

THE TRUTH WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING

PROOF OF ABSENCE

PART TWO

BORROWED LIVES

SOME
MEMORIES
REFUSE
TO STAY
BURIED

SOME
PEOPLE
NEVER
REALLY
LEAVE

A NOVEL BY

RAKTIM RANJIT

**PROOF OF ABSENCE
PART TWO**

BORROWED LIVES

A Novel by Raktim Ranjit

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CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Mother

The woman in the reconstruction had Helen Venn's hands. Elias noticed before he noticed her face, which was fortunate because the face belonged to someone else.

On the screen, a woman in a yellow cardigan stood at a sink rinsing strawberries. Her hair was grey at the temples. A child sat on the counter beside her, swinging bare feet against a cupboard door and complaining about the seeds. Nothing in the room belonged to Elias. The cupboards were pine instead of white laminate, the window opened over a narrow garden instead of Alder Row, and the child's voice carried the soft northern accent of someone raised two hundred miles from Dunley.

The hands were his mother's. Not similar hands. Not merely long fingers and square nails. Helen had broken the little finger of her left hand at eleven and never had it set properly. The joint bent inward when she spread her fingers. Elias had watched that crooked finger press pastry into tins, mend shirt buttons, tap cigarette ash into the sink when she thought Gabriel was outside.

The reconstructed woman turned off the tap. Her left hand opened over the draining board. The little finger bent inward.

Elias paused the video. Across the review table, Nia Vale stopped chewing the inside of her cheek. She was

twenty-six, according to the intake form, though she had the exhausted composure of someone who had spent a year speaking to lawyers twice her age. She wore a wool coat in the overheated archive office and kept both hands around an unopened bottle of water.

"That's the part," she said.

Elias enlarged the frame without generative enhancement. The source confidence tags hovered beside the woman's body. FACE: 92.1 percent. CARDIGAN: 76.4. HAND GEOMETRY: 38.8.

Thirty-eight point eight was low enough to be treated as reconstruction, not evidence. It was also high enough to have come from somewhere.

"Your mother broke her finger?" Elias asked.

"Never."

"You're certain?"

Nia gave him a look he recognized from people who had already answered the same question for someone else. "She taught piano. She had very boring hands. Straight fingers. Short nails. I have photographs."

Elias nodded and wrote the sentence in his notebook. NIA STATES MOTHER'S LEFT LITTLE FINGER STRAIGHT. He had stopped believing handwritten notes were purer than digital records, but he still liked the physical inconvenience of paper. It slowed him down.

"When did Morrow make this reconstruction?"

"2022. My mother died the year before. Cancer." Nia said it without lowering her voice. "I paid for three sessions. The first two were fine. The third was this afternoon in our old kitchen. I thought I'd forgotten the

cardigan. I thought I'd forgotten the strawberries. I thought I'd forgotten almost everything."

"And now?"

"Now the court gives us the source bundle and half the details aren't ours."

The court-ordered release of Morrow's legacy archives had begun six weeks earlier. Former clients could request the evidence underlying their reconstructions, with third-party material redacted and clinical notes separated unless legally discoverable. The process was supposed to restore control to people whose memories had been mediated by a company now famous for confusing therapeutic coherence with factual confidence.

It had instead created a new category of grief. People were learning which dead relatives had never said the comforting sentence they had heard fifty times. Which childhood rooms had been completed from property photographs taken years later. Which reconstructed embraces had a confidence score of twelve percent.

Elias had agreed to serve on the independent review panel because refusing would have felt like cowardice. Mara had called it masochism with stationery.

He did not tell Nia any of that.

"Why did you ask specifically for me?" he said.

For the first time, her composure changed. She looked toward the dark monitor beside him, then back.

"Because that isn't the only thing I found."

She opened her bag and removed a paper envelope. No phone. No tablet. Paper. Elias felt an unreasonable dislike of the object before she placed it down.

"My source release had one file that wasn't mine," Nia said. "They told me it was a clerical error. Then they removed it from the portal."

"Did you download it?"

"Printed the transcript."

She slid the envelope toward him. The first page bore a Morrow legacy header from 2008, five years before the company had formally existed. FALLOW CLINIC, BEREAVEMENT RECONSTRUCTION PILOT. SUBJECT IDENTIFIER redacted. SOURCE DONOR: HV-03.

Elias read the initials twice. Nia watched him. "Your mother's name was Helen Venn."

"Yes."

"And she died in 2007."

"Yes."

"Then why was somebody using her as a source donor in 2008?"

Elias turned the page. A short quotation sat beneath a technical note about gesture modeling.

Don't lick the spoon before everyone has had some. He knew the sentence.

Helen had said it every time she made cake. She had said it to Mara, to Elias, once to Gabriel when he was forty-three and should have known better.

Nia leaned forward. "My mother says that in the reconstruction. Exactly that. I have no memory of her

ever saying it when she was alive." The review office suddenly felt too warm.

Elias looked again at the paused woman with his mother's crooked finger and someone else's face. Morrow had spent years insisting its systems reconstructed individuals from individual evidence. Missing detail could be inferred from statistical priors, yes, but those priors were supposed to be generic. A hand was a hand. A kitchen was a kitchen. No living person's identifiable mannerism was meant to become another family's missing detail.

He turned to the last page of the transcript. At the bottom, beneath signatures from two researchers he did not recognize, was a third name.

Clinical observer: L. Ors. Elias closed the envelope.

Nia said, "You know her." He thought of Lena in the hearing room four months earlier, answering questions under oath until her voice went rough. He thought of her telling the inquiry that she had disclosed every Fallow protocol she remembered.

"Yes," he said.

"Is she going to tell me why I remember your mother?"

Elias looked at the woman's borrowed hand.

"She's going to tell both of us."

Nia did not leave when the interview formally ended. She sat in the corridor outside Elias's review room with the unopened water bottle still in her hands, watching civil servants carry archive boxes between offices. Elias found her there twenty minutes later. He had spent

those twenty minutes telling himself he needed to document the source discrepancy before speaking to her again. The less flattering truth was that the question she had asked remained in the room after she left: why do I remember your mother?

"You don't have to stay," he said.

"I know."

He sat two chairs away rather than beside her. The railway station below sent a vibration through the floor every time a train arrived. Nia looked down at the bottle. "I used the reconstruction after Mum died because I was frightened I was forgetting her face. People say that and it sounds dramatic, but faces actually go strange. You know what somebody looked like and then one day you realize you have been remembering a photograph, not them."

Elias knew. For years the most available image of Mara had been the school photograph reproduced in missing-person appeals, though he had convinced himself he remembered her independently of it. Later he discovered several facial details in his own recollection followed the photograph more closely than life.

"The third session wasn't even important," Nia continued. "It was supposed to be ordinary. Mum washing fruit after school. I chose ordinary because the company said ordinary memory was less emotionally destabilizing than a deathbed scene. I remember thinking that sounded sensible."

"It probably was sensible."

"That's what makes this worse."

She looked at him for the first time. "If the whole thing had been obviously exploitative, I could hate it cleanly. But I slept after that session. Properly. First time in weeks. I called my aunt and laughed about something. I stopped replaying the hospital. So what am I supposed to do with the fact that the thing that helped was made partly from somebody else's mother?"

Elias had spent much of the previous year learning that questions did not always become more ethical when answered quickly.

"You don't have to decide today."

Nia nodded. "That sounds like something a therapist would say."

"I am not a therapist."

"I know. You write everything down like the paper might arrest you if you don't."

He almost smiled. She finally opened the water.

"I looked you up before I came," she said. "The hearings. Your sister. The false kitchen. I thought you'd understand."

"Understand what?"

"Being grateful to a memory after you know it's wrong."

Elias looked toward the review-room door, where Helen's borrowed hand remained frozen on the monitor behind glass.

"Yes," he said. "I understand that."

It was the first useful thing he had told her.

Nia did not ask him to continue immediately. She stood beside the review table with her arms folded and watched the paused image of her mother, as if waiting for the reconstruction to betray itself without help. Elias understood the impulse. Once a scene became suspect, every pixel began volunteering as evidence. The yellow cardigan looked too yellow. The kitchen seemed too orderly. The hand that had started all of this now looked almost theatrically familiar.

"Can we see what the model knew before it generated the hand?" she asked.

"Yes. But not as a single answer."

He opened the source panel. Farah Vale had left photographs, voice messages, medical documents, shopping records, a small number of home videos and thousands of ordinary digital traces. None showed the exact gesture. The system had classified the missing hand position as low-evidence interaction space and filled it from a maternal prior.

Nia read the label. "Maternal prior sounds like something a lawyer invented to avoid saying another person's mother."

"Sometimes it is generic statistical behavior. Sometimes it contains donor-derived patterns. That's what we're trying to separate."

"And you can't tell me which this is."

"Not yet."

She sat down finally. "My mother hated uncertainty. She used to call three people before buying a toaster. She'd have hated this place."

Elias almost said his sister would have liked her. He stopped. That was the kind of relational shortcut people used when they wanted intimacy faster than evidence supported.

Instead he asked what Farah had been like when nervous.

Nia smiled. "She cleaned. Not useful cleaning. She'd wipe the same counter until everyone else got more anxious."

The reconstructed mother had done that too.

Elias marked the detail, then immediately asked whether any source footage showed it.

Nia shook her head. "No video. But I remember it."

"Then we keep it separate from the source map."

"You don't trust me?"

"I trust that you remember it. That's different from treating the memory as independent evidence about what the model used."

She stared at him long enough to decide whether to be offended.

"That is an awful sentence."

"Yes."

"But fair."

He added a note under witness recollection rather than direct source.

The distinction seemed tiny. It was exactly the distinction Morrow had once hidden.

When Nia left for a break, Elias replayed only the hand movement. Not the face. Not the voice. A wrist

turned. Two fingers tucked inward. The thumb rested against the ceramic edge.

He had seen it before.

Not in a reconstruction.

At home.

His mother reaching across a kitchen counter.

The recognition arrived so forcefully that his body supplied the rest: a blue-painted wall, the smell of toast, Mara complaining about school.

Elias stopped the clip.

He did not trust the scene that followed.

That was new.

CHAPTER TWO

The Release Office

Lena arrived carrying two coffees and did not offer Elias either one.

"That usually means you're angry," she said.

"One is mine."

"Then you're angry and optimistic."

The release office occupied what had once been a private insurance firm above the central railway station. The government had rented three floors after Morrow entered administration, filled them with secure terminals, paper shredders, privacy partitions and civil servants who had rapidly learned that almost every

ordinary noun could become sensitive when attached to somebody's reconstructed past.

Elias had been given a small review room because his cases tended to become arguments. Lena closed the door behind her. She had left Morrow eight months earlier, surrendered her clinical license pending review, and somehow looked less tired now that several committees were formally investigating her decisions. Elias had once thought guilt made people smaller. Lena seemed to have become more exact.

He turned the monitor toward her. The reconstructed woman appeared at the sink.

Lena watched without speaking. When the left hand opened, her eyes changed. That was enough.

"You remember it," Elias said.

"I remember the model family."

"Model family."

"Early terminology."

"Convenient terminology."

"Mostly bad terminology."

Nia sat at the far end of the table. She had refused to leave when Elias suggested he should speak to Lena alone.

"I'm Nia," she said.

Lena looked at her. "I know. Your consent form was attached to the review request. I'm sorry about your mother." Nia's expression did not change. "Which one?"

Lena put one coffee down. Elias almost admired Nia for it.

"Tell her," he said.

Lena removed her coat. She folded it over the back of a chair, buying perhaps five seconds. "Fallow's earliest reconstruction engine had very little usable training material. Home video from the 1980s and 1990s was inconsistent. Low resolution, poor audio, bad lighting. The team created what they called donor libraries. Families who consented to research provided recordings of ordinary domestic behavior. Cooking. Arguments. Birthdays. Bedtime routines. The models learned gesture patterns and environmental motion from those recordings."

"Generic patterns," Elias said.

"That was the intention."

"My mother had a crooked finger."

Lena looked at him. "I know."

"Nia's reconstructed mother has it."

"I saw."

"That's not generic."

"No."

Nia pushed the transcript toward her. "And the sentence?" Lena read the quotation. Her thumb stopped against the page.

"No," she said quietly.

"No what?" Nia asked.

"That should never have survived feature extraction."

Elias disliked the phrase feature extraction more than he expected. His mother's habits had become features. Her crooked finger, her irritation with spoon licking, the particular way she tucked hair behind her

right ear when reading. Things that had once made Helen Helen had been processed until researchers could call them texture.

"Who donated her material?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"You observed the project."

"I observed clinical sessions. I didn't manage acquisition."

"The transcript has HV-03."

Lena looked toward the door, though nobody could hear them through it. "Helen Venn was one of the early donor sets. I knew that. I did not know identifiable details were persisting into client-facing reconstruction years later."

Nia laughed once. "You all keep discovering things you didn't know at the exact point someone else finds them." Lena accepted that without defense.

Elias asked, "When did you know Helen was a donor?"

"2009."

"Mara started at Fallow in 2008."

"Yes."

"Did she know?"

Lena hesitated. Elias saw Nia notice it too.

"Did Mara know?"

"Eventually."

The room contracted around the word. Mara had told Elias much of what happened at Fallow after the first book's events. She had not told him this.

"Eventually when?"

"You need to ask her."

"I'm asking you."

"And I'm not going to answer for her."

Elias leaned back, angry enough to become calm.

"Who supplied the recordings?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"Who could have?"

"Family. Estate administrator. A research archive. Possibly Gabriel."

His father's name landed more heavily than the others. Nia looked between them. "Gabriel is your father?"

"Yes."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"Then ask him."

Elias thought of Gabriel telling him, with total confidence, that Mara had worn a red coat in a photograph where she was clearly wearing yellow. His father had spent the last year demonstrating that being wrong did not necessarily disturb him.

This might. Lena took out her phone, then seemed to reconsider and put it back. "Before you contact anyone, we need to determine whether this is isolated."

"You think it isn't."

"I think systems rarely make one kind of mistake exactly once."

Nia pointed to the screen. "That's not a mistake to me. I remember those hands. I remember watching them

wash strawberries. I remember thinking my mother cut the green tops too deep because she hated waste."

Her voice stayed steady until the last word.

"My actual mother couldn't eat strawberries during chemo. She hated the smell by the end. I know that. I know it from the hospital. But when I close my eyes, I can see her washing them."

Lena's face tightened. Nia stood. "I'm going to get more coffee. You two can decide which word makes that legal."

After she left, Elias said, "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Tell me you feel terrible."

"I wasn't going to."

"Good."

Lena looked at the paused hand. "Find every release bundle containing HV-03."

"I don't have authority for cross-subject search."

"Celia does."

"Celia won't authorize a fishing expedition."

"Then don't call it fishing. Call it a contamination audit. She likes nouns that sound expensive."

Elias almost smiled. Then Lena said, "And Elias?"

"What."

"Do not show Mara this reconstruction until you ask her what she already knows."

"Why?"

Lena rubbed a thumb along the paper cup.

"Because the first person I ever saw recognize Helen's hand in someone else's memory was Mara."

Lena asked to see the original bundle rather than the printed transcript. Elias logged them into a secure terminal, and for half an hour she moved through metadata while he watched her avoid the one question he cared about. He knew that strategy because he used it himself. Technical work could create an atmosphere in which emotion appeared premature.

"When Mara recognized Helen's hand," he said, "what did you do?"

Lena's fingers stopped over the keyboard.

"I reported it as possible cross-subject feature leakage."

"And clinically?"

"I asked whether she had been exposed to photographs from the other family. Whether she had overheard session details. Whether pattern recognition was being amplified by anxiety."

"You looked for ways she could be wrong."

"Yes."

"Did you look for ways the system could be wrong?"

Lena turned toward him. "Not first." There was no excuse attached to it.

That made the answer worse.

"Why not?"

"Because the system was new and the patients were distressed. We treated the technology as the instrument and the patient as the variable. That is a common research error when people are too impressed by their instrument."

Elias thought of all the evaluators he had trained to distrust subjective certainty while trusting system provenance that later proved incomplete. A common error could still ruin a life.

