expression sharpened. 'Don't use that phrase.'

'Why?'

'Because it gives you the wrong machine in your head. Nobody opened a skull and installed an event. We built reconstructions. People experienced them repeatedly. The brain did what brains do. It integrated.'

'You knew that could happen.'

'Eventually.'

'And continued.'

'Eventually is doing a lot of work in that sentence.' Jonah rubbed his thumb over the fold of the paper. 'At Fallow we thought vivid reconstruction would help grief patients access context around fragmented memories. Smell, room geometry, voices, photographs. The early results were excellent if you measured distress. People slept better. Panic scores fell. Families reported closure.'

'And accuracy?'

'Accuracy was complicated.'

'Meaning bad.'

'Meaning we could verify objects and dates more easily than subjective experience. Then we noticed people repeating inferred details in later interviews without remembering where the detail came from.'

'Source-monitoring error.'

'Yes. Except when the source was an immersive scene, the confidence increase was much stronger. A photograph suggestion fades. A room you have walked through, touched, heard, spoken inside, that gets stored differently.'

Elias thought of Mara's cup. The wet coat. The refrigerator switching off at exactly the right second.

'Why didn't you stop?'

Jonah laughed once, without humor. 'You have worked in companies. You know the answer. Because half the team thought we should. A quarter thought the effect could be controlled. A quarter thought reduced suffering justified some uncertainty. Those fractions changed every meeting.'

'Where was Lena?'

'In the half that wanted stronger warnings. Then in the quarter that believed control was possible. Then somewhere harder to name.'

'And Rohe?'

'Rohe believed an imperfect treatment that helped real people was morally superior to a perfect treatment that didn't exist.'

'That's convenient.'

'Most sincere beliefs are.'

A dryer buzzer sounded. The woman by the window stood, opened the door and began removing warm sheets. Jonah waited until she was at the far end of the room.

'Mara understood the problem before some of us did,' he said. 'Because she was inside it.'

Elias leaned forward. 'You knew her.'

'I knew a participant who refused to let us call an inference a memory.'

'Don't reduce her to a participant.'

'Then don't reduce me to a villain. We can both have preferences.'

Elias sat back.

Jonah continued. 'She recorded herself before sessions. Details, emotional state, what she thought was uncertain. Then she compared those notes with later interviews. It was better methodology than ours.'

'She stole research files.'

'Copied. Theft is a legal word and I'm old enough to enjoy precision.'

'You helped.'

Jonah looked toward the machines. 'I made certain permissions less competent than they might otherwise have been.'

'Why?'

'Because a seventeen-year-old shouldn't have had to prove to adults that her own uncertainty belonged to her.'

The sentence landed differently than Elias expected. He wanted information, not a defense of Mara he had never heard before.

'What happened in 2018?'

Jonah's jaw tightened. 'You happened.'

'I don't remember.'

'I know.'

'Everyone keeps saying that as if it excuses them.'

'It doesn't.' Jonah reached inside the newspaper and removed a plain envelope. 'You came to me with archived Fallow identifiers. You were already inside Morrow by then, though apparently your HR history has been cleaned into something prettier. You believed one subject ID belonged to Mara.'

'Did it?'

'You found out.'

'How?'

'You were persistent and unpleasant.'

'That sounds plausible.'

'You also knew exactly which systems not to trust. More than you know now.'

Jonah slid the envelope across the table. Inside was a photocopy of a handwritten data map. Elias recognized his own handwriting before he read a word. Arrows connected Fallow participant codes to later Morrow

archive containers. One code had been circled three times: F-117-MV.

Beside it Elias had written: NOT DEAD. STOP SEARCHING PUBLIC RECORDS.

His chest tightened.

'Where did you get this?'

'You gave it to me.'

'Why?'

'Insurance. You were very interested in analog redundancy.'

Elias looked at the note. 'Did I find her?' Jonah did not answer immediately. 'You found enough to become afraid of finding more.'

'That's not an answer.'

'It is the one I promised you.'

'Promised when?'

'2018.'

Elias put the map back into the envelope carefully because his fingers had started to shake.

'What else did I ask you to do?'

'If you ever came back without remembering, I was to give you evidence but not conclusions.'

'Why?'

'Your words?' Jonah looked at him. 'Because conclusions are the easiest thing to plant.'

He reached beneath the newspaper again and produced a photograph, glossy and small. Elias saw himself first, thinner, unshaven, standing beside a brick wall. The date stamp on the back was September 2018. Beside him stood a woman turned away from the camera. Dark hair. Green fabric visible at one shoulder.

Mara's old green sweatshirt.

Elias looked at Jonah.

"Who took this?"

"You did. Timer on a cheap camera. You were very proud of avoiding metadata."

"Is that Mara?"

Jonah folded the newspaper under his arm. "Find the original. Don't let me become your memory." He left through the laundrette door.

Elias remained beside the washing machines, holding a photograph from a year of his life he could not remember, looking at the back of a woman who might have been his sister seven years after she disappeared.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mara, Unedited

Elias spent the afternoon assembling Mara from sources that had never belonged to him. He began with public material. School newsletters. Debate-club minutes. A photograph from a charity race in which Mara stood at the back making rabbit ears behind a teacher's head. A student magazine contained a short review she had written of a terrible local production of *Macbeth*. Elias read it twice because he had forgotten how funny she could be when she disliked something.

The review began politely, then compared the actor playing *Macbeth* to a man who had recently discovered both murder and constipation. Mara had been sixteen. Elias laughed aloud at his desk.

The sound startled him.

He had spent fifteen years remembering Mara primarily as frightened. The kitchen had become the frame around every earlier version of her. Even happy memories seemed to lead toward that table eventually, as if she had been walking toward disappearance from childhood.

The sources disagreed.

A video from school showed her arguing with a prefect about a dress-code rule, not tearful but delighted by the argument. An old message thread with a friend named Nessa contained twenty-three consecutive jokes about a substitute teacher's shoes. In another, Mara lied about her age to get into a music venue, was caught, and

blamed Elias by inventing a nonexistent older brother who had supposedly abandoned her outside.

He found the message he had sent her afterward.

You are insane.

Mara: Not clinically, apparently.

The date was February 2011.

Elias stopped smiling.

The phrase was not casual in context. By then she had already been arguing with Fallow. He requested access to the police-released portion of Mara's old phone archive and compared it with his personal backup. Hundreds of messages were missing from his copy. Some had never been given to the family. Others had been withheld during the original investigation because they involved minors or clinical matters.

Tess Calder's name appeared repeatedly. At the time Tess had been a twenty-two-year-old trainee reporter at the Dunley Chronicle. Mara had contacted her through an anonymous email address. Their early messages were cautious.

Mara: Hypothetically, if a clinic recorded a patient remembering something differently after treatment, who owns the recording? Tess: Hypothetically, depends on consent, age, medical privacy, who funded the research and whether the patient signed away rights they didn't understand.

Mara: You made hypothetical much less fun.

Tess: Journalism does that.

Over the following months the messages became less hypothetical. Mara sent descriptions of Fallow sessions, never full documents. She believed the clinic's researchers were marking inferred scene details as

therapeutic completions, then later citing patients' confidence in those same details as evidence the reconstructions were accurate.

Tess repeatedly asked for proof. Mara repeatedly replied that proof was the problem.

One message read: They keep saying memory changes naturally, which is true, so every change they cause can hide inside the changes that would happen anyway.

Elias leaned back.

That sentence sounded more like the adult systems arguments he heard at Morrow than anything he remembered his seventeen-year-old sister saying. Another exchange hurt for a different reason.

Tess: Does your brother know? Mara: He knows I think something is wrong.

Tess: Not the same question.

Mara: He likes evidence.

Tess: So give him evidence. Mara: If evidence comes from me, he thinks the first question is whether I'm okay.

Elias read the line again. He tried to remember the conversations Mara meant. There had been arguments about sleep, medication, school absences. He remembered telling her he believed her. The statement remained clear.

I believe you, Mara.

But what had he believed?

That she was afraid?

That Fallow had done something wrong?

That she needed help?

Memory supplied his own calm voice, but not the words before or after. He opened a voice message Mara had sent Nessa three days before disappearing.

"Eli did the face again," Mara said, laughing softly. "The one where he's being supportive so hard you can practically hear the checklist. I told him I don't need him to fix me and he said, I know, which is exactly what someone says right before trying to fix you."

Nessa replied with a voice note full of laughter. Elias put the headphones down.

He had loved Mara. That fact had always felt morally sufficient. The archive was showing him that love could be accurate about itself and wrong about the person receiving it. Near evening he found a video from August 2011. Mara and Nessa sat on the floor of the Venn living room eating takeaway noodles. Elias was visible only at the edge, moving through the room with a stack of books.

Mara called, "Eli, what's the capital of Mongolia?"

"Ulaanbaatar."

"See?" she told Nessa. "Completely useless but incredible in emergencies involving Mongolia."

Off camera, Elias said, "You asked me."

"That's how traps work."

He watched himself cross the frame.

Nothing sinister. Nothing broken.

For twelve seconds, the three of them were ordinary. Elias replayed the clip once, then forced himself not to again.

Elias spent the afternoon listening to Mara without looking at her. Video made it too easy to search her face for clues she had never intended to provide. Audio

forced him to hear the person instead of the missing girl in the police photograph.

The recordings came from old phones, school projects, forgotten voice notes and corrupted backups Morrow had repaired with varying confidence. He ignored everything Vela had synthetically cleaned and selected only files with original audio available. Static remained. Doors slammed. One recording began with forty seconds of someone searching for the device beneath clothing.

Mara at fourteen was trying to learn Italian because she had decided she would live in Florence, though her pronunciation caused Helen to laugh so hard in the background that Mara threatened to emigrate sooner. Mara at fifteen recorded herself interviewing their father about his first job and spent half the conversation accusing him of lying about how much hair he once had. Mara at sixteen left Elias a voice message asking him to buy toothpaste, then spent the final twenty seconds singing the word toothpaste to the tune of a pop song he could no longer identify.

He had forgotten how frequently she laughed at her own jokes. His memories of the final year had flattened her into moods: frightened, secretive, angry, missing. The recordings resisted him. Mara complained about homework. Mara flirted badly with someone named Jules. Mara discussed stealing tiny jars of marmalade from hotels because, in her words, 'breakfast buffets are capitalism's only negotiable border.' Mara told a friend she wanted to study industrial design. Elias had believed she wanted psychology.

He searched his memory for the origin of that belief. Their mother had wanted psychology. Mara had once said she liked one psychology teacher. Somewhere, over fifteen years, those facts had fused into an ambition he had repeated to journalists as though it belonged to her.

Elias wrote INDUSTRIAL DESIGN in his notebook and felt stupidly ashamed. A file from February 2011 contained Mara and an unidentified girl in a coffee shop. Cups clicked. Music played too loudly. The girl asked why Mara was still going to Fallow if she distrusted them.

'Because if I stop, they write noncompliant,' Mara said.

'So?'

'So noncompliant becomes resistant, resistant becomes paranoid, and then every complaint proves the file.'

The girl swore softly.

Mara continued, lighter now. 'Also Lena sneaks me biscuits.'

Elias replayed the sentence.

Lena.

Not Dr. Ors. Lena.

There was familiarity in Mara's voice. Not friendship exactly, but trust. The girl asked whether Lena believed her.

'Sometimes. Then she gets scared of believing me and starts speaking like a paper.'

Elias almost smiled. He could imagine Lena hearing that criticism and accepting it with painful precision. Another recording, three months later, was harsher. Mara was alone, apparently speaking into a laptop

microphone. 'Session twelve. They reconstructed Mum's coat red again. It was beige. I brought the photograph. They said color confidence was low and emotional salience might explain why red felt correct.' She inhaled. 'I know it was beige because I didn't remember a color before they showed me red.'

Elias stopped the file.

The distinction was devastatingly simple. Not I remembered beige and they showed me red. I didn't remember a color before they showed me red.

He understood why that frightened her. An uncertain space had been occupied. Once occupied, it was difficult to experience the uncertainty that preceded it. He opened the associated Fallow notes. Most were restricted, but one imported clinical summary remained visible: PATIENT DEMONSTRATES INCREASED PREOCCUPATION WITH FACTUAL MINUTIAE AND DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING THERAPEUTIC NARRATIVE FRAME.

Elias read the sentence until anger made the letters sharper.

Factual minutiae.

The color of her dead mother's coat had become a symptom because she insisted that people distinguish between evidence and reconstruction. He understood Mara's fury in a way he had not when she was seventeen. At nineteen, Elias had thought she was arguing over details because grief made her cling to control. He had probably told her so. He could almost hear himself using the kind of gentle voice that made certainty sound compassionate.

The next audio file confirmed it. It was a voicemail from Mara to a friend. 'Eli did the thing again where he says he believes me but means he believes I believe myself. I swear if he studies one more article about trauma I'm going to set his printer on fire.'

Elias covered his eyes with one hand. Mara's friend laughed. 'He loves you.'

'I know. It's exhausting.'

'That's harsh.'

'No, loving him is also exhausting. We're even.'

The file ended with Mara ordering chips from somebody across the room.

Elias sat very still.

He had spent years remembering himself as the person who believed Mara when institutions did not. The record was less flattering. He had believed her distress. He had believed she was afraid. But when she described what Fallow was doing, he had treated her interpretation as something to be checked by the same kinds of experts she distrusted.

Kindness could still be disbelief. He wrote that down, then hated the neatness of it and crossed it out.

Near six, Ivo appeared at the archive door carrying two vending-machine coffees. He handed Elias one and looked at the waveform on screen. 'Finding anything useful?'

'I'm finding someone I remember badly.'

'That's everyone we know.'

Elias looked at him.

Ivo shrugged. 'My mother remembers me as a quiet child. There are witnesses to the contrary.'

'This is different.'

'Of course it is. But different doesn't mean every correction is sinister.'

Elias knew that. He needed Ivo to keep saying it anyway. They listened to a recording of Mara trying to teach their father how to use a new phone. Halfway through, she called the interface 'a crime against thumbs.' Ivo laughed. Elias did too.

For five minutes the archive was not evidence. It was simply a room where his sister's voice existed. Then the next file loaded.

At the end of Mara's archive was an audio file he did not recognize. It had been recovered from a school laptop two weeks after she vanished.

Mara spoke alone.

"For the record, in case I start remembering this differently: I don't hate Elias. I'm angry at him. Those are different. He thinks I need him to be certain because he's scared of what happens if he isn't."

She paused.

"Also he owes me forty pounds. If I disappear, somebody collect that."

Elias laughed and covered his mouth with one hand. The laugh broke halfway through.

He sat alone in the Morrow archive with tears on his face and felt embarrassed because Mara would have made fun of him for that too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Version History

The photograph was one Elias had carried in his wallet for seven years. Mara at thirteen, sitting on the sea wall at Ternmouth with wind pushing her hair across her face. Their mother had taken it during what became the family's last summer holiday together. Elias remembered the yellow raincoat Mara wore, the orange ice lolly in her hand, and the white boat near the horizon.

The digital file showed a red raincoat. He found it by accident while comparing family images against Fallow-era assets. At first he assumed the scan had shifted color. Old prints did strange things under cheap scanners. Then he opened the photograph from his own encrypted archive.

Yellow.

Same composition.

Same file dimensions.

Same date.

He placed the two versions side by side. In the yellow image, a white boat sat near the horizon.

In the red image, there was no boat.

Elias called Ivo.

"Please tell me you have eaten something," Ivo said.

"I have two versions of the same photograph."

"That is not food."

"Can you compare provenance?"

Ivo arrived with a sandwich and refused to touch the workstation until Elias ate half of it. Then he ran both images through checksum and processing-history tools.

"Neither is the untouched original," he said after ten minutes.

"What?"

"Your yellow one was exported by Morrow Enhancement 2.7 in 2022. The red one by Enhancement 1.3 in 2019."

"I didn't enhance it."

"Maybe it was automatic during archive migration. We used to run low-resolution images through restoration unless users opted out."

"Restoration shouldn't change a coat from red to yellow."

"Correct."

Ivo opened the pixel-confidence layers. "But it didn't exactly change it. The original color channels are damaged. Version 1.3 inferred red from surrounding values. Version 2.7 used another photograph from the same holiday and inferred yellow."

"The boat?"

"Not present in recoverable source pixels. 2.7 added it as scene completion based on other images from Ternmouth harbor."

Elias looked at the yellow version. He had stared at it during difficult years. It had sat in his wallet, then on his desk, then inside a notebook after the paper copy tore. He could remember the yellow coat independently of the photograph.

Could he?

"Which color was real?"

"We'd need the original print."

"Dad may have it."

"Then ask him."

Elias called Gabriel again.

His father sounded annoyed until Elias described the photograph.

"Red," Gabriel said immediately.

"You're sure?"

"Your mother bought that coat. Mara hated it because she said she looked like a fire alarm."

Elias closed his eyes.

Mara saying, I look like a fire alarm. The sentence arrived at once.

Where had it been a second ago?

"Do you still have the print?"

"Maybe in the boxes. Why?"

"Can you find it?"

"Now?"

"Today."

Gabriel was quiet. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Making a detail responsible for the whole world."

Elias almost ended the call. Instead he said, "Please find it." His father sighed. "I'll look."

Afterward Ivo watched Elias compare the two digital versions again.

"This part matters," Ivo said.

"Which part?"

"Neither system was trying to deceive you. Both were trying to help."

"One invented a boat."

"Because its job was called restoration and users complained when damaged photos looked damaged."

"So it lied aesthetically."

"It guessed aesthetically. Then somebody saved the guess as a photograph."

Elias stared at the image that had lived in his wallet. The danger was not that a machine could make a false picture.

People understood altered pictures.

The danger was that after enough years the altered picture had become one of the sources from which he remembered the day. His father called back at 9:12 that night.

"Found it," Gabriel said.

"And?"

A pause.

"The coat is yellow."

Elias sat straighter. "You said red."

"I know what I said."

"Is the print original?"

"Looks original. Helen's handwriting on the back."

"Send me a photograph."

"No."

"Dad."

"You come here and look at it with your own eyes. I'm not sending you another picture of a picture so you can ask a machine which picture is more true."

Elias had no answer.

His father continued, softer. "And Elias?"

"What?"

"There is a boat in it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Access Revoked

Celia Dain removed Elias's archive access at 9:03 the following morning. She did it in person.

"You entered a restricted physical collection, copied protected clinical metadata and involved a systems engineer in circumventing governance controls," she said. "You are suspended from reconstruction review pending investigation. Your employee credentials remain active for HR, legal and your own medical records. Everything else is read-only or unavailable."

Elias sat across from her in a conference room with transparent walls. People passed outside carrying laptops and coffee. The visibility made the conversation feel more private, not less.

"You knew I would find the video eventually."

"That is not relevant to your access."

"It is relevant to why the access disappeared while I was looking at it."

Celia folded her hands. "I changed the permissions." Elias had expected denial. The admission made him pause.

"You?"

"Yes. Your attempts triggered policy review. I saw the source was mis-scoped to an employee reconstruction and restricted it correctly."

"Then why was it available at all?"

"Vela's legacy ingestion imported relationship metadata more broadly than intended."

"A bug."

"A design defect. Bugs are usually smaller."

"Did you remove the physical archive label too?"

"I was auditing physical records after the same alert."

"So nobody was following me."

"I didn't say that."

Elias looked up.

Celia's expression remained neutral. "You reported an anonymous call. You received a photograph from Alder Row. I have no evidence those events came from Morrow. I also have no evidence they did not."

"Did you order surveillance?"

"No."

"Did Lena?"

"No authority to do so."

"That's not the same answer."

"Then ask her."

Celia slid a document across the table. "You may request your own historical clinical file."

"The continuity procedure."

"Yes."

"Why haven't you simply given it to me?"

"Because your 2018 consent contains a delayed-disclosure restriction."

Elias stared at the page.

"I restricted myself from seeing my own file?"

"You requested that certain materials be released only under specific conditions."

"Which conditions?"

"Those conditions are part of the restricted material."

He laughed despite himself. "That's elegant."

"You were apparently difficult even when cooperating."

"Apparently? You were there."

For the first time Celia looked almost amused. "I was not involved clinically. I handled data-retention language. You argued with me for forty minutes about whether future consent could be revoked by a person who no longer remembered granting it."

Elias felt an odd pull in his chest.

"What did I decide?"

"You didn't. That's why it took forty minutes."

"What did you decide?"

"That the question was above my salary."

"You're director of compliance."

"I was not then."

Celia's amusement disappeared. "There is something else you need to understand. Your situation is not only about you. The Fallow and early Morrow archives contain other participants' memories, abuse disclosures, medical histories, accusations, family recordings and third-party identities. If you decide the company has done something wrong, that does not give you the right to tear open every file until you find the proof you want."

"Convenient argument for Morrow."

"Also true."

He hated how often that phrase now appeared around him. Celia continued. "You think secrecy has one beneficiary. It doesn't. Companies hide behind privacy. Patients also need it. If you expose one to expose the other, you may injure people who never agreed to become evidence in your sister's story."

Elias looked at the suspension notice.

"Do you believe Morrow did something wrong?"

Celia did not answer for several seconds.

"I believe institutions become very good at describing old wrongdoing as obsolete procedure," she said. "That is not the same as knowing what happened to your memory."

"You know more than you're telling me."

"Of course I do. So does your dentist. Access is not entitlement."

Elias stood.

Celia's office had no personal photographs. The only object on the shelf that suggested a life outside Morrow was a child's clay bird, green paint rubbed away from one wing. Elias noticed it because everything else had been chosen to survive lawyers: clean desk, locked cabinets, no papers left faceup, a whiteboard scrubbed until old marker stains remained only as ghosts.

'Your access is suspended for seventy-two hours pending review,' Celia said. 'That includes Vela, legacy archives, clinical databases and physical evidence storage.'

'Because I looked at my own file.'

'Because you used privileged systems to investigate protected third parties.'

'Mara is my sister.'

'Family is not an access category.'

'She has been missing fifteen years.'

'Missing is not consent.'

The sentence irritated him because it was correct. Celia slid a printed form across the desk. Elias did not touch it. 'Your badge will continue to open public work

areas. If you attempt restricted access, security will be notified automatically.'

'Was security notified the night Mara's video disappeared?'

Celia looked at him for half a second too long. 'I don't know what you're referring to.'

'A restricted video owned by Mara Venn. It became invisible while I was viewing metadata.'

'Then you were already somewhere you shouldn't have been.'

'Who changed the permission?'

'I'm not discussing audit data with the person under audit.'

Elias almost laughed. 'Do you practice sentences like that?'

'No. I hear them often enough.'

He placed his notebook on the table. Celia's eyes moved to it.

'You dislike those,' he said.

'I dislike uncontrolled copies of confidential information.'

'Paper makes you nervous.'

'Paper burns, gets stolen, gets photographed, gets left in taxis and gets discovered by executors forty years later. Digital systems at least let us know who failed.'

'Unless the audit record is restricted.'

'You are not nearly as clever as your irritation is telling you.'

That landed. Elias sat back. Celia folded her hands. 'You think this is a story in which the company has information about your sister and therefore every person between you and that information is protecting

the company. Some of us are protecting people whose records are entangled with hers. Fallow files contain other patients. Minors. Families. Allegations never proved. Clinical reconstructions later found to be wrong. You cannot pull one thread because it belongs to you emotionally.'

'Does Mara have a right to those records?'

'If she is alive, she has rights. If she is deceased, her estate may have rights. You are neither by default.'

The words if she is alive entered the room and stayed there. Elias watched Celia's face. 'That was careful.'

'Everything I say to you is careful.'

'Why?'

'Because you hear gaps as invitations.'

He looked at the clay bird on her shelf. One wing was thicker than the other. A child had pressed a thumb into the body before the clay dried.

'Who made that?' he asked.

Celia followed his eyes. 'My daughter.'

'How old?'

'Not relevant.'

'No. It isn't.' Elias paused. 'Would you let Morrow reconstruct a memory of her if she disappeared?'

Celia's face changed so slightly that another person might have missed it. 'That is manipulative.'

'Yes.'

'At least you're aware.'

'Would you?'

She looked at the bird. 'I would want to. That is not the same as believing I should.' For the first time Elias understood why she worked in risk rather than

research. Celia was not afraid of technology. She was afraid of what reasonable people would ask it to do when grief removed their patience for uncertainty.

'Did Morrow reconstruct Mara before I did?' he asked.

Celia's expression closed again. 'Your review is over.'

'Did I reconstruct her in 2018?'

'Leave, Elias.'

He stood but did not pick up the suspension form.

'You need to sign that.'

'Send it to me.'

'You distrust digital records.'

'Today I distrust pens more.'

Celia almost smiled. It vanished quickly. At the door Elias turned back. 'If I was a clinical participant, does my current employee agreement allow you to conceal that from me?'

'No.'

The answer came immediately.

'Then either I wasn't one or someone believes another agreement supersedes this one.'

Celia said nothing.

Elias opened the door.

"One question."

Celia waited.

"In 2018, did I know Mara was alive?"

Her face remained still, but her eyes moved toward the table before returning to him.

"Your restricted file contains third-party identity protections," she said.

It was the closest thing to yes he had received.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

No Diagnosis

Lena met him offsite because Elias no longer trusted clinical rooms and Lena no longer trusted Morrow's meeting logs. They chose a coffee shop beside the railway station at four in the afternoon. Commuters passed behind the glass carrying bags and folded umbrellas. Elias sat facing the entrance. Lena noticed and chose the chair opposite without commenting.

"Mara was never diagnosed with psychosis," Lena said after he asked the question directly. "She was never diagnosed with bipolar disorder, delusional disorder or any condition that would explain away her complaints about the research."

"Her police file says she had a history of emotional instability."

"That phrase came from a clinical summary written after she left Fallow."

"By whom?"

"Dr. Pritchard signed it."

"You worked under him."

"Yes."

"Did you agree?"

"No."

"Did you object?"

Lena looked at the coffee she had not touched. "Not loudly enough." Elias felt anger, then exhaustion. "Why did Mara say people would tell us she was sick?"

"Because Pritchard had already begun reframing her objections as symptoms. She was anxious, sleeping

badly, hypervigilant and keeping obsessive records. All of those things were true. The error was treating the truth of those symptoms as proof that the object of her fear was imaginary."