"Mara was fifteen."

"Yes."

"You were the adult in the room."

"Yes."

Nia returned before he could continue. She carried three coffees and put one in front of Lena despite having every reason not to be generous.

"I don't know how you take it," she said.

"Black is fine."

"It has milk."

Lena accepted it. "Then milk is fine." For the next hour, they catalogued what Nia wanted from the investigation. She did not want the reconstruction removed. She did want a source explanation. She wanted to know whether Rosa's voice had been altered with another donor's speech pattern. She wanted the raw photographs her family had provided returned. She did not want reporters to contact her aunt.

Elias wrote each preference separately.

"Why separate?" Nia asked.

"Because consent to one thing isn't consent to the others."

Lena glanced at him. He ignored the look.

When Nia left again, Lena said, "You learned something."

"Don't sound surprised."

"I wasn't."

"You were."

"A little."

For several seconds the conversation almost became easy. Then Elias looked back at Helen's donor code.

"If Mara knew in 2010, why didn't she tell me in 2011?"

Lena's answer came slowly. "Maybe she tried." That possibility followed him home.

The release office had been designed to look temporary. White walls, movable partitions, rented furniture. Six months later it had developed the permanence of any bureaucracy that expected to disappear soon. People labeled drawers. Someone kept milk in the staff fridge. A cactus near reception had survived three directors.

Lena placed one coffee in front of Elias after all. "I changed my mind."

"About the coffee?"

"About rewarding your mood."

He drank. It was too hot, which meant she had bought it recently rather than carrying it from home. He noticed himself noticing and disliked the reflex.

"Nia's case isn't isolated," Lena said.

She showed him three intake summaries. In each, claimants reported details that felt deeply familiar but were absent from direct source bundles. A lullaby. A phrase. The placement of a hand during grief.

"Self-selection bias," Elias said. "People know the scandal. They're looking for borrowed material now."

"Some reports predate the scandal."

That made him look up.

Lena slid over a 2023 therapy note in which a client described a reconstructed mother as "more like someone else's mum than mine" and then laughed it off. Another note from 2024 documented a patient insisting the system had inserted a childhood kitchen he had never seen.

Both cases were closed as low-confidence reconstruction dissatisfaction.

"Who reviewed them?" Elias asked.

Lena did not answer immediately.

He understood before she spoke.

"You."

"One of them."

"And?"

"I treated it as normal model error. Which it could have been."

"Could have."

"Yes."

The old tension returned between them, not romantic, not professional, something less stable. Elias wanted Lena to have noticed sooner because that would make the present easier. Lena wanted, perhaps, to be allowed the limitations of the person she had been. Neither could give the other what they wanted.

"Did you connect it to First Copy?" he asked.

"I didn't know First Copy existed by that name."

"You knew early Fallow used shared material."

"Fragments. Not the downstream architecture."

He leaned back.

Lena's voice sharpened. "You are doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Turning every fact I know now into something I should have known then."

The accusation was precise enough to hurt.

Elias looked at the case notes. "Fair."

She exhaled. "I hate when you say that quickly."

"Would you prefer resistance?"

"Sometimes. It feels less rehearsed."

For several minutes they worked without speaking. Outside the glass partition, claimants waited for appointments that might change the meaning of their most intimate memories.

Lena finally said, "The danger here is not just contamination. It's retroactive suspicion. If we tell everyone borrowed details exist, people may start distrusting memories that were never touched by Morrow."

"We can't hide the risk to prevent that."

"I didn't say we should."

"You sounded like you were about to."

She looked at him. "And you sounded like the version of yourself who thinks anticipating my mistake is the same as listening."

He drank the coffee.

Cold now.

They both noticed.

Neither commented.

CHAPTER THREE

Borrowed Words

Mara answered on the fourth ring with, "If this is about Sam, he has done nothing prosecutable."

"I wasn't calling about Sam."

"Then I assume he's safe for another day."

Elias stood outside the release office while commuters moved beneath the station canopy. A departure board clicked through destinations behind him. He had chosen the street because there were no quiet places nearby, and for once he wanted noise.

"Do you remember HV-03?"

Mara did not answer. A bus sighed against the curb.

"Mara."

"Where did you see that?"

"A release bundle."

"Whose?"

"I can't tell you."

"Oh, look at you with professional ethics."

"Did you know Mum's recordings were used at Fallow?"

The joke left her voice. "Yes." Elias watched a man wrestle a folded stroller through the station doors.

"Since when?"

"Since I was fifteen."

He closed his eyes.

"You were in the program."

"That was the point at which I was most likely to find out."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Which year would you have preferred? The one where you thought I was dead or the one where you nearly reported me to the police?"

"Last year would have been convenient."

"Last year we were busy finding out you had turned a recording of me into your favorite memory. I had a list."

Elias looked at his notebook, though there was nothing useful in it yet. "Lena said you recognized Mum's hand in someone else's reconstruction."

Mara was quiet long enough that he heard a cupboard door close at her end.

"I want to see you," she said.

"Today?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not your office."

"My flat?"

"Too many cups."

"That joke has expired."

"It has recurring rights. Meet me at Calder's. Six."

"Tess?"

"Unless you know another Calder who keeps gin in a filing cabinet."

She ended the call. At six, Tess Calder's office looked exactly like the sort of place Mara would choose for a conversation she did not want digitally overheard. Newspapers leaned against walls in unstable stacks. Two filing cabinets had handwritten labels. The window refused to close fully, so September air moved the corner of a printed court transcript on Tess's desk.

Tess handed Elias tea in a chipped mug.

"You told her," he said.

"She told me first," Tess replied.

Mara sat on the windowsill with her coat still on. She looked at Elias for several seconds before speaking. "Mum wasn't supposed to be identifiable."

"Lena said that."

"Then for once we're all using the same vocabulary."

Tess opened a paper folder. Inside were photocopies of Fallow internal documents, some already familiar from the inquiry. One page carried a heading Elias had never seen: DOMESTIC MOTION LIBRARY, DONOR FAMILY THREE.

Below it were categories. Cooking preparation.

Sibling interaction. Parent-child correction.

Household conflict. Affection gestures.

Bereavement-associated speech. Elias stopped at the last line.

"What does that mean?"

Mara answered. "Things people say when someone is dead."

"Mum was dead when the recordings were donated."

"Some were before. Some weren't."

She handed him another sheet. The source list included birthday tapes, school performances, a Christmas recording, and twelve hours of audio labeled HELEN VOICE JOURNALS.

Elias looked up. "Voice journals?"

"Mum recorded them during the last year of her life."

He had never heard of them.

"Why?"

"Because she knew something was wrong."

"She died of an aneurysm."

"She had headaches for months. The doctors told her they were migraines. She started recording things because she was afraid her memory was getting bad."

Elias remembered none of this. He was sixteen when Helen died, old enough to believe he had been paying attention.

"Who gave Fallow the recordings?"

Mara looked at Tess. Tess looked at Elias.

He already knew.

"Dad."

Mara nodded.

"Why?"

"Because he was grieving and a researcher told him Helen's recordings could help build tools for families like ours."

"Did he know you were in the trial?"

"Not at first. Fallow's departments barely knew what the others were doing. That's part of why it got so bad."

Elias put the papers down. "You recognized Mum in another patient's reconstruction. What happened?"

Mara's face changed in a way he had learned not to hurry.

"A girl named June," she said. "She was sixteen. Her father died in a car accident. We were in the same waiting group. She did a reconstruction of breakfast with him. Afterwards she described him telling her not to lick jam from a spoon because other people might want some."

Elias's mouth went dry.

"Mum's sentence."

"Not exactly. Close enough that I noticed. Then June did this thing with her hand when she told the story." Mara folded her left little finger inward. "That."

"And you told Lena."

"I told everyone. They said grief creates pattern-seeking. Then they wrote down that I was becoming fixated on source contamination."

Tess said, "That phrase appears later in the notes used to describe Mara as clinically unstable." Elias felt anger arrive with a clean, almost useful shape.

Mara saw it. "Don't make this about how angry you can be for me." He looked at her.

"I'm angry for myself too," she said. "Mum became building material. I became a patient for noticing. You became a customer of the same machinery. There's enough to go around."

Elias turned back to the donor list. Twelve hours of Helen's voice.

He remembered one sentence from the first book: keep the ugly version. Mara's phrase, or so he had believed.

"Mara."

She knew before he asked.

"No," she said.

"Keep the ugly version. Where did you get it?"

"I don't know."

"You said it was yours."

"I said it a lot. That's not the same thing."

Tess sat very still. Elias asked, "Did Mum ever say it?"

Mara looked toward the half-open window.

"That's the problem," she said. "I remember her saying it now."

Tess had kept copies of Mara's earliest emails under three different names because Mara changed accounts whenever she suspected somebody had accessed them. Most were logistical. Train times. Questions about sources. Complaints about adults who used the word resilience when they meant obedience.

One email from 2010 was addressed to Tess but never sent. It sat in a drafts export recovered years later. I keep thinking the problem is not that they can make a false thing. People do that already. The problem is they can make the false thing feel organized. Real memory is messy. It changes angle when you touch it. Their version arrives finished.

Elias read the paragraph twice.

"She was fifteen," Tess said. "I was twenty-one and thought I understood more because I knew how to use a recorder."

Mara, at the window, said, "I was also fifteen and thought knowing one bad thing made every adult an idiot. Let's preserve accuracy." Tess ignored her. "You asked why she didn't tell you about Helen's donor material. There are drafts addressed to you."

Mara turned. "What?" Tess looked surprised. "You don't remember?"

She opened another folder. Elias recognized his old university email address.

The draft began Eli, I need you to listen before you start fixing this. Then it stopped.

Another: Mum's tapes are in the program. Dad gave them. They are using pieces of her in other people's sessions. I know how that sounds. Please don't say I sound sick.

The final sentence took all air out of the room. Mara sat down.

"I never sent that."

"No," Tess said.

"Why?"

Nobody could answer. Elias imagined the fifteen-year-old version of his sister hovering over send, already predicting his response. He wanted to defend nineteen-year-old Elias. He had not known. He would have listened.

Would he? At nineteen he believed evidence came before interpretation. If Mara told him people were

using their dead mother's hands in other people's memories, he might have asked for proof first. He might have told her to sleep. He might have called their father.

Mara watched him reading his own imagined defense.

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your face did."

He closed the draft.

"You were probably right not to send it."

Mara looked startled. The admission hurt more than denial would have.

Tess said nothing. After a while Mara asked, "Can I have a copy?"

"Yes."

"Paper."

Tess printed it. Mara folded the page into quarters and put it in her pocket. No explanation. No ceremony.

Another unsent sentence became part of the case.

Mara met him at a small bakery because she refused to discuss family evidence in the release office if she could avoid it. "Institutions make people speak like minutes from a meeting," she said. "I want cake."

Elias showed her Nia's case on paper, with names removed where possible.

Mara read slowly. "The hand is Mum's?"

"It resembles her. We don't know whether the system sourced it from her."

"Good sentence. Keep saying that one."

"I intend to."

She pushed the pages back. "What do you want from me?"

"Do you recognize the phrase Nia remembers her mother saying?"

He read it aloud.

Don't make me into the good version just because I'm gone.

Mara's expression changed so slightly he might have missed it years earlier.

"Mum said something like that."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Recorded?"

"Maybe."

"To whom?"

"Eli."

He stopped.

She rubbed her forehead. "This is why I hate talking to you about memory. I give you one maybe and you build scaffolding around it."

"I'm asking source questions."

"You are vibrating."

He had no response to that.

Mara tore a piece from her pastry and ate it. "I remember Mum saying, 'Don't make me nicer because I'm dying.' Or maybe 'Don't make me easier.' Something like that. I remember Dad laughing. I remember being in the kitchen. None of those details is independently verified. Happy?"

"No."

"Excellent."

They went through surviving family phrases. Mara remembered Helen using humor to interrupt pity. Elias remembered more practical language. Their overlap was imperfect.

Then Mara said, "There was a tape."

"Which tape?"

"Mum used to record herself when she couldn't sleep. Not the formal journals. Cheap cassettes. She called them insomnia rubbish."

Elias had never seen them.

Gabriel might have.

Mara looked annoyed at her own recollection. "I haven't thought about those in years."

"Why now?"

"Because the phrase made me think of the tape recorder on the fridge. Or because you asked and my brain generated a nice answer. Pick your religion."

They called Gabriel from the bakery. He remembered the cassettes immediately.

"Your mother hid them because she thought they were embarrassing," he said. "There was a box."

"Where?" Elias asked.

"Storage, maybe. After the move."

Mara closed her eyes. "Of course there is a box. There is always a box with this family."

Gabriel added that Helen had labeled some tapes ASTER.

Elias and Mara looked at each other.

The bakery around them continued normally. Milk steamed. Someone dropped a spoon. A child cried because a biscuit broke.

The word Aster connected their mother's private recordings to a research site that should not yet have mattered.

Mara finished the pastry.

"We're not going today."

"Why?"

"Because you have that face."

"What face?"

"The one where evidence becomes more important than food. Finish your coffee."

For once, he did.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mara's Rule

They listened to Helen's surviving home tapes until midnight and found nothing. That should have been reassuring. It was not.

Tess had obtained copies years earlier from Gabriel while investigating Fallow, though she had never heard of the voice journals. The domestic tapes showed birthdays, school concerts, an argument about Christmas lights, Mara at eleven refusing to wear a

paper crown, Elias at fourteen pretending not to dance when he clearly was.

Helen's voice moved through the room with the ordinary authority of someone who had no idea she would become evidence. Put that down.

Your father's asleep. No, we are not getting a rabbit.

Elias, stop teaching her that. Mara, shoes.

She laughed differently than Elias remembered. Higher. Less controlled. At 10:43 p.m., Tess paused a video from 2005.

Helen stood in the garden holding a broken planter. Gabriel was filming.

"We can glue it," he said.

"It'll look awful."

"It already looks awful."

Helen considered the cracked pot and shrugged. "Then leave the crack. At least we'll know which one is ours." Nobody spoke.

Elias replayed the line. Not keep the ugly version.

Not close enough to prove anything. Close enough to bother him.

Mara got up and went to the window. "This is what I hated most."

"The donor library?" Tess asked.

"No. The feeling that every sentence has a parent."

She turned around. "You start checking whether a phrase is really yours. Then whether the way you laugh is yours. Then whether you like a song because you liked it before treatment or because it played during a reconstruction. There is no finish line."

Elias closed the video.

"We need a rule," Mara said.

"For what?"

"For this investigation."

"You're joining it?"

"Don't sound pleased."

"I'm not."

"Liar."

Tess smiled into her tea. Mara took a pen and wrote on the top sheet of a legal pad.

WE DO NOT CORRECT A MEMORY WITHOUT A REASON.

Elias read it.

"Define reason."

"Legal consequence. Medical consequence. Someone's safety. Evidence of deliberate abuse. Not curiosity."

"Truth matters."

"Yes. So does not turning every dinner you ever had into a forensic scene."

"If Morrow reused identifiable material, we need to know the scale."

"Scale, yes. Every individual detail, no."

Elias could already see situations where the rule would fail. Mara saw that too. "You are not allowed to make six exceptions before we leave the room."

"What if a detail is central to someone's identity?"

"Then ask them if they want to know."

"What if they can't know what they would want without knowing what it is?"

"Welcome to consent."

The argument had the comfortable shape of their recent relationship. They could fight now without either of them disappearing afterward. Elias had not realized how much safety there was in being able to irritate someone tomorrow.

Tess tapped the donor list. "There are twelve hours we haven't heard."

"Voice journals," Elias said.

"If they exist," Mara replied.

"The inventory says they did."

"The inventory also says 'bereavement-associated speech' as if Mum was a weather system."

Tess said, "Where would Gabriel have kept them?" Mara looked at Elias.

He sighed. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

"Because you have the box."

The box of family papers Gabriel had given him before Christmas sat beneath Elias's desk at home. He had stopped treating it as evidence after finding the photograph of Mara with an ordinary blue cup. This had felt like progress.

At one in the morning, the three of them were kneeling on his floor undoing that progress. The box contained school reports, utility bills, birthday cards, photographs and several miniDV tapes already digitized. No voice journals.

Mara found an envelope taped to the underside of the cardboard insert.

"That's new."

"You say that as though the box updates itself," Elias said.

She peeled it free. Inside was a brass key and a receipt from a storage facility in Ternmouth dated 2008.

Tess leaned over her shoulder. "Unit number?"

"C-17."

Elias read the address. Ternmouth.

The seaside town from the photograph his father had misremembered. Yellow coat, not red. One of the memories that had taught Elias to tolerate ordinary error.

Mara sat back on her heels.

"Dad rented storage there after Mum died?"

"Apparently."

"Why Ternmouth?"

Elias looked at the old photograph on the top of the box. Helen had loved the place. That much he remembered without needing the picture.

Mara picked up the key.

"We go tomorrow."

"Your rule," Elias said. "Do we have a reason?"

She looked at the donor inventory.

"Someone else's dead mother has Mum's hands."

Then she put the key in her pocket.

"That's enough."

Mara did not leave immediately. She stood beside the kitchen table with the key closed in her fist and watched Elias rewind the tape for a third time. He had stopped

pretending he was looking for anything new. The act had become ritual, a way to postpone the moment when the recording would become fixed in their understanding. Helen's voice moved through the speakers with ordinary irritation, asking somebody off camera to stop leaving wet towels on the radiator. There was no revelation in it. No code. No warning. Only a family sentence that had survived because somebody forgot to erase a cassette.

"This is what I mean," Mara said. "The useful stuff always looks boring before somebody needs it."

Elias glanced at the key in her hand. "And the rule?"

"No reconstruction without a source list I can see. No source list without provenance. No provenance, we walk away."

"Even if it could answer something important?"

Mara looked at him for a long moment. "Especially then."

He understood why she said it. The most dangerous part of Morrow had never been bad output. Bad output could be challenged. The dangerous part was a scene that arrived with enough emotional accuracy to make challenge feel like cruelty. If a dead parent said exactly what a child had wanted to hear for twenty years, technical uncertainty became almost indecent. Elias had seen clients defend a reconstruction because it comforted them, then defend the comfort as if it were evidence.

Mara opened a drawer and put the key beside a roll of tape and two dead batteries. "Also, if either of us

starts saying we know Mum would have wanted something, the other person gets to throw water at us."

"That seems vulnerable to abuse."

"Good."

For a while they worked without talking. Elias made a paper list of every surviving Helen recording, and Mara marked the ones she remembered personally. Their disagreements were immediate. Elias remembered a Christmas tape as 2004. Mara insisted it was 2003 because she had been missing a front tooth. The label said 2005. Gabriel, called for arbitration, said it was probably 2004 and then admitted he had once reused blank cassettes without changing labels.

Mara laughed so hard she had to sit down.

It was the first time that day Elias heard her laugh without anger inside it. He almost wrote that down, then stopped himself. Not everything needed to become evidence simply because he was afraid of losing it.

Near midnight Mara found a cheap plastic case behind the old tapes. Inside was a single brass key on a paper tag. The handwriting belonged to Helen.

ASTER STORAGE.

Mara's face changed. Not fear. Recognition without context.

"Do you remember that?" Elias asked.

"No."

He waited for the old reflex to offer an interpretation. Aster House. Fallow. Morrow. Their mother had been involved before they knew. Any of those stories could fit.

Mara closed the case. "Then we do this properly."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. And if the place is full of haunted dolls, I'm blaming you."

"Why me?"

"You have the face of a man who attracts archives and haunted dolls."

She put the key in her pocket again. This time, when she said, "That's enough," Elias believed she meant the tape rather than the past.

CHAPTER FIVE

Forty-Seven Seconds

The storage facility was closed when they arrived. Mara blamed Elias for checking the address and not the Sunday hours. Elias blamed the website for listing twenty-four-hour access without clarifying that it applied only to existing customers with electronic codes. Tess blamed both of them and found a café across the road.

For forty minutes they sat beneath a framed photograph of a lighthouse while Mara stole chips from Elias's plate and pretended this was not, in any recognizable sense, family archaeology.

At 12:03, the facility manager arrived to deal with a broken gate. He was seventy if he was a day, wore an

orange vest over a cable-knit jumper, and regarded the 2008 paper receipt as an accusation.

"We changed systems in 2014."

"Does the unit still exist?" Elias asked.

"C corridor exists. Seventeen exists. Whether your stuff does is another question."

The brass key opened the old mechanical lock. Inside the unit stood three metal shelves, two collapsed cardboard boxes, a folding chair and a plastic storage crate with GABRIEL VENN written across the lid in black marker.

Mara did not move for several seconds.

"He kept Mum in a box at the seaside," she said.

"That's not what this is."

"I know."

She hated reassurance when she had not asked for it. Elias still offered it too quickly. Tess photographed the exterior of the crate before they touched it. "Chain of custody."

Mara looked at Elias. "She's becoming you."

"She's always been like this."

"Terrifying."

The crate contained notebooks, cassette tapes, miniDV cassettes, a small digital recorder, and a grey envelope marked FALLOW RESEARCH COPY. A second envelope was sealed and addressed in Helen's handwriting.

GABRIEL, IF YOU'RE STILL WORRYING.

Nobody opened that one. Not yet.

Elias lifted the digital recorder. It was an early solid-state model with a cracked battery cover. The batteries had leaked years ago. The facility manager found them an adapter in his office.

The recorder contained fourteen audio files. Thirteen were corrupted or empty.

The fourteenth lasted forty-seven seconds. Helen's voice began in the middle of a sentence.

"...not memory exactly. More like the shape around it. I keep reaching for words and getting the idea of the word first. Gabriel says everybody does that when they're tired. Maybe he's right."

A small laugh. Then paper shifting.

"Mara says I should record the ugly version before I tidy it in my head. That's her phrase. Ugly version. She thinks I edit stories when I tell them. She's right about that too."

Mara gripped the edge of the table. Elias looked at her.

Helen continued.

"If this turns out to be nothing, good. If it isn't, I want them to have the boring parts too. I burned dinner. Elias is sulking because I told him he can't go to Bristol. Mara stole my blue scarf and lied very badly. Gabriel is pretending not to worry. That's today. Keep that."

The recording ended. No one spoke.

Mara pressed stop even though it had already stopped.

"My phrase," she said.

Elias understood. Keep the ugly version had not been Helen's phrase borrowed by Mara.

It had been Mara's phrase preserved by Helen. For several months, Elias had used the sentence as an example of how language might migrate through memory. The new evidence restored authorship, if authorship was the right word for something spoken by a fifteen-year-old and repeated by her mother.

Mara laughed once, unexpectedly.

"I win."

"Against whom?"

"Reality. Briefly. Don't ruin it."

Elias smiled. Then Tess opened the Fallow envelope.

Inside was a donor consent form signed by Gabriel Venn. The date was March 4, 2008.

The form authorized use of Helen's family recordings for bereavement research, gesture modeling and synthetic reconstruction experiments. At the bottom, under OPTIONAL VOICE JOURNALS, Gabriel had checked YES.

Mara's smile disappeared. Attached was a handwritten note from a research coordinator.

Received: 12 audio diaries, 7 home video cassettes, 19 family photographs. One line had been added later in another pen.

High-value donor. Retain full-fidelity features for longitudinal continuity tests. Elias read it twice.

"Full-fidelity," Tess said.

"Meaning they didn't strip identity," Mara replied.

Elias looked at the forty-seven-second recorder. His mother had wanted the boring parts kept.

Fallow had kept more than that. They stayed in the storage unit after finding the recorder because none of them was ready to return the objects to boxes. Dust floated through the strip of fluorescent light near the door. Mara sat on the folding chair. Elias stood over the crate. Tess, unusually respectful of the moment, stopped photographing.

"Mum knew she edited stories," Mara said.

"Most people do."

"She said it like a flaw."

"Maybe she meant style."

Mara rolled the dead batteries between her fingers. "I spent years thinking the goal was to stop editing. Write it down before the brain cleans it. Record everything. Keep first versions."

"It helped."

"It also made me insane about versions."

Elias objected immediately. "You weren't insane."

"Figure of speech. Don't litigate adjectives."

He sat on the floor opposite her.

"I built the same habit later," he said. "Notes. timestamps. canaries in documents."

"Yes. But you got paid for it."

Tess said, "Barely." Mara smiled.

Then she looked at the sealed envelope addressed to Gabriel. "I don't want to open that without him." Elias was surprised. "Why?"

"Because it's addressed to him."

"It may contain relevant research information."

"Still his."

There it was again. The boundary Elias kept discovering after the fact. Relevance did not create entitlement. They catalogued the rest of the crate without opening private letters. One notebook belonged to Helen. Most pages were grocery lists, appointment times and descriptions of headaches. One line read: forgot word for colander, called it pasta basket, Mara laughed, correct response.

Mara read it and covered her mouth.

"Pasta basket."

Elias remembered Helen saying that. Or now he did.

He felt the familiar uncertainty begin. Mara saw it and tapped the page. "Don't ruin it."

"I'm not."

"You are already checking whether your memory predates the sentence."

He closed the notebook.

"Fine."

"Good."

They carried the crate into Tess's car. On the drive back, Mara played the forty-seven-second recording once more through the car speakers. Helen complained about burned dinner. About Elias sulking. About Mara stealing a scarf. About Gabriel worrying.

Ordinary family failure, preserved because a frightened woman decided boring things mattered. When the recording ended, nobody restarted it.

For several miles, they simply drove.

The drive back from the storage facility took them along the river, where old industrial buildings had become expensive flats without losing their soot-dark brick. Mara sat with the forty-seven-second recording on her lap as if it were a physical object. She had refused to upload it to the release authority until they could duplicate it on two separate drives and seal the original card. Elias would once have called that excessive. Now he found it reassuring.

"Do you remember Mum saying any of that?" he asked.

"No. Do you?"

"The thing about Dad buying the wrong washing powder."

Mara turned toward him. "That's your memory?"

"I remember her complaining about the smell."

"She complained about everything that smelled like flowers."

"That narrows it down."

"It should. Dad kept buying lavender because the packet was purple and he thought purple meant sensitive skin."

Elias smiled despite himself. The recording had contained that exact argument. Helen teasing Gabriel for choosing detergent by color, Gabriel defending himself from another room, Mara laughing somewhere near the microphone. Forty-seven seconds of domestic failure, none of it significant except that a phrase embedded in

Nia's reconstruction had appeared there nearly word for word.

They stopped at a service station because Mara wanted chips and Elias had forgotten to eat. Inside, under fluorescent lighting, a television above the coffee machine was showing a panel discussion about Morrow. The subtitles referred to "memory contamination victims" and "synthetic family experiences." A legal analyst used the phrase "mass psychological trespass."

Mara watched for ten seconds and turned away.

"Too soon?" Elias asked.

"Too neat."

He knew what she meant. The public needed nouns. Victim. Contamination. Fraud. Implantation. Each word carried a story about what had happened and who had done it. None captured the mixed reality of people who had received false details inside experiences that might still have helped them survive grief.

At the register, the cashier recognized Mara.

It happened slowly. The woman's eyes moved from Mara's face to the television and back again. She did not say the name. She only asked, "Are you the sister?"

Mara's shoulders stiffened.

Elias stepped forward, but Mara answered first. "I'm buying salt and vinegar chips."

The cashier flushed. "Sorry. I just meant..."

"I know."

Outside, Mara opened the bag before they reached the car. "You were about to do the thing."

"What thing?"

"Move between me and another person like you're six feet tall and useful."

"I'm five eleven."

"Exactly. Fraudulent behavior."

He did not apologize. She did not ask him to. They ate in the parked car while rain began against the windscreen, light enough that neither switched on the wipers.

Mara took out the memory card. "The line in Nia's reconstruction. Mum says it here first. That's enough to establish borrowing?"

"Not by itself. It establishes a source candidate. We need evidence the source entered First Copy before Nia's model was trained."

"So the family recording is not the smoking gun."

"No."

"Good. I hate smoking guns. They make journalists stupid."

"Tess is a journalist."

"Tess is stupid in specialized ways."

Elias drove on. Behind them, the service-station television kept simplifying what had happened. In the car, the original recording remained short, ordinary and stubbornly incomplete. That felt closer to the truth.

Before they left the storage facility, Elias asked the manager for access logs covering the previous six months. The request was ordinary enough that the man looked disappointed. He had clearly expected the famous missing-sister family to ask about secret visitors or broken locks.

"Nobody accessed that unit except the account holder," he said.

"Who is the account holder?"

"Gabriel Venn."

Mara turned. "Dad still pays for this?"

The manager checked. "Annual debit. Never missed."

Gabriel, called from the car park, sounded surprised. He had assumed the storage payment was for old furniture. Helen's tapes had remained because nobody knew enough to discard them and nobody cared enough to inventory them.

"The most secure archive in the story," Mara said after the call, "is Dad forgetting what his standing order is for."

Elias wrote down the storage account history.

Mara saw. "You are documenting the joke?"

"The continuity of possession."

"Of course."

They returned inside to photograph the unit layout before resealing it. The recordings had been packed beneath winter clothes, tax files and a broken lamp. No climate control. No archival sleeves. One cassette case had warped from heat.

The physical disorder mattered. If someone had staged the find, they had done so with years of dust and terrible household organization. Not impossible, but increasingly implausible.

Mara picked up an old scarf from a box and immediately put it down.

"Mum's?" Elias asked.

"Maybe. Or mine. I don't know."

He waited for her to examine it.

She did not.

"Not every object gets a case file," she said.

They sealed the unit and left with only the authorized recordings. The scarf stayed behind, uncertain and unimportant.

That became a kind of relief.

CHAPTER SIX

Family Resemblance

Celia Dain listened to the forty-seven seconds twice and swore only once. For Celia, this counted as emotional collapse.

She occupied a corner office at the release authority despite technically being an outside consultant. Her desk held no photographs, plants or decorative objects. A mug said COMPLIANCE IS A LOVE LANGUAGE, which Elias suspected had been given to her as an insult and adopted out of spite.

"You want cross-subject access," she said.

"We want an audit," Elias replied.

"You always want an audit when you mean a search."

"Lena said you'd like the noun."

"Lena has spent fifteen years underestimating how much I dislike her."

"You helped her at the inquiry."

"Both can be true."

Mara sat beside Elias with the donor consent copy on her lap. She had insisted on attending because the material concerned Helen. Celia had objected because Mara was neither staff nor claimant counsel. Mara had responded by asking whether Celia preferred the conversation happen in a newspaper office.

Mara was now attending. Celia read the line about full-fidelity features. "This notation is older than Morrow's incorporation."

"Which means?" Mara asked.

"Which means I can blame dead governance structures. Unfortunately, some of the people involved are alive, so the pleasure will be limited."

She turned to her terminal.

"What exactly do you want searched?"

Elias gave her the donor code HV-03, the gesture feature associated with Helen's left hand, and the phrase fragments found in Nia's bundle. Celia typed.

Nothing happened for nearly a minute. Then a result count appeared.

742. Mara leaned forward. "Seven hundred and forty-two what?"

"Records containing direct or derived references to HV-03."

"Clients?"

"Records. Could be technical tests, duplicated archives, internal evaluations. Don't catastrophize

before we classify. Elias does enough of that for everyone."

Elias ignored her. Celia narrowed the query to client-facing reconstructions.

Result: 63. The room changed.

Sixty-three people had experienced reconstructions containing material derived from Helen Venn's donor set.

"How many were told?" Mara asked.

Celia searched disclosure fields. Four.

"Four?"

"The other fifty-nine may contain only low-level motion priors. We don't know yet."

"Nia got Mum's actual broken finger."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

Celia looked at her. "Yes. I spent three years cleaning up this company's consent failures. Understanding is not the problem." Elias asked, "Can we see the feature inheritance map?"

"Not without privacy controls."

"Can you see it?"

Celia did not answer immediately. Then she opened another window.

A network diagram filled the screen. At the center sat HV-03. Lines extended into labeled feature clusters: domestic hand motion, maternal correction speech, kitchen task sequencing, grief-associated facial behavior, casual laughter, hair-touch gesture, vocal cadence.