"She was scared because something was happening, and the fear became evidence that nothing was happening."

"Yes."

A train announcement sounded overhead. Lena waited until it ended.

"There was another problem," she said. "Mara had become very good at detecting changes in her own recollections. Too good, perhaps. She recorded pre-session accounts, then compared them with later reports. But once you start watching memory that closely, normal variation becomes frightening. She could no longer tell which changes came from treatment and which came from being human."

Elias understood that immediately.

The yellow coat. Red coat. Boat. No boat.

"She stopped trusting herself."

"Yes."

"Like me."

Lena did not deny it. Elias looked through the window at the station platforms. "Did she ever come back?"

"To Fallow? No."

"To Dunley?"

Lena's face became guarded.

"Third-party identity protection," Elias said.

"Don't make that sound absurd."

"It is absurd when the third party is my sister."

"She is not an extension of you."

The sentence cut deeper than he expected. Lena saw it. "That came out harder than I meant."

"Was it wrong?"

"No."

They sat quietly for a while. A little girl at the next table was drawing on a paper napkin while her father looked at his phone. She drew a house, crossed it out, then drew another house beside it. Elias watched the second become larger than the first.

"Why did I volunteer in 2018?" he asked.

"You were trying to protect something."

"Mara."

"I can't answer that."

"You don't need to."

Lena's eyes lifted to his.

"I found a photograph at Pember," Elias said. "Me. You. A woman who may be Mara. Jonah had it. He said I made him promise not to tell me whether she was alive unless I remembered why."

Lena closed her eyes briefly.

"You contacted Jonah."

"He contacted my common sense. It didn't work."

She almost smiled.

"Was it Mara?"

"I am not answering from a photograph you haven't verified."

"You know."

"Yes."

There it was.

The word settled between them.

Elias's hands became cold.

"She's alive."

Lena did not speak.

"Or she was in 2018."

Still nothing.

He looked away because her silence had become too loud in his head. For fifteen years he had lived inside the absence of a body. He had imagined rivers, fields, locked rooms, unmarked graves. He had learned how long certain evidence survived outdoors. He knew missing-person recovery statistics by age and circumstance. Hope had gradually become something he considered intellectually embarrassing.

Now a woman across from him could end it with one sentence and would not.

"I hate you," he said.

Lena nodded.

That made him angrier.

"Don't accept it like a diagnosis."

"I'm not."

"Say something."

"I am trying to decide which cruelty belongs to me and which one you asked me to keep."

Elias stared at her.

"Then make a decision."

Lena finally took a sip of coffee. It had gone cold.

"In 2018," she said, "you knew more about Mara than you know now."

Elias waited.

"And you chose not to keep all of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Blue

The Ashfield Ceramics factory closed in 2023, but its founder still answered emails. His name was Martin Ashfield, seventy-two, and he replied to Elias's inquiry at 6:11 the next morning with the enthusiasm of a man pleased that anyone still cared about discontinued crockery. Harbor Blue, he confirmed, had been designed in late 2015 and first sold publicly in March 2016. The specific white crackle line near the handle was not damage but part of a glaze effect unique to the second production run.

Elias sent a rendered image from the reconstruction. Ashfield replied: That's ours. 2017 or 2018 batch, I'd say. The rim got darker after the kiln change. Where did you find it?

Elias did not answer.

He went to Calder Avenue's former facilities supplier instead. The company had archived delivery invoices. Twelve Harbor Blue cups went to Morrow's research annex in May 2018. Two months later another six were ordered after "breakage during clinical use."

One note contained a photograph for an insurance claim. A Harbor Blue cup lay shattered beside a white acoustic panel.

The room number was 3C. Elias recognized the panel from the facilities ticket: Replace acoustic panel after subject impact.

He enlarged the image.

A smear of blood marked one ceramic fragment. The invoice became more than an object trail. It became an event.

He called Lena.

"Did I break the cup?"

There was a pause at the other end. "Where are you?"

"Answer."

"Elias, where are you?"

"Home."

"Are you alone?"

"That question is becoming insulting."

"Did you break a blue cup in Suite 3C in August 2018?"

He heard her exhale.

"Yes."

"How?"

"You threw it."

"At you?"

"At the wall."

Elias looked at his right hand. "Why?"

"You had just watched Mara's kitchen recording for the first time."

The sentence emptied the room.

"No."

"Yes."

"I watched it two days ago for the first time."

"You watched it two days ago for the first time you remember."

Elias sat down.

Every part of him resisted the wording because it was too easy, too complete. Yet the blue cup's history

had already led to the same year. Calder Avenue. Continuity. His own voice. The kitchen assets.

"What happened after I watched it?"

"You became angry."

"At Mara?"

"At yourself. At me. At Fallow. At the fact that you'd spent seven years believing your memory of that night was direct."

"But why did I believe it in 2018?"

Lena was quiet.

Elias understood slowly.

The false kitchen memory existed before the continuity procedure. Or some version of it did.

"Where did the memory originally come from?"

"We never established that cleanly. You had reported the kitchen conversation the morning after Mara disappeared, years before any immersive procedure."

"So Morrow didn't create it."

"Not the original belief."

"Then what did you do?"

Lena's answer took too long.

"We made it stronger."

Elias closed his eyes.

"Why?"

"Because you asked us to."

He opened them again.

"That makes no sense."

"I know."

"Why would I discover my memory was false and then ask you to reinforce it?"

"Because by then the false memory was doing something you thought you needed."

"What?"

"Protecting another memory."

Elias felt his heart accelerate.

"Of what?"

"I can't tell you yet."

He almost threw the phone. Instead he placed it carefully on the table.

"Lena, if you say not yet again, I'm going to assume every answer is worse than the last."

"Some are."

"Did Mara ask me to forget her?"

The question came without planning.

Lena was silent.

Elias pressed. "Did she?"

"No."

Relief arrived, immediate and shameful.

"Then what was I protecting?"

"Her location."

The words were barely audible. Elias stood so abruptly the chair scraped across the floor.

"You knew where she was."

"You did."

"In 2018."

"Yes."

"I found her."

Lena's silence confirmed it.

Elias walked to the window, then back, unable to remain anywhere for more than a few seconds. "Was the woman in the Pember photograph Mara?"

"Yes."

The room became impossibly ordinary. A delivery truck reversed in the street below. Someone in the

neighboring flat ran water through pipes. His refrigerator started. Elias pressed his fingertips to the table.

"Is she alive now?"

Lena said nothing.

"Is she alive now?"

"I don't know."

He believed her.

That was somehow worse.

"Why did I ask you to reinforce the kitchen?"

Lena's voice softened. "Because after you found Mara, you were afraid that if Morrow questioned you, if police reopened the case, if someone used reconstruction on you, you would lead them to her. You wanted the last coherent memory of Mara to end in 2011."

Elias looked at the blue charity-shop cup on his table.

"And the cup?"

"You hated the white one because it belonged to the recording. You picked up the blue cup in Suite 3C and said you wanted one detail that hadn't been Mara's. Something your mind could own."

"So I put it in the kitchen."

"Yes."

Elias touched the rim.

"And then I threw it."

"A different one."

For a second, absurdly, he laughed.

Lena laughed too, quietly.

The shared sound frightened him because it felt familiar.

Not new familiar.

Remembered familiar.

Then a memory opened.

Calder Avenue. Lena sitting on the floor against the acoustic wall. Elias beside her. Broken blue ceramic between them. He heard himself say, "If I forget this, you'll still know."

Lena answered, "Yes."

"That's a terrible amount of trust."

"I know."

The memory vanished.

Elias remained standing in his kitchen with the phone in his hand. On the other end, Lena had gone quiet.

"You remembered something," she said.

Elias looked at the blue cup.

"I don't know."

For once, the words felt less like failure than accuracy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tess Calder

Tess Calder chose a restaurant that did not take reservations and arrived twenty minutes late. Elias had expected someone sharper in appearance, perhaps because the old messages with Mara made her seem like a person composed entirely of questions. Instead she wore a raincoat with one missing button and apologized to the waiter before she apologized to Elias.

"You look exactly like her," Tess said after sitting down.

Elias disliked the sentence immediately. "People usually say she looked like me."

"That's because you're the one who's still around to hear it."

He studied her. Fortyish now, dark hair cut unevenly at the jaw, nicotine stain on the side of one finger despite the fact she had apparently quit smoking years ago. She caught him looking.

"If you're reconstructing me already, at least wait until I order."

"I don't reconstruct people socially."

"Mara said you did."

The waiter came. Tess ordered soup, bread and tea. Elias ordered coffee. She looked at him.

"Of course."

"What?"

"She said you could use coffee as a meal if nobody physically intervened."

Elias looked down at the menu. "When did you last see her?" Tess did not answer until the waiter left.

"In person? Never before she disappeared. We spoke by email, phone, once by video. I met her years later."

Elias's hand stopped beside the water glass.

"What year?"

"2012."

A year after Mara vanished.

"Where?"

"Not telling you."

"She's my sister."

"Yes. She knew that."

"Did you know she was seventeen when you helped her disappear?"

Tess laughed without humor. "I didn't help her disappear. I helped her understand what she had. By the time I met her, she had already disappeared very competently without my assistance."

"Did you publish?"

"Tried. My editor killed the story. Not because he thought she was lying. Because we couldn't prove which reconstructed details had been introduced by the clinic and which were normal memory drift. Fallow's lawyers had a perfect defense. Memory changes. Everybody knew memory changes."

The soup arrived. Tess waited until the waiter moved away.

"Mara understood the problem before I did. She kept saying the experiment wasn't whether they could put a false thing in your head. It was whether they could make one version of the past easier to retrieve than the others."

"Narrative Stability."

Tess looked up. "There it is."

"What?"

"The phrase. She hated it. Said it sounded like a bridge engineer had been put in charge of grief."

Elias could hear Mara saying that. He could hear it too clearly.

"Did she ever talk about me?"

"Constantly."

"Good things?"

"Sometimes."

"That's evasive."

"It's polite."

Tess tore bread in half. "She loved you. She also thought you were unbearable when frightened."

"I wasn't frightened."

Tess stared at him.

He almost smiled. "Fine."

"She said you treated uncertainty like an emergency. If she couldn't prove something, you'd start checking. Dates. Messages. What she ate. Whether she slept. You thought you were helping establish what was real. She felt like she was becoming a case file in her own kitchen."

Elias looked at his coffee.

"Did she say I didn't believe her?"

"She said you believed that she believed herself."

That distinction hurt more.

Tess took a spoonful of soup. "When I met her in 2012, she was angry. That's what I remember most. Not fragile. Not hiding in a basement. Angry that everybody's version of her was becoming more durable

than she was. The clinic had a file. The police had a file. Your family had posters. Newspapers had photographs. She said if she went home, she'd spend the rest of her life proving which version was hers."

"She was a child."

"She was seventeen when she left. She was eighteen when I met her. People don't become wise at midnight on their birthday, but they do become legally inconvenient to rescue."

"Did you stay in contact?"

"Intermittently."

"Until when?"

Tess glanced toward the window. "2018." Elias felt the now-familiar contraction in his chest. "Did I contact you then?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You wanted proof she was alive before you'd agree to meet her."

He stared.

"I knew?"

"You suspected. You'd spent two years inside Morrow following Fallow identifiers. You found me through an old legal memo. You were not pleasant."

"What did I say?"

"You accused me of withholding evidence in a missing-person investigation. I told you Mara wasn't evidence. You said that was sentimental nonsense. Then you apologized three days later by sending me a six-page correction of your own argument."

That sounded humiliatingly plausible.

Tess reached into her bag and placed a folded sheet of paper on the table.

"You gave me this in 2018."

Elias opened it.

His handwriting.

IF I ASK WHETHER SHE IS ALIVE, DO NOT ANSWER
UNLESS I CAN TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED AT
CALDER.

Below it:

Ask me what I broke.

Elias looked up.

"The cup," he said.

Tess's expression changed.

"Blue," Elias added. "I threw it at the wall after
watching Mara's recording."

Tess sat back slowly.

"Then you're further along than last time."

"Last time?"

"You came to see me in 2019."

Tess had chosen a café beside the old courthouse because, she said, lawyers made excellent camouflage. At lunchtime every table was occupied by people reading documents they did not want overheard. The espresso machine screamed at regular intervals, covering the beginnings and endings of private sentences.

She was smaller than Elias expected, with silver beginning at one temple and a scar along the side of her thumb. She did not offer to shake his hand. She looked at him for several seconds and said, 'You look more like your father now.'

'You knew him?'

'I interviewed him. Once. He hated me.'

'He hated journalists.'

'Your father hated weather if it arrived without permission.'

Elias almost smiled. Tess noticed and seemed disappointed that she had succeeded. They ordered soup neither of them ate. Tess kept her phone inside a signal-blocking pouch on the table, not hidden. 'I assume you came because Lena finally failed to keep you away from me.'

'Lena didn't send me.'

'She never sends anyone. She just removes enough doors that people discover hallways.'

'You knew Mara in 2011.'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'She emailed me after I wrote a small piece about private clinics sharing anonymized patient data with university researchers. I was twenty-two, freelance, underpaid and convinced every encrypted email meant Watergate.'

'Was she your source?'

'One of them.'

Elias disliked the phrase. Mara had become participant, source, missing person, subject. Each noun took something away.

'What was she like with you?'

Tess leaned back. 'That is a dangerous question.'

'Why?'

'Because you're asking me to give you my Mara so you can compare her with yours. Then whichever version hurts less will start winning.'

'I'm asking what you observed.'

'Fine. She was funny. Impatient. More politically aware than I was. She lied about her age the first time we met because she thought I wouldn't take a seventeen-year-old seriously. She was right. She could be cruel when she thought someone was patronizing her. She loved expensive notebooks but wrote in them with free pens. She wanted to design furniture for small flats.'

Industrial design. Another confirmation.

'Was she suicidal?'

Tess's face hardened. 'No.'

'Did she ever say she wanted to disappear?'

'Yes.'

Elias looked up.

'Those aren't the same question,' Tess said. 'She wanted to leave Dunley. She wanted her records to stop following her. She wanted an adulthood that didn't begin with every employer, doctor and boyfriend being able to discover that a clinic once called her unstable.'

'She was seventeen.'

'Exactly. Adults had already built a permanent version of her.'

The espresso machine shrieked behind them.

'Did you help her leave?'

'No.'

'Did Lena?'

Tess stirred soup she had not tasted. 'Ask Lena.'

'I did.'

'Then enjoy the experience of not getting what you want.'

Elias felt anger rise. 'You knew my sister was alive and said nothing to my family.' Tess met his eyes. 'Careful.'

'About what?'

'The tense you just used.'

He heard it. Was alive. Not is. Tess saw him hear it and looked away. 'I didn't say she was alive now.'

'But she was after 2011.'

'I am not answering that.'

'You already did.'

'Then don't make me regret it.'

Elias pushed the soup aside. 'My father died not knowing.'

'I know.'

'He spent years looking.'

'I know.'

'And you decided Mara's preference mattered more.'

Tess's voice became quiet. 'No. Mara decided Mara's preference mattered more.'

Elias stared at her.

'That's the part you keep struggling with,' Tess said. 'You think everyone else made decisions around her. Sometimes she made decisions around you.'

He wanted to leave. Instead he asked, 'Why didn't she trust me?' Tess finally tasted the soup and grimaced. 'Because you loved evidence until evidence disagreed with the person you were trying to protect.'

'That sounds rehearsed.'

'It is. She said it more than once.'

Elias felt the old instinct to defend himself. He had been nineteen. Their mother was dead. Their father was barely functioning. Mara was seventeen and frightening

herself with theories about a clinic. He had tried to find adults who could help.

He also remembered a voicemail from Mara: Eli did the thing again where he says he believes me but means he believes I believe myself.

'Did I meet you before?' he asked.

Tess stopped stirring the soup.

There it was.

'When?' Elias asked.

'2018.'

His hands went still beneath the table.

'Where?'

'Here, actually. Different tables. Better soup.'

'What did I know?'

'Enough to terrify both of us.'

'Did I know Mara was alive?'

Tess's expression tightened. 'You came in with proof.'

'What proof?'

'A photograph, two train records and a voice message you refused to let me copy.'

'Did you hear it?'

'Yes.'

'Her voice?'

'Yes.'

The café continued around him. Cups touched saucers. Someone laughed near the door. A lawyer at the next table highlighted a paragraph yellow. Elias felt the ordinary room become indecently stable.

'What happened after I showed you?'

Tess's eyes moved toward the blocked phone on the table. 'You asked me not to publish.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because you had spent seven years demanding that people look for Mara. Then you found her and discovered the person most endangered by being found was Mara.'

Elias swallowed. 'And you agreed?'

'Eventually.'

'Journalists don't usually bury proof of a living missing person.'

'Journalists are also human beings. Inconvenient professional defect.'

'Did she ask you directly?'

Tess nodded.

'And me?'

'You asked too.'

He stared at her. 'I don't remember meeting you.'

'I know.'

'How?'

'Because you came back six months later.'

Elias felt cold.

Elias felt cold.

"I don't remember that either."

"I know."

"What did I ask?"

"The same questions."

"And what did you do?"

Tess folded her hands over the soup bowl.

"What you told me to do. I lied to you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Seven Missing Months

Elias had never considered 2018 missing. That was what made it worse.

If someone had asked where he lived that year, he could answer. A one-bedroom flat near Halden University. If asked where he worked, he would say research consulting and part-time teaching. He remembered marking student papers, repairing a leaking radiator, attending a colleague's wedding in June and spending Christmas alone because his father had influenza.

There was no blank wall in his autobiography. There were simply seven months filled with the wrong density.

Ivo, working from home after being warned formally to stop helping, sent Elias a spreadsheet of employment traces through an encrypted local transfer. The records were mundane enough to be convincing. Payroll from Halden continued through 2018, but reduced to sixty percent workload from March through September. Travel reimbursements placed Elias in Dunley three or four days most weeks. Building records at Calder Avenue showed a temporary consultant badge assigned to E. Venn.

There were hotel bills Elias did not remember paying. Train tickets he did not remember taking.

A dentist appointment in Dunley while he supposedly lived two hours away. He opened his handwritten notebook from March 2018.

Lecture preparation. Grocery list. Reminder to call Dad. A note about a student's dissertation. Then forty-three pages had been cut out.

Not torn roughly. Removed with a blade close to the binding. The notebook resumed in October.

Elias held it beneath a lamp and examined the spine. Tiny paper fibers remained where the pages had been excised. He could not remember doing it. At the back cover he found a penciled number.

43 = enough.

His handwriting.

Enough for what?

He checked other notebooks. April through September were represented by two thin books he remembered using. Both contained suspiciously ordinary material. Shopping. Work. Books read. Weather. Almost no emotional content. Almost no Mara.

Yet bank records showed payments to Pember Station, a storage facility, Calder Avenue cafes and a pharmacy near Morrow's annex. He called the storage facility.

They still had an account under his name.

"Active?" he asked.

"Dormant but paid through standing order," the clerk said. "Small unit. Locker class."

"Can I access it?"

"With identification and the key."

"What if I've lost the key?"

"We can drill the lock with authorization."

"What number?"

A keyboard clicked.

"Three twelve."

Elias closed his eyes.

Vale Street.

Calder Avenue.

312.

The number had traveled backward into childhood because adult Elias had rehearsed it until it acquired age. He went to the facility that afternoon.

Locker 312 contained almost nothing. A cardboard box. Two shirts. A pair of shoes. An obsolete digital recorder with its battery removed. Three cheap notebooks wrapped in plastic.

Elias sat on the concrete floor before opening them. The first notebook began May 2018.

His handwriting looked different. Faster. Less controlled.

Page one:

Rules.

1. Paper first.
2. Never trust a reconstruction because it feels worse.
3. Never trust one because it feels better.
4. Separate what Mara said from what I need her to have said.
5. If Lena tells me to stop, ask whether she means clinically or personally.
6. If I ask to be made certain, refuse me.

Elias read the sixth line several times. The next page had been ripped out.

Later entries referred to M.A., T.C., J.Q. and LO. Mara Aster. Tess Calder. Jonah Quill. Lena Ors.

June 14:

Met M. I did exactly what she expected. Asked for proof before I hugged her. Elias put the notebook down.

His vision blurred.

He waited until it cleared.

June 14, later:

She looks older. Obviously. Stupid sentence. Scar under chin. Hair tied back. White cup. She said, "He'll come anyway." I remembered the sentence before she said it. Need to tell Lena.

Elias felt the storage room disappear around him.

White cup.

Older Mara.

Are you sure you want him here?

He'll come anyway.

The flash on Alder Row had been real.

Not imagination.

A fragment from 2018.

He turned pages faster.

June 15:

Mara won't tell me where she lives. Good. I hate that it is good.

June 21:

I threatened police. She left. I think I have ruined this again.

June 24:

Tess says wait. Lena says stop trying to convert panic into action. I hate when they're both right.

July 3:

Mara called.

Then nothing for six pages.

The next entry:

I know where she is now. Beneath it, in block capitals:

THIS IS THE THING TO LOSE.

Elias sat on the floor of Locker 312 holding proof that he had once found Mara and then designated the knowledge itself as dangerous. The second notebook was labeled CONTINUITY.

He did not open it yet. He was afraid it would tell him exactly what he had asked to forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

3:12

The number appeared thirteen times in the Continuity notebook.

3:12.

Sometimes alone. Sometimes beside a box. Once written across an entire page and crossed out so heavily the paper had nearly torn. Elias took the notebooks home and spread them across his dining table. He kept his phone in another room. At 2:40 a.m. he was still reading.

The entries described meetings with Lena and Jonah, memory tests, source-isolation exercises and a procedure Elias referred to as reconsolidation rehearsal. He complained constantly about terminology.

July 17:

They keep saying "weaken retrieval pathway" because nobody wants to write "make me less able to remember where my sister lives." I understand why. Still cowardly language.

July 19:

Lena says not erasure. I know. If I know a book is in a library but lose the shelf number, the book still exists. We are trying to lose the shelf number.

July 26:

Vela precursor can reinforce alternate route. Kitchen is stable because I have rehearsed it for seven years already. That is why it is useful and why this is obscene.

Elias stopped.

The kitchen memory predated the procedure, but the procedure used it as an alternate route. Reinforcement, not invention.

Another entry:

Need one anchor that belongs to 2018 so future me can detect contamination if necessary. Blue cup. If I ever prove blue cup impossible, follow 312 then Pember then 3:12. Elias looked at the blue cup on his table.

He had designed his own contradiction. Not to fool himself forever.

To give himself a way back. At 3:08 he found the first instruction associated with the final number.

WHEN 3:12 RETURNS, WALK. DO NOT DRIVE. TAKE COAT. NO PHONE.

Elias checked the wall clock.

3:09.

The coincidence felt ridiculous. He had chosen the hour by reading until it approached. Still, his body had begun preparing before he consciously decided. He closed the notebook, stood, went to the hall and took his coat from the hook.

He stopped with one arm in the sleeve.

Conditioning.

The thought made his skin prickle.

The notebook continued:

At 3:12, route memory may survive even if episodic context does not. Don't panic if movement feels automatic. That is the point. Elias put on the coat.

At exactly 3:12, he left the apartment. He did not choose a direction at the first corner. His feet turned left.

He walked through empty streets toward the river, then east along a service road he rarely used. The city at that hour felt neither threatening nor peaceful. Delivery vans idled outside shops. A fox crossed beneath a railway bridge. Two nurses in dark uniforms waited for a bus and ignored him.

Elias kept walking.

At each junction he tried not to think about where to turn. The route came as bodily expectation. Right here. Across there. Under the tracks. He experienced the disturbing sensation of following someone who occupied the same muscles.

Forty minutes later he reached Pember Station. The main concourse was closed, but a side entrance served night trains. Elias passed ticket machines and continued toward lockers at the far end of Platform Two.

He knew the number before seeing it.

81.

Locker 81 required a key.

Elias searched his pockets.

Nothing.

Then his fingers found a seam inside the lining of his coat. The fabric had been cut and resewn badly near the lower hem. He tore three stitches with his thumbnail.

A small brass key dropped into his palm.

Elias stared at it.

He had worn this coat for years.

He inserted the key.

Locker 81 opened.

Inside was an empty metal shelf and a paper envelope taped to the back wall.

TO ELIAS.

His handwriting.

He removed it.

The envelope contained no letter. Only a train ticket dated September 3, 2018 and a small card with a five-word message.

YOU ASKED US TO DO THIS.

On the reverse:

Not enough yet.

Elias felt anger rise at his former self with almost comic intensity.

"You arrogant bastard," he whispered.

Pember Station was almost pleasant at three in the morning, which Elias resented. The daytime crowd had vanished. Fluorescent strips reflected in the polished floor. A bakery kiosk sat closed behind a metal shutter, its display still showing photographs of pastries no one could buy. Electronic boards announced trains to cities that felt fictional at that hour.

The locker corridor was narrower than he remembered from the security footage. Eighty-one sat near the far end, chest height, scratched around the key slot. Elias had no key. He had no memory of owning one.

He tried the combination he used for his bicycle lock at university. Wrong. His mother's birthday. Wrong. Mara's birthday. Wrong. He stopped and looked around, embarrassed by the intimacy of guessing passwords in an empty station.

At 3:12, the overhead clock changed. Elias's hand moved before he decided anything. He entered 0312.

The lock clicked.

He stared at it.

Behavioral memory, he thought. Procedural association. A number rehearsed enough times could survive even when the event attached to it did not. That was an explanation. It did not make the opened locker less disturbing.

Inside sat a folded train map, an old paperback, a disposable camera still wrapped in plastic, and a plain envelope addressed in Elias's handwriting: NOT YET. He did not open it.

For nearly a minute he simply stood there with one hand on the locker door. A person could obey his own handwriting out of fear just as easily as trust. The instruction came from a version of him with unknown motives. Treating that self as wiser would be another form of authority without evidence.

He removed the train map. Three stations were circled in blue ink: Pember, Calder South, and Wrenford. Wrenford meant nothing to him. On the reverse was a list of dates, all in 2018. Beside one date Mara's initials appeared.

M.V. 14 AUG. DON'T FOLLOW.

He read it twice.

The paperback was a cheap edition of a detective novel. Several pages had been folded. Elias checked them, expecting a code. The marked passages concerned witnesses changing their stories after repeated interviews. One sentence had been underlined in pencil: certainty is often the final draft, not the first account.

He could not tell whether the line belonged to the novel or whether he had written it in the margin. He did not trust himself enough to quote it. The disposable camera bothered him most. Twenty-seven exposures.

The wheel indicated twelve had been used. No digital metadata. No cloud backup. Exactly the kind of device his earlier self would choose if he wanted evidence to exist outside Morrow's systems.

He held it to the fluorescent light. No way to know what was on the film without developing it. A man in a railway uniform entered the corridor carrying a mop bucket. Elias closed the locker halfway.

'They clear abandoned lockers every ninety days,' the cleaner said.

'This one wasn't cleared.'

The man shrugged. 'Long-term lease maybe.'

'Can you check?'

'At three in the morning?'

'Fair.'

The cleaner glanced at the open door. 'You've been coming to that one for years.' Elias looked at him. 'What?'

'Maybe not years. Seen you before, though.'

'When?'

The man laughed. 'Mate, I clean a train station. People are mostly coats.'

'Was I alone?'

'Usually.'

Usually.

Elias opened his notebook. 'Do you remember talking to me?' The cleaner's expression changed from mild amusement to concern. 'You okay?'

'I'm checking something.'

'You asked me once if the cameras covered the lockers.'

'What did you say?'

'That they cover the entrance, not inside. Privacy, I suppose. Or cheapness.'

'Anything else?'

'You gave me twenty quid to forget your face.'

Elias stared.

The man grinned. 'I didn't take it. You looked rough. Thought you were cheating on someone.'

'Was I?'

'How would I know?'

'Right.'

'If you are, she's not worth this level of admin.'

Elias almost laughed. It came out as a breath. He took the camera and map. He left the envelope.

Then he reconsidered, returned, and photographed the envelope with his phone before closing the locker. The contradiction made him angry at himself. He had spent days insisting digital records could be changed, yet the first thing he did when frightened was create another one.

On the platform he waited for the first local train. The city outside the glass was still black. He searched Wrenford. A small town two hours north, population eleven thousand. Nothing connected it to Mara publicly.

His phone had 38 percent battery. No new messages. He opened Lena's contact, stared at her name and closed it without calling.

At 3:47 he boarded an empty carriage. He placed the disposable camera on the table across from him as though another person had taken the seat. The train moved through industrial suburbs and rows of sleeping houses.

Halfway home Elias noticed something written in tiny letters along the folded edge of the train map. His own handwriting again.

IF YOU DEVELOP THE FILM, DO NOT USE MORROW.

He looked at the camera. At the next stop an advertisement outside the window flickered, briefly replacing a smiling family with a blank blue screen. Elias flinched, then became irritated that he had flinched.

The cleaner had said he came to Locker Eighty-One usually alone.

Usually meant sometimes not.

He wanted to go back and ask who had been with him. Instead he wrote the question in the notebook and forced himself to wait until daylight. The compulsion to resolve uncertainty immediately was beginning to feel less like a strength than a hand on the back of his neck.

A station cleaner looked over from fifty feet away. Elias put the card into his notebook.

When he returned home at 5:03, he found his phone on the dining table. He was certain he had left it in the bedroom.

The screen showed one outgoing call made at 4:18 a.m.

Recipient: LENA ORS.

Duration: 2 minutes, 11 seconds. Elias remembered none of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Night Work

Lena answered on the first ring when Elias called again.

"What did I say to you at four eighteen?"

She was quiet for several seconds. "You don't remember calling."

"No."

"Where are you now?"

"Home."

"Are you injured?"

Elias looked down at his hands. A shallow cut crossed his left palm near the thumb. He had noticed it at the station and assumed he caught the locker edge.

"Minor cut."

"Do you know how you got it?"

"Probably the locker."

"Probably isn't what I asked."

He almost laughed. "You sound like me."

"You called and said the route still worked."

"What route?"

"You didn't say. Then you asked whether I had kept my promise."

"What did you answer?"

"Yes."

"Which promise?"

"You didn't specify."

"And you didn't ask?"

"I did. You said, 'If you don't know, you're not the one I meant.' Then you hung up."

Elias sat at the table. "That sounds insane."

"It sounds conditioned."

"You knew about 3:12."

Lena exhaled. "Yes."

"What is it?"

"A retrieval cue you selected during Continuity. You linked it to a chain of procedural actions. Walking route. Pember. Locker. You wanted a path that might survive even if episodic access weakened."

"Why three twelve?"

"Because it had no connection to Mara. You chose it randomly from a room clock during a session."

Elias looked at the old note impression from 2011. 3:12 had appeared beneath DON'T LET THEM CORRECT YOU.

"Then why is it in my 2011 notebook?"

"It isn't."

"I shaded an impression beneath a removed page."

Lena was silent.

"The notebook existed in 2011," he said.

"The page may have been written on later."

Of course.

He had kept old notebooks for decades. In 2018 he could have reused one, placed a sheet over a blank page, written the cue, then removed the top sheet. His mind had assigned the pressure mark to the notebook's original year.

Another false age.

"Why the anonymous call at 3:12?"

"I didn't make it."

"Who knew the cue?"

"You. Me. Jonah. Possibly one technician. Celia knew the consent structure, not all cue details."

"Mara?"

"I don't know."

After the call, Elias examined his apartment. The front-door camera showed him returning at 5:01. It also showed him leaving at 3:12. Nothing unusual.

Then he checked Morrow's access notifications. His employee badge, which he had believed was inside his desk drawer, had been used at Morrow at 4:06 a.m.

Elias opened the drawer.

The badge lay there.

He stared at it.

Cloned credential? Delayed log? Someone else using his ID?

He called Ivo.

"I am officially not helping you," Ivo said. "Tell me the technically fascinating thing I am not helping with."

Elias gave him the access event. Ivo checked from an external audit portal still available to suspended staff. "Badge read at south entrance. Then research elevator. Floor nine at four oh-nine. Restricted archive at four fourteen. Exit at four twenty-six."

"Camera?"

"I shouldn't."

"Ivo."

A long pause.

"Sending one still."

The image arrived.

Elias stood inside Morrow's south entrance at 4:06 a.m.

Same coat. Same face.

His left hand was wrapped in a white handkerchief. Elias looked at his cut palm.

"I was at Pember then."

"Were you?"

"I remember being there."

The sentence tasted wrong as soon as he said it.

"Station camera," Ivo said. "Check independent source."

Elias requested public security footage through a professional archive portal. The 4:06 frame from Pember showed no Elias near Locker 81. He searched earlier.

3:51.

There he was.

He opened the locker at 3:53. By 3:58 he had left the station.

His memory had placed him there for nearly an hour longer than reality. Enough time to reach Morrow by taxi.

"What did I access?" Elias asked.

Ivo was quiet.

"Archive node C-17. Your Continuity file."

"Can you see what I did?"

"Copied one encrypted package to removable media."

Elias searched his coat.

Inside the same hidden seam that had contained the locker key, his fingers touched hard plastic.

A small encrypted drive.

He placed it on the table. There was blood along one edge.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Make It Mine

The drive opened only after Elias entered three answers he did not consciously know. First prompt: What did she steal from the hotel?

He typed marmalade.

Accepted.

Second: What did you owe her?

Forty pounds.

Accepted.

Third: What color belongs to you? Elias looked at the blue cup.

Blue.

Accepted.

A single video file appeared. No folder tree. No supporting documents. No metadata beyond a creation date in August 2018.

Lena arrived twenty minutes later because Elias refused to watch it alone and refused to go to Morrow. She stood in his kitchen while he made coffee, watched him forget to put grounds into the machine, then quietly did it for him without comment.

"Did I steal this file last night?" he asked.

"Apparently."

"Did you know I would?"

"I knew you built recovery behaviors. I didn't know the exact sequence. You insisted that no single person know all of it."

"That sounds paranoid."

"It was methodical paranoia. You were proud of the distinction."

Elias sat at the table. The screen remained dark.

"If I watch this, does it contaminate anything?"

"Yes."

"Everything does."

"Yes."

He clicked play.

Calder Avenue Suite 3C.

The camera faced Elias directly. He was twenty-six. A blue cup rested between both hands. A small adhesive sensor was fixed near his temple. Lena sat partly outside the frame, only her shoulder visible.

Recorded Elias looked into the camera.

"Session fourteen," he said. "August twenty-fourth. I'm recording this because future me will assume coercion if he finds the procedure without context."

Present-day Elias felt Lena turn toward him but did not look away from the screen.

"No one is forcing me," recorded Elias continued. "Lena thinks I'm making the decision too quickly. Jonah thinks the procedure is a bad idea. Celia thinks the consent language is legally impossible. This is the first time in weeks everybody has agreed on something and I am ignoring them."

A faint laugh came from off camera. Jonah. Recorded Elias looked exhausted, but his eyes were clear.

"I found Mara in June. She is alive. She is not being held. She does not want her current location documented anywhere that can be subpoenaed, leaked, reconstructed or inferred from me. I know where she is. That knowledge creates risk."

Present-day Elias stopped breathing.

The words were not revelation anymore. He had pieced them together. Hearing himself say them made them final. Recorded Elias continued. "We cannot erase a memory. Anyone who says otherwise is selling something. What we can do is weaken retrieval by disrupting reconsolidation and strengthen an alternate autobiographical route that already exists. In my case, the kitchen memory."

He picked up the blue cup.

"This object did not exist in 2011. I know that. That's why I chose it. If I ever need to know the memory was reinforced, I can date the cup."

Off camera, Lena said, "State what you are asking us to do." Recorded Elias closed his eyes for several seconds.

When he opened them, his composure was thinner.

"Make the kitchen easier to remember than the reunion."

"More specific."

"When I think of Mara's disappearance, I want retrieval to terminate at 2011. I don't want the 2018 meetings to come automatically. I don't want her location accessible through ordinary questioning."

"And the kitchen scene?"

Elias on screen looked down at the cup.

"I know I wasn't there."

"Say it again."

"I wasn't there."

"Then why preserve it?"

His younger face changed.

The professional language disappeared.

"Because I have lived with that memory for seven years. Because some part of me still needs to have been there when she left. Because the real last conversation we had in 2011 was an argument in the hallway and I don't remember the words anymore. Because when I watched her recording, I realized my mind had already put me in the room."

He swallowed.

"And because if I'm going to lose the memory of finding her again, I need one goodbye I can live with."

Lena's voice became softer. "Elias, that's not protection. That's grief."

"I know."

"Those are different treatment goals."

"I know."

"You could keep the kitchen as a known reconstruction without integrating it autobiographically."

Recorded Elias stared at her off camera. Then he said the sentence that had waited seven years to reach him.

"Make me remember I was there."

Present-day Elias pressed pause.

The room around him seemed too bright.

Lena did not move.

"I said that."

"Yes."

"And you did it."

"We tried to create a controlled autobiographical association. We did not understand how completely it would consolidate."

Elias looked back at his younger face frozen on the screen.

"No. Don't hide behind we didn't understand. You warned me."

"I did."

"Jonah objected. Celia objected."

"Yes."

"And I insisted."

"Yes."

He resumed the video.

Recorded Elias leaned toward the camera.

"If this works too well, future me will think somebody did this to him. That's fair. In a sense somebody did. The somebody is me."

He gave a tired, humorless smile.

"Sorry."

The video ended.

Elias sat in his kitchen with both hands flat on the table. For two days he had wanted a perpetrator.

Morrow. Lena. Fallow. A system. Someone who could be separated cleanly from him. The video had not absolved any of them.

It had done something worse. It had made room for his own consent inside the harm.

Lena reached toward him, stopped before touching his arm and let her hand fall. The video did not begin with the sentence that changed everything. For twelve minutes Elias watched a younger version of himself resist it.

He sat in a clinical chair at Calder Annex wearing loose sensors around his wrists. The room behind him was painted an institutional cream that the reconstruction had later transformed into the kitchen wall. A blue ceramic cup rested between his hands. His

hair was longer than in the university footage, his face thinner, his eyes bruised with lack of sleep. Lena's voice came from off camera.

'State your name.'

'Elias Venn.'

'Date.'

'August twenty-third, 2018.'

'Do you understand this session is experimental?'

'Yes.'

'Do you understand the procedure may alter how easily you retrieve existing autobiographical memories?'

Recorded Elias gave a small, impatient nod. Lena said, 'Say yes aloud.'

'Yes.'

'Do you understand that repeated immersive reconstruction may increase subjective confidence in inferred details?'

'I wrote the warning language, Lena.'

'Then you understand why I'm making you hear it.'

Present Elias paused the recording. He looked at Lena across the table in her office. She did not ask him to continue.

'I wrote the warning language?' he said.

'Parts of it.'

'When?'

'During your research contract.'

'The contract I don't remember.'

'Yes.'

He resumed the video.

Recorded Elias leaned forward. 'I don't want deletion. I know you can't delete a memory. I want

retrieval interference around locations, names, routes, faces if necessary.'

'Why faces?' Lena asked from off camera.

'Because if I recognize someone accidentally, I can lead them back.'

'Who?'

'Don't make me name her in the consent record.'

'Then we stop.'

The younger Elias closed his eyes. He looked angry, not frightened. 'Mara.' Present Elias felt the word in his chest before his mind arranged it.

On screen, Lena said nothing for several seconds.

'You found her,' she said finally.

'Yes.'

'And she asked you not to disclose her location.'

'Yes.'

'Do you agree with that choice?'

A long pause.

'I agreed to protect it.'

'That wasn't my question.'

Recorded Elias looked toward the camera. For one second present Elias had the absurd sensation that the man was looking at him.

'I don't know how to agree with a choice that means my father dies thinking she might be in a ditch somewhere,' the younger Elias said. 'I don't know how to call that ethical.'

Lena's voice softened. 'Then why are you here?'

'Because she is still the person who gets to choose.'

Present Elias stopped the video again. The office remained ordinary. A tram moved outside the window.

Somewhere down the corridor a printer began feeding pages.

'My father was alive in 2018,' he said.

'Yes.'

'Did I tell him?'

'No.'

'Did Mara know he was dying?'

'Not then.'

'And later?'

Lena looked down. 'Later, yes.' Elias wanted to ask what Mara had chosen. He did not. Too many truths were arriving in the wrong order.

He restarted the recording.

The next portion was technical. Lena reviewed risks. Another clinician, Dr. Sayeed, asked questions about sleep, medication, panic symptoms and whether Elias had been drinking. Elias answered with clipped impatience. He was not a passive patient. He challenged terms, corrected probability estimates and demanded that the consent document distinguish between impaired retrieval and erased content.

Then a second file began. The room lights were dimmer. A headset covered Elias's eyes. The blue cup sat in his hands as a tactile anchor. Through the speakers came the sound of rain and an old refrigerator.

Present Elias recognized the kitchen immediately.

His stomach turned.

The recorded session displayed the reconstruction feed in a smaller pane. Mara sat at the kitchen table, but the chair opposite her was empty. The original camera viewpoint was fixed near the counter. She looked toward the lens, face wet from crying.

'If I disappear, don't let them tell you I was sick,' she said.

Present Elias had heard the line thousands of times inside himself. Hearing the source made it feel both more real and less his. Mara continued. 'Eli wasn't here tonight. That's important. He'll make it his fault if you let him. Don't.'

Recorded Elias made a sound through the headset. Lena paused the scene.

'Take it off,' she said.

'No.'

'Elias.'

'Again.'

'You're outside protocol.'

'Again.'

The scene replayed.

Mara said the sentence. Then the second. Eli wasn't here tonight. Recorded Elias's hands tightened around the cup.

After the third repetition, Lena stopped the session herself.

'You are not processing this,' she said. 'You're rehearsing it.'

'What's the difference?'

'Right now? About twenty years of clinical literature.'

The younger Elias laughed bitterly. 'She made a goodbye for me and I wasn't there to receive it.'

'It wasn't a goodbye.'

'Then what was it?'

'Evidence.'

That answer seemed to hurt him. He took off the headset. His eyes were red. 'I spent seven years remembering the conversation I should have had.'

'Imagining,' Lena corrected.

'Same room. Same line. Every time I tell the police story, I'm more certain I saw her.'

'Which is why we should not reinforce it.'

Recorded Elias looked at the empty chair in the reconstruction pane.

'Put me there.'

Lena said no.

He asked again.

The argument lasted nine minutes. Elias made it sound clinical. He proposed using the scene as an emotional integration exercise, preserving explicit tags that the event was reconstructed. Lena warned that those tags might not survive repeated exposure. Elias answered that he understood the risk.

Then he said the sentence present Elias had already seen in isolation.

'Make me remember I was there.'

Lena went very quiet.

Recorded Elias continued. 'Not because I think I was. Because if I have to lose the part where I found her, I need something on the other side. I need one goodbye I can live with.'

Present Elias stopped the video and did not restart it. He had imagined coercion. Sedation. A decision made while broken enough not to count. Instead he had watched himself argue for the procedure with professional knowledge of its dangers.

'I knew,' he said.

'Yes.'

'I understood exactly what could happen.'

'You understood what we knew then.'

'Don't soften it.'

'I'm not. We didn't know autobiographical adoption could remain this stable for eight years after active reinforcement stopped.'

'But you knew it might.'

'Yes.'

He stood and walked to the window. The city below looked clean from twenty floors up. Cars moved through intersections according to lights. People crossed when signals told them the correct moment. He envied systems whose rules were visible.

'Was I competent to consent?'

'Legally and clinically, yes.'

'Was I making a good decision?'

Lena did not answer.

He turned. 'You were the psychologist.'

'And I was also someone who knew Mara was alive, knew why she needed protection, knew you were under internal investigation, and knew that if Morrow seized your devices or compelled a full debrief you could expose her. There wasn't a clean option.'

'There was not doing this.'

'Yes.'

'You could have refused.'

'Yes.'

He waited for a defense. None came. Lena looked older than she had in the recording. 'I should have.'

That answer was harder to hate than justification would have been. Elias returned to the table. On the

screen his younger self was frozen with one hand lifted toward the blue cup, as if about to touch it again.

Elias noticed the unfinished gesture.

"Did it work exactly as I asked?" he said.

"No."

"What went wrong?"

"You lost more than Mara's location."

"How much more?"

Lena looked at the notebooks spread across the table.

"That's what we've been afraid to find out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Agreement

Celia brought the consent file to Elias's apartment in a sealed envelope and made him sign for it on paper.

"You enjoy symbolism," he said.

"I enjoy chain of custody. Symbolism is free."

Lena had left an hour earlier after making Elias promise not to watch any additional procedure recordings alone. He had agreed because he was tired of discovering that his earlier self had anticipated every objection his present self considered original. Celia sat at the small dining table and waited while he opened the envelope.

The agreement was thirty-eight pages. The first twenty-two were ordinary clinical language. Experimental procedure. No guaranteed outcome. Potential distress. Uncertain durability. Risk of source confusion. Possible degradation of adjacent memories through associative interference. Elias initialed every page in 2018.

Page twenty-three contained a section titled Future Access and Reversal. Elias had added handwritten amendments.

Participant requests that no automated restoration of targeted episodic pathways be attempted without renewed present-time consent.

Beneath it:

Past consent is not permission to override future refusal. Celia pointed to another line. "This was the forty-minute argument."

Elias read:

Future self may not remember reasons for restriction and may reasonably interpret restriction as coercive. Therefore disclosure must include evidence of original consent but should not presume original consent remains morally binding.

He looked up. "I wrote better contracts when frightened."

"You were unbearable."

"You said that before."

"It remains true."

The next page was worse. The procedure's goal was listed not as memory erasure but preferential retrieval restructuring. Target memories were described by code: M-2018A through M-2018F.

"Where are the definitions?"

"Third-party appendix. Still restricted."

"Because Mara appears in them."

"And others."

Elias read the adverse-event section. During trial sessions he experienced temporal confusion, identity distress, intrusive reconstructed imagery and one episode of dissociation lasting twenty-two minutes.

"Did I lose consciousness?"

"No. You remained responsive. Later you remembered almost none of the interval."

"What did I do?"

Celia hesitated. "Asked everyone in the room to prove which year it was."

Elias looked at her.

"How?"

"You rejected phones because clocks could be altered. Rejected network time because servers could be compromised. Asked for a newspaper, then pointed out newspapers can be printed in advance. Jonah finally opened a sealed bottle of wine with a vintage you remembered buying the previous week."

"That doesn't prove the year."

"You said exactly that."

Despite himself, Elias smiled.

Celia did not.

"It frightened people," she said. "Not because you were violent. Because every piece of evidence we gave you became another system that could theoretically be wrong. You demonstrated, quite effectively, that certainty has no natural stopping point."

The smile disappeared.

He continued reading.

The final page contained a statement in his handwriting. I understand that successful treatment may cause me to experience a constructed scene as emotionally real even where I retain intellectual knowledge that it is reconstructed.

Below that, added later:

If I forget that it is constructed, the procedure has exceeded my consent. Elias looked at Celia. "Did it?"

"Yes."

"Then Morrow harmed me."

"Yes."

The admission was so direct that he needed a moment.

"And yet you covered it up."

"We classified it as an adverse outcome, suspended that protocol and continued monitoring you."

"Without telling the version of me who believed the kitchen was real."

"Your own disclosure restrictions prevented full release until trigger conditions were met."

"Convenient."

"Painfully."

"Did anyone argue I should be told anyway?"

Celia looked toward the window. "Lena. Repeatedly."

Elias said nothing.

"Rohe opposed it," Celia continued. "He believed disclosure itself might destabilize the therapeutic result and expose Mara. Jonah believed the entire procedure should be documented publicly, with your identity removed. You refused because you thought publication would help people reverse-engineer who the protected third party was."

"Mara."

"I did not say that."

"You don't have to anymore."

Celia gathered the pages but left the handwritten final sheet in front of him.

"There is another problem," she said.

"Of course."

"Your consent file was accessed three weeks ago."

Elias looked up.

"By whom?"

"Your credentials."

"I don't remember."

"I know."

"Was there camera footage?"

"No physical access. Remote authentication."

"Then someone used my account."

"Or you did."

Elias looked at the sentence he had written eight years earlier. If I forget that it is constructed, the procedure has exceeded my consent.

At the bottom corner, in tiny handwriting he had not noticed, was another note. When this sentence becomes true, start again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

M. Aster

The name appeared in a rental payment from June 2018.

M. ASTER.

Elias had transferred eight hundred pounds to a property company in a town called Bellweather, two hours north of Dunley. The reference field contained only deposit.

Mara Aster.

He remembered Tess using the surname in one of the old notes. He remembered his storage notebook abbreviating Mara as M.A. The connection seemed obvious enough that Elias distrusted it on principle.

He searched public records carefully. An Mara Aster had registered at a local medical practice in Bellweather in 2018. Age hidden. No electoral listing. No social accounts. The trail ended within months.

Elias drove north without telling Lena. Bellweather was smaller than he expected, a former mill town built along a river with steep streets climbing away from the center. The rental address belonged to a converted textile warehouse. The current manager, a man named Omar Bell, remembered almost nothing about tenants eight years earlier until Elias showed him the building's old unit number.

"Top floor?" Omar said. "There was a woman there with a cat. Or maybe the next one."

"Did she have a scar under her chin?"

Omar looked at him. "I didn't conduct chin inspections."

"Sorry."

"You police?"

"No."

"Debt?"

"No. Family."

That changed something. Omar's expression softened, but not into trust. "If she wanted family finding her, she'd have left forwarding." Elias felt the rebuke before understanding it.

"I'm not asking for a current address."

"Good, because I don't have one."

He allowed Elias into the former unit after checking with the current tenant, who was at work. The flat had been renovated. White walls, new flooring, kitchen moved to the opposite side.

Still, Elias knew where to look. Near the window was a rectangular discoloration in the floor where older boards had been replaced.

A memory surfaced.

Mara sitting cross-legged there, older, hair tied back. A white cup in her hands.

"You brought him," she said.

Lena answered, "He was going to come anyway."

No.

The phrasing differed from the fragment Elias remembered.

He closed his eyes.

Are you sure you want him here?

He'll come anyway.

Who had said which line? The current tenant's kettle clicked off in the kitchen. Elias opened his eyes.

On the wall near the old floor repair was a faint pencil mark preserved beneath a coat of paint. Three horizontal lines and a number.

161.

Height measurement.

Mara had been around that height at seventeen. He photographed it, then stopped. A height mark proved nothing. Children, previous tenants, furniture measurements.

Omar stood in the doorway. "You okay?"

"Did the tenant in 2018 leave suddenly?"

"No idea."

"Any police? Complaints?"

"You're doing the family thing like police."

Elias stood. "Sorry."

As he passed the building mailboxes downstairs, one label caught his eye. Not because of the name but the handwriting. A small capital M with the right stroke pulled too far down.

M. ASTER had once been written in that hand on a faded strip still trapped beneath newer labels. Mara wrote her M that way.

Elias touched the plastic cover but did not open it. Outside, he found a public bench overlooking the river and sat for nearly an hour.

He had spent fifteen years wanting proof Mara survived the night she vanished. Now proof accumulated everywhere and did not produce the feeling he had imagined. Relief existed, but it was tangled with something meaner.

She had lived.

Without him.

She had turned eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-four. She had chosen rooms, bought groceries, perhaps made friends who never knew the name Venn. Elias had remained in the kitchen while Mara kept moving.

His phone vibrated.

A message from Lena.

Where are you?

He almost lied.

Bellweather.

The typing indicator appeared immediately.

Then stopped.

A minute passed.

Finally:

Please don't knock on doors looking for the life she asked you not to own. Elias stared at the sentence.

He hated it because it was correct enough to hurt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Patient Privacy

Morrow formally suspended Ivo the next morning. He called Elias from a park bench while feeding pieces of his breakfast to pigeons.

"Good news," Ivo said. "I have discovered an excellent way to reduce meeting load."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm suspended with pay. This is practically a wellness program."

"You have a mortgage."

"That is why the pay part is carrying the joke."