The lines did not end there. They connected to other donor sets.

Then to composite profiles. Then to something called FAMILY RESEMBLANCE LIBRARY v2.

Elias pointed. "What is that?" Celia's face had gone still.

"I don't know."

Mara laughed without humor. "Popular answer today." Celia opened the archive metadata.

Created 2010. Last modified 2016.

Owner: Reconstruction Research Group. Purpose: Cross-donor stabilization for sparse autobiographical scenes.

Elias read the phrase slowly.

"Cross-donor stabilization."

Celia said, "If a reconstruction lacked enough direct evidence, the system could apparently borrow features from demographically or relationally similar donor families."

"Apparently?"

"This predates my role."

Mara stood and walked to the window. "So if somebody needed a mother washing strawberries, it picked pieces of mothers it had seen before."

"Potentially."

"And nobody told the person."

"Potentially."

"Stop saying potentially."

Celia closed the diagram.

"No. Because we do not yet know whether this affected final rendered scenes or only model training. Those are different things legally and technically."

"Not to Nia," Elias said.

Celia looked at him. "Correct. Which is why we verify before we notify sixty-three grieving families that parts of their dead relatives may have come from yours."

The sentence landed badly. Mara sat again.

"Sixty-three," she said.

Celia shook her head. "That's Helen." She reopened the network and zoomed out.

Hundreds of donor codes appeared. Lines crossed between them until the screen resembled cracked glass.

"The library contains four hundred and twelve family donors."

Elias stared. Celia said, "If this propagated the way it looks like it did, Helen is not the story."

Mara's voice was quiet.

"Then what is?"

Celia turned the monitor toward them.

"Everyone borrowed from everyone."

Celia insisted that before anybody used the number sixty-three publicly, they classify exactly what level of transfer each reconstruction contained. She created four categories on a whiteboard.

A: generic learned motion with no identifiable donor trait. B: donor-derived behavior unlikely to be individually identifying.

C: identifiable gesture, speech or object transfer. D: direct donor material presented as subject-specific evidence.

Mara read the categories. "You invented a taxonomy for stealing mothers."

"I invented a taxonomy for not calling every statistical prior theft."

"Less catchy."

Elias stood between them, which had become his informal job whenever Mara and Celia occupied the same room. The first ten cases mostly fell into A and B. A father opened a cupboard using a motion learned from several donor households. A child tied shoes with a generic sequence. No recognizable identity survived.

Case eleven was different. A reconstructed grandmother hummed four notes while peeling potatoes. The melody came from a donor video in which Helen hummed the same fragment.

Mara recognized it immediately.

"Mum did that."

Celia asked, "Is the melody unique?"

"No idea."

Ivo searched public music databases. The four notes were too short to identify.

"Category B," Celia said.

Mara objected. "To me it's C."

"Because you know the donor."

"Exactly."

The room paused. Identifiability depended partly on who was looking.

A stranger might hear four generic notes. A daughter heard her mother. Elias added a note to the taxonomy: SUBJECTIVE IDENTIFIABILITY MAY VARY BY RELATIONSHIP.

Celia stared at it. "That's legally horrible."

"It's factually true."

"Those are often the legally horrible ones."

By case twenty, everyone was tired. Mara had stopped making jokes. Celia had removed her shoes under the table. Ivo was eating dry cereal from a paper cup because the vending machine had betrayed him.

Then case twenty-one showed a reconstructed father saying, "Put your coat on properly, you'll catch your death." Mara laughed.

"Every parent in Britain is a donor now."

Even Celia smiled. The joke mattered because it restored scale. Not every overlap was sinister. Human beings repeated one another constantly. Any audit that treated common culture as proprietary identity would become absurd.

The task was not to prove uniqueness everywhere. It was to identify where Morrow had concealed specific borrowing while presenting the result as personal evidence.

That line remained messy. They kept working.

Celia turned the conference room into a contamination lab by removing everything decorative from the table and covering the remaining surface with paper maps. She had printed source paths because, as

she put it, "People become reckless when arrows on a screen look clean." Each map represented a claimant. Nia. June. Three others who had reported familiar gestures, phrases or room details that did not belong to their families.

Elias stood at one end and traced the routes with a pencil. The lines crossed in places that should not have mattered: a Fallow language set, an early Morrow calibration library, a therapist training archive. None of those proved direct borrowing. They proved opportunity.

"Opportunity is enough for a newspaper," Tess said from the doorway.

Celia did not look up. "Then thank God this is not your newspaper."

"It is not a newspaper."

"Whatever shape your moral panic takes this year."

Tess placed a folder on the table. "I found three families whose released source bundles contain phrases they cannot trace to any direct record. All three were in pilot clinics before 2015."

Celia finally looked at her. "Consent to share?"

"For the existence of the anomaly, yes. Not names."

Mara entered behind Tess carrying sandwiches. "I brought lunch because Elias will otherwise convert caffeine into a personality disorder."

"Already done," Ivo said.

They worked until the paper maps stopped looking like evidence and began looking like weather. Elias had to force himself to step back. His old instinct was to

chase every repeated word. But family speech was repetitive by nature. People said the same things. Parents touched children's faces. Siblings stole food. Grieving people remembered kitchens because kitchens were where families spent time.

The difficult question was not whether two reconstructions resembled each other. It was whether Morrow's internal systems had concealed a causal path while representing the output as personal history.

Celia tapped Nia's map. "We need one impossible transfer."

Mara frowned. "Impossible?"

"Specific enough that coincidence becomes unreasonable. An unusual phrase tied to a dated source. A distinctive physical mistake. Something no model should produce from general priors."

Elias thought of the blue cup from his own false kitchen memory. The glaze had not existed in 2011. That object had exposed the reconstruction because chronology defeated familiarity.

"Objects," he said.

Ivo looked up. "What about them?"

"Language travels easily. Gestures too. Objects are narrower. Find claimant reconstructions containing identifiable household objects that appear in donor footage but not claimant records."

Tess nodded slowly. "A borrowed mug."

"Or wallpaper, toys, furniture, packaging. Anything with a dateable production history."

Mara smiled without humor. "The domestic archaeology of corporate negligence."

For the next two hours Ivo ran image comparisons while Elias manually rejected false positives. A red kettle appeared in four kitchens because millions had been sold. A children's puzzle repeated across three families because it came from a catalogue. A yellow curtain seemed promising until they discovered the pattern had been common in the early 2000s.

Then Ivo stopped.

On one screen was a frame from Nia's reconstruction. Her mother stood beside a sink. On the draining board sat a ceramic sugar bowl shaped like a pear, green leaf for a lid.

On the second screen was Helen Venn in a home video from 2006, reaching past the same absurd pear.

Mara leaned closer. "We had that thing."

"Everyone had ugly fruit ceramics," Elias said automatically.

"No. Look at the chip."

A triangular piece was missing from the pear's left side.

Ivo magnified both images without generating detail. Same location. Same shape.

Celia said nothing for several seconds. Then she drew a circle around Nia's map and wrote one word beside it.

Specific.

The room changed after that. Not triumph. Nobody looked pleased. They had wanted evidence and had

found it. The difference between those two states became harder to ignore every day.

That night the pear sugar bowl became a problem of scale. Ivo found seventeen visually similar ceramic containers in public shopping archives, three with comparable chips, and one exact product catalogue entry from 2002. The Venn bowl was not unique.

"So our specific object is less specific," Celia said.

"Still the same chip geometry in Nia's reconstruction," Elias replied.

"Which could have been generated from the Venn frame after object selection."

Ivo nodded. "Yes. The product itself is common. The damaged instance is not."

They needed to prove the model had access to that exact frame when Nia's reconstruction was created.

The source path was hidden behind a normalized prior. Orpheus might reveal it. Without Orpheus they had circumstantial evidence, not provenance.

Mara looked at the two pear images on screen. "This is ridiculous. We have reached the point where my mother's chipped sugar bowl requires chain of custody."

"The bowl doesn't," Elias said. "The model dependency does."

"Thank you. Much less ridiculous."

Celia ordered a historical storage search while Ivo inspected model hashes. Tess interviewed the manufacturer and discovered the pear design had been sold primarily through regional markets, including the one Helen visited. None of that proved the transfer.

The team became irritable.

By midnight Elias realized why. They all wanted the bowl to be definitive because a physical object was easier to understand than statistical influence. A matching chip felt like a detective story. The real system was messier.

"We may be overinvesting in the object," he said.

Mara pointed at him. "Write down the date."

"Why?"

"Elias Venn voluntarily abandoning a piece of evidence. Historic."

Celia ignored them. "He's right. We keep the bowl as one line of evidence and build the broader dependency case."

They returned to phrase paths, session architecture and donor consent.

At 1:20 a.m., Ivo received an automated archive result.

One legacy backup referenced a Venn home-video frame in a maternal environmental bundle used during Nia's 2022 session.

The frame ID matched the sugar bowl video.

Nobody celebrated.

Mara simply said, "There."

Elias read the hash twice.

Direct path.

The reconstruction had used their family footage.

The bowl was no longer only resemblance. It was transfer.

Celia closed the laptop. "We stop now."

"We have more to trace," Elias said.

"Tomorrow. If we keep going, one of you will make a mistake because you're tired, and then I will have to explain to a court why exhausted people handled protected memory data at two in the morning."

Mara stood. "I love when bureaucracy acts like an adult."

On the way out, Elias looked at the pear image one last time.

The object had mattered.

So had the hours spent proving exactly how much.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Source Unknown

The first rule of contamination analysis was to find a clean control. The second was to admit when there might not be one.

Ivo Chen arrived at the release office with a backpack, two packets of crisps and the expression of a man delighted to have been invited into a disaster that was not technically his responsibility.

"I was told retirement from Morrow would involve less Morrow."

"You work for a company auditing Morrow," Elias said.

"Yes, but spiritually I expected distance."

Ivo had grown his hair longer since leaving. He also wore a wedding ring now, which Elias had noticed three months earlier and forgotten to ask about until Mara scolded him.

They set up in a secure analysis room with no network access except the court archive. Celia provided fifty anonymized reconstruction bundles, stripped of identities but retaining source lineage. Ivo wrote scripts to compare rendered features against donor libraries.

The first match took eleven minutes. Client 18-F had reconstructed a grandmother buttoning a child's coat. The hand motion came seventy-one percent from a donor in Scotland who was not related to the client.

The second involved a father's laugh. The third, a kitchen light fixture.

By evening they had thirty-two probable cross-donor transfers.

"Some of these are harmless," Ivo said.

Mara, who had brought sandwiches and then stayed, looked over his shoulder. "Define harmless."

"A generic reach movement learned from lots of people isn't psychologically meaningful. That's how machine learning works."

"My mother's broken finger is not generic."

"Agreed. That's the line we're trying to find."

Elias watched source weights scroll down the screen.

"The problem is that the line moves depending on the person."

Ivo nodded. "A lamp can be generic until it's the lamp somebody remembers their father fixing the night

before he died." They worked until the station announcements below became infrequent.

At 9:18, Ivo stopped typing.

"That's weird."

Nobody liked that sentence from an engineer.

"What?" Elias asked.

Ivo pointed to a source lineage record. One reconstruction contained a phrase with no donor attribution.

Most generated dialogue had traceable components: direct audio, written text, linguistic model inference, donor prior. This one said SOURCE UNKNOWN.

"Could be corrupted metadata," Elias said.

"Could be."

"What phrase?"

Ivo opened the redacted transcript. A reconstructed father was speaking to his adult daughter in a hospital corridor.

You do not have to remember me correctly to have loved me. Mara stopped eating.

Elias felt an immediate, unpleasant familiarity.

"Have you heard that?" Ivo asked.

"No."

Mara said, "Yes." Everyone turned.

She put the sandwich down.

"Where?" Elias asked.

"Fallow. Lena said something like it once. Not exactly."

"When?"

"After I complained about June's reconstruction. She told me factual error didn't automatically erase emotional truth."

"That's not the same sentence."

"I know."

Ivo searched the phrase across the archive. Seven matches.

Seven unrelated clients had encountered variations of the same line. None had direct source attribution.

Elias looked at the timestamps. The earliest was 2011. The latest 2025.

"Model-generated comfort phrase," Ivo said. "Probably a template embedded in old dialogue priors."

"Then why source unknown?"

"Bad migration."

"You don't believe that."

Ivo sighed. "I believe software is capable of being boring in ways that look sinister." Mara leaned closer to the screen. "Search one more phrase."

"What?"

She hesitated.

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

Elias turned sharply. "Mara."

"We know it's mine. Search it."

Ivo did. The exact phrase returned one record.

Mara's 2011 video. Elias exhaled.

Then Ivo removed the word sick and searched semantic similarity. Fourteen records appeared.

If I leave, don't let them make me ill. If I'm gone, don't believe them when they say I wasn't well.

If I disappear, don't believe the diagnosis. Different clients.

Different years. Different families.

Mara stared at the screen.

"Those could be coincidence," Elias said.

She looked at him. "You don't believe that." He didn't.

Ivo opened the earliest record. 2010.

A year before Mara's recording. A teenage boy in a Fallow trial had reconstructed his mother saying:

If I'm gone, don't let the doctors decide what I meant. Mara sat back.

"Then maybe my sentence wasn't first."

Elias thought of how long one line had defined both their lives. He had finally learned it was real.

Now he had to ask where it came from.

Ivo's clean-control problem followed Elias home. He found himself standing in front of his own bookshelf trying to decide which memory in the room had never passed through a Morrow system, a police interview, a family retelling or one of his notebooks. The answer was probably many of them. Yet the question had made ordinary certainty feel contaminated.

He took down an old paperback from university. A receipt fell from between the pages. October 2011. Aster Cafe. Black coffee and almond biscuit.

He had seen the transaction before, during the investigation into Mara's kitchen memory. This receipt was physical, folded and stained. It should have felt

stronger than database evidence. Instead he noticed that he could not remember putting it in the book.

There was a knock at the door.

Lena stood outside carrying a paper bag. "Mara said you've eaten badly for two days."

"Mara exaggerates."

"She said you had coffee for breakfast and forgot lunch."

"That is technically two things."

Lena walked in without asking and put soup on the counter. She saw the receipt in his hand.

"What are you testing?"

"Nothing."

"You hold evidence differently when you're testing it."

He almost asked how she knew, then remembered how many clinical sessions she had observed years earlier. The thought still created a small pressure behind his ribs.

"Ivo says we need a clean control," Elias said.

"For the technical analysis. Not for your life."

"Convenient distinction."

Lena took off her coat. "Elias, there has never been a clean control for a human memory. Parents tell stories. Photographs change emphasis. People repeat jokes until nobody remembers who started them. Morrow industrialized something that already existed. That does not make the industrial version harmless, but it also does not mean every influence is corruption."

"That's exactly the kind of sentence Rohe would use."

"Rohe would use it to reduce responsibility. I'm using it to stop you from treating influence as annihilation."

He looked back at the receipt. "If I remember Rebecca taking half the biscuit because I saw the transaction record, what is that memory?"

"I don't know."

"Helpful."

"You hired me for accuracy, not morale."

He had not hired her. Neither of them mentioned that.

They ate at the small table near the window. Lena described three claimant cases she had reviewed that afternoon. One woman had recognized a lullaby from her reconstruction as something her real mother had never sung. She still wanted to keep the scene because it helped her speak about a childhood she had otherwise avoided. Another claimant wanted every inferred frame destroyed. A third refused to learn which details were borrowed.

"There won't be one ethical answer," Lena said.

"Institutions hate that."

"People hate it too."

After she left, Elias returned the receipt to the book but changed the page. Not because page number mattered. Because he wanted to know later whether he had moved it. He wrote the new page on paper and immediately became annoyed with himself.

Then he laughed.

A clean control was impossible. But an honest record of uncertainty was not.

He left the receipt where it was and went to bed without checking it again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Letter Box

Gabriel did not answer the door for six minutes because he was in the garden arguing with a fox.

"It keeps digging beneath the shed," he explained when he finally let them in.

Mara looked past him. "Have you considered diplomacy?"

"Have you considered adulthood?"