Elias sat on his sofa with the Continuity notebooks open around him. "They'll blame the archive breach on you."

"No. Camera shows you. System shows you. My crime is being technically curious around an emotionally catastrophic colleague."

"I asked you."

"Yes. I am an adult with a keyboard. You don't get to own all the bad decisions."

The phrase stayed with Elias after the call. At noon Celia summoned him to a legal review, not at Morrow but at an external solicitor's office. Jonah was there, to Elias's surprise, as was a woman he did not recognize who introduced herself as counsel representing former Fallow participants.

Her name was Saira Malik.

"Before anyone releases more archive material to Mr. Venn," Saira said, "I need it understood that these

files contain identities and memories of people who have spent fifteen years believing the program was closed. Some are survivors of abuse. Some made allegations they later withdrew. Some have families who do not know they participated."

Elias looked at Celia. "Why am I here?"

"Because you keep asking why we won't open everything," Celia said. "This is why."

Saira slid a document toward him. It was heavily redacted, but one paragraph remained visible. A Fallow participant described a childhood event during therapy. Later reconstruction inserted a particular room layout inferred from a family photograph. Months afterward the participant identified the generated room as the location of the event with high confidence.

"Was the event real?" Elias asked.

"Unknown," Saira said. "That is the point. The allegation may have been true. The room detail was not evidentially supported. After treatment the participant could no longer separate them."

"Did Morrow use the account?"

"Early researchers studied it. Later legal consultants reviewed whether reconstruction could improve witness recall."

Elias felt nausea rise. "For court?" Jonah answered. "Pilot only. It was stopped."

"After what?"

"After we demonstrated confidence increased faster than accuracy."

"And Rohe buried it."

"Rohe ended it," Celia said. "Then failed to disclose enough about why. Those are both true."

Saira leaned forward. "If you expose Morrow by releasing raw files, you may turn every reconstructed memory in those files into public spectacle. People will ask whether abuse happened, whether grief was fabricated, whether family accusations were real. Some questions have no recoverable answer."

Elias looked at the redactions.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Separate institutional proof from patient content," Saira said. "Find protocols, metrics, executive decisions, software logs. Not people's memories."

It was exactly the sort of distinction Elias would have demanded professionally.

Personally, it felt unbearable.

"Mara copied files," he said. "Did she take patient data?"

Jonah answered carefully. "Some. She was seventeen and frightened. We later helped her strip identities from most of what she kept."

"We."

"Me. Lena. Tess eventually."

"And me?"

Jonah looked at him. "In 2018, yes." Elias almost laughed at the endless discovery of his own participation.

Celia placed a small drive on the table. "This contains non-patient governance records from the Fallow transfer and early Morrow program. You can review it under counsel supervision. It may answer some of your questions without opening anyone else's life."

"Why give it to me now?"

"Because your consent trigger has been met, and because pretending we can contain this by withholding everything has become stupid."

Jonah smiled faintly. "Promotion suits you."

Celia ignored him.

Elias looked at the drive. For the first time, the people restricting him did not appear to be standing on the opposite side of the truth.

They were arguing about who would be injured by it. That made the path forward less satisfying and more real.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Two Notes

The first note was inside the Continuity notebook.

MARA IS ALIVE.

Elias had written it in block capitals on August 29, 2018. Beneath it were three lines of verification: direct meeting, independent photograph, live voice confirmation by Tess. The second note appeared thirty pages later.

MARA DIED AT SEVENTEEN.

Same handwriting. Same pen. Dated September 2. Elias stared at both until the difference in meaning felt almost physical.

He called Lena and asked her to come over. She arrived carrying food from a Thai restaurant and refused to discuss the notes until he ate. He took three bites of rice while she watched.

"Satisfied?"

"No, but less annoyed."

He placed the notebook between them.

Lena read both pages.

"I remember this exercise."

"Exercise."

"You were testing future belief states."

"Explain."

She turned to the second note. "During Continuity, we asked you to write statements from the perspective of the autobiographical model you expected to retain. Not facts. Expected beliefs."

"So this one means future me should believe Mara died?"

"Not exactly. You were trying to predict what absence would become if the 2018 reunion weakened. You knew you had never accepted a literal death without a body. The wording was deliberately extreme because you wanted to see whether it later felt wrong."

"It does."

"Good."

He gave her a look.

"Sorry. Occupational damage."

Elias turned the page. "Why write it without labeling the exercise?"

"You did label it."

"Where?"

Lena pointed to a tiny triangle in the corner. Elias had seen the mark throughout the notebooks and assumed it was a page-count symbol.

"Simulation marker," she said. "You designed it because you didn't want explanatory language influencing later retrieval."

He felt equal parts relieved and furious. "I built a private notation system and then removed my memory of the key."

"You planned to retain the key."

"Clearly a strong plan."

Lena smiled despite herself.

The moment lingered longer than either expected. Elias noticed that when Lena smiled genuinely, one side arrived before the other. He knew this already. The recognition carried no image, only familiarity.

"How close were we?" he asked.

Her smile disappeared.

"In 2018."

Lena looked at the notebook. "Close enough that it complicated the work."

"Were we together?"

"No."

The answer came quickly.

"Did I want to be?"

A longer pause.

"Sometimes."

"Did you?"

"Elias."

"That's not a no."

"It is a boundary."

He recognized his own phrase from the cognitive evaluation and almost laughed. Lena continued, "You were grieving, frightened, carrying information you believed could endanger Mara, and undergoing an experimental procedure. I was supervising parts of that procedure. Whatever either of us felt was not something I was willing to turn into a relationship."

"After?"

"After, you remembered me differently."

The sentence was quiet.

Elias looked at her.

For the first time he understood that the procedure had not only taken memories from him. It had taken a shared history from Lena while leaving her with the obligation to behave as if it had never existed.

"Did I know that would happen?"

"Yes."

"And you agreed."

"Eventually."

"Why?"

Lena's eyes moved to the blue cup on the counter.
"Because you told me that if I made your attachment to me more important than Mara's safety, I'd be proving you were right not to trust me."

"That sounds cruel."

"It was."

"Was it true?"

"Also yes."

They sat quietly.

Elias turned back to the notebook and found another triangle-marked statement.

LENA IS THE PERSON WHO DID THIS TO ME.

He read it aloud.

Lena closed her eyes.

Below it, in smaller handwriting:

This will be emotionally convincing. Check consent before believing it.

Elias looked at her.

"I anticipated hating you."

"You were thorough."

"Did you anticipate hating me?"

Lena looked toward the window.

"No," she said. "That would have been easier."

CHAPTER THIRTY

A Woman in Glass

The still image came from the same August session in which Elias broke the cup. Saira's governance archive contained no patient footage, but a facilities incident report included three photographs of Suite 3C after the damage. Elias had already seen the broken ceramic. He had not examined the observation-room window closely.

In the third photograph, the dark glass reflected the room behind the camera.

A woman stood there.

Only half her face was visible. Hair tied back. Narrow jaw. A pale mark beneath the chin.

Mara.

Elias enlarged the image without enhancement. The pixels remained crude, but the resemblance was stronger than the Pember photograph. The woman wore a dark coat and held both arms tightly across her body.

"She was there," Elias said.

Lena sat beside him at the solicitor's office. "Yes."

"During the procedure."

"For one session."

"Why?"

"You asked her to witness your consent. She refused at first. Then she agreed on the condition that she would not speak to you during the reconstruction."

Elias looked at Mara's reflection. "Did I know she was behind the glass?"

"Yes."

"Why can't I remember seeing her?"

"Because that session was one of the targeted memories."

The photograph showed his younger self only as a blurred shoulder at the edge. He imagined Mara watching him ask to forget where she lived.

"Did she approve?"

"No."

"Then why did she come?"

"Because you told her the procedure was happening whether she came or not."

Elias winced. "Apparently I had a limited persuasion toolkit."

"You were both very good at threats disguised as decisions."

"What did she say afterward?"

Lena hesitated. "She said you were turning forgetting into another way to control the situation."

"Was she right?"

"Partly."

"What did I say?"

"That she had controlled the situation by disappearing."

Elias looked away.

"She slapped you," Lena added.

He turned back. "Mara hit me?"

"Once. You deserved it enough that Jonah pretended not to see."

Against all expectation Elias laughed.

Lena laughed too.

The laughter eased something, then made its absence more obvious when it stopped. Elias looked again at the reflected woman.

"Was that the last time I saw her?"

"No."

"When was the last?"

"September third. Pember Station."

The date on the ticket from Locker 81.

"The photograph Jonah had."

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"You said goodbye."

Elias felt his chest tighten. "The real goodbye."

Lena nodded.

"And I replaced it with the kitchen."

"Not immediately. The real memory remained accessible for weeks. Then less often. Eventually the kitchen became dominant."

"Do you have a recording of Pember?"

"No. You forbade cameras after the timer photograph."

"Handwritten account?"

"Probably in the materials you hid."

"Locker 81 was empty except for the card."

Lena looked at him. "It wasn't supposed to be."

Elias sat straighter.

"What was supposed to be there?"

"A packet. Analog recordings. Your notes. Copies of Mara's redacted evidence."

"Someone removed them."

"Or you did."

They both understood the implication. The recent 3:12 route had led Elias to an almost empty locker and then to Morrow, where he copied the Continuity video. If the procedural chain had activated earlier, perhaps weeks earlier when his consent file was accessed, he might already have moved the packet.

"Where would I take it?" Elias asked.

Lena looked at the photograph of Mara in the glass.

"Somewhere you believed only you could find."

Elias thought of old notebooks, storage units, physical keys, buildings with wrong addresses. Then one memory surfaced with unexpected clarity.

His mother's grave.

Not the funeral.

A stone bench twenty yards behind it, loose at one corner because tree roots had lifted the base. Elias had hidden cigarettes beneath it at sixteen.

Mara had found them and replaced two with rolled-up notes that said YOU'RE BAD AT CRIME.

He stood.

Lena saw the answer in his face.

"Where?"

"Somewhere Mara already taught me to hide things."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Bench

The cemetery had changed less than Alder Row. Trees were taller. Several older headstones had been replaced by flat markers, and the path near the chapel had been resurfaced. Helen Venn's grave remained beneath the same sycamore, the lettering softened by sixteen winters. Elias stopped in front of it and felt immediately ashamed that his first thought concerned the bench behind it.

He had not visited in almost three years. His mother had been dead longer than Mara had been missing when Mara disappeared. The arithmetic used to seem impossible. Now everything in his life came with dates that outran the people attached to them.

Lena stayed near the path while Elias knelt at the stone. Neither of them had discussed whether she should come. He had said cemetery and she had taken her coat.

"Sorry," Elias said under his breath.

It was unclear which absence he meant. The stone bench stood twenty yards away, tilted slightly upward on the right where sycamore roots pressed beneath the paving. Elias remembered being sixteen, lifting the loose edge with Mara while she laughed at his secret cigarettes. She had found them within a day and replaced them with notes because, as she informed him, he was bad at crime and worse at hiding smells.

Elias crouched beside the bench. The stone was heavier than he remembered.

Lena came closer. "Need help?"

"I can manage."

"That wasn't a personality assessment."

Together they shifted the right edge just enough to expose a narrow cavity beneath the base. Elias reached into wet soil and touched plastic. A black document pouch came free.

It was modern, waterproof, and sealed with tape dated August 28, 2026.

Three weeks ago.

Elias stared at the date.

"I moved it," he said.

"Looks like it."

"Before I ran Vela."

"Your consent file was accessed around then."

He remembered nothing.

Inside the pouch were two microcassette recorders, a paper envelope, photocopies of Fallow governance records with names removed, and a notebook smaller than the others. The cover read PEMBERTON in Elias's handwriting, though the station had always been called Pember. The deliberate error felt like another marker.

They sat on the bench. Elias opened the notebook. The first page contained a rule.

If the spelling looks wrong, trust that I meant you to notice it.

He almost laughed.

"I hate myself," he said.

"You were worse in person."

"Comforting."

The entries began September 1, 2018. Mara leaving again in two days. She says not to say "again" because

leaving the first time was not something she did to me. I know she is right and still think the sentence.

September 2:

We argued about whether I should know her next address. She says no. I said that makes the procedure unnecessary. She said maybe that's the point. We are both trying to use forgetting to solve a trust problem.

Elias looked at Lena.

"Did she want me to undergo Continuity?"

"No. She tolerated it because you had already learned enough to find her and because Morrow's internal investigation was getting close to the same trail."

"Could I have just promised not to tell?"

"You did."

"And didn't trust myself."

"You didn't trust interrogation, legal compulsion, reconstruction or your own obsession if she disappeared again."

The last phrase caught him.

"She disappeared again?"

"From you. Not from everyone. After September third she cut direct contact."

Elias returned to the notebook.

Final entry, September 3:

Pember. Mara says I keep wanting goodbye to behave like proof. There is no proof a person will remain gone. There is only whether they choose to return. She asked if I still remember the kitchen. I said yes. She said, "Then keep the ugly version. Don't polish it because you need it to hurt correctly."

I told her I loved her. She said, "I know. That's never been the problem."

No final speech. No promise. She got on the train. I watched until it left.

Then one more line:

I wanted her to turn around. She didn't.

Elias closed the notebook.

The sentence was ordinary enough to break him. For years he had imagined the perfect missing final moment: rain, blue cup, warning, guilt. The real goodbye contained a platform, an argument about language and a sister who did not turn around.

He bent forward with his elbows on his knees. Lena did not touch him.

He was grateful for that until he was not.

"Why didn't she turn around?" he asked.

Lena's voice was gentle. "I don't know." He laughed once through tears. "Finally a good answer."

After several minutes he opened the paper envelope. Inside was a photograph from Pember Station, the original of Jonah's copy. The timer had captured Elias on one side, Lena on the other, Mara between them. This time Mara faced the camera.

Thirty-two-year-old Elias had seen thousands of reconstructions of people restored from poor images. None of them prepared him for the simple violence of a clear photograph.

Mara at twenty-four.

Hair tied back.

The photograph had been developed at a small shop in Wrenford that still processed film. Elias chose it because the owner, an elderly man named Armit,

accepted cash and wrote orders on carbon paper. Armit did not ask why Elias watched the machine as though it might testify against him.

Twelve photographs came back. Three were useless exposures of pavement. One showed the interior of a train. Two showed Jonah outside a pub Elias did not recognize. Another showed Tess Calder laughing beside a newspaper box. The remaining six contained Mara.

Not seventeen-year-old Mara reconstructed from records. Mara at twenty-four. In one she stood beneath a station sign wearing a red wool hat and holding a takeaway cup. In another she was turning away, annoyed with whoever held the camera. A third caught her mid-sentence, one hand raised, mouth open, a grocery bag looped over her wrist. The photographs were badly framed. Human. Uncurated.

Elias spread them across his dining table in chronological order, though the sequence might have been wrong. He could not stop looking at her hands. They were older. That was what broke the visual spell. The face still contained enough of seventeen to be cruel, but her hands belonged to an adult who had lived years without him.

He found no blue cup. No rain. No cinematic evidence of survival. Just Mara standing outside a discount pharmacy, Mara eating chips from paper, Mara squinting at the camera because the sun was in her eyes.

The fifth photograph showed both of them reflected faintly in the window of a café. Elias had apparently taken it while pointing the disposable camera outward. Mara sat opposite him. He could see the shape of his

own shoulder and the pale oval of his face. On the table between them lay a folded map.

He touched the photograph and tried to summon anything. Smell. Sound. A phrase. Nothing came. He had been there. The image did not make him remember.

That fact should have reassured him. Evidence could remain evidence without becoming experience. Instead it felt like looking at a photograph of someone wearing his body. Ivo arrived at seven carrying groceries and immediately said, 'You have the serial-killer table.'

Elias looked at the arranged photographs, notebook, train map and photocopies. 'This is organized.'

'That's what serial killers say in documentaries.'

He set a bag in the kitchen and came closer. His joking stopped when he saw Mara.

'That's her.'

'2018.'

Ivo pulled out a chair but did not sit until Elias nodded. He examined each image without touching. 'Film can be faked.'

'Yes.'

'Good. Just checking we're still annoying.'

'The shop says the roll is consistent with a 2018 batch. Chemical aging matches. Not proof of subject identity.'

'Face match?'

'I haven't run one.'

Ivo looked surprised. 'Why not?'

'Because I know what result I want.'

'That's new.'

Elias ignored him.

Ivo pointed to the station image. 'What's written on the back?' Most were blank. The final photograph, the one with Mara looking directly at the lens, had writing. Elias had not noticed it until the paper dried fully.

For when Eli decides evidence is romantic. The handwriting matched old letters from Mara closely enough that Elias's first impulse was to trust it. He resisted. He compared letterforms manually, then hated himself for turning her joke into forensic work.

'She knew you'd keep the pictures,' Ivo said.

'Apparently.'

'She knew you'd need them.'

'Or I asked her to write it.'

'Also possible.'

Elias looked at the photograph. 'Why don't I remember her?' Ivo sat back. 'Because whatever they did worked.'

'Not completely. I remember the kitchen. I remember childhood scenes that are contaminated with adult locations. I remember Owen March, who was assembled from three people. But this?' He tapped the picture. 'Nothing.'

'Maybe the brain isn't a filing cabinet and there isn't a neat folder labeled Mara 2018.'

'I know.'

'You say that every time I tell you something you know.'

'Because you keep telling me things I know.'

'Because sometimes knowledge doesn't change behavior.'

Elias stared at him. 'Have you been talking to Lena?'

'God, no. She frightens me in complete sentences.'

They ate at the table with the photographs turned face down because Elias discovered he could not chew while looking at Mara. Ivo told him about a software deployment failing because an engineer had named two production servers FINAL and FINAL2. Elias laughed despite himself.

Afterward, he flipped the photographs back over. There was a small detail in the café window image he had missed. On the reflected table, beside the map, lay an audio recorder. Analog, rectangular, with a red record button.

'If that still exists,' Elias said, 'it could contain the conversation.'

'Do you want it to?'

The question irritated him. 'Of course.'

Ivo waited.

Elias looked at the adult Mara on the table. 'I don't know.'

'Better answer.'

They searched the locker inventory photographs from Pember. No recorder. The 2018 continuity map listed three physical caches. Pember was one. A second had been destroyed when a storage facility closed. The third was identified only by a phrase: THE BENCH.

Elias searched his notebooks. The phrase appeared twice in 2018 pages he did not remember writing. One entry read: BENCH, WRENFORD EAST GARDEN. ASK BEFORE DIGGING. Ivo read over his shoulder. 'That sounds literal.'

'It might not be.'

'With you, unfortunately, it probably is.'

They drove to Wrenford the next morning. East Garden was a small municipal park behind a library, half lawn and half neglected flowerbeds. There were six benches. Elias walked among them without recognition.

The fourth bench carried a brass memorial plate for a woman named Evelyn Ross. Beneath it someone had scratched a tiny V into the wood. Elias crouched and examined the ground. Fresh digging would be obvious. Eight years of soil would not.

'Ask before digging,' Ivo said. 'Who are we asking?'

A voice behind them answered, 'Preferably me.'

They turned.

An elderly woman in gardening gloves stood on the path with a municipal badge clipped to her coat. She looked at Elias carefully. 'You came here before.'

'When?'

'Years ago. With a young woman.'

Elias's mouth went dry.

'Do you remember her?'

The gardener smiled faintly. 'Hard not to. She argued with you for twenty minutes about whether burying things made them more important.'

'What did she look like?'

The woman pointed to the photographs in Elias's hand. 'Like that.'

Elias looked down.

Mara's face stared back at him from 2018. The gardener led them to the rear of the bench where a removable plank had once concealed a narrow cavity. It was empty now. 'You took whatever was there the next day,' she said. 'Both of you came back.'

'Did she say where we were going?'

'No. She said you asked too many questions.'

'That sounds like her.'

'You said that then too.'

For the first time an ordinary stranger remembered Elias remembering Mara after 2011. No database. No Morrow archive. No machine inference.

A human witness.

He should have felt vindicated. Instead he felt grief arrive fresh and almost physical, because the evidence did not only prove Mara lived. It proved there had been time with her he had chosen to lose.

Back at the car, he turned over the final photograph again. Beneath Mara's first sentence, faint enough that the lab technician had not noticed, was another line in the same ink.

Scar beneath her chin.

Older eyes.

Not a ghost. Not a theory. She was looking at the camera with an expression he remembered from childhood: amused by somebody else's seriousness.

On the back, she had written:

For when Eli decides evidence is romantic.

Then beneath it:

You found me. Now leave me found.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

What He Protected

The first microcassette contained the conversation Elias had been afraid to recover. The recording quality was terrible. Train announcements bled through the background, and every few seconds the microphone rubbed against fabric. Lena wanted to digitize it first. Elias refused. He wanted the imperfections intact.

Mara's voice appeared after twenty seconds.

"Is that thing on?"

Recorded Elias answered, "Yes."

"You promised no recordings."

"You agreed to one audio record of consent."

"I agreed because you said future-you would be intolerable."

"Correct assessment."

A short laugh.

Present-day Elias closed his eyes. Mara continued. "Fine. Say what you're promising."

His younger voice changed, losing the argumentative rhythm.

"I won't give Morrow your location. I won't give police your location unless I have evidence you're in immediate danger. I won't publish the files in a way that identifies you or other Fallow participants. I won't contact your employer, landlord or friends. If you don't contact me, I won't use technical systems to find you again."

"And?"

A pause.

"I won't decide your absence means you need rescuing."

"That one."

"I know."

"No, Eli. You know the sentence. I'm asking whether you understand it."

Recorded Elias sighed. "Probably not enough."

"Better."

The microphone moved. A train announcement named a northbound service. Mara said, "I'm not doing this because I hate you."

"I know."

"Stop saying I know every time you don't want to answer."

"Fine."

"You did it just then."

"Mara."

"There he is."

Present-day Elias pressed his fingers against his eyes. He could almost see her now, not through memory but through the photograph resting beside him.

Recorded Elias said, "I spent seven years thinking you were dead."

"I know."

"You let me."

"I let everybody think I was missing. That's not the same as telling you I was dead."

"You knew what it would do."

"Yes."

The honesty stopped the argument for several seconds. Mara's voice softened. "I am sorry for that. I

don't know how to make it fair. I don't think there is a fair version."

"You could come home."

"Home to what? Dad treating every late night like a crisis? You checking whether my memories match my messages? Reporters? Fallow lawyers? A police interview where they ask whether I'm stable enough to explain why I left?"

"I'm not Dad."

"No. You're worse in a more organized way."

Despite everything, both of them laughed.

The recording continued.

"What are you protecting with the procedure?" Mara asked.

"Your location."

"Only that?"

A long pause.

"No."

"Say it."

Recorded Elias breathed in.

"I'm protecting myself from knowing you chose to leave me twice."

Present-day Elias opened his eyes. Lena sat across the table, motionless.

On tape, Mara said nothing for several seconds. Then: "That's at least true."

"I hate you sometimes."

"I know."

"You can say it apparently."

"Older-sister privilege."

"You're younger."

"Not emotionally."

Another laugh.

Then Mara became serious. "If you're going to do this, don't make me nicer in the memory."

"What?"

"The kitchen. Don't turn me into some tragic little girl who says exactly what you needed. Keep me angry. Keep me difficult."

"The system doesn't work like that."

"Systems always work like that when people want them to."

"Mara."

"Promise."

Recorded Elias said, "I promise." The tape ended soon after.

Present-day Elias stared at the cassette player. He had broken that promise.

The kitchen memory had made Mara vulnerable, tearful, almost entirely about him. Even when the words remained hers, the emotional shape had shifted. The reconstruction had polished her into the sister Elias needed to fail.

"Did I do that deliberately?" he asked.

Lena shook her head. "Not consciously. The sessions reinforced details you attended to. You attended to vulnerability because guilt made it salient. Vela's predecessor learned what reduced conflict in recall. Over repeated exposure, Mara became more consistent with the narrative you already carried."

"A victim."

"Your victim."

He looked at her sharply. Lena did not retreat. "Not because you hurt her that night. Because guilt needs

ownership. If Mara left for reasons larger than you, there is nothing for you to solve. If you failed her, then at least you remain central."

The cruelty of the interpretation made him want to reject it. The tape made that difficult.

"Did you tell me this then?"

"Many times."

"Did I listen?"

"Sometimes."

Elias picked up Mara's photograph. You found me. Now leave me found.

"There are moments," he said, "when I think the procedure didn't change me enough."

Lena's expression softened. "And moments when I think it changed exactly the wrong things."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Breach

Morrow security arrived at Elias's apartment at 7:30 the next morning with a warrant to recover proprietary data copied during the 4:14 archive breach.

Celia came with them.

"They are not searching your personal papers," she said before entering. "The order is limited to Morrow devices and the encrypted package copied from node C-17."

Elias held up the small drive. "This?"

"Yes."

"I've already opened it."

"I know."

"Then why take it now?"

"Because pretending procedure no longer matters is how we got here."

He handed it over.

The security technician placed it in an evidence pouch. Elias watched the seal close and thought of Mara's archive label on the records-suite floor. Celia stayed after the others left.

"You should see the full footage," she said.

They used Elias's television because he no longer had access to Morrow. The security video began at 4:06 a.m. with Elias entering the south door. He moved normally, not dazed, not hurried. He nodded to a night guard, signed a visitor exception on a tablet and took the lift to nine.

"I spoke to him?"

"Audio isn't retained at that desk. Guard remembers you saying you forgot something."

On the ninth floor, Elias used his badge at the restricted archive. When the first attempt failed, he entered a maintenance override code.

"I don't know that code."

"You did in 2018. It was retired in 2019 but still accepted by the legacy node."

"Why?"

"Because systems are museums of mistakes."

Inside the archive, Elias went directly to a terminal. No searching. No hesitation. He inserted the drive from his coat and copied the package. Then he did something neither had seen in the earlier log.

He opened a second folder.

Celia paused the footage.

"This is why I'm here."

"What was it?"

"Mara Venn case linkage."

Elias felt his stomach tighten.

"What did I do?"

Celia resumed.

On screen, Elias authenticated with a legacy code, selected three records and changed their relationship state from active to sealed. Then he printed a summary, folded it and put it into his pocket.

"Sealed from whom?"

"From Vela's automatic source ingestion."

"I removed Mara's records?"

"Three links."

"Which ones?"

"One is an address relation from 2018. One is a police case annotation. One is unknown because its source record was subsequently deleted."

"By me?"

"Not that night."

Elias watched himself leave the building at 4:26.

"Where is the printed summary?"

"Not found in your apartment during the limited search."

He checked the coat he had worn. Empty.

"Could I have taken it somewhere after Morrow?"

Celia opened city traffic footage. At 4:38 a camera caught Elias walking west. At 4:51 another caught him near Dunley Central Hospital.

Then he disappeared from available cameras.

"Hospital," Elias said.

"You had no appointment."

"Fallow was near the hospital."

Celia nodded.

The old Fallow Clinic building still existed, now used as administrative offices for a private physiotherapy company. Elias felt another bodily recognition. Orange chairs. Too many plants. A corridor that smelled of citrus cleaner.

"Did I go there?"

"We don't know."

"Can we check?"

Celia looked at him. "Your suspension does not prevent you from walking on a public street." It was the closest thing she ever gave to permission.

Before leaving, she said, "Elias, the fact that your conditioned route made you do something does not

mean you lacked agency. You designed the route. You also designed it eight years ago for circumstances that may no longer exist."

"Meaning?"

"A contingency plan can become dangerous after the contingency changes."

He understood.

His earlier self had built automatic behaviors to protect Mara from Morrow. His present self was triggering them without knowing whether Mara still needed protection, whether Morrow was still the threat, or whether the behaviors themselves were destroying evidence he now needed.

For the first time he became afraid not of someone controlling him, but of obeying himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lena's Lie

The old Fallow building had a physiotherapy sign over the entrance and blue chairs where Elias remembered orange ones. He arrived with Lena just before closing and persuaded the receptionist to let them look at the ground-floor corridor after Lena produced documentation of her former research affiliation.

"You worked here," Elias said as they passed what had once been the waiting room.

"Three years."

"And never told me until this week."

"Yes."

"We need a new word for that because lie is getting overused."

"Omission remains available."

"Cowardice?"

Lena looked at him. "Also available." The bluntness took some pleasure out of accusing her.

At the end of the corridor, an office door stood where Elias remembered a storage cupboard. Lena explained the building had been remodeled. He walked slowly, allowing associations to come without forcing them.

Citrus cleaner.

A wall clock.

A woman crying behind a closed door. Mara at fourteen sitting with her knees pulled up on an orange chair, whispering, "Don't tell Dad I swore."

Then another memory overlaid it. Adult Elias in the same corridor in 2018.

Lena beside him.

"This is where you met her," she said.

"Who?"

"Me. The first time you remember from before Continuity."

Elias looked at the wall.

"2017."

"You had traced Fallow's data transfer to Morrow and came here looking for archived property records. I recognized your name."

"Did you tell me you knew Mara?"

"Yes. Immediately."

"So my memory of meeting you at Morrow in 2021 replaced an actual first meeting here."

"Not exactly replaced. The 2021 meeting happened. You simply experienced it as first."

He nodded slowly.

A door opened inside memory. Not literal. A connected sequence suddenly gained edges.

Lena younger, standing in the corridor with a cardboard archive box. Elias saying, "You wrote the note."

Lena: "Which note?"

"The one police used to call her unstable."

"I didn't write it."

"Your name is in the file."

"As reviewer. I objected to the language."

"Where?"

"In the version they didn't give you."

The memory vanished.

Elias gripped the back of a blue chair.

"I confronted you here."

"Yes."

"You had a box."

"Yes."

"I accused you of writing Mara's clinical summary."

Lena's eyes widened slightly. "You're recovering more quickly than I expected."

"Don't sound pleased."

"I'm not."

He looked at her. "What else happened?"

"You asked me to help find the original records. I did. That's how you entered Morrow's research work."

"You recruited me."

"I introduced you to Jonah. He recruited your technical competence. You recruited yourself into everything else."

They reached a room at the rear. It had once been Fallow's analog archive. The current staff used it for exercise mats.

Elias stood in the center and felt nothing.

"The lie," he said. "The important one. What haven't you told me yet?"

Lena's face tightened.

"I knew Mara's location after 2018."

He stared.

"You told me you didn't know where she was."

"I said I didn't know where she went the night she left in 2011. Later I avoided answering directly."

"That's legalistic."

"Yes."

"Do you know where she is now?"

Lena looked at the rolled exercise mats rather than him.

"I knew until January this year."

The floor seemed to shift.

"You were in contact."

"Occasionally."

"This year."

"Yes."

"And you watched me sit in your office two days ago asking if my sister might be alive."

"Yes."

Elias's hands began to shake.

"Why?"

"Because Mara's last instruction to me was not to reveal her location to you unless you reached the 2018 consent record on your own."

"I have."

"Yes."

"So tell me."

Lena finally looked at him.

"She moved in January without telling me where."

Elias laughed once, bitterly. "Perfect."

"I can give you the last contact information she permitted me to retain."

"Why now?"

"Because the condition she set has been met."

Lena did not deny the absurdity of it. That made the argument worse. Elias had prepared for resistance, for clinical phrasing, for the possibility that she would invoke consent forms and privacy statutes until his anger had nowhere human to land. Instead she sat in the consultation room with both hands around a cup of tea and allowed him to accuse her accurately.

'There were conditions,' she said. 'Several. Yours. Mara's. Mine.'

'Yours?'

'I refused to participate unless there was a recovery path outside Morrow.'

'The lockers.'

'Some of them.'

'Jonah.'

'Yes.'

'Tess.'

'She was your choice.'

Elias stood by the window because sitting across from Lena made the room feel too much like every evaluation he had ever undergone. 'You built a maze around me and then spent years asking how I felt about walls.'

'That's a fair description.'

'Stop agreeing with me.'

Lena looked at him. 'Would you prefer I lie?'

He almost said yes.

The answer frightened him enough that he sat down. Lena put the tea aside. 'Your consent in 2018 was specific. You wanted Mara's current identity and location made difficult to retrieve. You wanted the existence of the reunion itself weakened because you believed knowing you had found her would eventually lead you to search again. You did not ask to lose your work history, your relationship with me, or unrelated autobiographical memories.'

'But I did.'

'Some.'

'How?'

'Retrieval networks overlap. Context overlaps. You were working inside Morrow while investigating Mara, so memories of the company became cues for memories of her. The more aggressively the protocol disrupted those cues, the more collateral loss occurred.'

'You say protocol like that makes it less insane.'

'It was a protocol. It was also insane in ways we underestimated.'

'And when you realized?'

Lena's eyes dropped. 'Gradually.'

'You had eight years.'

'We had annual evaluations showing stable employment, intact daily functioning and no spontaneous recovery causing distress. Every year I considered whether telling you would violate the decision you had made while informed.'

'And every year you decided the dead version of me got the vote.'

'Not dead.'

'He might as well be. I don't know him.'

'You are him.'

Elias laughed sharply. 'Convenient for responsibility.'

'And inconvenient for victimhood.'

The words struck hard enough that he stared at her. Lena did not retreat. 'You want there to be a clean line between the person who did this and the person it was done to. There isn't. That does not excuse me. It does not absolve Morrow. It also does not erase your agency.'

'Agency requires continuity.'

'No. Accountability often survives discontinuity. Ask anyone who has hurt someone while intoxicated, manic, dissociated, concussed. The question is not whether the

later self remembers. The question is what obligations remain.'

'Don't diagnose me by analogy.'

'I'm not.'

He looked away.

For several seconds they listened to a trolley squeak in the corridor.

'Did Mara approve the kitchen reconstruction?' he asked.

Lena inhaled slowly. 'Not exactly.'

'What does that mean?'

'She approved use of the recording in your treatment. She did not approve being represented as speaking to you directly.'

Elias felt something cold move through him. 'So she didn't know.'

'Not until afterward.'

'What did she say?'

'She was furious.'

'At me?'

'At all of us. Mostly you.'

He almost smiled despite himself. 'That sounds right.'

'She said you had finally found a way to make her disappearance about being present.'

The sentence hurt because it was elegant in exactly the way Mara could be when angry.

'Did she ask you to undo it?'

'She asked whether we could.'

'Could you?'

'Not reliably. Once the reconstruction had been repeated and integrated, trying to overwrite it with another scene risked creating additional contamination.'

We could weaken access. We could restore uncertainty. We could not return you to a pristine state that no longer existed.'

'So you left it.'

'You chose to leave it.'

'There it is again.'

'Because it matters.'

Elias pressed his palms against his eyes. He saw the kitchen anyway.

'Why did you keep working here?' he asked.

Lena was quiet long enough that he lowered his hands.

'Cowardice,' she said.

He had expected a complicated answer.

'That's not all.'

'No. I believed I could reduce harm from inside. I believed the clinical program could be corrected. I believed Rohe when he said the company would separate therapeutic reconstruction from confidence reinforcement. I believed leaving would hand the work to people who understood the risks less. Some of those beliefs were true. Some were excuses. They were often the same sentence.'

Elias studied her. 'Did you ever tell anyone Mara was alive?'

'Only those she authorized.'

'My father?'

'No.'

'He died in 2020.'

'I know.'

'Did Mara know before he died?'

'Yes.'

Elias gripped the chair arm. 'Did she contact him?' Lena's face changed. 'That is hers to tell you.'

'You don't get to use her boundaries as a shield every time the answer hurts.'

'No. But I also don't get to break them because you are angry.'

He stood again. 'I don't know how to trust anything you say.'

'Then don't. Verify what you can.'

'And what I can't?'

'Leave it uncertain until you have a reason not to.'

It was exactly what Elias taught clients. He hated her for returning it to him.

At the door he stopped. 'When did you first meet Mara?'

'September 2008.'

'How old were you?'

'Twenty-one.'

'You were barely older than me.'

'Yes.'

For years Elias had imagined Lena as part of the adult machinery that surrounded Mara. In 2008 she had been a junior researcher, twenty-one, probably frightened of Rohe, probably believing credentialed people above her knew more than they did.

The fact did not make her innocent. It made the history harder to simplify.

He opened the door.

Lena said his name.

He turned.

'There is one thing you should know before you find her again.'

'Again.'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Mara did not disappear because she hated you.'

Elias's throat tightened. 'I never thought that.' Lena looked at him with unbearable gentleness. 'You did in 2018.'

"You let a condition written by my missing sister govern what I could know about my own life."

"Yes."

"Do you hear how insane that sounds?"

"Every day."

He wanted to shout. Instead he said, "What was the last thing she told you about me?" Lena's expression changed in a way he had not seen before. Grief, perhaps.

"She asked whether you were happy."

Elias had no defense against that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Missing-Person File

The police case file had been altered in 2018. Not rewritten. Not falsified. Three digital links had been sealed under a privacy order submitted by a solicitor representing an adult formerly listed as missing. The name of the adult was withheld from the family-facing copy, but the internal case identifier belonged to Mara Venn.

Elias read the order in an interview room at Dunley Central Police Station while Detective Superintendent Amara Holt, who had inherited cold-case oversight years after Mara vanished, sat across from him.

"She contacted police?" he asked.

"Through counsel."

"To say she was alive."

"To state she was alive, safe, an adult and did not consent to her current location being released."

Elias felt a pressure in his chest that was almost relief, almost anger.

"Why wasn't the missing-person case closed?"

"It was internally resolved as located alive in 2018. Public status remained restricted because of safeguarding concerns and her request. Your family was informed through a limited notification."

"No, we weren't."

Holt turned the monitor toward him. Acknowledgment form. Gabriel Venn. September 12, 2018.

Elias stared at his father's signature.

"Dad knew."

"Your father was told Mara was alive and did not wish contact. He signed a confidentiality undertaking regarding public disclosure."

The betrayal was so complete it felt almost clean.

"Why didn't he tell me?"

Holt looked uncomfortable. "According to the file, you were present when the notification was given."

Elias looked up.

"I was here."

"Yes."

"In this station."

"Room may have been different."

He could not speak for several seconds.

Holt opened another document.

Statement by Elias Venn, 2018. I accept that Mara is alive and has requested no contact. I will not pursue disclosure of her location through police systems.

His signature.

Below it, an additional note:

Mr. Venn requests that future family inquiries be directed to Gabriel Venn due to ongoing clinical treatment.

Elias closed his eyes.

His father had not spent the last eight years believing Mara was dead. He had spent them protecting a fact Elias himself had asked not to be reminded of.

"Can I call him from here?"

Holt nodded.

Gabriel answered after three rings.

"Elias?"

"You knew."

Silence.

"Since 2018. You knew Mara was alive."

His father's breath came through the phone.

"Yes."

Elias stood and walked to the corner of the interview room because sitting felt impossible.

"You let me talk about her. Every year. You let me put flowers out on her birthday. You let me say maybe one day they'll find something."

"You told me to."

"Stop saying that. Everyone keeps saying I asked for this as if that makes it fine."

"It wasn't fine."

Gabriel's voice broke slightly. "None of it was fine. You came to me with Lena and a lawyer. You said Mara was alive. You said she didn't want us to know where. You said you were going through some treatment because you were afraid you'd go looking again. You made me promise I wouldn't tell you unless you asked a very specific question."

"What question?"

"You said, 'Did the police close the case because they found her alive?'"

Elias looked at Holt.

He had never asked that. Why would he? The public file remained unresolved.

"And if I asked anything else?"

"I was supposed to say I didn't know."

"You lied to me for eight years."

"Yes."

"How could you?"

Gabriel was quiet for so long Elias thought the call had dropped. Then his father said, "Because the first seven years nearly killed you. And because when you told me she was alive, I thought getting you back might be the only thing she could still give us."

Elias pressed his free hand against the wall.

"That's not your decision."

"No. It was yours."

"Apparently I make terrible decisions."

"You make terrified decisions and then turn them into principles."

The accuracy was unbearable.

Elias ended the call without saying goodbye.

Holt gave him time.

After several minutes she said, "There is one more item." Elias laughed weakly. "Of course there is."

"When Mara's case was restricted in 2018, one evidence link was removed from active police search systems. Authorization came from you as a technical consultant working with Morrow's legacy-data team."

"What link?"

Holt opened the entry.

A location inference generated from historical Fallow records. Potential address cluster for Mara Venn.

Elias had marked it contaminated and recommended deletion.

"Was it contaminated?" he asked.

"We don't know. The source model no longer exists."

"Could it have led to her?"

"Possibly."

Elias looked at his own 2018 approval signature. For the first time, the thought formed clearly.

He had not merely forgotten Mara's location. He had helped remove the trail that anyone else might have used to find her.

If Mara had later needed help, if something had happened after January, Elias might have destroyed the very evidence that could reach her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

What He Did

For the next two days Elias stopped asking other people questions. He did not trust the answers, but more importantly he no longer trusted the version of himself doing the asking. He went home from the police station, switched off his phone and placed every notebook from 2018 across the living-room floor in chronological order. Then he created three columns on sheets of paper taped to the wall.

KNOWN ACTION.

REMEMBERED ACTION.

INFERRED ACTION.

The first column grew quickly. He found Mara in June 2018. He met her at least twice. He learned where she was living. He entered Morrow's Continuity program. He asked for retrieval restructuring. He instructed his father and several others to withhold information from his future self. He sealed a police linkage that might have identified Mara's location. He removed pages from notebooks. He built automatic retrieval cues. He accessed his own consent file three weeks earlier. He broke into Morrow's archive at four in the morning.

The second column was almost empty.

White cup.

Mara older.

Lena on the floor beside a broken blue cup. A black gate in rain.

The third column became intolerable. He may have destroyed evidence.

He may have obstructed a missing-person investigation. He may have helped Mara disappear permanently from people who loved her.

He may have done more than protect her location. At 2:15 a.m. he found the entry that broke his composure.

August 7, 2018.

Mara says if I do it again she will never forgive me. I told her I already can't forgive myself. Not useful. Elias read the line six times.

Do what again?

The next page had been removed. He examined the cut edge. Deliberate, clean.

Two pages later:

Lena says intent does not matter if the outcome is the same. I said that's convenient for clinicians. She said it is more convenient for guilty people.

No explanation.

Elias's mind supplied possibilities faster than he could reject them. Had he exposed Mara's address once already?

Had someone found her because of him?

Had she been harmed?

Had he manipulated her memory?

The thought stopped him.

Fallow technology existed. Early Morrow technology existed. Elias had worked with both. If he feared Mara revealing something, could he have used reconstruction on her?

There was no evidence.

That did not prevent the idea from gaining emotional weight. He wrote it under INFERRED ACTION, then crossed it out so hard the paper tore.

At three in the morning he called Lena despite having promised himself not to.

She answered sounding awake.

"What did Mara mean by do it again?"

"What entry?"

He read it.

Lena was quiet.

"Tell me."

"You contacted her employer."

Elias closed his eyes. "Why?"

"After your first meeting she stopped answering you. You found where she worked through a professional registry and called pretending to verify a reference. You wanted to know whether she was safe."

"I violated the promise before I made it."

"Yes."

"Did it endanger her?"

"Her manager mentioned the call. Mara realized you had traced her. She moved apartments."

Elias sat on the floor. The terrible act was smaller than his imagination and more believable because of it. Not murder. Not technological abuse. An ordinary boundary crossed by a frightened brother who believed concern converted intrusion into care.

"What did she say?"

"That if you did it again, she would never forgive you."

"And the part about intent?"

"You kept saying you only wanted to know she was safe. I told you the outcome for Mara was that she had to move. Your reason did not undo that."

Elias looked at the wall of categories.

"Why did I cut the next page out?"

"I don't know."

He laughed tiredly. "There it is."

"Elias, stop reading tonight."

"Why?"

"Because you are treating missing pages as accusations."

"They might be."

"They might also be grocery lists."

"I don't cut grocery lists out with a knife."

"You did stranger things."

After the call he did not stop. At dawn he found a folded sheet trapped inside the back cover of a notebook.

The handwriting was his but unusually large.

THE WORST THING I DID WAS DECIDE HER FEAR
GAVE ME PERMISSION.

Below it:

If future me wants a crime, give him this one. It is enough. Elias sat in the grey morning light and understood that his earlier self had anticipated not only paranoia but appetite. The desire for a terrible secret was itself a way to make the past coherent.

A dramatic crime would be easier to punish than a pattern of ordinary violations committed while insisting he loved her. That did not make him feel better.

It made the guilt harder to escape.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Rohe

Adrian Rohe agreed to meet only after Celia informed him that Elias had access to the original consent file and non-patient governance records. The meeting took place in Morrow's boardroom, though Elias remained suspended and had to sign in as a visitor.

Rohe was fifty-eight, grey-haired, carefully dressed, and less physically imposing than Elias expected from years of seeing his name attached to internal decisions. He had a habit of turning his wedding ring when listening.

"You believe I owe you an apology," Rohe said.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

Elias had prepared himself for denial. The word irritated him.

"For what specifically?"

Rohe looked at the papers between them. "For allowing a therapeutic research program to cross a line before we had language adequate to describe the line. For allowing outcome metrics to reward certainty. For approving Continuity after the evidence for autobiographical adoption was already concerning. For letting legal fear influence disclosure after your adverse event."

"That sounds rehearsed."

"It is. I've had eight years to rehearse it."

"Then why is none of this public?"

Rohe's fingers touched the ring. "Because early disclosure would have exposed participants. Later, because Morrow became valuable enough that people had incentives not to reopen the foundation. Those reasons overlap. I won't insult you by pretending only the first mattered."

"Narrative Stability. Who created it?"

"I approved it. A clinical team proposed it."

"What did you think it measured?"

"Reduction in contradictory retrieval. Patients with coherent autobiographical narratives often function better than patients repeatedly forced to confront uncertainty."

"Even if the coherent version is wrong."

"Sometimes factual completeness is impossible."

"That's not an answer."

Rohe leaned forward. "Then here is one. A woman reconstructs the last conversation she had with her dead father. The exact words are unknown. We have fragments from messages, his speech patterns, her diary. The model generates a plausible exchange. She knows it is reconstructed. She sleeps for the first time in months. Six weeks later she remembers one generated sentence as if he actually said it. Have we harmed her?"

"Yes, if you told her the memory was evidence."

"We didn't."

"Did the product keep reminding her which sentence was generated?"

Rohe hesitated.

"No," Elias said. "Because reminders reduced Narrative Stability."

"In some versions, yes."

"You optimized people to forget uncertainty."

"We optimized for relief."

"Same mechanism. Better marketing."

Rohe's face tightened. "And if she tells you the memory saved her life?" Elias thought of the kitchen. It had tormented him, but it had also given Mara a final warning, a last moment in which he mattered.

"Then the benefit is real," he said. "The event still isn't."

Rohe nodded slowly. "That's the problem we failed to respect. Emotional truth and factual truth can diverge without one cancelling the other. We treated convergence as a therapeutic success."

"You let people leave believing reconstructions."

"Sometimes."

"You let me."

"You asked us to."

Elias's chair scraped as he leaned forward. "Do not use my consent to make your decision disappear. I wrote that if I forgot the kitchen was constructed, the procedure exceeded consent. You knew I forgot."

Rohe's eyes dropped to the table. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because Lena argued disclosure was your right. Jonah argued the program had failed. Celia argued your future consent was legally indeterminate. I argued that restoring the fact could lead you back to Mara and undo the purpose for which you accepted the risk."

"So you chose the successful lie."

"I chose what I believed caused less harm."

"To whom?"

Rohe did not answer.

There it was. The question that turned institutional ethics into accounting. Elias opened the governance drive and placed a printed chart on the table. Narrative Stability scores rose after the system stopped displaying uncertainty labels continuously inside immersive sessions.

"Who ordered this change?"

Rohe looked at the document. "I did."

"Why?"

"Patients complained the labels prevented emotional engagement."

"And confidence increased."

"Yes."

"Did accuracy?"

"Not proportionally."

Elias sat back.

The company did not need a malicious AI. It needed good outcomes, investors, satisfied patients and a metric that made ambiguity look like failure.

"One more question," Elias said. "Did you know Mara was alive?"

Rohe's ring stopped turning.

"In 2018, yes."

"Before that?"

"Not until Lena disclosed it during your internal investigation."

"Did you ever try to find her?"

"No."

Rohe's office occupied the corner of Morrow's top floor but managed not to look expensive. That was its expense. Pale wood, old books, no visible screens except a tablet lying face down beside a legal pad. On one wall

hung the company's first public product photograph: an elderly woman smiling inside a reconstruction headset while her daughter held her hand.

Elias had seen the image in investor decks. He had never noticed the daughter's expression before. She was crying. Rohe followed his gaze. 'Mrs. Halpern. First bereavement trial outside Fallow.'

'Did she remember accurately?'

'Some things.'

'Did she feel better?'

'Yes.'

'Which answer mattered more to you?'

Rohe sat behind the desk. 'At the time? The second.' Elias had expected denial. Everyone had become more difficult to hate once they stopped denying the obvious.

'Mara called your program dangerous.'

'Mara was right about several things.'

'Several.'

'And wrong about others.'

'Such as?'

'She believed confidence drift made reconstruction inherently unethical. I believed it made reconstruction a technology requiring controls.'

'Controls you didn't have.'

'Not enough of them.'

'Yet you commercialized it.'

Rohe's fingers rested on the legal pad. 'We commercialized a substantially different system six years later.'

'Built on the same research.'

'Every medical technology is built on research that looks barbaric in retrospect if you remove chronology.'

'That's a good sentence.'

'It's also true.'

'Truth isn't a disinfectant.'

Rohe smiled faintly. 'You were always good at turning my phrasing against me.'

Elias went still. 'Always?'

Rohe realized the mistake and did not try to repair it. 'You worked with us in 2017 and 2018.'

'My employee record says 2021.'

'You were a research contractor. Later, under the terms of Continuity, that relationship was removed from your accessible HR history.'

'Removed or hidden?'

'Hidden from your account. Not deleted.'

'Who authorized that?'

'You did. Lena co-signed. Legal approved.'

'And you?'

'I objected.'

That surprised him. 'Why?'

'Because you were both too close to the problem. You because Mara was your sister. Lena because she had spent years trying to correct what happened at Fallow. I believed the procedure would create exactly the kind of identity instability we are now discussing.'

'Yet it happened.'

'I was chief research officer, not a monarch.'

'Founder.'

'Still not a monarch.'

Elias sat opposite him. 'Why didn't you stop it?' Rohe looked at the old product photograph. 'Because you produced a convincing threat model. Morrow security had identified unauthorized access to legacy files. Legal

was preparing device seizure and interviews. You knew Mara's location. You believed disclosure would expose her and several former Fallow participants. The proposed intervention was narrower than the eventual outcome.'

'You keep calling it an outcome.'

'What word would satisfy you?'

'Damage.'

Rohe nodded. 'Damage.'

The concession gave Elias no satisfaction.

'Did you know the kitchen memory was being constructed?'

'Not until after the first sessions.'

'And then?'

'I ordered it stopped.'

'Lena says I continued.'

'You threatened to resign, disclose Fallow materials indiscriminately and identify Mara publicly if we terminated the protocol without an alternative.'

Elias stared at him. 'I threatened to expose her?'

'You threatened many things. Whether you would have done them is another question.'

For the first time the earlier Elias sounded not noble, not simply desperate, but dangerous in the ordinary way frightened people could become dangerous when convinced urgency made them righteous.

'Was I blackmailing you?'

'At times.'

'Did it work?'

'At times.'

Rohe leaned back. 'You want a villain, Elias. I understand. A villain preserves the self. If someone did

this to you, then the person you were remains cleanly yours.'

'You profited from a technology that changed people's confidence in memories.'

'Yes.'

'You hid adverse results.'

'We classified them as source-monitoring events, not adverse clinical outcomes, because distress scores did not worsen.'

'That is hiding with vocabulary.'

'In retrospect, yes.'

'In retrospect?'

Rohe's face hardened for the first time. 'Do not mistake confession for simplicity. Thousands of patients used Morrow systems without developing false autobiographical memories. Some recovered verifiable details after strokes. Some resolved family disputes by discovering their confident recollections were wrong. Some grieving people entered reconstructions knowing every uncertain element and found comfort anyway. The technology is not one thing because your case is terrible.'