"Briefly."

Their father had become easier to love after Elias stopped expecting him to supply reliable history. Gabriel remembered emotions with precision and dates as acts of improvisation. He could tell you exactly how frightened Helen had been before a hospital appointment while confidently placing the appointment in a year when the hospital wing had not yet opened.

They sat at his kitchen table with the donor consent form between them. Gabriel read his signature.

"Yes."

"You remember signing it?" Elias asked.

"No. But that's my signature and I remember giving them tapes."

Mara's jaw tightened. "Why?" He looked at her. "Because your mother was dead and somebody told me her recordings could help people remember their families. I was not making sophisticated ethical decisions. I was trying to get through breakfast."

"They used her in other people's memories."

"I know that now."

"Did you know then?"

"No."

Mara slid the high-value donor note toward him. Gabriel read it slowly.

"I never saw this."

Elias believed him.

"What were the voice journals?"

His father looked toward the window. "Helen started recording herself near the end."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"I thought I had."

Mara laughed once. "Of course you did." Gabriel did not react. "She had headaches. Word trouble sometimes. She was frightened of forgetting things. Doctors said migraines. She made recordings because it made her feel in control."

Elias asked, "Where are the other eleven?"

"Fallow had copies. I kept originals."

"Where?"

"Storage."

"We found one recorder. Forty-seven seconds."

Gabriel frowned. "No. There was a box of cassettes."

"Not in Ternmouth."

He got up without explanation and disappeared into the hall. Mara looked at Elias. "Fox ate them."

"Don't."

"I'm coping."

Gabriel returned carrying a wooden letter box with a brass slot in the top. Elias recognized it from childhood. Helen had bought it at a market and used it for household notes nobody wanted to say aloud. Complaints about chores. Requests for money. Once, a drawing Mara made of Gabriel as a pig because he refused to let her sleep at a friend's house.

Gabriel placed it on the table.

"Your mother put things in here near the end. I stopped reading them after she died."

Mara's expression softened despite herself. The box contained old folded notes, receipts and one small envelope labeled FOR G, NOT CHILDREN.

"Excellent privacy practice," Mara said.

Gabriel handed it to Elias. "You're no longer children."

"That isn't how privacy works," Elias said.

"Then don't open it."

Mara took it. Inside was a storage inventory in Helen's handwriting.

VOICE DIARIES: 12 TAPES. MASTER SET WITH GABRIEL.
COPIES FOR RESEARCH IF I AGREE.

Below that:

IF I DON'T AGREE, BURN THE COPIES.

Mara looked at Gabriel.

"Did she agree?"

His face changed.

"I thought she had."

"That's not what I asked."

Gabriel sat down.

"The research coordinator came after she died. He had an unsigned form Helen had discussed with a doctor. He said she intended to participate. I believed him."

"So you signed."

"Yes."

"For her."

"For the estate."

Mara pushed away from the table. Elias said, "Who was the coordinator?"

Gabriel rubbed his forehead.

"I don't remember."

Mara stood by the sink, breathing through her nose. Then Gabriel added, "But I kept his letters."

From the bottom of the wooden box he removed three envelopes bound with an elastic band. The sender's name appeared on the first.

Dr. Adrian Rohe. Gabriel made tea while Mara read Rohe's first letter. He used the old kettle that whistled too loudly and refused every suggestion to replace it. Elias noticed the habit and wondered whether some future model would classify it as PATERNAL OBJECT ATTACHMENT.

He hated himself for the thought. Gabriel set three mugs on the table. "Your mother liked Rohe because he listened."

Mara looked up. "Did he?"

"At first. She had been to doctors who said headaches, stress, migraines, more sleep. Rohe asked her what forgetting felt like. She liked the question."

"He wasn't her neurologist."

"No. Research consultant. Memory specialist, whatever that meant then."

Elias read the second letter. Rohe thanked Gabriel for "continued access to Helen's domestic archive" and wrote that her material was becoming unusually valuable because it contained repeated interactions across many years.

"Did that phrase bother you?" Elias asked.

"Valuable? No. I was pleased."

Gabriel looked ashamed of that now. Mara softened slightly. "Because it meant Mum mattered."

"Yes."

The answer exposed the emotional leverage beneath donor recruitment. Families did not merely consent to research. They were told their dead relatives could continue helping people.

Useful after death. Valuable.

Preserved. Words grief wanted to hear.

Gabriel opened a drawer and removed a faded brochure from Aster House. On the cover, a family watched an old home video together.

PRESERVE THE ORDINARY.

Mara read the slogan. "They really knew what they were doing." Elias expected anger.

Instead she looked sad.

"That's exactly what Mum wanted. Keep the boring parts."

The same desire could lead to radically different systems depending on who controlled the boundary between preservation and invention. Gabriel touched the brochure. "I thought I was giving them the boring parts."

"You were," Mara said. "They decided what else to make from them."

It was the closest she had come to absolving him. Not forgiveness.

A distinction. Gabriel heard it anyway.

Gabriel made tea after the letter box was opened, which was his way of responding to almost every emotional emergency that did not require an ambulance. He used the chipped brown pot Helen had hated and Mara refused to throw away. Elias watched his father rinse cups and realized how many family gestures could be described as patterns if someone wanted to remove the person from them.

"Mum wrote to Rohe more than once," Mara said.

Gabriel kept his back to them. "Apparently."

"You didn't know?"

"I knew she wrote to doctors. She wrote to everyone when she was worried. School governors. The council.

Once a bus company because the driver shut the door on your coat."

Mara smiled faintly. "I remember that."

"You screamed as if you'd been kidnapped by public transport."

The box contained eleven envelopes, three returned unopened, and a carbon copy of a typed letter. Helen's language was formal at first. She thanked Rohe for discussing memory preservation after her diagnosis. She asked whether recordings made for research could ever be used without family permission. She wanted clarification on who owned transformed versions of personal material.

The last question had been underlined twice in pen.

Elias read it again.

"She understood the problem before the system existed," he said.

Gabriel shook his head. "Don't make her prophetic. Helen worried about everything. Most of it never happened."

Mara looked at him. "This did."

"Yes. And if you turn every worry she had into evidence that she foresaw Morrow, you'll make a different fictional version of her."

The correction landed because it was true.

Elias set the letter down.

Gabriel finally joined them at the table. He looked older than he had a year before, though Elias knew age was not an event one could date cleanly. His father had spent months watching the public discover private

fragments of Helen. Every interview request treated him as a surviving witness to a woman becoming a technical resource.

"There is something I didn't tell you," Gabriel said.

Mara's face tightened immediately.

He noticed. "Not a conspiracy. Just cowardice."

"Excellent start," she said.

In 2008, after Helen's health worsened, Gabriel had signed a broad research consent form allowing copies of family recordings to be used for "model development and therapeutic simulation." He had believed it meant testing whether the software could organize videos chronologically. Rohe had described the work as building a family archive Helen could leave behind.

"Did Mum sign?" Elias asked.

"Some forms. Not that one. She was in hospital that week."

Mara stared at him. "You signed for all of us?"

"I signed as owner of the tapes."

"You didn't own my face."

Gabriel flinched.

Elias almost intervened, then stopped. Protecting his father from Mara's anger would only repeat an old family pattern.

Gabriel nodded. "No. I didn't."

That answer changed the room. Mara had arrived prepared to fight justification. Admission left her with nowhere easy to put the anger.

She stood and walked to the sink. For several minutes she washed already clean teaspoons.

When she returned, she placed one envelope in front of Gabriel. It was addressed in Helen's handwriting but never opened.

"Keep that one," Mara said.

"Why?"

"Because not everything has to become evidence just because we found it."

Gabriel put the envelope in his pocket without reading the front again. The gesture was awkward, almost childlike. Elias understood then what Mara had meant earlier. Distinction was not absolution. Sometimes it was simply the first space in which a relationship could continue.

CHAPTER NINE

Aster House

Rohe's letters were careful enough to survive a lawsuit and warm enough to persuade a grieving man. Dear Mr. Venn,

Helen's recordings may allow us to build methods that preserve ordinary family memory rather than only exceptional moments. The value of a person's life is often in habits too small to document deliberately.

Mara read the paragraph aloud twice.

"He knew exactly what he was selling."

Gabriel remained at the table. "I liked him."

"Of course you did."

"Mara."

"No, Dad. You don't get to make your grief a solvent for every decision."

Gabriel looked at her for a long time. "And you don't get to pretend I wasn't twenty-seven years from knowing what you know now." The room went quiet.

Elias expected Mara to leave. Instead she sat down.

"Fair," she said.

Gabriel nodded once. The second letter mentioned a research site called Aster House.

Elias knew the name because years later Mara had used Aster as an alias. He looked at her.

She saw it. "Yes. That's where I got it."

"You never told me."

"We are discovering a theme."

Aster House had been a private residence outside Dunley converted into a small bereavement research center before Fallow opened its main clinic. Helen had never been treated there, but her donor materials had.

The building still existed. By late afternoon Elias, Mara and Tess were standing in front of a red-brick house with boarded lower windows and a FOR LEASE sign tilted in the garden.

Tess had obtained permission from the property owner, a solicitor who sounded relieved someone might finally tell him why former patients occasionally came to photograph the place.

Inside, dust softened everything. The ground floor contained a reception room, two offices and a kitchen. Upstairs were three small clinical rooms.

Mara stopped in the doorway of the second.

"I remember this."

Elias said nothing. She walked inside.

The room was empty except for a metal radiator and a strip of faded wallpaper. Mara touched the wall near the window.

"There was a couch there. Blue. Lena sat here."

"You were treated at Fallow, not here."

"I know."

Tess watched her. "Could you have visited?"

"I don't remember."

Elias hated the immediate urge to search for records. Mara's rule stopped him from reaching for his phone. They continued upstairs.

In the attic, beneath collapsed insulation, Tess found a row of old acoustic panels nailed over a section of wall. One had come loose. Behind it was a narrow storage cavity.

Inside were empty equipment cases and a stack of laminated cards. Each card described an emotional target.

HOME SAFETY.

PARENTAL WARMTH.

GRIEF ACCEPTANCE.

SIBLING TRUST.

SELF-FORGIVENESS.

Mara picked up the last one. On the reverse were dialogue prompts.

I knew you were trying. You did what you could.

You don't have to carry this for me. Elias felt a cold recognition.

Variations of those sentences appeared constantly in Morrow reconstructions. Not because dead people had said them.

Because somebody, years earlier, had decided grieving people needed to hear them. Tess photographed each card.

Mara took another from the pile.

IDENTITY STABILITY.

On the reverse: Don't let them tell you who you were.

Elias looked at her. She looked back.

The phrase was not hers. Not exactly.

But it was close enough that fifteen years seemed to rearrange themselves around it. At the bottom of the card, in small print, was a project label.

ASTER HOUSE LANGUAGE SET, REVISION 3.

Dated 2008. Three years before Mara disappeared.

Aster House had once been a private residence and later an outpatient research site. By the time Elias, Mara and Tess arrived, it belonged to a small architectural firm whose receptionist became noticeably less enthusiastic about helping when Tess explained why they were there.

"We don't have records from before the renovation," the woman said. "And we don't want cameras."

"Neither do I," Elias replied.

Mara glanced at him. "Possibly the first useful thing about your personality."

They were allowed fifteen minutes in the basement after Tess produced a letter from the release authority. The building smelled of plaster dust and coffee. Where clinical rooms had once been, designers now argued over flooring samples. Nothing looked preserved enough to satisfy the part of Elias that still wanted physical places to confess.

The basement archive consisted of metal shelves and boxes left by previous owners because nobody had decided whose problem they were. Tess wore gloves. Mara refused them until Tess pointed out mold.

"Fine. I respect fungus more than institutions."

They found payroll lists, maintenance invoices and a set of training binders. Most were administrative. Elias forced himself to read them anyway. Important evidence often survived because it looked too dull to destroy.

In a binder marked CLIENT COMMUNICATION, Mara found a sheet titled Emotional Continuity Phrases. It contained examples of language therapists could use when a reconstruction had uncertain dialogue.

I'm here.

You can tell me.

We don't have to fix it tonight.

I know you tried.

The phrases were not sinister. That made them worse.

"These are therapeutic prompts," Tess said.

"They're generic," Elias replied.

Mara turned the page. "Then why are they tagged by donor family?"

Columns listed VENN, SAYE, CALDER, MERCER and others. Beside each phrase was a familiarity score.

Elias felt the architecture of the system become clearer. Aster House had not only collected what families said. It had measured which forms of reassurance felt credible when transferred.

"They were testing emotional portability," he said.

Tess photographed the page under authority protocol. "That phrase is going in my article."

"No," Mara said.

"Why?"

"Because it sounds clever. Clever makes people think we understand it more than we do."

Tess considered this and lowered the camera. "Annoyingly fair."

At the bottom of the binder they found the language set referenced on Rohe's letters. Revision 3, 2008. The date mattered because it placed formal cross-family language testing before Mara's disappearance and before the public founding of Morrow.

Elias turned to the first page.

A paragraph explained that participants often rejected technically accurate reconstructions when dialogue felt "relationally implausible." The proposed

solution was to borrow high-acceptance interaction patterns from donor families with similar structures.

Similar structures.

Brother and sister.

Widowed father and daughter.

Mother and adolescent child.

Tess leaned against a shelf. "They turned family roles into templates."

Mara read further. "No. They turned comfort into a compatibility problem."

Elias looked at the room around them, now full of architects' discarded samples. Aster House had not contained a machine deciding to deceive anyone. It had contained researchers making small, defensible decisions. A phrase that felt wrong could distress a patient. A borrowed phrase that felt right improved the session. Measure the improvement. Keep the phrase. Build a library. Repeat.

By the time the process became horrifying, every individual step had probably looked practical.

On the way out, Mara stopped beside the former staircase and touched nothing.

"Do you remember coming here?" Elias asked.

"I remember a staircase."

"This one?"

She looked at it, then at him. "I'm not answering that anymore."

He nodded.

It was not avoidance. It was discipline.

They returned to Aster House after the Pattern Library leak made the basement records legally urgent. This time the architectural firm had closed the floor and sent everyone home. Police tape across the archive door gave the building a drama it had lacked on the first visit.

Mara disliked it immediately. "Now it looks important."

"It is important," Tess said.

"That's not what I mean."

Elias did.

The first visit had been dust, binders and people complaining about mold. Now every box looked like evidence because authority had declared it so. The change in atmosphere did not alter the paper inside.

Investigators found a second set of training binders in a locked cabinet. These contained therapist feedback forms from 2008 to 2010. Many praised the use of relational priors because sessions felt "less mechanical" and patients stayed engaged longer.

One therapist wrote: direct-source-only dialogue often feels emotionally wrong even when factually supported; composite phrasing produces better continuity.

Another wrote: recommend hiding low-confidence flags during active scene because patients fixate on them and lose therapeutic immersion.

Mara read that twice. "There. That's the entire company in two comments."

"Not the entire company," Elias said.

She pointed at him. "Quota."

He almost smiled.

The cabinet also contained participant feedback. A woman complained that her reconstructed father sounded "too kind." A teenager said his mother in the scene apologized more than she ever had in life. Another client wrote that the generated version felt more truthful than literal recordings because it captured "what she meant."

That sentence unsettled Elias.

What she meant.

The system's authority had expanded from reconstructing events to interpreting people.

"This is where they crossed it," he said.

Lena, reading over his shoulder, shook her head. "No single crossing. Therapists do interpretation constantly. Families do too. The mistake was turning interpretation into generated evidence without keeping the boundary visible."

Mara looked at her. "That's worse."

"Yes."

In the final box they found a training exercise built around Helen's recordings. Trainees were asked to choose which generated replies "felt most Helen-consistent" after watching twenty minutes of family video.

A group of strangers had been trained to judge what their mother would say.

Mara left the room.

Elias found her upstairs near the reception desk.

"I know it's old," she said before he spoke. "I know nobody in that binder was trying to steal her. I still hate them."

"You can."

"Thank you, therapist."

"I learned from Lena."

"Then stop immediately."

She looked through the glass doors at the street. "It's one thing to know data was used. It's another to see people practicing being experts on her."