'And my case isn't terrible because the technology helped others.'

'Correct.'

They looked at each other. Elias thought he understood why people followed Rohe. The man could inhabit moral contradiction without rushing to escape it. That talent was indistinguishable from integrity until the bill arrived.

'Did you ever believe Mara was unstable?' Elias asked.

Rohe exhaled. 'At first, I believed she was a bereaved adolescent becoming fixated on normal reconstruction variance.'

'Normal.'

'What we considered normal then.'

'When did you change your mind?'

'When she predicted our own follow-up data better than we did.'

'And you apologized?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'She was gone.'

'You could have corrected her file.'

'Yes.'

'Did you?'

'Not fully.'

'Why?'

Rohe looked away. 'Because correcting it would have created discoverable evidence that the program knew her complaints were valid.' There it was. Not murder. Not an evil machine. A liability decision made by educated people around a table.

Elias felt suddenly tired.

'How many people?'

'With significant autobiographical adoption?'

'Yes.'

'We can document forty-three probable cases in early cohorts. Perhaps more.'

'And current users?'

'Vela has stronger provenance separation. It flags inference. It resists stability optimization.'

'Because Mara was right.'

Rohe's mouth tightened. 'Because evidence was right.' Elias almost stood. Then he understood the distinction Rohe had chosen and why it mattered.

'You still can't say her name without making it about data.'

Rohe looked at him for a long time. 'Mara was right.' The office seemed quieter afterward.

Elias asked one final question. 'When did you learn she survived 2011?'

"Why should I believe you?"

Rohe looked tired for the first time. "Because finding her would have created a witness, a legal problem and a human being we would then have had to decide what to do with. Institutions are often less dramatic than you imagine. Avoidance is cheaper than conspiracy."

Elias believed that too.

It was one of the worst things Rohe could have said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Caller

The anonymous voice at 3:12 belonged to Mara. Elias learned this from Tess, not from Lena.

Tess arrived at his apartment carrying a cheap prepaid phone and placed it on the table without sitting.

"Before you ask, I didn't know she'd call you that night," she said. "I knew she had been watching for a specific trigger."

Elias stared at the phone. "She's alive."

"As of four days ago, yes."

The room changed around the sentence. He gripped the edge of the table.

"Four days. You spoke to her four days ago."

"Text relay."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Everyone says that now because it became useful."

"I genuinely don't. She moved in January and uses rotating relays."

Elias looked at the prepaid phone. "Why did she call me?"

"Because she built a watch with me years ago. If certain Morrow archive identifiers became active under your profile, I was supposed to notify her. Three weeks ago your consent file was accessed. She assumed you were starting the recovery route."

"She was monitoring me."

"A condition, not your daily life."

"You sent her my activity."

"One alert."

"And Alder Row? The photograph."

Tess's jaw tightened. "That was hers." Elias stood. "She followed me."

"No. She hired someone to confirm whether you were physically revisiting old locations after the trigger fired."

He laughed, furious. "She spent fifteen years demanding autonomy and hired someone to watch me from across the street."

"Yes. It's hypocritical. You can tell her if you get the chance. She already knows."

"Why?"

"Because she was afraid the recovery cues were activating without you understanding them. She wanted to know whether to intervene."

"By telling me not to run Vela after I'd already run it."

"She didn't know the exact timing."

Elias paced to the window. "Why not contact me normally?"

"Because she didn't want to become the answer before you understood the question."

"That sounds like something Lena would say."

"Mara says worse things with more jokes."

Elias turned. "Can I contact her through that phone?"

"Maybe. One message. She decides whether to answer."

He picked up the device. The screen contained a blank compose window addressed to an anonymous relay.

He typed:

I know about 2018. I know I promised not to find you. I also know you watched me at Alder Row. That was not okay.

He paused, then added:

Are you safe?

He deleted the question.

That was the old pattern. Concern immediately becoming inquiry.

He typed instead:

I am not asking where you are. I would like to speak if you want to.

Send.

The message vanished from the screen.

"How long?" he asked.

"Could be minutes. Could be never."

"You enjoy that answer too much."

"I've had practice with your family."

Tess finally sat.

"There is something you should know before she answers, if she does. She isn't the seventeen-year-old from your files and she isn't the twenty-four-year-old in the photograph. She has had fifteen years you didn't witness. Don't meet her like a solved case."

Elias looked at the phone.

"I don't know how else to meet anyone anymore."

"Learn quickly."

The phone remained silent for forty-seven minutes. Tess drank two coffees. Elias drank one and forgot the second beside the sink.

At 5:19 p.m. the screen lit.

One message.

You always did take the long route.

Elias sat down.

A second arrived.

I'm safe.

Then a third.

I need to know whether you watched the Pember tape.

Elias typed yes.

The response came after a minute. Then you know why I left.

He wrote:

I know why you said you left. I'm trying not to make those the same thing.

No response.

He thought he had lost her. The messages from Mara arrived through an encrypted service that deleted metadata after delivery. Elias hated the design immediately. No timestamps he could independently verify. No durable message IDs. No audit trail. It felt less like communication than being asked to trust a voice in a dark room.

He still answered.

How do I know this is you? he typed.

Three dots appeared.

The reply came: You don't. He stared at the sentence until another arrived.

Ask something only I would know. Elias considered childhood secrets and rejected each because they might exist in family archives. He considered the forty pounds Mara claimed he owed her, but that was in the audio file. He typed: What did Mum call the burnt part of toast?

Mara answered: Your breakfast.

Elias laughed despite himself. Their mother had scraped burnt toast into the sink for Mara and served Elias his nearly black because he insisted he liked it. The joke appeared in no surviving recording he knew of.

Not enough, he typed.

Of course not, she replied. You'd be disappointed if it was. The sentence sounded like her. That was not evidence either.

He asked about a plastic dinosaur they had hidden inside their father's shoe before a job interview. She remembered the species incorrectly, calling it a stegosaurus when Elias thought it had been a triceratops. The disagreement made him trust her more than a perfect answer would have.

It was a triceratops, he wrote. You were always wrong about dinosaurs.

It had horns.

All dinosaurs had horns when we were children. We bought cheap toys. He could see her saying it.

The conversation stopped for eleven minutes. Elias paced the apartment, phone in hand, furious at himself for waiting on an indicator. When Mara returned, she wrote: Lena says you're doing badly.

He typed: Lena should stop discussing me. She wrote: Good, definitely you.

He sat at the table.

Why now? he asked.

Because you found enough that avoiding you became another way of controlling the story.

Are you safe?

Yes.

Where are you?

No.

He had known the answer before asking and still felt rejected by it. Did I find you in 2018?

Yes.

Did we meet?

Twice.

Only twice?

Three times if you count you standing outside my building for forty minutes and leaving without knocking. Elias closed his eyes. No image came.

Why did I leave?

You were trying to decide whether seeing me was for me or for you.

What did you decide?

You came back the next day. The answer sat on the screen. Elias imagined an apartment he did not know, a door he had stood outside, a version of himself choosing to leave. It was almost worse than not remembering the reunion. It suggested restraint he could not claim emotionally because he had no access to having exercised it.

Did you forgive me? he typed. Mara took longer with that one.

For what?

He became angry. You know what. I know twenty things you think need forgiveness. Pick one.

Not believing you.

You believed parts of me.

That's worse.

Sometimes.

He stared at the phone. Did I help you disappear?

No. You helped me stay disappeared later. Did you want Dad to know?

The typing indicator appeared and vanished several times. Mara wrote: Not in a message.

His jaw tightened. Did you contact him before he died? Not in a message, Eli.

He put the phone down hard enough that the screen rattled against the table. For five minutes he did not touch it. Anger felt cleaner than helplessness. He could accuse Lena of withholding. Tess of lying. Morrow of hiding records. Mara was harder. The boundaries belonged to the person whose disappearance had governed his life. Rejecting them would repeat exactly what everyone said he had done before.

He picked the phone up.

Sorry, he typed.

Mara replied almost immediately: You always apologize faster in writing. He smiled despite himself. Cowardice likes editing, he wrote.

That was Dad's line.

Was it?

Yes.

I remember saying it.

You stole half your personality from him and spent twenty years denying it.

This felt dangerously normal.

Elias asked where she had lived after 2011. Mara refused specifics but described changing cities, finishing school under another name, working in a print shop, then studying design. She had been poor for years. She had also been happy sometimes. That detail caught him off guard.

Happy? he typed before he could stop himself. Mara replied: Christ, Elias. I didn't spend fifteen years standing in fog waiting for your plot to catch up.

He laughed so suddenly he had to put the phone down. When he returned, another message waited.

I had friends. Jobs. Bad dates. Good dates. A flat with mushrooms growing behind the bathroom wall. I got food poisoning in Lisbon. I learned to make a chair that doesn't wobble. I was a person.

Elias read the final sentence several times.

He typed: I know.

No you don't, she replied. That's okay. You can learn. He did not answer immediately.

The exchange continued until nearly two in the morning. Mara avoided every question that could identify her current location. She answered some emotional questions with jokes and some simple questions with long pauses. She remembered their mother differently. She insisted Helen hated a song Elias remembered her loving. They argued about it for six messages before Mara wrote: See? This is what normal memory looks like. Annoying and useless.

At 2:41, Elias asked whether she had sent the anonymous call after his first reconstruction.

No, Mara wrote.

Who did?

Ask Lena.

He started typing a response, then deleted it. Mara sent one final question: Do you remember what happened after the station?

Elias looked at the words for a long time before answering.

Then:

Better.

Another message followed.

Do you remember what happened after the station?

Elias typed no.

The typing indicator appeared, disappeared,
returned.

Finally Mara wrote:

Then don't come yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Wrong Version

The instruction not to come became an address in Elias's mind despite containing none. For the next three days he obsessed over every phrase Mara sent through the relay. She replied infrequently and refused voice calls. She confirmed almost nothing about her present life. She asked questions instead.

Do you still hate almonds? Do you remember Mum singing the wrong words to songs?

Did Dad ever fix the hallway light? Elias answered carefully, then found himself auditing each answer against records. When Mara asked what color their mother's dressing gown had been, he did not respond for twelve minutes.

Finally he wrote:

I remember red. I have a photo of blue. I no longer know.

Mara replied:

It was green. You both lose. Elias laughed so suddenly that he nearly dropped the phone.

Then suspicion followed.

How did he know the person messaging him was Mara? The relay concealed identity. Tess could be sending the messages. Lena could. Morrow could have built a conversational model from Mara's archives.

He hated the thought as soon as it appeared, but it did not leave. He wrote a verification question only Mara should know.

What did you put in my cigarette hiding place at Mum's grave?

The answer came:

Two notes. One said YOU'RE BAD AT CRIME. The other said I SOLD THE CIGARETTES TO OWEN FOR £3.

Elias stared.

He remembered only the first note.

Owen.

The nonexistent friend.

He typed:

There was no Owen.

A long pause.

Then:

There was an Owen. Just not Owen March.

Elias's pulse accelerated.

Who?

No answer.

He sent another message.

Mara?

Nothing.

That evening he tore every notebook from the wall arrangement and stacked them in boxes. He was tired of clues that behaved like commands. Tired of handwriting that outranked his own present judgment because it was older. Tired of dead versions of himself controlling the living one.

He carried the boxes to the rubbish chute. His hand rested on the first lid.

Throwing them away would feel good. That alone made him suspicious.

He carried them back.

At midnight the relay finally answered. Owen March was a name you gave Simon and Ollie together after one of the early continuity tests. It stuck. I told you because you were terrified you'd invented a whole person. You hadn't. You combined two.

Elias sat on the floor. Simon Kells. Oliver Dane. Broken tooth, airport father, garage, sweets, Havers Park. Traits blended until a stable child emerged.

Mara continued:

The cigarette note was for Oliver. You called him Owen later because the reconstruction used the wrong label. I thought it was funny until you didn't.

Elias typed:

Why were you involved in my childhood-memory tests?

No reply.

Then:

Because you asked me to tell them when the machine made you nicer than you were.

Another:

It did that a lot.

Elias smiled despite himself.

He slept on the sofa with the phone beside him. At 2:38 a.m. he woke standing in the kitchen.

The refrigerator door was open. His bare feet were cold against the floor.

He held a black marker in his right hand. Across the white refrigerator door, in his handwriting, were six words.

DO NOT LET MARA BECOME PROOF.

Elias stepped backward.

He had no memory of getting out of bed. The marker cap lay on the table. Beside it was the relay phone, open to a message he had sent at 2:31.

I remember what I did after Pember.

Mara had replied immediately.

No you don't.

Elias looked at the refrigerator. A new memory pressed forward.

Pember Station. Train gone. Lena touching his shoulder. Elias turning away.

Then a car.

Morrow.

A room.

He heard his own voice saying, Delete the location model.

The memory felt complete.

It felt terrible.

It felt true.

Mara's message remained on the phone.

No you don't.

For the first time Elias understood that a recovered memory could be just as dangerous as a false one if he loved the explanation it offered.

CHAPTER FORTY

The Other Elias

The second microcassette from beneath his mother's bench was labeled AFTER PEMBERTON. Elias waited until morning to play it. Lena came over. Tess joined by video but kept her camera off at Elias's request. Mara did not answer the relay.

The tape began in a car. Turn signal. Road noise. Elias breathing hard.

Lena's younger voice: "You don't have to decide tonight." Recorded Elias: "Yes, I do."

"No. You want to because deciding feels better than leaving."

"She'll be gone tomorrow."

"That's the point."

A car horn sounded in the distance. Elias on tape said, "The location model can infer Bellweather from Fallow contacts, Tess's records and my travel. If Morrow audits what I accessed, they'll find it."

"Then seal access."

"Sealing leaves a record."

"Deleting leaves one too."

"Not if I mark the model contaminated."

Lena was silent.

"It is contaminated," Elias continued. "It uses enhanced photos and reconstructed address associations. Half the links are circular."

"And half?"

"Could still be right."

"Then don't call it contaminated because you need it gone."

Recorded Elias struck the dashboard with his hand.

"What do you want me to do? Let Morrow retain a probabilistic map to her front door?"

"I want you to write what you're doing accurately."

A long pause.

Then Elias said, "Fine. I am deleting a model that may contain valid location evidence because I believe Mara's privacy matters more than preserving a route to find her."

"And if she goes missing for real?"

The tape went quiet except for road noise. Present-day Elias closed his eyes.

Recorded Elias answered, "Then this may be the worst decision I ever make." The phrase landed without melodrama because he had already lived inside its consequences.

The recording continued at Morrow. Jonah joined them. Celia argued that deletion violated retention policy. Elias proposed sealing the raw sources while deleting the derived location model because the model itself incorporated improperly obtained data.

Jonah agreed technically.

Celia agreed legally after forty minutes. Lena did not agree morally.

"Mara should decide," she said.

"She already said she doesn't want the location retained."

"Did she understand it might be the only route back to her?"

"She isn't planning to vanish from herself."

"People get sick. People have accidents. People become unable to ask for help."

Recorded Elias became quiet.

Then another voice entered.

Mara.

She had been on speakerphone.

"Delete it," she said.

Present-day Elias opened his eyes. On tape, Lena asked, "Mara, are you certain?"

"No. That's not a useful standard. I want it deleted."

"Do you understand the risk?"

"Yes. If something happens, you may have less information to find me. I still want it deleted."

Elias on tape said, "Are you sure?" Mara laughed bitterly. "Interesting time for you to discover consent."

Silence.

Then softer: "Yes, Eli. Delete it."

The tape ended.

Present-day Elias remained still.

He had not unilaterally erased the route. He had done what Mara asked.

The decision could still have terrible consequences. Consent did not make outcomes safe. But the moral shape was different.

Lena watched him carefully.

"Why was this tape hidden?"

"Because you knew future you might find the deletion log and assume the worst."

"Then why not leave it with the log?"

"Because you didn't want the explanation accessible to Morrow."

Elias looked at the cassette. His earlier self had not been a villain or a victim.

He was simply another Elias, frightened in different directions, capable of care and arrogance in the same decision.

The relay phone vibrated.

Mara.

One message.

Now you remember enough.

A second followed with a location. A train station on the coast, ninety minutes away.

Tomorrow. 11:40.

Then:

Come alone.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Mara

The train reached Carrow Bay at 11:32. Elias remained seated until nearly everyone else had left the carriage. He had spent the journey rehearsing what not to ask. Where do you live. What name do you use. Why didn't you call. Are you safe. Are you married. Do you have children. Did you ever miss me. Every question contained a claim disguised as concern, a small demand that fifteen years of another person's life become available because he had suffered through their absence.

He left the station with nothing prepared. Carrow Bay was a cold coastal town built around a harbor and a long promenade. The sea appeared silver beneath low cloud. Gulls shouted over bins near the taxi rank. Elias stood outside the station entrance and checked the time.

11:39.

A woman leaned against a dark green railing across the road. He knew her before he recognized her.

The distinction was immediate and impossible to explain. She had Mara's height, though adulthood had changed the way she occupied it. Dark hair cut near the jaw. Black coat. Hands in the pockets. A faint pale scar beneath her chin, exactly where the 2018 photograph showed it.

She looked thirty-two.

Because she was.

For years Elias had imagined this moment badly. Running. Embracing. Anger. Collapse. A thousand

versions that required Mara to wait motionless while he completed his reaction. Instead she looked both ways and crossed the road.

"You look awful," she said.

Elias laughed.

The laugh turned into something else and he covered his mouth with one hand. Mara stopped an arm's length away.

She did not hug him.

Neither did he.

"That's rude," he managed.

"You always liked accurate data."

Her voice was older, lower, but the rhythm was there. He had heard recordings. The actual sound still felt different because it occupied air rather than archives. Elias looked at her face too carefully.

Mara noticed. "Don't."

"Sorry."

"You're doing the thing where you inspect me."

"I know."

"Apparently you still say that."

They both smiled, cautiously.

Mara pointed toward the promenade. "Walk?"

They walked.

For several minutes neither spoke. Elias tried to let the town remain present. Salt in the air. Wet benches. A child throwing chips to gulls despite a sign asking people not to. Mara's shoes were practical and badly scuffed. She wore no visible jewelry except a cheap watch.

"Are you safe?" Elias asked eventually.

Mara looked at him.

"I know," he said. "I wasn't going to ask."

"That's progress."

"It is still the first thing I want to know."

"I'm safe."

"Thank you."

"Don't ask safe from what."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were physically vibrating with the question."

They reached a bench facing the water. Mara sat. Elias remained standing until she looked up at him.

"You can sit without agreeing with me."

He sat.

"Why January?" he asked.

"Lena told you I moved."

"Yes."

"A company that bought one of Morrow's old data vendors started cleaning legacy records. My alias appeared in a validation queue tied to Bellweather. Nothing dramatic. I moved before it became a problem."

"Morrow was looking for you?"

"Not intentionally. That's the point. Nobody has to be hunting you when systems preserve relationships longer than people remember creating them."

Elias nodded.

Mara looked toward the harbor. "I knew Vela might reach the old kitchen file eventually. Jonah warned me when they announced legacy ingestion. I asked Tess to alert me if your continuity identifiers woke up."

"Then you had someone photograph me at Alder Row."

Mara winced. "Yes."

"That was invasive."

"Yes."

"Hypocritical."

"Very."

"You don't get to make it okay because you were worried."

"I know."

He looked at her.

Mara smiled faintly. "Apparently I say it too." The anger Elias had carried toward the unseen photographer loosened because she did not defend it.

"Why didn't you just call?"

"Because the last time I became real to you, you nearly tore my life open trying to verify it."

"I was different."

"You were twenty-six. That's not infancy."

"I know."

"And I didn't know whether the old procedure had destabilized. I didn't know whether you were remembering me or reconstructing me. I didn't want my voice to become another source before you reached the consent record."

Elias looked at the water.

"You sound like Lena."

"She learned from me."

"She would dispute that."

"She can write a paper."

He laughed again.

Mara's expression softened.

"I missed that," she said.

The words were quiet enough that he almost pretended not to hear them.

"Me laughing?"

"You laughing before you decide whether you're allowed to."

Elias's throat tightened.

He looked at her hands. No cup. Nothing to anchor the moment to later.

"I don't remember meeting you in 2018," he said.

"I know."

"I have notes. Recordings. A photograph. I know facts. But I don't have you."

Mara looked at him for a long time.

"Maybe that's why I agreed to this."

"To what?"

"Meeting now. I spent years thinking if you didn't remember 2018 then it didn't count. That was unfair. It counted for me."

"I'm sorry."

"Which thing?"

"I don't know where to start."

"Good. Start there."

The word made both of them smile. A gull landed near the bench and stared at them with professional aggression.

Mara tore a corner from the paper bag she carried, then remembered it contained no food.

"Still stealing hotel marmalade?" Elias asked.

"Only from corporations. I have ethics now."

"Selective ethics."

"They're easier to maintain."

For several minutes they talked about nothing important. Their father. The bakery under Elias's apartment. A terrible television series Mara watched. The fact that Elias still owned the same coat style. The

ordinary conversation hurt more than revelation because it revealed how much ordinary life had been missing.

Then Mara said, "You need to ask me about the kitchen."

Elias looked at her.

"Do I?"

"You've crossed half the country inside your own head to get here. Ask."

He took a breath.

"Why did I remember being there before Morrow ever reinforced it?"

Mara's face changed.

This, finally, was the question she had been waiting for.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The Conversation He Lost

"Because you were supposed to be there," Mara said.

Elias waited.

"Not that night. Earlier. We had an argument on the fifteenth, two days before I left. Same kitchen. Same weather, almost. I was holding a cup. You were wearing the coat. I told you about Fallow and you kept asking for documents."

Elias felt the scene approach but not arrive.

"What did you say?"

"A lot of things I regret. A few I don't. I told you they were changing how I remembered Mum. You asked what specifically had changed. I told you that was not the point. You said if I couldn't identify a concrete false memory, we couldn't know whether Fallow caused anything."

"That sounds like me."

"Painfully."

"Did you say the line then?"

"Not exactly. I said if I left, you would probably let Dad tell everyone I'd had a breakdown because it was easier than believing me."

Elias looked at the water. Mara continued. "You got angry. Said I was turning people who loved me into enemies. I said love didn't make you accurate. Then you left for university the next day still angry."

"And on the seventeenth you recorded the video."

"Yes."

"I watched it when?"

"Not in 2011. The police kept the device. You didn't see the full recording until 2018. But the morning I disappeared, you heard Dad describe part of what police found."

Elias turned toward her.

"Dad saw the recording?"

"Not all of it. Police told him I'd left a message saying I wasn't sick and that you weren't there. He told you badly."

A memory flickered.

Gabriel in the hallway. Pale, unshaven. Saying, She left some bloody video. Says she's not crazy. Says you weren't even there. Elias felt his pulse jump.

"I remember that."

"Maybe."

"No, I do."

Mara's expression sharpened. "Careful."

He stopped.

She continued. "You were exhausted. You'd been awake most of the night with police. You already felt guilty about our argument on the fifteenth. Dad's summary, your memory of the earlier kitchen argument, the weather, the coat, the fact I used the same phrase about not being sick. They blended."

"By the police interview I had already told them I was with you on the seventeenth."

"Yes."

"Before Dad told me about the video?"

Mara shook her head. "No. That's one of the timeline mistakes. Dad told you around eight in the morning after police first reviewed the device. Your formal

interview was later that afternoon. The transcript time in the copy you had was wrong."

Elias stared at her.

The apparently insignificant document error.

"Wrong by how much?"

"Seven hours. Someone entered 08:40 instead of 15:40 when the transcript was digitized years later. The paper original has the correct time."

The whole origin rearranged itself. There had been no impossible fully formed false memory before evidence existed. There had been an earlier real kitchen argument, an emotionally charged family summary of Mara's recording, exhaustion, guilt and ordinary source confusion. Elias's mind had fused them before Morrow ever touched him.

"So Fallow didn't put the original memory in me."

"No."

"Morrow didn't."

"No."

"I did."

Mara shrugged slightly. "Your brain did. I don't know if assigning blame to an organ helps." Elias laughed under his breath.

"Then in 2018 I discovered it was false."

"Yes."

"And instead of correcting it, I turned it into something stronger."

"Yes."

"Because it hid where you were."

"Partly."

"And because I wanted the goodbye."

Mara looked away.

"That part made me angrier than the privacy argument," she said. "You took my recording and made yourself the person I was talking to."

Elias had no defense.

"I know I consented," he said. "But you didn't."

"No."

"I'm sorry."

Mara rubbed her palms together against the cold. "I know why you did it. That doesn't make it mine."

He nodded.

"The first time we met in 2018," she said, "you asked me to tell you the exact truth of every year. Where I'd lived, who helped me, why I hadn't contacted you. You thought if you could reconstruct the whole sequence, we could start again clean."

"What did you want?"

"Lunch."

Elias looked at her.

Mara smiled sadly. "I hadn't seen my brother in seven years. I wanted lunch. You brought a folder." He covered his face with one hand.

"Please tell me I didn't."

"Tabbed sections."

"Oh God."

"You highlighted things."

"I deserve the slap."

"That came later."

They both laughed, and for a moment the horror of the story loosened enough to reveal two siblings underneath it.

Then Mara grew serious.

"At our second meeting, you didn't bring the folder. You brought noodles from that place near Alder Row I liked. It had closed, so you found another place that made them badly. We argued anyway. But you listened."

Elias wanted that memory with sudden desperation.

"Can you tell me everything?"

Mara looked at him.

He heard himself.

"No," he said before she could answer. "Sorry."

"You can ask."

"But I don't need to turn your account into a replacement memory."

Mara's expression softened.

"We ate terrible noodles," she said. "You apologized without explaining why you were right. That was new. I told you I was using Aster because Mum used to read us those ridiculous space books and you couldn't remember the reference. I enjoyed that more than I should have."

"I still don't remember."

"Good. Something I get to keep."

He smiled.

"After Pember," Elias said, "did you ever want me to recover the memories?"

"Sometimes. Then I remembered why we made the decision. The procedure went further than anyone expected. I was angry about that. But I also built a life in which you weren't checking the edges."

"Were you happy?"

Mara looked toward the sea.

"Sometimes."