Elias understood. His own fifteen years of certainty about Mara had done something similar.

"I did that to you," he said.

Mara turned. "Different scale. Same family habit."

She did not soften it.

He was grateful.

CHAPTER TEN

First Copy

The question was no longer whether language had leaked between people. The question was whether anyone at Fallow had considered that leakage a feature.

Ivo scanned the Aster House cards and compared them to fourteen thousand reconstructed dialogue segments in the court archive. The secure analysis room filled with matches.

Not exact copies. Variants. I knew you were trying became I always knew you meant well.

You did what you could became You did everything you could have done. Don't let them tell you who you were became Don't let anyone decide what I was for you.

The language had been softened, personalized and fitted to source-specific speech patterns. Clients experienced it in the voices of dead parents, spouses, siblings and children.

"This isn't generation," Ivo said. "It's conditioning."

Elias looked at him. "Explain."

"The model had target meanings. It wasn't told to repeat the sentence. It was rewarded when the reconstructed dialogue landed near a therapeutic intention. The actual wording could vary."

Mara sat on the table with her arms folded. "So the machine didn't make Mum say a script. It made everyone's dead relatives improvise toward the same emotional destination."

"Yes."

"That's worse."

Ivo nodded. "I think so too." Celia had joined them reluctantly. She stood by the door reading the preliminary report with the expression of someone imagining twelve kinds of litigation.

"We need proof this reached production systems," she said.

"The matches are in production reconstructions," Elias replied.

"Matches demonstrate similarity. They do not demonstrate causal lineage."

Mara groaned. "I want one conversation where nobody says causal lineage."

"Then stop investigating a causal lineage problem."

Ivo pulled up the earliest surviving model documentation. ASTER LANGUAGE TARGETS were referenced in Fallow v0.8.

Then Fallow v1.1. Then a migration package into MORROW SEED.

Then nothing. The link disappeared in 2013.

"Maybe they removed it," Celia said.

"Or renamed it," Ivo replied.

He searched internal code comments preserved in old repositories. One result appeared.

// preserve first-copy priors for backward continuity
Elias leaned closer. "First copy?"

Ivo searched the term. A technical document opened.

FIRST COPY referred to the earliest complete synthetic family model built from donor sets before any client-specific reconstruction. It contained composite parents, siblings, domestic spaces and conversational intentions. Researchers used it to test whether the engine could create a coherent autobiographical scene from minimal data.

The family did not exist. It was assembled from pieces of hundreds of real people.

Helen's hands. Someone else's kitchen.

Another person's laugh. Therapeutic dialogue targets.

Mara read silently.

"What happened to it?"

Ivo scrolled to deployment history. The First Copy model was never released as a client.

It was used as a prior in every Fallow reconstruction from 2009 to 2012. Elias felt the scale before he understood it.

Mara said, "Every reconstruction?"

"That's what this says."

"Mine?"

Ivo did not answer. He searched Mara's legacy session IDs.

The dependency tree appeared.

FALLOW SUBJECT MV-17.

Base prior: FIRST COPY v4. Mara stood very still.

Elias remembered the question that had defined the first book: if a person can remember something that never happened, who created the memory?

This was different. Mara's memories were not simply false.

They might contain pieces of strangers who had once been real. Ivo opened the First Copy donor map.

A warning filled the screen.

MODEL ARCHIVE INCOMPLETE.

Then, beneath it: Primary relational donor cluster: VENN FAMILY.

Elias read the words once. Mara read them twice.

Celia sat down. Their family had not merely been used by the system.

Their family had been the system's first example of what a family looked like. The primary Venn cluster contained a relational map more detailed than any of them expected. It did not simply say mother, father, son, daughter. It encoded probabilities.

When Mara became distressed, Helen was likely to offer practical reassurance rather than physical affection. When Elias became angry, Gabriel was likely to challenge him directly, increasing withdrawal.

When Gabriel became anxious, he interrupted. When Helen became anxious, she organized tasks.

When Mara wanted to escape discomfort, she joked. Mara read the list and said, "Rude."

"Accurate?" Ivo asked.

"Ruder."

Elias found himself reading his own pattern repeatedly. WITHDRAWAL FOLLOWING CHALLENGE. He remembered leaving rooms. He remembered not leaving others. The model did not describe a destiny. It described likelihood from recorded examples.

That was how it became dangerous when rendered as personality. A probability could be experienced as essence.

Ivo opened the First Copy simulator but did not run it. "This is why it survived so long. Generic models could make a plausible room. First Copy could make people respond to each other."

"Using us," Mara said.

"Using everyone in the donor cluster. You were weighted heavily because the dataset had a lot of repeated family interaction."

Elias stared at a diagram showing VENN FAMILY contributions in thick lines.

"Could First Copy generate an entirely synthetic event?"

"Yes."

"And make it feel relationally familiar."

"That was the point."

Mara walked to the window. "Do not run it." Nobody had suggested running it.

Her reaction told Elias she had imagined the same thing he had: a synthetic family dinner with Helen alive, Gabriel younger, Mara seventeen, himself nineteen. No event required. No source moment. Just a statistically plausible Venn evening assembled from patterns.

A machine capable of generating the family they might have been. The temptation was immediate and repulsive.

Ivo closed the simulator.

"Deleted from local cache," he said.

Mara nodded. The button had not been pressed.

That became its own kind of evidence.

They did not press ACCEPT AS BASELINE. Instead Ivo cloned the interface into a sandbox and disabled every write function before anyone touched it. He insisted on showing Elias the network diagram twice.

"Nothing in. Nothing out. If you somehow awaken an evil algorithm, it will have to ruin civilization through this laptop's speakers."

Mara sat beside him. "Can it play podcasts? Because that may be enough."

First Copy looked embarrassingly primitive. No immersive room. No realistic faces. The early interface displayed text, rough audio and low-resolution image composites. Yet beneath the crude design was the same logic that later systems would hide more elegantly.

A therapist selected a family role. Mother. Father. Sibling. Partner. Then chose emotional context. Grief. Conflict. Reconciliation. Uncertainty. The system suggested interaction patterns ranked by acceptance across prior participants.

Elias selected SIBLING and CONFLICT without running a generation.

A list appeared.

Practical repair after argument.

Humor deflection.

Food offering.

Object exchange.

Delayed apology.

"That's us," Mara said.

"It's millions of siblings."

"Both can be true."

Ivo opened the metadata. Each pattern drew from dozens of donor fragments. Some were anonymous. Others carried family identifiers.

VENN appeared repeatedly.

Not because the Venn family was uniquely loving or psychologically useful. The notes suggested something more mundane. Helen and Gabriel had recorded unusually large amounts of domestic life, first casually and later because Helen wanted to leave material for her children. The abundance made their family statistically valuable.

"We were convenient," Mara said.

The word seemed to hurt more than special would have.

Elias found a testing memo. Early participants had been exposed to two versions of the same reconstructed scene. One used only direct family evidence and marked gaps openly. The other used cross-family patterns to create smoother interaction. Participants preferred the second version by a wide margin.

The researchers called this increased continuity acceptance.

Mara read the percentage. "Seventy-eight."

"Small sample," Ivo said.

"Still seventy-eight people out of a hundred choosing the nicer lie."

"Not necessarily lie," Elias said. "The interaction could have happened."

Mara looked at him. "Listen to yourself."

He did.

That was the problem. Plausibility had always sounded reasonable when described one detail at a time.

They tested the interface with a dummy dataset created by Ivo. No real family material. Two synthetic

siblings, one argument, one missing section. First Copy suggested a reconciliation in which one sibling slid a bowl of cereal across the table rather than apologizing.

Mara laughed softly. "You did that once."

"When?"

"After you broke my headphones."

Elias could almost see it. Kitchen table. Cereal bowl. Mara refusing to look at him.

He checked the dummy dataset.

No such detail existed.

"You see?" Ivo said. "Common behavior can feel personal because common behavior is how families work."

Mara's smile disappeared. "And if the bowl had our stupid pear sugar pot beside it?"

No one answered.

First Copy's danger was not that every borrowed detail was unique. It was that generic familiarity could create trust long enough for specific borrowed material to pass unnoticed.

Elias closed the sandbox.

"We need the donor map," he said.

Ivo nodded toward a locked dependency table. "That will be consent architecture."

Mara stood. "Then let's find out what our parents agreed to on behalf of people who couldn't consent because they were children."

The interface remained open behind them, its unpressed button waiting patiently for an agreement nobody intended to give.

The First Copy sandbox produced one more discovery before they shut it down. A hidden analyst view allowed engineers to see how often users corrected suggested relational behavior. One column was labeled RESISTANCE.

Mara read the word aloud. "Resistance to what? Being wrong?"

Ivo opened the documentation. Resistance meant frequency of user corrections that disrupted narrative continuity.

"So correcting the machine is resistance," Mara said.

"In that metric, yes."

"And reducing resistance was good?"

"For session completion."

The word had transformed disagreement into friction. Elias thought of clinical notes describing Mara as resistant when she challenged memory inconsistencies. The same conceptual move existed in software and psychology: define the desired path, then label deviation as a problem.

Lena later confirmed that therapists had been encouraged to distinguish productive correction from perseverative correction. The categories were clinically defensible in some contexts and dangerously subjective in others.

"If a patient keeps saying the wallpaper is wrong," Mara said, "at what point do you decide they're perseverating rather than noticing the wallpaper is wrong?"

Lena answered, "That is exactly the question the protocol failed to protect well enough."

Ivo removed the RESISTANCE column from the proposed modern audit tool.

"Don't delete history," Elias said.

"I'm not. I'm removing it from the new interface. Historical copy stays."

Mara smiled. "Look at us, arguing correctly about deletion."

They renamed the modern field USER CORRECTIONS and separated it completely from treatment success.

One word would not repair the past.

But words shaped what institutions noticed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Consent Map

Gabriel read the phrase PRIMARY RELATIONAL DONOR CLUSTER without blinking. Then he asked Elias what relational meant.

Mara got up from the table and left the room. Gabriel watched her go. "Was that a stupid question?"

"No."

"It felt like one."

Elias closed the laptop. They were in Gabriel's kitchen again because no secure office could make this conversation less personal. Outside, the fox had

overturned a planter and left soil across the patio. Gabriel had not noticed.

"It means the system used our family material to learn how family members behaved toward each other," Elias said. "Not only what hands looked like or how people moved in a kitchen. Relationships."

Gabriel stared at the closed laptop. "From the tapes I gave them."

"Partly."

"And Mara's therapy."

"Possibly."

"And Helen's recordings."

"Yes."

Gabriel rubbed both palms across his face. "I signed one form."

"The consent form was broad."

"I didn't understand it."

"Most people wouldn't have."

"Would you?"

The question irritated Elias because he did not know. He remembered himself at nineteen believing a police statement could fix reality if he gave enough detail. At twenty-six he had signed a Morrow consent that eventually allowed researchers to alter how he accessed his own memories. The form had been technically informative. He had still misunderstood what agreement would feel like afterward.

"Maybe not," he said.

Gabriel nodded as though Elias had given him something useful. Mara returned carrying the wooden letter box.

"I found another paper."

She placed it between them. It was not a consent form. It was a diagram.

Helen's handwriting labeled four circles: ME, GABRIEL, ELIAS, MARA. Lines between them carried notes. Gabriel interrupts when afraid.

Elias goes quiet when angry, then says something precise enough to hurt. Mara makes jokes when she wants to leave.

I tidy stories afterward. Elias read his line twice.

"Where was this?"

"Behind the false bottom."

"The box has a false bottom?"

"Apparently Mum distrusted all of us."

Gabriel smiled weakly. "Healthy instinct." At the bottom Helen had written:

FOR THE MEMORY STUDY. RELATIONSHIP MAP, NOT
DIAGNOSIS.

Elias looked at Gabriel.

"She did know about some research."

"I told you she discussed it."

Mara tapped the last phrase. "Relationship map." The same concept as First Copy.

Helen had voluntarily described how her family behaved. What she had not consented to, according to

every paper they had, was having that map transformed into a reusable emotional template for strangers.

Mara sat opposite Gabriel. "Did Rohe interview Mum?"

"Once. Maybe twice."

"At home?"

"The first time."

"Was I there?"

Gabriel frowned. "I don't think so."

"Was Elias?"

"He was at school."

Elias asked, "Did Rohe record it?"

"Probably. Everyone recorded everything. It was research."

Mara gave him a tired look. "That's not a law of nature." The doorbell rang.

No one moved. It rang again.

Gabriel went to answer it and returned with a courier envelope requiring a signature. The recipient was Elias.

There was no sender. Inside was a single photocopied page from a Fallow document.

FIRST COPY RELATIONAL VALIDATION, SESSION 14.

Under SUBJECT FAMILY it read VENN, but the participant list contained five people. Helen.

Gabriel. Elias.

Mara. And a fifth name.

JUNE SAYE.

Mara stopped breathing for a moment.

"June," Elias said.

The girl from Fallow. The one whose reconstruction had first carried Helen's mannerisms. Mara took the page.

At the bottom, in handwritten notes, someone had written: Cross-family familiarity accepted by both adolescent subjects after 3 exposures.

No distress observed. Proceed.

The consent map was worse in paper form because paper made the shortcuts visible. Boxes represented people. Lines represented authority. Some lines were solid, some dotted, some annotated with legal language that seemed designed to discourage anyone from following them to a conclusion.

Gabriel sat at the table with both hands flat beside his tea.

"I signed this," he said.

"One part," Elias replied.

"It led to the rest."

Mara returned from the garden after ten minutes and took the chair farthest from him. She did not look angry anymore. Elias preferred the anger.

Celia had joined by encrypted call. She explained that research consent in the late 2000s had treated household media as property more often than as relational data. If Gabriel owned the tapes, he could grant access to copies. Whether that authorization legitimately covered biometric modeling of children appearing in those tapes was another question.

"Another question meaning no," Mara said.

"Another question meaning no court had answered it clearly at the time."

"Law is adorable when it arrives after harm."

Gabriel pushed the map away. "I thought I was helping Helen leave something for you."

Mara's reply came quickly. "You were. And you also gave them material. Both happened."

Elias watched his father absorb the sentence. The family had become practiced at holding two uncomfortable facts together. It did not make the facts easier.

Ivo enlarged a handwritten note from one of the early adolescent studies. Cross-family familiarity accepted by both adolescent subjects after three exposures. No distress observed. Proceed.

"Who were the subjects?" Elias asked.

Celia checked the sealed index. "One Venn. One Saye."

Mara looked up. "Me?"

"The Venn code corresponds to you."

June Saye's name remained sealed pending direct consent, but by then they already knew enough to suspect her.

Mara stood so abruptly that the chair struck the wall. "I was fourteen."

"Yes."

"What does accepted mean?"

No one had an answer from the form.

They found session notes instead. Mara had been shown a reconstructed scene involving Helen. After the third exposure, she stopped correcting an unfamiliar phrase and later repeated it during a free-recall interview. The researcher marked this as successful relational stabilization.

Elias felt sick.

Mara read the note herself. "What phrase?"

The source was redacted because it belonged to another donor family.

Celia said they could request judicial access.

"No," Mara replied.

Everyone looked at her.

"If the phrase belongs to June or whoever, I don't get to break her privacy because something was done to me. Ask her."

It was so consistent with Mara's rules that Elias should have expected it. He had not. A year earlier he might have argued that knowing the phrase was essential. Now he recognized the cost hidden inside essential.

Gabriel spoke quietly. "Did I take you to those sessions?"

Mara did not answer at first.

"Sometimes. I remember Lena too. I remember a man with terrible breath. I remember a room with orange chairs. I don't know which of those are right."

Gabriel looked down.

Mara's voice softened without becoming kind. "Dad, don't ask me to tell you whether you were good or bad in every memory. I can't do that for you."

He nodded.

The consent map remained on the screen. It was supposed to show who had authorized what. Instead it showed how easily institutions converted family relationships into legal permissions. Parent became owner. Recording became asset. Participation became exposure. Acceptance became safety.

Elias wrote one sentence in his notebook and then crossed it out because it sounded too clean.

Consent had not failed at one moment. It had been diluted through translation.