It was the most honest answer possible.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Lena's Answer

Lena met them in Carrow Bay only after Mara invited her. They chose a small rented cottage above the harbor where the owner left a basket of tea, stale biscuits and an instruction sheet for a fireplace none of them intended to use. Elias stood by the window while Mara made tea. Lena arrived carrying a folder and no laptop.

For the first time since the investigation began, all three people connected to the memory sat in one room. The blue cup was absent.

Mara noticed that too.

"Thank God," she said. "If either of you had brought one, I was leaving."

Lena smiled. "I considered it for scientific rigor."

"You have always been less funny than you think."

"That is clinically disputed."

Elias watched them and realized their familiarity extended across years he did not know. The jealousy was immediate, childish and impossible to justify. He let it exist without converting it into a question.

Lena opened the folder.

"You asked for the complete mechanism," she said. "This is as complete as we can make it without pretending certainty."

She drew three circles on paper.

"First, ordinary source confusion in 2011. Real argument on October fifteenth. Similar kitchen context. Your coat. Rain. Mara discussing Fallow and the possibility of leaving. Then on the eighteenth you heard

partial information from the recording before your formal police interview. Under sleep deprivation and acute stress, elements merged. By afternoon you sincerely reported the blended event as a memory from the seventeenth."

"No technology required," Elias said.

"Correct."

Second circle.

"Between 2011 and 2018 you rehearsed that memory hundreds of times. Police statements, family discussions, your own investigation, imagined alternatives. Each retrieval reconsolidated it. The kitchen became more stable while peripheral details changed."

"The mind made its own reconstruction."

"Yes."

Third circle.

"In 2018 we used the existing false memory as a competing retrieval route. We repeatedly paired the kitchen with sensory material from Mara's actual recording and with present-day tactile anchors. Blue cup. Wet coat. Suite sounds. Guided imagery. The intent was to make retrieval of Mara terminate at the older narrative before it accessed the 2018 location knowledge."

Mara said, "Which remains one of the worst sentences anyone has ever said about grief."

Lena nodded. "Agreed."

"Why did other memories change?" Elias asked. "Owen. Vale Street. You appearing in childhood scenes."

"Associative contamination. We used childhood memories as controls to measure whether you could

distinguish source layers. Unfortunately the same people, phrases and environmental cues repeated across sessions. Your brain linked them. The control memories became contaminated by the testing process."

"Owen?"

"A stable composite label. Simon Kells and Oliver Dane were both present in different childhood events. During one session you mistakenly called Simon Owen after hearing Jonah mention an engineer named Owen in another context. Later the system pulled traits from Oliver to complete the poorly imaged boy in the park photograph. Repetition did the rest."

"There was an actual Owen?"

Mara smiled. "Oliver's middle name." Elias stared at her. "You could have told me that days ago."

"You were having such a productive crisis."

"Cruel."

"Accurate."

Lena continued. "Vale Street came from Calder Avenue because address numbers were used repeatedly during sessions. You retained 312 and attached it backward to a childhood walking memory. My presence leaked into reconstructions because my voice and face were salient during guided recall."

"And 3:12?"

"Conditioned procedural cue. You selected it deliberately. Unlike episodic memory, practiced action sequences can remain available when context weakens. That's why you could walk to Pember without remembering creating the route."

"And why I accessed Morrow at night."

"Yes. Your recovery chain had multiple stages. Once consent metadata changed and Vela surfaced the kitchen contradiction, old cues became salient. You began executing parts of a plan without recalling its design."

Mara placed a cup of tea in front of Elias. White ceramic.

He looked at it.

She raised one eyebrow. "It's a cup."

"I know."

"Dangerous phrase."

He wrapped both hands around it anyway.

"Did Vela itself do anything unexpected?" he asked.

Lena nodded. "It reconciled evidence more aggressively than prior systems. Earlier versions weighted accepted autobiographical reports heavily because Narrative Stability treated repeated user confidence as a reliability signal. Vela reduced that weight and increased independence scoring. When it encountered your kitchen memory, it found the direct recording, location records and later procedure assets. The highest-coherence interpretation was that you were not there."

"So Mara saying 'you were never there' was not consciousness."

"No. It was generated dialogue from convergent sources. Your actual recording contained 'you weren't here tonight.' Your 2018 sessions contained repeated statements that you were not there. Vela compressed them."

"It accidentally told the truth."

"A truth. In inaccurate wording."

Elias smiled faintly. "Appropriate."

Mara looked at Lena. "Tell him the part you keep avoiding."

Lena became still.

"Which part?"

"Why you stayed at Morrow."

Elias looked between them.

Lena closed the folder.

"After your adverse outcome, I intended to leave. Mara asked me not to."

"Why?"

Mara answered. "Because somebody inside needed to know what the old systems had done. Jonah had already left. If Lena left too, Morrow got to remember Fallow however it wanted." Lena looked at Elias. "I stayed to push for uncertainty labeling, source provenance and eventually Vela's independence weighting. I also stayed because I thought I owed you monitoring."

"Monitoring."

"Not surveillance. Clinical follow-up. Your annual evaluations. The questions I kept asking about Mara even when you avoided talking about her."

Elias remembered appointments he had considered routine employee wellness checks.

"You were checking whether the kitchen memory was destabilizing."

"Yes."

"And every year I said it was stable."

"Yes."

"Which looked like success."

Lena's face tightened. "To the system, yes. To me, less each year."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The Product

Morrow's board suspended Vela's public launch three days later. It was not because Elias threatened them. Threats would have been easier to contain.

Celia, Lena, Jonah, Saira Malik and Elias assembled a record that did not rely on a single patient's memory. Governance minutes showed when Narrative Stability was introduced. Software commits showed when uncertainty indicators were reduced during immersive sessions. Clinical outcome charts showed patient distress falling while source-confusion reports rose. Internal emails showed researchers warning that repeated plausible reconstructions could become autobiographical without deliberate deception.

The most damaging document was boring. A product review from 2020 contained a table with two columns.

Persistent uncertainty prompts: lower satisfaction, lower narrative stability, higher source awareness. Reduced uncertainty prompts: higher satisfaction, higher narrative stability, lower source awareness.

Recommendation: reduce persistent prompts for consumer release. Nobody had written, Make people forget which parts are guesses.

They had written improve user experience. Elias sat in the boardroom while Rohe read the document on a screen larger than most bedroom walls.

"This is not evidence we intended false-memory adoption," one board member said.

Jonah replied, "Correct. It's evidence you measured the warning sign, renamed it a tradeoff and shipped around it." Another executive argued that users signed disclosures explaining reconstructions were probabilistic.

Lena asked how often those disclosures remained visible during the immersive experience.

Nobody answered.

Celia presented legal exposure from the early witness-memory pilot. Saira presented privacy consequences if former participant files were subpoenaed indiscriminately. Elias presented his own case only after the institutional evidence had been established.

He did not show Mara's kitchen recording. He did not show the Pember tape.

He did not name where she had lived. For the first time in his investigation, he possessed powerful evidence and deliberately withheld the parts that were not his to give.

Rohe watched him notice this.

"You could make a stronger case with your personal files," Rohe said during a break.

"I know."

"You aren't."

"No."

"Mara?"

"Not your business."

Rohe nodded once.

The board voted to suspend public deployment, preserve all legacy systems under independent audit and notify regulators of the undisclosed Fallow-derived

risk data. The decision did not destroy Morrow. Its hospital tools remained in use under restrictions. Existing users did not suddenly lose access to reconstructions of dead parents or trauma recovery sessions. The world refused to arrange itself into a satisfying corporate collapse.

Outside the meeting, journalists were already calling. Tess had prepared a story but held publication until Saira completed privacy review. The headline would not mention Elias or Mara.

It would focus on the metric.

Narrative Stability.

"People will still want the product," Elias said to Tess that evening.

They sat in a pub near Morrow while television screens above the bar displayed financial news with subtitles.

"Of course," Tess said. "It works. That's why this matters."

"If it only hurt people, the decision would be easy."

"Most dangerous things are not dangerous because they never help."

At another table, a couple in their sixties watched a Morrow advertisement on a phone. A woman was shown revisiting a childhood birthday reconstructed from old home movies. She smiled as her deceased father entered the scene.

Elias looked away.

"My mother," he said, "I don't remember her voice as clearly as I remember Mara's kitchen."

Tess waited.

"If Morrow could give it back accurately enough to feel real, I'm not sure I'd refuse."

"That doesn't make you a hypocrite."

"It might."

"Then be one. People are allowed to want the thing they know can hurt them. The ethical problem is what they're told about the risk and whether the system is rewarded when they forget it."

Elias looked at the advertisement again. The woman touched her reconstructed father's hand.

The image was emotionally meaningful.

It was also impossible.

Both facts survived.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Recovery Sequence

Ivo returned to Morrow under whistleblower protection and spent his first morning proving that Elias's recent night behavior had been less mysterious than everyone feared.

"Congratulations," he said over a video call. "You did not become a sleepwalking cybercriminal. You became an extremely annoying automation."

"Explain."

Ivo shared a diagram.

The 2018 Continuity procedure had paired retrieval cues with a sequence of rehearsed actions. The sequence was not software controlling Elias. It was behavioral training supported by reminders Elias had planted in physical places and, later, by an encrypted personal script that watched his own Morrow profile for specific archive changes.

"You built a watchdog in 2018," Ivo said. "Tiny thing. It couldn't access content. It checked whether three continuity identifiers changed state. If they did, it sent a local notification to an old device account and unlocked the first cue note."

"The consent-file access three weeks ago."

"That was you too. Sort of. Your old watchdog credentials became valid again during Vela migration. The migration pinged the identifiers, the script sent you a prompt. We found the message in an archived phone backup."

Elias read it.

IF THIS FIRES, CHECK BLUE.

He did not remember receiving it.

"I probably saw it, checked the cup provenance and started the chain before consciously deciding to run Vela."

"Exactly. Your brain supplied a reason later. Anniversary, curiosity, whatever fit."

"Then the night calls?"

"Procedural state plus sleep deprivation. You weren't unconscious. You just failed to encode parts of the transitions well, especially after repeated cue exposure. Security footage shows you functional."

"Why did I remember staying at Pember longer than I did?"

"Your old rehearsal script included a forty-minute waiting phase at the station during training. Real night, you skipped it. Memory imported the practiced duration."

Elias smiled without humor. "Even my contingency plan contaminated itself."

"Systems are beautiful. People are terrible. The reverse is also true."

Ivo opened another window. "There's one thing I can't explain."

"Of course."

"The refrigerator message. DO NOT LET MARA BECOME PROOF. No rehearsal note contains it. No 2018 cue. That's current you."

Elias looked toward his kitchen. He had cleaned the marker off, but a faint grey shadow remained on the white surface.

"I wrote it half-asleep."

"Probably."

"Why?"

"I fix software. I charge extra for metaphysics."

After the call, Elias sat with the statement for a long time. Do not let Mara become proof.

He understood it now.

Through the entire investigation he had wanted Mara to prove something. That Morrow was guilty. That Elias was innocent. That the kitchen was false. That his love had been justified. That his guilt had been deserved. Even her survival threatened to become evidence in a case whose center remained Elias.

Mara was alive.

That did not mean she existed to resolve him.

The relay phone buzzed.

A message from her.

Lena says they're offering you restoration.

Elias typed:

Not restoration. Reconstruction of the missing period.

Mara replied:

That's what they call it when they want you to sign.

He smiled.

She sent another.

Are you going to do it? Elias looked at the Continuity notebooks, the Pember tape, the photograph, the blue cup, the white refrigerator with the faint marker shadow.

He wanted June 2018 back. He wanted the terrible noodles.

He wanted to remember Mara slapping him and the exact face she made before doing it. He wanted Pember

Station, the last turn before the train doors closed, the argument that had led to goodbye. He wanted to know whether Lena had touched his shoulder in the car afterward. He wanted ownership of the missing months.

The wanting was enormous.

He typed:

I don't know.

Mara answered:

Good.

This time the word did not irritate him.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The Noodles

Mara sent the recording on a Sunday morning without warning. Not the physical recorder she had mentioned in their messages, but a digitized copy of ten minutes from June 2018. The file arrived through Tess with one instruction.

Listen once before deciding whether you want the rest. Elias sat at his table for almost an hour before opening it.

The restraint was not noble. He was afraid. Not of something terrible. He had become practiced at terrible things. He was afraid the recording would contain happiness, something ordinary and intimate that he had lost by choice. Pain was easier to discover because pain justified investigation. Happiness merely proved there had been a life while he was absent from himself.

He made coffee, forgot it, reheated it, then finally pressed play.

Restaurant noise.

Cutlery. A child complaining somewhere nearby. A fan with a bad bearing rattling overhead.

Mara's voice came first.

"This smells wrong."

Recorded Elias said, "It's noodles."

"That is not a defense."

"You asked for the place on Carden Street. It closed."

"Seven years and the city betrays me before you do. Impressive."

"I already apologized."

"You apologized for the folder."

A paper sound.

Elias remembered nothing, but he could picture the folder because Tess had described it. Tabbed sections. Highlighted documents. He hated himself before his younger voice spoke again.

"I brought information because I didn't know whether you'd answer questions."

"Do you hear yourself?"

"Yes."

"No, you hear the words. Different thing."

There was a pause.

Then recorded Elias said, more quietly, "Fine. I don't know how to do this." The room in the recording seemed to change.

Mara answered, "That's a much better sentence." Present-day Elias closed his eyes.

Cutlery moved. Someone at another table laughed. Recorded Mara said, "Try the noodles."

"You said they smell wrong."

"They do. That's not permission to be dramatic."

A few seconds of eating.

"They're terrible," Elias said.

Mara laughed.

Present-day Elias felt the sound in his chest. It was not the laugh from childhood videos. It belonged to twenty-four-year-old Mara. Deeper, more careful at first, then suddenly full when Elias apparently made a face.

"God, I missed that," she said.

"Bad food?"

"Your face when reality fails quality control."

"That's not a thing."

"It is absolutely a thing. You look personally betrayed by incorrect soup."

The recording softened into ordinary conversation. Mara described a neighbor who practiced trumpet badly. Elias complained about a university administrator. Neither discussed disappearance for almost two minutes. Elias found those two minutes almost unbearable.

Then recorded Elias said, "Why Aster?" Mara sighed. "Here we go."

"You don't have to answer."

"But you'll vibrate until I do. Mum's space books. Remember? The stupid ones with the princess who lived on the asteroid?"

"No."

"Excellent. Something I know that you don't. Let's preserve this miracle."

"Was Aster her name?"

"No. It was the cat."

Mara laughed again.

Present-day Elias stopped the recording. He had not known that.

He still did not remember the books. The fact had no corroboration and no importance. It existed only because Mara told him.

He resumed.

The conversation turned toward the first meeting. Mara said, "You called my job."

"I know."

"You don't get to use that word as a refund."

"I was worried."

"You were worried in 2011 too. You know what being worried feels like to you? Permission."

Recorded Elias did not answer.

"I had to move," Mara continued. "My manager asked why some man was checking whether I worked there. I had spent years making a life where nobody knew the whole story. One phone call from you and suddenly I was explaining why my brother might be looking for me."

"I didn't say I was your brother."

"That's the part you think matters?"

"No."

"Good."

There was the word again. Recorded Elias exhaled. "I'm sorry. No explanation. I was wrong."

Mara became quiet.

"That sounded painful," she said.

"It was."

"Maybe write down the technique."

"No folder."

"Growth."

Another long pause.

Then Mara said something present-day Elias had not expected.

"I was wrong too."

Recorded Elias seemed equally surprised. "About what?"

"Leaving you nothing."

"You left the video."

"For proof. Not for you. I made the whole thing about making sure nobody could rewrite me. I didn't think

about what it would do to people who loved me. Or I did and decided that was the price."

"You were seventeen."

"Don't make me innocent because I was young. I knew Dad would break. I knew you'd look forever. I told myself you would eventually stop."

"I didn't."

"No. You made a career out of it. Very efficient grief."

They both laughed, but the sound did not last. Recorded Elias said, "Did you ever want to call?"

Mara's answer took several seconds.

"Every birthday."

Present-day Elias pressed a hand against his mouth.

"Why didn't you?" recorded Elias asked.

"Because wanting to call isn't the same as wanting everything that follows the call."

"You could have said one sentence."

"And then you'd ask two questions. Dad would ask ten. Police would want to verify. Fallow would hear. Tess would have to decide what she could print. There is no one sentence once people know you're alive."

The recording continued for another minute. At the end, chairs scraped.

Mara said, "Are we doing this again?"

"If you want."

"No folder."

"No folder."

"No contacting work."

"No contacting anyone."

"And no trying to save me."

Recorded Elias paused.

"I'll try."

Mara groaned. "Terrible answer."

"Honest answer."

"Fine. Keep it."

The file ended.

Elias sat with his coffee untouched.

He wanted the rest.

He wanted every minute Mara had kept, every joke, every argument, every silence his mind had surrendered. But wanting no longer felt like entitlement. He sent her a message.

I listened once.

She replied:

Only once?

Yes.

A minute passed.

Show-off.

Elias smiled.

Then she wrote:

Do you want the rest? He looked at the closed audio file.

Not yet, he typed.

This time the decision hurt. That was how he knew it was real.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The Witness Pilot

The legal pilot began with a robbery that never mattered to anyone outside the research team. A convenience-store clerk witnessed a masked man enter, threaten him, take cash and leave. The crime had been recorded by two cameras, allowing researchers to compare what the clerk remembered with what actually happened. No suspect was prosecuted through the study. The case was chosen precisely because ground truth existed independently.

Jonah showed Elias the redacted report in Saira Malik's office.

"This was 2010," Jonah said. "Fallow had started getting inquiries from legal consultants about whether guided reconstruction could help witnesses recover details after traumatic events."

The clerk initially remembered the robber wearing a black jacket, standing near the drinks refrigerator and saying, Open the drawer. The video showed a dark navy jacket. He stood two feet farther left. Audio was too poor to determine exact words.

Researchers built several probable reconstructions using the video, witness report and store layout. In one version the robber said, Open the till. After three guided sessions, the clerk's confidence that the phrase had been Open the till rose from uncertain to near-certain.

The video still could not verify it.

"Maybe that was the actual phrase," Elias said.

"Exactly," Jonah replied. "Could be. That's why the study is frightening. If the generated sentence happened to be right, the process still made the witness more certain for the wrong reason."

Another participant initially could not remember whether a suspect held an object in his right or left hand. Reconstruction used the right hand because that was statistically more likely from the available camera angle. Weeks later the witness confidently identified right.

Ground truth from another camera showed left.

"How many?" Elias asked.

"Twenty-three participants. Small sample. Enough to kill the legal program."

"But not the clinical one."

"Because clinical outcomes were different. A grieving person doesn't need to testify about which hand a dead parent used to hold a cup."

"Until the memory enters a family dispute. Or an abuse allegation. Or police ask them later."

"Exactly. Memory doesn't stay inside the use case you designed it for."

Saira opened a later document. In 2012, Fallow researchers proposed a permanent visual marker for generated details inside every reconstruction. Clinical staff objected that the marker reduced immersion and therapeutic benefit. A compromise placed the marker at session start and end.

Users later remembered seeing the scene. They did not always remember seeing the warning.

"Why didn't this end everything?" Elias asked.

Jonah looked at him as if the question was too familiar. "Because the therapy helped people. I keep telling you. People stopped having nightmares. Trauma patients could enter rooms they'd avoided for years. A woman who had lost her child used reconstruction to recover ordinary mornings that had become inaccessible behind the final hospital week. She said it gave her daughter back a life instead of only a death."

"And were the mornings accurate?"

"Some details. Some inferred. The mother knew that at the beginning. Five years later? We don't know."

Elias thought of his own mother. Red dressing gown, blue dressing gown, perhaps green according to Mara.

"Did Mara know about the witness pilot?"

Jonah nodded. "That's what changed her from suspicious patient to whistleblower. She found a summary in a shared research folder. She realized the team already knew confidence could be engineered independently of accuracy."

"You gave it to her."

Jonah looked down. "I left a directory accessible. Whether that was intentional depends on which lawyer is asking."

"You were twenty-seven."

"Twenty-six. Not an excuse."

"Why help her?"

Jonah took time.

"Because she asked a question none of the senior people liked. If a patient remembers an inferred detail later, do we mark the therapy successful or the record corrupted? Nobody could answer without admitting the

metric was doing moral work we had hidden inside statistics."

Elias looked through the report again. At the bottom was a handwritten note from Adrian Rohe.

Confidence gain is not fidelity gain. Do not pursue evidentiary deployment.

"He knew," Elias said.

"Yes."

"And stopped it."

"Yes."

"Then years later approved consumer design that reduced source reminders."

"Also yes."

Elias leaned back.

Rohe was easier to understand when imagined as a hypocrite. Harder when the same person had correctly identified the risk, stopped one application, then gradually accepted the mechanism elsewhere because the context felt different.

Institutional failure did not require ignorance. Sometimes it required remembering a warning only inside the category where it had first been written.

Saira closed the file. "This is the strongest evidence we have because it doesn't depend on anyone's autobiographical account."

"Will it be public?"

"Redacted."

"Rohe will argue it proves the company acted responsibly by ending the pilot."

"He should. That's part of the record."

Elias looked at her.

"You don't want a simple case either."

"Simple cases make bad safeguards. If we pretend every decision was malicious, future institutions learn only to avoid looking malicious. I want rules that survive good intentions."

That sentence stayed with Elias. Rules that survived good intentions.

Fallow had been built from people trying to reduce suffering. Morrow had been built from people trying to make reconstruction useful.

Elias had built Continuity trying to protect Mara. Mara had disappeared trying to protect herself.

Good intention was not innocence. It was simply one more fact.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Room 614

Elias visited the hospital because Lena asked him to see what he was arguing against.

"I'm not arguing against reconstruction," he said.

"You sound like you are when you're angry."

"That's your interpretation."

"Yes. Come anyway."

Room 614 belonged to a man named Daniel Reeve, forty-nine, who had survived a motorway collision three years earlier. Daniel remembered the accident and his life before it. What he could not access clearly was the six-week period after surgery, including the final visits of his father, who died unexpectedly while Daniel was still hospitalized.

Morrow had reconstructed portions of those weeks from hospital cameras, family videos, messages and nurses' notes. Daniel sat by the window with a walking stick against his chair and greeted Elias as if they were meeting socially.

"Lena says you're the famous disaster."

"She used those words?"

"No. I improved them."

His wife, Clare, laughed from the sofa. Daniel showed Elias a printed photograph from a reconstruction. His father sat beside the hospital bed holding a newspaper.

"This happened," Daniel said. "Camera verifies he visited that day. Newspaper is in the visitor log because Dad argued with a nurse about leaving it behind. The

system reconstructed the room from three camera angles."

"Dialogue?"

"Mostly unknown."

"Do you remember any?"

Daniel nodded. "I remember him telling me my hair looked terrible." Clare said, "He always told you your hair looked terrible."

"Exactly."

Elias looked at the image. "Was that line in the reconstruction?"

"One possible version."

"Before you remembered it?"

Daniel smiled. "That's why Lena brought you."

Elias felt uncomfortable.

Daniel continued. "I don't know if Dad said it that day. I know he said it a hundred other days. The reconstruction gave me the line. Now when I think of that visit, I hear it."

"Does that bother you?"

"Sometimes."

"Would you rather not have done it?"

"No."

The answer came without hesitation.

"Why?"

Daniel looked at Clare before answering. "Before the reconstruction, that period was a medical hole. Dad died inside it. I had facts. He visited six times. He brought a newspaper. He complained about parking. But I couldn't picture him in the room. Afterward I could. Some of the picture is generated. I know that. It still connects the facts into something I can live with."

"What if you stop knowing which parts are generated?"

"Then somebody should remind me."

"What if the reminder hurts?"

Daniel shrugged. "Then it hurts." Clare looked at him. "You say that now."

"True."

She turned to Elias. "There were weeks when the uncertainty labels made him angry enough to stop sessions. He said if every nice moment came with a little warning sign it felt like the machine was taking his father away again."

Daniel nodded. "Also true."

"And when they hid the labels?" Elias asked.

"It felt better," Daniel said.

"That's the problem."

"Yes."

No argument.

Elias had expected to leave with moral clarity. Instead he sat for another hour while Daniel described using reconstructions to overcome panic associated with hospitals. The treatment had helped. Clare said he could now attend medical appointments without sedation. Daniel said one generated memory had almost certainly blended with a real one.

Both facts survived.

On the way out Elias asked Lena why she had chosen Daniel.

"Because he is not a cautionary tale," she said. "Neither are you."

"My memory was altered beyond consent."

"Yes. And parts of the procedure may also have protected Mara exactly as you intended."

They stood beside the hospital lifts.

"Do you think I would have exposed her without it?"

"I don't know."

"Your favorite answer."

"It is often the only ethical one."

The lift arrived.

Inside, a woman held a newborn wrapped in a yellow blanket. Elias looked away because the intimacy felt private even in public.

"Daniel knows one line from his father may be false," he said.

"Yes."

"And keeps it."

"Yes."

"Is that wrong?"

Lena pressed the ground-floor button. "Why do you need it to be wrong or right?" Elias looked at the closing doors.

Because categories were easier to carry. He did not say it.

Lena already knew.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The Last Address

Mara took Elias to Bellweather herself.

Not because he asked.

She called one morning and said, "I want to show you something before the hearing. Don't make it weird."

"That instruction lacks measurable criteria."

"Already weird. Excellent start."

They met at the station and walked uphill to the converted warehouse Elias had visited weeks earlier. Omar Bell was not on duty. Mara used the public entrance and stopped outside rather than going in.

"Top floor," she said. "You already know that."

"I went inside."

"I know."

Elias looked at her. "How?"

"The manager emailed an old forwarding address after your visit. It eventually reached me. He said some intense man with my face was asking about chin scars."

Elias winced. "That sounds worse summarized."

"Most of your behavior does."

She smiled, then looked up at the windows.

"I lived here eleven months. First place that felt mine."

"Was the cat real?"

Mara laughed. "Omar remembered the cat?"

"Possibly your neighbor's."

"Mine. Her name was Evidence."

Elias stared.

"I'm joking. Her name was Poppy."

"I genuinely hate you."

"I know."

They walked around the building toward the river. Mara pointed to a supermarket. "I worked there for six weeks before Tess got me freelance transcription work. That cafe used to be a pharmacy. I hated the pharmacist because he pronounced my surname like Astor and corrected me when I corrected him."

The details were aggressively ordinary. Elias wanted to record them. He kept his phone in his pocket.

"Why show me?"

Mara considered. "Because you found this place through a payment and a height mark and a rental record. You were turning it into evidence again. I wanted you to see that it was just somewhere I lived."

They reached the bench overlooking the river where Elias had sat during his first visit.

Mara sat beside him.

"I was happy here sometimes," she said. "Also lonely. Also furious. I had a terrible mattress. Poppy destroyed a curtain. I dated a woman called Rachel for four months and broke up with her because she wanted to move to Manchester. I got food poisoning from the restaurant you walked past on the way here. None of that is in your archive."

Elias looked at the river.

"I didn't know you dated women."

"I dated people. Don't make it into a category project."

"I'm not."

"Your eyebrows are."

He laughed.

Mara continued. "The point is, I wasn't waiting to be found. That's the part I need you to understand before all this becomes public. I wasn't hiding in a room for fifteen years because Morrow stole my life. I had a life. Complicated, sometimes bad, often good."

"Do you regret leaving?"

"Some days."

"Do you regret not calling?"

"More days."

"Would you do it again?"

Mara looked at him. "There you are."

"What?"

"Trying to turn fifteen years into one verdict."

Elias smiled faintly. "Occupational damage."

"Family damage."

They sat quietly.

A dog ran along the riverbank carrying a stick twice the width of its body. After a while Mara said, "The first year, I used to write letters to you."

Elias turned.

"Never sent them."

"Do you still have them?"

"Some."

He waited.

Mara raised an eyebrow. "Good restraint."

"I'm suffering."

"Excellent."

"Will you ever let me read them?"

"Maybe."

"Okay."

She looked almost disappointed that he did not push.

"You're making this difficult," she said.

"Apparently growth is irritating."

"Extremely."

Before they left, Mara took him to a small secondhand shop near the station. She searched a shelf of kitchenware and picked up a plain white ceramic cup.

"This is almost like the one from the video," she said.

Elias looked at it.

"Almost?"

"The handle was thinner."

"You're sure?"

Mara laughed.

"No."

She put it back.

That was the whole lesson.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The Decision

The night before the hearing, Elias and Lena sat on the floor of his apartment because every chair was covered with documents. Saira had reduced the evidence package to institutional records: governance minutes, software commits, metric definitions, warning memos, witness-pilot results and the relevant sections of Elias's consent file. Mara's personal material was excluded except where she had provided explicit permission for a short redacted statement.

Elias had read the package three times.

"There's a gap," he said.

Lena looked up from a printed timeline. "Where?"

"Between Fallow identifying autobiographical adoption and Morrow reducing uncertainty prompts. We have internal reasoning, but no document where somebody says they understand the connection."

"Because nobody wrote it that way."

"Rohe's witness-pilot note gets close. Confidence gain is not fidelity gain."

"Then use it."

"He will argue clinical reconstruction is different."

"It is different."

Elias looked at her.

"You're helping the other side."

"There shouldn't be an other side to accurate description."

He smiled tiredly. "You were impossible in 2018 too, weren't you?"

"Worse. Younger and certain."

"I don't believe you were ever certain."

"That's because you met me after Fallow."

They worked until midnight.

Eventually the papers blurred. Lena pushed a box aside and leaned against the sofa.

"Do you remember the first time you told me about the kitchen?" she asked.

"2017?"

"Yes."

"No."

"You were furious with me about Mara's clinical file. We sat in the old Fallow corridor for nearly two hours. At some point you described the last night. Blue cup and all."

"The cup was already blue then."

"Yes."

"Before Harbor Blue entered the procedure."

"You remembered a generic blue cup. The 2018 object anchor later gave it the exact Harbor form."

Elias considered that. "Layers."

"Always."

"Did you believe my kitchen account in 2017?"

"At first."

"When did you doubt it?"

"When I found Mara's direct recording and saw you weren't there."

"Did you tell me immediately?"

"No."

Elias looked at her.

"Why not?"

Lena's face tightened. "Because I was afraid you would stop helping investigate Fallow if I destroyed the memory holding your grief together." There it was. Another decision made for someone else's good.

"How long did you wait?"

"Three days."

"What happened in those three days?"

"You helped us recover two archive indices and identified the link that eventually led to Tess."

"So withholding the truth was useful."

"Yes."

"Did that make it right?"

"No."

Elias looked at the evidence covering his floor. That was the pattern everywhere. Useful and wrong. Helpful and dangerous. Consensual and harmful. Protective and controlling. Truths did not cancel one another simply because they were uncomfortable in the same sentence.

"Why tell me now?" he asked.

"Because tomorrow I'm going to testify that Morrow repeatedly allowed usefulness to justify delayed disclosure. I can't make that accusation while preserving the version where I never did the same thing."

Elias nodded slowly.

"Thank you."

Lena looked surprised.

"I am still angry," he said.

"There he is."

They smiled.

A little after one, Lena stood to leave. At the door she hesitated.

"What happens after the hearing?"

"Regulators investigate. Lawyers become wealthy. Morrow issues statements."

"I meant you."

Elias looked at her.

The question contained years he did not remember and weeks he did.

"I don't know."

Lena nodded. "Good."

"You really need another word."

She put on her coat.

Elias said, "Dinner sometime?"

Lena looked back.

"Not therapy. Not memory work. Dinner."

"Are you asking because you remember wanting to in 2018?"

"No."

"Because Mara told you I did?"

"No."

"Because you've spent a month confusing gratitude, dependency and attachment?"

"Possibly."

Lena smiled.

"That is an appalling invitation."

"I can prepare a cleaner version."

"Don't."

She opened the door.

"After the hearing," she said.

It was not a promise. Elias found that he could live with that.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

What Morrow Knew

The public hearing began on a Monday morning in a government building whose heating system clicked loudly enough to remind Elias of the refrigerator. He noticed the association and let it pass.

That, more than anything, told him how much had changed. Morrow's inquiry was not a trial. No one stood in a dock. There were no dramatic objections, no single document that caused the room to gasp. Regulators asked precise questions about research governance, disclosure language, product design and data provenance. Lawyers asked for definitions. Engineers disagreed about versions. Clinicians argued over whether therapeutic benefit could justify reconstructive uncertainty. Most of the work consisted of people explaining decisions that had seemed small when they were made.

Lena testified for nearly four hours. Elias watched from the second row beside Saira Malik. Mara was not present. Her name appeared only as Participant F-17 in documents and as a redacted third party in Elias's Continuity record.

Lena described Fallow's early grief program, the shift from factual fidelity toward Narrative Stability, Mara's objections, and the team's failure to distinguish clearly between a patient feeling coherent and a memory becoming evidentially trustworthy.

"Did you know participants were incorporating generated details into later recollections?" a regulator asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"We had credible evidence by late 2010."

"And the program continued."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lena looked down at the documents before her. "Because the same participants often improved clinically. We treated source confusion as a manageable side effect rather than a challenge to the treatment goal."

"Was that reasonable?"

A long pause.

"Parts of it were reasonable at the time. The conclusion we built from those parts was not."

The answer irritated one of Morrow's lawyers, who shifted in his chair and wrote something on a yellow pad. Lena continued before another question came. "I want to be precise. We did not possess technology capable of inserting arbitrary memories into people. We still do not. What we had was more ordinary and, in some ways, more dangerous. We could provide plausible sensory and narrative material during periods when people were actively trying to make sense of incomplete autobiographical events. Repetition increased familiarity. Familiarity influenced confidence. Confidence then became one of the signals later systems used to rank reconstructions."

"A feedback loop."

"Yes."

"Did Morrow understand this before consumer release?"

"Some people did. The company understood pieces of it. That is not the same as saying every person understood the full consequence."

"Did senior leadership?"

Lena looked toward Rohe.

"Enough to require stronger warnings than we gave."

Rohe testified later.

He did not defend Narrative Stability as elegantly as he had in private. Public rooms altered language. He acknowledged approving the removal of persistent uncertainty prompts because users found them intrusive. He acknowledged that source awareness declined afterward. He acknowledged that the early witness-recall pilot had demonstrated increased confidence without comparable gains in accuracy.

"Why was that pilot not disclosed to later users?" the chair asked.

"It was a limited internal study and never commercialized."

"That is not what I asked."

Rohe turned his wedding ring.

Elias almost smiled.

"Because disclosure would have complicated the claim that our primary risk was model error rather than human adoption of model output," Rohe said finally.

The room became very quiet. Not dramatically quiet. Pens still moved. Someone coughed. A ventilation grille rattled.

But the sentence remained.

Morrow's greatest risk had never been that Vela would hallucinate a false scene. It was that a person would live with a plausible scene long enough to stop remembering which parts had been uncertain.

Elias testified on the second day. He refused to enter his reconstructed kitchen into evidence.

The regulator looked surprised. "Mr. Venn, your case is central to the inquiry."

"The relevant technical facts are already documented through system logs and my consent file. The original kitchen recording belongs to my sister. She has not consented to public release."

"Would the recording strengthen your account?"

"Yes."

"And you still decline?"

"Yes."

The lawyer representing Morrow leaned toward his microphone. "Mr. Venn, you are willing to make serious claims about the company while withholding evidence that could contextualize those claims."

Elias looked at him.

A month earlier, the accusation would have frightened him because it threatened completeness. Now he said, "Evidence can be relevant without becoming yours."

Saira did not smile, but he saw her pen stop moving.

The hearing continued.

By evening the first news reports had appeared. Some called Morrow's technology memory manipulation. Others claimed the inquiry proved all reconstructed memories were unreliable. Both

statements were wrong in ways that made better headlines than the truth.

Outside the building, cameras waited.

Elias hated being photographed.

He stood at the top of the steps while Tess approached through reporters. "You can use the side exit."

"I know."

"Then why are you here?"

Elias looked at the cameras. For years he had disliked photographs because they felt like evidence captured without permission, little future arguments about what he had been doing and how he had looked while doing it. Now he understood that refusing photographs had never protected him from interpretation.

"I don't want to hide," he said.

Tess nodded.

He walked down the steps. Reporters shouted questions about false memories, Mara, lawsuits, whether Morrow had experimented on him.

Elias answered only one.

"Did they put a memory in your head?"

He stopped.

"No," he said. "That's the wrong question."

Then he kept walking.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The Offer

Morrow offered Elias a complete reconstruction of his missing 2018 period under independent supervision. The proposal arrived two weeks after the hearing, signed by the external clinical team now overseeing legacy participants. It promised source-separated viewing, continuous uncertainty labels, no Narrative Stability optimization and the ability to stop after any segment. The process would not claim to restore memory. It would assemble the strongest surviving evidence into immersive scenes and allow Elias to decide what, if anything, he accepted.

The old Elias would have signed before reaching the second page. The current one carried the proposal around for six days.

He took it to Lena first. They met in the same station coffee shop where she had told him Mara had never been diagnosed. Lena no longer worked at Morrow. She had resigned the morning after her testimony and accepted a temporary research post at a university ethics center that she joked paid partly in moral superiority and partly in disappointing coffee.

"Do you want me to tell you not to do it?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Then I'm not going to."

"Would you do it?"

"For myself?"

"Yes."

Lena considered. "Probably."

Elias looked up, surprised.

"You expected a more enlightened answer?"

"A little."

"I'm curious. I also believe reconstructions can be useful. None of this changes that."

"Even after Fallow."

"Especially after Fallow. The mistake is not using tools. The mistake is allowing usefulness to become authority without noticing."

Elias folded the proposal. "I want the noodles." Lena smiled. "The terrible ones?"

"Apparently. I want to remember the second meeting with Mara. I want Pember. I want to remember how we were."

"You may not get that. You may get scenes built from recordings and notes that eventually feel like memory."

"I know."

"Do you?"

He looked at her.

Lena smiled faintly. "Sorry. Had to."

He laughed.

There was a pause.

"I want to remember you too," Elias said.

Lena's smile disappeared.

"2018," he continued. "Not because I think there was some hidden romance. I know there wasn't. But you remember years of me that I don't. That creates an imbalance I hate."

"You hate imbalance or dependence?"

"Both."

"Maybe you don't need to correct it."

Elias looked out at the trains.

"Do you regret agreeing to Continuity?"

Lena took time before answering. "Yes. And no."

He waited.

"I regret strengthening the kitchen. I regret underestimating associative spread. I regret accepting your argument that protection of Mara justified risks we didn't understand. I don't regret helping protect her location once she chose not to be found."

"Even though the procedure hurt me."

"You are not the only person whose interests existed."

The sentence once would have sounded cruel. Now it sounded like the center of the whole story.

Elias nodded.

He took the proposal to Mara next. They met in a public garden halfway between Dunley and wherever she was currently living. She refused to specify which direction that was. She had cut her hair shorter since Carrow Bay.

"It makes you look like Mum," Elias said.

"Dangerous. She had terrible hair in the nineties."

"You know what I mean."

"Unfortunately."

They walked beneath bare trees. Elias gave her the proposal.

She read the first page and returned it.

"Not my decision."

"I know."

"Then why show me?"

"Because some of the source material is yours."

Mara stopped.

That answer mattered.

"They would exclude anything you don't consent to," Elias said. "I can reconstruct only my own recordings and notes."

"Would that be enough?"

"Probably not."

"Good."

He looked at her.

"I'm serious," Mara said. "Maybe not enough is the right amount."

"You don't want me to remember 2018."

"Part of me does. I hate being the only one carrying some of it. Another part remembers what happened when both of us became obsessed with making memory behave."

They resumed walking.

"I have one recording you haven't heard," Mara said.

Elias's attention sharpened automatically.

She noticed.

"See?"

"Sorry."

"It's from the second meeting. The bad noodles. I recorded ten minutes because I didn't trust you not to later claim you had been reasonable."

"Was I?"

"Absolutely not."

"Can I hear it?"

Mara looked at him.

Elias waited.

Then she said, "Not today."

The old frustration arrived.

He let it.

"Okay."

Mara studied his face as if looking for the hidden argument.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You're extremely unsettling now."

"I've been told."

They reached the garden exit. Before leaving, Mara said, "If you decide to reconstruct, don't do it because you think the version with the most data wins."

"Why would I do it?"

"Because you want to meet the person you were. That's allowed."

"You hated him."

"Sometimes."

"You loved him."

Mara rolled her eyes. "Don't make me say emotionally useful things in public."

Elias smiled.

She hugged him.

It happened quickly enough that he had no time to prepare. For one second he stood rigid.

Then his arms came around her. No rain. No kitchen. No cup.

He did not try to memorize the details.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The Last Reconstruction

Elias entered Reconstruction Suite Four for the last time on a Thursday afternoon. The room looked smaller than it had on the night the kitchen broke open. Perhaps because he no longer believed the machinery possessed hidden authority. The white acoustic panels remained white acoustic panels. The immersion chair was a chair. Sensors lay in a tray waiting for a person to give them meaning.

Ivo stood at the control desk wearing a visitor badge because he had transferred out of Morrow's reconstruction division. "You know this is a terrible place to hold a sentimental farewell."

"I am not sentimental."

"Your sister wrote jokes in your cigarette cache. You're basically a Victorian widow with databases."

Elias smiled. "Are the sources isolated?"

"Yes. No adaptive dialogue. No scene completion beyond documented geometry. Every inferred element stays visibly marked. And before you say it, yes, I verified the verifier."

"Good."

Lena had refused to supervise. She said the choice needed to be Elias's without her becoming part of the emotional frame again. Mara had declined to attend for simpler reasons. I lived through it once. Very efficient of me.

Elias sat in the chair. He had not accepted the full 2018 reconstruction offer.

Instead he requested one scene.

The original kitchen.

Not the memory.

The evidence.

"Ready?" Ivo asked.

"No."

"Excellent informed consent."

Elias lowered the headset.

The kitchen appeared.

Immediately, it was uglier than his memory. The old video had poor color. Room geometry came from photographs that did not fully agree. Missing areas remained grey rather than filled. Objects with low confidence appeared slightly translucent. A confidence band floated near the floor despite Elias's instinctive desire to turn it off.

The table was there.

The strawberry magnet.

The damaged wall.

Rain beyond the window.

Mara sat alone.

Her cup was white.

Elias did not appear across from her. There was no chair where his memory had placed him because the original recording showed that chair pushed against the wall.

He stared at the empty space. For years that space had belonged to him.

Now it did not feel like being erased. It felt like seeing the room.

Mara looked toward the recording device.

"Eli, if you're watching this, don't do the thing where you decide you've already worked out what I mean."

Source label: DIRECT AUDIO, 99.7%.

He smiled.

She spoke about Fallow. About not being fine and not being sick. About records, Lena, fear and anger. Elias listened without trying to anticipate the sentence.

Then it came.

"If I disappear, don't let them tell you I was sick."

The words remained painful.

Their meaning had changed.

They were not a prophecy spoken into Elias's hands. They were an instruction Mara left because she did not trust the systems and people around her to describe her absence honestly.

She continued.

"And don't make this into something you did. You weren't here tonight. You couldn't have stopped anything tonight because you weren't here."

Elias looked at the empty chair. For the first time he believed her.

Not because Vela said it. Not because cameras placed him elsewhere.

Not because a consent file proved the blue cup came later. He believed her because he no longer needed to be present for her fear to matter.

Lena entered the old recording carrying the canvas bag. The two women spoke about Pember. Mara looked frightened and angry and funny in the same six minutes. No reconstruction needed to choose which version was true.

When Mara returned to the camera and said, "Please don't turn me into a dead person just because you can't find me," Elias closed his eyes.

"Stop," he said.

The scene froze.

Ivo's voice entered quietly. "Want out?"

"Yes."

The kitchen vanished.

Elias removed the headset.

Ivo looked at him but did not ask how he felt.

"Delete the session?" he said.

Elias thought about it.

"No. Preserve it with source labels. No adaptive version."

"Done."

"And revoke my personal immersion access after today."

Ivo raised an eyebrow. "Permanently?"

"Until I ask to restore it through someone who has enough sense to make me wait."

"I nominate a committee of seven hostile librarians."

"Perfect."

Ivo entered the restriction.

On the desk beside the chair lay the full 2018 reconstruction proposal.

Elias picked it up.

There was still time to sign. He imagined terrible noodles. Mara's slap. Pember. Lena in 2018. All the scenes he might regain, or might only learn to experience convincingly.

He tore the signature page in half. Not because truth did not matter.

Because he had finally learned that wanting something to be a memory did not make reconstruction the only way to know it happened.

"That's dramatic," Ivo said.

Elias looked at the torn page.

"I know."

"Please never change entirely."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

The Ugly Version

Morrow survived.

For a while that offended everyone who wanted a cleaner ending. Its valuation collapsed, then stabilized. Two executives resigned. Rohe stepped down from operational leadership but remained involved in the independent archive review after former participants demanded continuity from the people who actually understood the old systems. Regulators imposed restrictions on immersive reconstruction, including persistent source labeling, cooling-off periods for high-risk clinical use and explicit separation between therapeutic reconstruction and evidentiary claims.

None of these measures guaranteed safety. They made harm harder to call success.

Lena began teaching one day a week. Jonah joined a standards group despite announcing repeatedly that standards groups were where useful ideas went to acquire acronyms. Ivo moved into reliability research and sent Elias photographs of error messages with captions such as YOUR PEOPLE NEED YOU.

Tess's article appeared without Mara's name. The opening described a metric.

Not a missing girl. Not a grieving brother. Not a frightening machine.

Narrative Stability.

The article traced how a reasonable therapeutic goal became a proxy for something it could not measure. It quoted no private patient memories. It made fewer

people furious than a sensational story would have and more institutions nervous.

Elias considered that a success. He did not return to Morrow.

For several months he consulted with Saira's team on standards for reconstruction evidence, then stopped because every meeting made him want to correct somebody's terminology. He began teaching a small postgraduate seminar instead.

The first session was called Evidence Is Not Memory. A student asked whether the reverse was also true.

"Usually," Elias said.

"Then what is memory evidence of?"

Twenty people waited for the elegant answer. Elias had once loved elegant answers.

"Depends," he said.

The students looked disappointed.

He smiled.

His relationship with Mara developed badly and therefore, perhaps, honestly. They spoke every week at first, then not for three weeks after an argument about their father. Mara believed Gabriel deserved some forgiveness for keeping the 2018 secret. Elias said forgiveness was not a duty. Mara accused him of turning principles into hiding places. Elias told her she did the same thing with autonomy.

She hung up.

He did not call back that night. The next morning she sent:

Still angry. Also you were partly right, which is rude.

Elias replied:

Same.

That became enough.

He visited Gabriel before Christmas. His father had found the Ternmouth photograph and placed it on the kitchen table before Elias arrived.

The coat was yellow.

The boat was visible near the horizon.

"You said red," Elias reminded him.

Gabriel looked irritated. "I was wrong."

"You sounded certain."

"I am often wrong with confidence. You inherited it."

They ate dinner.

Later Elias asked about the morning Mara disappeared. Gabriel did not remember telling him about the video before the formal police interview.

"Mara says you did."

"Maybe."

"The police timeline supports it."

"Then probably."

The lack of certainty frustrated Elias for several seconds.

Then it didn't.

Before leaving, Gabriel gave him a cardboard box of family papers. "I'm tired of storing your evidence."

"It's family history."

"That's what I said. Evidence."

At home Elias opened the box slowly. He found school reports, birthday cards, two photographs of Mara wearing the red coat his father had remembered even though the Ternmouth one was yellow. He found a note from his mother written on the back of a utility bill. He found no definitive record of Owen March.

He stopped looking.

Near the bottom was a photograph of the Venn kitchen from 2010. Mara stood at the sink holding a cup.

It was blue.

Elias stared.

His pulse quickened before reason caught up.

Different cup.

Plain blue. No Harbor glaze. No white crack. Entirely possible in 2010. For a few seconds he laughed so hard he had to sit down.

He sent Mara a photograph of the photograph.

Her reply came immediately.

Oh no. Burn it before you start another book of notes.

Elias typed:

Too late.

He took out a black notebook.

Then paused.

Instead of documenting provenance, dimensions, date confidence and glaze differences, he wrote one sentence. Mara had a blue cup once.

He closed the notebook.

The ugly version was enough.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

White Cup

By the following October, Elias could enter a kitchen without checking the color of every cup.

He still noticed them.

He had not become a different species. The anniversary of Mara's disappearance arrived under clear skies, which annoyed him because fifteen years of memory had made rain feel contractually required. He woke late, bought bread downstairs and discovered his coffee had gone cold while he was reading student essays at the table.

He drank it anyway.

At eleven Mara called.

"I'm outside."

Elias looked toward the window. "Outside where?"

"Your building. Try to control yourself."

He went downstairs.

She stood beside the bakery holding a paper bag and wearing a green sweatshirt under her coat. Not the same one from the old photographs. He checked before he could stop himself.

Mara saw.

"New," she said. "Bought last week. There is a receipt if you need emotional closure."

"I hate you."

"You've said."

She came upstairs.

The paper bag contained marmalade, stolen from a hotel breakfast buffet.

"You are thirty-two."

"And thriving."

"This is theft."

"From a chain hotel. Legally it's activism."

"That is not legally anything."

Mara put the jar in his cupboard. They spent the afternoon doing almost nothing. She complained about his furniture. He made lunch. They argued about whether a tomato could be considered bad before visible mold appeared. Mara found the blue charity-shop cup and held it up.

"This one?"

"No. Similar."

"You kept it anyway."

"Yes."

She turned it in her hands. "Do you still have the actual Harbor Blue?"

"Morrow evidence archive."

"Good. Hideous thing."

"You spent fifteen years represented by it. Show respect."

"I spent fifteen years represented by a school photograph I hated and a sentence I said while crying. My relationship with representation is poor."

Elias took the cup from her and placed it back on the shelf. Near evening they walked to a small restaurant. Mara told him about work but not the company name. She said she had been seeing someone for six months, then enjoyed watching Elias try not to ask identifying questions.

"You can ask his first name," she said.

"I wasn't going to."

"Liar."

"What's his first name?"

"Sam."

Elias waited.

"That's all you get."

"Fine."

"You're sweating."

"I'm eating soup."

Mara laughed.

After dinner they returned to the apartment. She took an old recorder from her bag. Elias recognized the shape immediately.

"The noodles?"

"Ten minutes. Second meeting, 2018. I said you could hear it someday."

He looked at the recorder. For months he had told himself he no longer needed it.

That was not the same as not wanting it.

"Why now?"

"Because I decided."

"Do you want me to listen?"

Mara shrugged. "I want you to have the choice." Elias picked up the recorder.

It was heavier than expected. Inside were ten minutes of his own missing life. No reconstruction. No generated imagery. Actual voices. Terrible noodles. Perhaps an apology he wanted to hear. Perhaps a sentence that would change how he understood another year.

He placed it on the table.

"Not tonight."

Mara looked surprised.

"You sure?"

Elias smiled. "No."

"Good answer."

They made coffee instead.

Mara opened the cupboard and reached automatically for a plain white mug. Elias took the blue one.

She looked at it, then at him.

"You know that wasn't my cup."

"Yes."

"You know I wasn't holding it that night."

"Yes."

"You know you weren't there."

Elias looked at his sister standing alive in his kitchen.

"Yes."

Mara poured coffee into both cups. They sat at the table while traffic moved below the windows. No rain. No refrigerator turning off at the correct moment. Nothing arranged itself into a scene that deserved to be remembered forever.

Mara told him a story about Sam getting trapped in a hotel bathroom because the lock broke. Elias laughed. Halfway through the story she changed one detail, then corrected herself.

"No, wait. It was Tuesday, not Wednesday."

"Does it matter?"

Mara stopped.

For a second they looked at each other.

Then she smiled.

"No."

Elias's coffee cooled while they talked. Later he would remember the blue cup on the table and Mara's

white one beside it. He would remember the marmalade in the cupboard. He would remember that the sky had been clear.

Some of those details would be wrong.

He knew that now.

The cup was still blue. He drank from it anyway.