He left the crossed-out line visible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

June Saye

June Saye had not disappeared. She had become an accountant in Leeds. This was so ordinary that Elias distrusted it for approximately four seconds before recognizing the habit and stopping.

Tess found a public business filing. Celia found a claimant record in the release authority. Mara found a photograph of June at a charity run and said she looked

exactly like someone who would have hated being found through a charity run photograph.

They did not contact her immediately. Mara insisted.

"I spent years being the interesting missing girl. We ask before we turn her into evidence."

Celia sent a formal notice through the claimant portal explaining that a legacy record might contain her information and asking whether she consented to contact.

June replied twelve minutes later.

YES. PHONE ME BEFORE I CHANGE MY MIND.

The video call took place that afternoon. June appeared in a bright kitchen with a toddler's drawings taped behind her. She was thirty-one, wore large glasses and began by saying, "If this is about my dad's reconstruction, I already know it was rubbish."

Mara sat beside Elias but slightly out of frame until June asked who else was present.

"Mara Venn."

June's face emptied. For a second nobody spoke.

Then June laughed.

"You are alive."

Mara's shoulders tightened. "Yes."

"I thought you were."

"Why?"

June leaned back. "Because you told me you were leaving." Mara stared.

"When?"

"Aster House."

Elias felt the room shift. Mara said, "I don't remember being there with you."

"I do."

"That doesn't make it true."

June's smile disappeared. "Right. Of course. We get to say that now." She went to a cupboard and returned with a small notebook. "I wrote things down after sessions because you told me to. You said written notes weren't magic but at least they embarrassed future versions of yourself."

Elias looked at Mara.

"That sounds like you."

"Unfortunately."

June opened the notebook.

"March 16, 2010. Mara says the rooms are built from other people. She says don't trust anything that arrives too clean. She says she's going to find out where the source families come from."

Mara closed her eyes.

"I was fifteen."

"So was I."

"Do you remember Session Fourteen?"

June's face changed.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"They put us in the same reconstruction."

Celia, listening from another terminal, said, "Together?"

"Not physically. We were in separate immersion rooms. They gave us a scene with both our families."

"Why?"

"They wanted to see whether familiar behavior could make unfamiliar people feel known."

Elias felt anger become almost mathematical.

"What scene?"

June looked at Mara rather than him. "Breakfast. Your mum was there. My dad was there. Your brother was there, except he didn't look exactly like Elias. More like a guess."

Mara whispered, "I remember a breakfast."

"We all do," June said. "That's why it worked."

She described the scene. A kitchen with yellow curtains. Helen making toast. June's father reading a newspaper. Mara and June arguing about jam. A boy at the table telling them both to shut up.

Elias had never experienced that reconstruction. Yet as June spoke, he could see the yellow curtains.

He stopped her.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Continue."

But the image remained. Yellow curtains.

A red cereal bowl. His mother turning toward the toaster.

He knew enough now not to call it memory. June said, "After three sessions, they asked us to rate how familiar everybody felt. I gave your mum eight out of ten. I'd never met her. She'd been dead three years."

Mara's hand closed around the edge of the table.

"And me?"

June smiled sadly. "Ten."

"We knew each other."

"Yes. But here's the weird part. They asked me which things I remembered from before the experiment. I couldn't tell."

She turned a page.

"I wrote: Mara says that is the point."

No one said anything. Then June added, "There's something else. After you disappeared, someone came to my house."

"Who?" Elias asked.

"Adrian Rohe. He asked for my notebooks. I said I'd lost them."

"Why?"

"Because Mara told me never to give anyone the first copy."

Elias looked at the notebook in her hands. First Copy.

The phrase had existed among the girls before it became a technical artifact in Morrow's archive, or perhaps because they had overheard it there.

June lifted the notebook toward the camera.

"I still have mine."

June agreed to meet Mara in person for the first time since adolescence. They chose a bakery halfway between Leeds and Dunley. Elias did not attend, which required more self-control than he wanted credit for.

Mara told him about it afterward. June had arrived early and recognized her before Mara entered the door. They hugged awkwardly. Then both laughed because neither knew whether the hug came from actual

friendship, reconstructed familiarity, or twenty years of imagining the other.

"Did that bother you?" Elias asked.

"For about five seconds. Then she stepped on my foot. That felt authentic."

They spent three hours comparing what they remembered of Aster House. Some details matched. Some contradicted. June remembered blue chairs in the waiting room. Mara remembered green. June remembered Lena wearing glasses. Lena did not wear glasses then, according to photographs. Mara remembered a vending machine that building plans showed was probably there.

The old instinct would have been to resolve each disagreement. They deliberately did not.

Instead they marked memories with three symbols in June's notebook. A circle for both remember.

A triangle for one remembers. A question mark for source evidence.

"We made the least scientific study in history," Mara said.

"How did it feel?"

"Good. Terrible. Funny."

June remembered Mara telling her that if she ever escaped Fallow, she would go somewhere with no cameras and become a florist. Mara had no memory of wanting to be a florist.

"Would you have been good at it?" Elias asked.

"No. Plants sense contempt."

June gave her a copy of the notebook and kept the original. Before leaving, they agreed on one thing without checking evidence. They had been friends.

Maybe not in the stable, lifelong sense First Copy later modeled. Maybe not family.

But enough. Mara said, "I don't need a confidence score for that."

Elias did not argue.

June agreed to meet a second time, but only in a place she chose. That turned out to be a cafe inside a garden center outside Leeds, where elderly couples argued about compost and nobody looked twice at a sealed evidence envelope beside a plate of scones.

"I like this place," June said. "It has no interest in trauma unless the hydrangeas die."

Mara immediately liked her.

Elias could tell because Mara became rudier.

"Your tea is criminally weak."

June looked into the cup. "I asked for weak."

"Then you're complicit."

The conversation stayed deliberately ordinary for fifteen minutes. June talked about her accounting practice. Mara complained about train seats. Elias listened and understood that both women were controlling the pace in ways no clinical protocol could quantify.

Eventually June opened the notebook they had couriered back to her after scanning. On one page was a childhood account of a reconstructed afternoon with her

father. A sentence had been underlined years later in different ink.

I don't need you to be brave for me.

"That isn't something my father said," June told them. "I know because he was constitutionally incapable of asking anyone not to be brave. He thought emotional repression was a national resource."

Mara smiled.

"The line came from my session?" she asked.

June shook her head. "We don't know yet. Celia requested the sealed donor link after I consented."

Her phone buzzed. She looked at the message and pushed the device toward them.

AUTHORIZED CROSS-DONOR SOURCE: VENN FAMILY AUDIO, H. VENN.

June exhaled through her nose.

Elias felt the old impulse to locate the original tape immediately. Mara did not move.

"Do you want to hear it?" she asked.

June stared at the notification. "Eventually. Not today."

"Okay."

That was all.

Elias found the simplicity difficult. Evidence existed. Access was lawful. Curiosity pressed against him like a physical itch. Yet the person most affected by the answer had said not today.

June closed the notebook. "Can I ask something unpleasant?"

"Those are Elias's favorite," Mara said.

June looked at him. "If I never listen to the original, do you think I'm choosing ignorance?"

A year earlier he would have said yes, perhaps with caveats. He thought of his own refusal to reconstruct 2018 fully. "No. I think you're choosing which facts you need to experience directly. That's different from denying they exist."

June nodded. "Good answer."

"He has been trained," Mara said.

Later, walking through rows of indoor plants toward the car park, Mara stopped beside a display of pear-shaped ceramic containers. Hundreds of them, new and glossy.

"There," she said. "Proof our family had terrible taste, not unique taste."

Elias picked one up. No chip. Different leaf shape.

"Not the same model."

"Of course you know that."

"I looked it up."

June, behind them, laughed.

The sound made Elias turn because for half a second it reminded him of someone else. He could not identify who. This time he did not chase the resemblance.

Outside, June shook Mara's hand and then unexpectedly hugged her. Mara froze for a fraction of a second before returning it.

"I remember you from nowhere," June said quietly.

Mara stepped back. "Let's keep it that way until we know better."

June smiled. "Deal."

As they drove away, Elias realized that uncertainty had become a form of consent between them rather than a failure to be solved.

June's husband joined them for the second half of the garden-center meeting and immediately changed the emotional temperature by asking whether anyone wanted more cake. His name was Paul. He knew almost nothing about Morrow beyond what June had chosen to tell him.

Elias found that notable. He was accustomed to investigations consuming entire households.

Paul sat beside June. "I'm under strict instructions not to ask what she doesn't want to discuss."

Mara nodded approvingly. "Marry him again."

June smiled. "Too expensive."

Paul had known June for twenty years and could provide a different kind of evidence. Not childhood memory, but later behavior. He remembered her using one phrase repeatedly with their children: You don't have to be brave for me.

June froze.

"I say that?"

"All the time."

She looked at Elias. "I got it from the reconstruction."

Possibly.

The phrase had appeared in her teenage exposure session, sourced from Helen. June then carried it into adulthood and used it with her own children.

A borrowed sentence had become authentic family language through use.

"What does provenance mean now?" June asked.

Elias considered. "Historical origin remains Helen's recording if the chain is correct. But your use is yours."

"Can a sentence have two owners?"

Mara answered. "Language has never been good at ownership."

Paul looked amused. "I thought I was coming for cake."

The discovery complicated the release authority's plans. If families were told a phrase originated elsewhere, they might interpret their later use as contamination rather than ordinary adoption. Yet hiding origin would repeat Morrow's mistake.

Lena proposed distinguishing source provenance from relational ownership. Everyone hated the wording.

"What about 'where it first came from' and 'what you did with it'?" June said.

That became the working language.

June chose to tell her adult daughter the phrase's history. Her daughter laughed.

"Mum, half the things you say came from television."

June looked offended. "Not the important things."

"Especially the important things."

The daughter then said she liked the phrase and intended to keep using it.

June told them this story with visible relief.

Elias noticed how quickly relief tempted everyone toward a moral. Borrowed things can become real. It was true in one sense and dangerous in another.

Morrow could have used the same idea to excuse concealed transfer.

So he added the less satisfying part.

"The fact that the phrase became meaningful later doesn't make the original undisclosed exposure acceptable."

June pointed at him. "There he is."

"Who?"

"The man who arrives after every comforting thought with a footnote."

Mara laughed.

Paul ordered another pot of tea.

For once, the footnote did not ruin the comfort.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Familiar Hands

June's notebook arrived by courier under chain-of-custody seal and immediately caused three departments to argue about whether a spiral notebook could contain protected health information belonging to people who had never consented to its existence.

Celia solved the problem by locking it in a safe and telling everyone to file motions later. Elias read it with Mara present.

The entries were short, adolescent and devastatingly practical. March 12. Dad's laugh wrong. Told Lena. She says model only 62% on laugh. Why show it then?

March 16. Mara says mother's hands in my session. I think she's right. March 21. Breakfast again. Yellow curtains. I know they aren't ours but I dreamed them last night.

March 23. Rohe says familiarity can be created by relational consistency. I asked if that means fake. He says not fake, modeled. March 29. Mara angry because they put her brother in scene when he wasn't a participant. She says they're making people out of guesses.

Elias stopped at that one.

"You knew they modeled me."

Mara rubbed her forehead. "Apparently."

"Do you remember?"

"Pieces."

"What pieces?"

"A version of you at breakfast. Wrong hair. You kept saying something about toast."

"I don't say things about toast."

"Exactly. It was disturbing."

He almost laughed. The notebook continued.

April 2. Mara brought tape recorder. Says she will make own source archive. April 8. Lena took recorder. Returned it later. Mara says file count changed.

April 11. Session 14. We both recognized Helen's hand on different woman. They say visual carryover. Mara says bullsh*t. The asterisk was June's.

April 13. They paused group sessions. April 20. Mara says somebody copied our complaints into symptoms.

Elias closed the notebook. That sentence connected directly to what they already knew. Mara's objection to source contamination had become evidence of paranoia in her clinical record. The institution had interpreted accurate suspicion through the lens most convenient to itself.

Mara said, "Keep going." April 24. Aster House. Rohe says First Copy isn't a person. It's a family-shaped prior. Mara says if it has people's voices and habits then call it what it is. He asks what. She says stealing with maths.

Ivo, reading over Elias's shoulder, said, "That also sounds like her." Mara looked pleased. "Fifteen-year-old me was excellent."

"She was exhausting," Lena said from the doorway.

Mara's face hardened. Lena had not been invited to the notebook review. Celia had called her after seeing repeated references to clinical decisions.

"You took my recorder," Mara said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you were recording other patients without consent."

"I was recording myself."

"You were leaving it running in group waiting areas."

Mara glanced at June's entry. "Did you delete files?"

"No."

"Someone did."

"Possibly."

"Who had it?"

"Me, a research assistant, then you."

"Name."

Lena thought. "Peter Kade." Ivo immediately searched the archive personnel directory.

Peter Kade had been a research assistant at Fallow from 2009 to 2011. Then systems engineer at Morrow from 2013 to 2017.

Then no employment record. Celia said, "He's dead."

"How?" Elias asked.

"Heart attack. 2020."

Mara stared at the notebook. "Convenient." Lena looked at her sharply. "No. Don't do that. People die without becoming clues."

Mara opened her mouth, then closed it.

"Fair," she said.

The notebook's final relevant entry was dated June 1, 2010. Mara says hands matter because hands aren't dialogue. Nobody writes a hand for therapy. If the hand moves between people, the whole thing moves.

Elias read it twice. Fifteen-year-old Mara had understood the evidentiary problem better than the adults around her. Dialogue could be dismissed as therapeutic scripting. A crooked finger could not.

He turned to Nia's reconstruction still open on another screen. Helen's hand.

Crossed from one woman into another. The first clue had been the right one.

June's spiral notebook remained in a sealed review room for two days while lawyers decided which lines could legally be compared. Elias disliked the delay but understood it. The notebook contained memories of other people, some named, some identifiable through context. A document could belong physically to one person while containing pieces of many lives.

Ivo eventually received permission to run a narrow phrase and object match without displaying unrelated content. He called it "searching with mittens on."

Mara watched through the glass. "You say that as if your normal work uses hands."

"Metaphor is all engineers have left after management takes the budget."

The match returned eleven potential overlaps. Eight were useless. Common phrases. Common rooms. A red cardigan sold by the thousands. The ninth involved a hand gesture June had written about at sixteen: her father touching the bridge of his nose with two fingers before apologizing.

The gesture appeared in Helen footage.

It also appeared in thirty-seven unrelated public videos.

"Not specific," Elias said.

The tenth was a joke about burnt toast. Too common.

The eleventh was a description of someone hiding a house key in a flour tin.

Mara went still.

"Mum did that."

Elias remembered the flour tin. Blue lid. Never used for flour because Helen disliked baking. After her death Gabriel had searched for the spare key for three days before Mara remembered where it was.

"Did June's family?" Elias asked.

Ivo checked available direct sources. No evidence. June had explicitly written that she did not remember any flour tin in their kitchen outside the reconstruction.

The donor map traced the detail to an early Venn home interview.

Mara rubbed both hands over her face. "So not just emotional phrases. Household behavior."

"Potentially," Elias said. "But it could still have been used as a general plausible hiding place."

"From our family."

"Yes."

She looked at him. "You always add the narrowing sentence after the damaging one."

"It's my job."

"No. It's your religion."

He almost objected, then decided she was partly right.

Nia arrived while they were still reviewing the match. She had brought the photographs of her mother again and placed one beside the screen showing Helen's hand. The similarity was striking only after one knew to look for it. Same finger position. Same slight turn of the wrist.

"I spent last night watching videos of Mum's hands," Nia said. "Do you know how insane that sounds?"

"Less than you think," Elias replied.

"That's not comforting."

She pointed to one photograph. Her mother, Farah, was cutting cake. The hand shape was different. Another showed her holding a cigarette. Different again.

"The reconstruction hand feels more familiar than these," Nia said. "That's the part I hate."

Lena, who had been silent, answered carefully. "Familiarity is a response, not a provenance marker. It can still be emotionally real without identifying the source correctly."

Nia laughed once. "You psychologists have incredible ways of making bad news grammatically balanced."

"Occupational hazard."

Elias looked from Farah's photographs to Helen's borrowed hand. The first clue had seemed visual, almost trivial. Now it represented something broader. Morrow had not stolen complete people and moved them intact. It had transferred tiny human efficiencies: how a mother held a cup, where a key might be hidden, which sentence helped after an argument.

The theft was difficult to see because each fragment was small enough to look universal.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Red Cardigan

Nia returned with photographs of her mother. There were eighty-three of them, sorted by year because she said grief had briefly made her the sort of person who labeled folders at three in the morning.

Her mother's name was Rosa Vale. She had worked in a school office, loved crime novels, disliked coriander, and wore cardigans in nearly every photograph.

None was yellow.

"The reconstruction made me remember the yellow one," Nia said. "For years I thought there was a photo missing."

Elias sat beside her at the review terminal. "Do you want to know where it came from if we can identify it?" She looked at him. "Is that Mara's rule?"

"Partly."

"Yes. I want to know."

Ivo ran image-feature comparisons against the First Copy donor library. The cardigan matched a home video from Donor Family 19.

A woman named Ruth Bell wore it in 2004 while decorating a Christmas tree. Nia watched the source clip.

Ruth Bell was white, fifty and broad-shouldered. Rosa Vale had been brown-skinned, forty-seven and small. The cardigan fit neither woman's body exactly in Nia's reconstruction. The model had preserved color and knit texture while altering shape.

"So that's somebody else's mother," Nia said.

"Yes."

"Do we know if she consented?"

"Her family did."

"To me wearing her clothes in my head?"

Elias did not answer. Nia laughed without humor.
"Right."

They traced the strawberries next. Generic visual prior.

The crooked finger: Helen. The phrase about licking the spoon: Helen.

The kitchen tap: direct source photograph from Nia's childhood home. The window light: inferred from weather records.

Rosa's voice: authentic model derived from thirty-two recordings. Her face: mostly direct photographs.

The scene was neither true nor invented. It was assembled.

Nia looked at the evidence map for a long time.

"If you showed me this before the reconstruction, I would've said no."

"To the session?"

"Yes. But if you'd shown me after Mum died and said I could hear her voice again, maybe I'd have signed anything."

Elias wrote nothing.

"That's the part nobody likes," she said. "Consent isn't a personality trait. I wasn't the same person three weeks after she died."

He thought of his own 2018 consent.

"No," he said. "You weren't."

Nia closed the evidence map.

"Can we check one more thing?"

"What?"

"The red cardigan."

"There isn't one."

"I know. But after I requested the source release, I started remembering a red cardigan too. I thought maybe I was correcting the yellow one."

Elias frowned.

"Was red ever mentioned in your release documents?"

"Not that I saw."

He searched text. No red cardigan.

Image metadata. No red.

Then he found a file access record. Two days before Nia reported remembering red, her claimant portal had displayed a thumbnail from an unrelated Bell family source due to a temporary indexing error.

Ruth Bell was wearing a red cardigan. The thumbnail had been on screen for less than two seconds before the portal corrected itself.

Nia stared at it.

"I don't remember seeing that."

"You may not have consciously noticed it."

"But now I remember Mum in it."

Elias said nothing. The horror of Morrow had always seemed to reside in immersive reconstruction, in sophisticated systems capable of turning evidence into experience.

But the brain did not require sophistication. Two seconds of the wrong photograph could become material.

Nia covered her mouth with one hand.

"Can you take it out?"

Elias looked at her.

"The red cardigan. Can you make me stop seeing it?"

He knew the technical answer. There were therapies for intrusive imagery. Reconsolidation methods. Exposure techniques. Attention training.

There was no delete key.

"No," he said.

Nia nodded slowly.

"Good."

"Good?"

"I needed somebody to say no."

Nia's mother owned three red cardigans. This should have made the reconstruction detail less useful, but instead it exposed another problem. Once Nia began searching family photographs, she found evidence for almost anything if she looked long enough.

"This one is close," she said, placing a 2009 Christmas photograph on the table.

Farah wore burgundy.

"Not red," Elias said.

"My mother would have called it red."

"Color categories are not reliable enough."

"You see why people hate you."

"Frequently."

They reviewed eighty-three photographs. In seven, Farah wore something red or red-adjacent. In twelve, she stood in kitchens. In five, she held cups with both

hands. Each similarity could support the reconstruction if one wanted it to.

Mara watched from the other side of the table. "This is what happened to me after I disappeared. People took every photo and made a theory. Sad face meant depressed. No smile meant frightened. Too much smile meant manic. Once someone has a story, the archive becomes obedient."

Nia sat back. "So how do I know anything?"

"You know your mother existed," Mara said. "You know these photos happened. You know the reconstruction contains at least one borrowed object. Everything else can have labels."

Nia did not look satisfied, but she looked less trapped.

Later that afternoon Elias accompanied her to the small flat where Farah had lived during the final years of her life. Nia had delayed clearing it because grief made every object feel like a vote. Keep. Donate. Throw away. Each decision implied a judgment about importance.

The kitchen still contained Farah's mugs.

Nia opened a cupboard. "None of them are the one in the reconstruction."

"That doesn't prove she never owned it."

"I know."

She sounded irritated, then smiled. "Sorry. I'm learning to anticipate your disclaimers."

They found the cardigan in a bedroom drawer. Not red. Rust-colored, with one missing button.

Nia held it against herself. "This feels wrong."

"What does?"

"I remember her in a brighter red one. Very clearly."

Elias waited.

"And now I can't tell whether that's because of the reconstruction."

There was no useful reassurance. He helped her fold the cardigan instead.

On the way out, Nia stopped beside a framed photograph near the door. Farah was laughing at someone outside the frame. Her face had no resemblance to Helen. The scene contained no suspicious objects.

"This one," Nia said. "I don't remember when it was taken. I don't know what she was laughing at. But I know I like it."

"You don't need more than that."

She looked at him. "You actually believe that now?"

He considered the question. "I'm trying to."

At the release office, Lena was waiting with a request form. Nia could choose whether to receive a full provenance annotation of her mother's reconstruction. Every borrowed or inferred detail would be marked.

Nia read the form twice.

"If I say no, can I change my mind later?"

"Yes," Lena said.

"And if I say yes, I can't unknow it."

"Correct."

Nia signed the section marked DEFER.

Lena asked, "Good?"

Nia looked through the glass at the reconstruction room. "I needed somebody to let no be an answer."

That sentence stayed with Elias long after she left.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lena's Ledger

Lena kept a paper ledger because in 2010 the Fallow database had crashed twice in one month and she had stopped trusting it. Elias found this almost offensively familiar.

"You had notebooks too."

"Most people did before you turned stationery into a moral philosophy."

They sat in Lena's apartment, which Elias had visited only once before. It was smaller than he expected. Books stood in double rows. A framed print leaned against the wall rather than hanging. On the dining table lay six black ledgers labeled by year.

Mara picked up 2010.

"You kept patient notes at home?"

"Session counts and protocol deviations. No full clinical records. Still against policy. You may report me to the committee that already dislikes me."

"I have a queue."

The ledger entries used initials.

MV.

JS.

ROHE.

Kade.

FC.

Mara pointed. "First Copy?"

"Yes."

Lena turned to March. FC contamination complaint, MV + JS. Hand morphology persistent. Technical says low risk. Requested suspend relational blending.

April 3: Rohe rejects suspension. Says familiarity metric improving.

April 9: MV recorder issue. Kade reviewed files without psych authorization.

April 12: Two patient reports contain non-source dialogue target. Rohe calls expected convergence.

April 21: Need distinguish emotional utility from autobiographical adoption. Nobody wants to discuss.

Elias looked up. "You knew." Lena did not pretend otherwise. "I knew something was wrong."

"You kept working."

"Yes."

Mara read another entry. May 2:

MV says First Copy feels more familiar than actual home after repeated exposure. Distress moderate. Recommend stop. May 3:

Program continues without MV for two weeks. Mara touched the initials with one finger.

"I don't remember saying that."

Lena looked at her. "You were furious."

"That's not narrowing it down."

"You said the fake kitchen came to mind before your real one. You stopped being able to picture the Alder Row cupboards without yellow curtains."

Mara went still. Elias remembered June's breakfast description.

Yellow curtains.

"Do you still see them?" he asked.

Mara looked annoyed. "Sometimes."

"You never told me."

"Because I have been living with contaminated memories since I was fifteen. I cannot make every curtain a family meeting."

Lena turned further through the ledger. June 18:

MV asks whether memory can be made less certain deliberately. Says certainty is what hurts. Elias looked at Mara.

"That sounds familiar."

She ignored him. July 1:

Rohe proposes Confidence Normalization protocol. Reduce explicit source warnings during immersion because warnings disrupt therapeutic effect.

July 4: I objected.

July 6: Protocol approved.

Mara closed the ledger hard.

"That's it."

"What?" Elias asked.

"That's when everything changed. Before that, the system showed confidence tags during sessions. After July, they hid them unless you asked."

Lena nodded. "Rohe believed constant uncertainty prevented emotional engagement."

"He made the guesses invisible."

"Yes."

Elias felt a familiar anger toward Rohe, but the ledger made it harder to reduce the past to one man. Lena had objected. Then stayed. Kade had crossed authorization lines. Technical staff had called hand contamination low risk. Therapists had valued outcomes. Gabriel had signed forms. Mara and June had recognized problems. Everyone had occupied a smaller moral frame than the consequences.

Lena turned to the final page of 2010. One entry had been circled twice.

December 14: First Copy now treated as heritage model. Rohe says cannot remove without breaking longitudinal continuity. Kade suggests distillation into production prior.

Below it, in different handwriting, someone had added: If we remove the family, the system forgets how to feel like home.

Mara read it aloud.

"Whose handwriting?"

Lena stared at the sentence.

"Peter Kade's."

After the ledger review, Mara asked Lena to walk with her. Elias was not invited.

He found this offensive for approximately ten minutes and then went home. Lena later told him only what Mara permitted her to share. They walked along the river. Mara asked why Lena had stayed after July 2010, when confidence warnings were hidden.

"Because I thought I could limit harm from inside," Lena said.

Mara replied, "Did you?"

"Sometimes."

"Enough?"

"No."

That answer apparently kept Mara from leaving. She asked whether Lena had ever believed Mara was delusional.

Lena said yes. Not about source contamination specifically. About one claim Mara made that researchers were altering her home recordings overnight. Lena had assumed stress and hypervigilance.

Later they discovered Kade had in fact reprocessed the files overnight, changing timestamps.

"So I was wrong about why," Mara said when she recounted it to Elias, "but right that something happened."

"Yes."

"That's an awful combination."

A person could sound paranoid because they lacked access to the mechanism of a real event. That lesson had followed Mara through every institution since.

Lena gave her the 2010 ledger at the end of the walk.

"I don't want this," Mara said.

"Neither do I."

"That's not consent."

Lena almost smiled. "May I give it to you?" Mara thought.

"Yes."

At home she put it in a drawer and did not open it again for weeks. Ownership did not require constant review.

Lena's ledger did not read like a confession. Most entries were boring clinical shorthand: participant late, audio failure, parent requested break, child refused headset. Elias trusted boring records more than polished recollections, but he had learned not to romanticize them. A terse note could hide as much as it preserved.

They sat in Lena's flat because she would not allow the original ledger into Morrow custody. Celia objected. Lena invited her to obtain a warrant. Celia, after a pause, said she admired the consistency.

Mara turned pages slowly.

"You wrote about me like this?"

"I was twenty-three and trying to sound professional."

"You succeeded. I sound like a lab rat with sarcasm."

Lena looked down. "You were a child who kept asking questions I should have asked first."

One entry described Mara rejecting a reconstructed memory because Helen's bracelet was on the wrong wrist. A supervisor instructed Lena to repeat the scene

without drawing attention to the discrepancy. On the third exposure Mara no longer mentioned it.

Elias felt his jaw tighten.

"Did you know what that meant?"

"Not then. I thought habituation. Reduced fixation on irrelevant detail."

Mara read the sentence aloud. "Irrelevant detail."

"I know."

"The detail was how I knew it wasn't my memory."

Lena said nothing.

That silence did more than an apology would have. Elias recognized the old version of Lena who had once believed restraint could substitute for honesty. She was not defending herself now.

Several pages later, Lena had drawn a small square in the margin beside an entry marked JS. Inside the square: ASK WHERE IT CAME FROM.

"June," Mara said.

Lena nodded.

The session involved a line June repeated after exposure to a father reconstruction. Lena had written that the wording sounded familiar but could not locate the source. Three days later she found it in Helen's recorded journal. She raised the issue with a supervisor.

"What happened?" Elias asked.

"I was told cross-family lexical overlap was expected and clinically insignificant."

"Did you believe them?"

"For about a week."

The ledger changed after that. Notes became more detailed. Lena recorded exact phrases, source questions, who gave instructions. She was building a private audit before she had language for why.

Mara traced one line with her finger without touching the ink. "You were scared."

"Yes."

"You still stayed."

"Yes."

Neither woman softened the fact.

Near the end of the ledger, an entry referred to Helen's Origin model. HJ source approved for relational calibration pending family consent confirmation.

The date preceded Gabriel's broad consent form by eleven days.

Elias read it twice. "They used her material before Dad signed."

Lena closed her eyes. "If the date is accurate."

Mara laughed sharply. "Welcome to Elias's church."

"Dates matter."

"I know. That's why it's funny."

They photographed the page under protocol, then Lena put the ledger back in a drawer.

"You're not sending it with us?" Elias asked.

"Certified copy tomorrow. Original stays here until a court orders otherwise."

He almost argued. Instead he nodded.

Ownership did not require constant review. Evidence did not require surrender. The distinction would once

have seemed inefficient. Now it looked like the beginning of ethics.

After the ledger review, Lena showed Elias something she had not offered Mara. A personal letter she wrote in 2011 and never sent to Rohe. It was not evidence of action. It was evidence of hesitation.

I think we are teaching children to stop objecting to uncertainty, she had written. I am not sure whether reduced correction means increased trust or learned futility.

Elias read the sentence twice.

"Why didn't you send it?"

"I rewrote it as a formal concern memo. Cleaner language. Less accusation."

"And the memo?"

"Filed. Discussed. Closed with recommendations."

"Which were?"

"More debriefing. Better post-session labels."

"Not stopping the protocol."

"No."

He put the letter down.

Lena looked toward the drawer containing her ledger. "The private version understood more than the professional version."

"Because the professional version had to survive the institution."

"That's the story I told myself."

"Is it false?"

"Not entirely. That's why it's dangerous."

The conversation shifted into an argument neither had planned. Elias accused her of using complexity to avoid judgment. Lena accused him of wanting a single moral category because categories made anger easier to manage.

"You think if you can classify what I did as protection or cowardice, you can decide what to feel," she said.

"I know what I feel."

"No, you know what facts you have."

He stood.

"That's unfair."

"Yes."

The immediate admission disrupted his anger.

Lena laughed bitterly. "See? I learned from Mara too."

Elias sat again.

For several minutes neither spoke.

Then he asked, "If you had sent the letter exactly as written, would anything have changed?"

"Maybe. Maybe I would have been removed from the project. Maybe Rohe would have stopped earlier. Maybe another researcher would have taken my place and nobody would have helped Mara leave later."

"You don't know."

"Exactly."

The word held no triumph.

Elias looked at the unsent letter. It was tempting to make it a lost opportunity, the moment everything could have changed. Real history rarely offered clean hinges.

People chose under uncertainty, then later edited the importance of those choices according to outcomes.

"Do you want this included in the inquiry?" he asked.

"Yes. With the fact it was unsent. I don't want credit for an objection nobody received."

That answer mattered to him more than the letter itself.

He left Lena's flat after midnight. In the stairwell she called his name.

"Elias."

He turned.

"I am sorry. Not as a clinical statement. Not as closure. Just because I am."

He nodded.

He did not tell her whether he forgave her.

She did not ask.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dead Data

Peter Kade left behind forty-six boxes of engineering notes and no digital estate plan. His widow had donated them to a university archive after his death, apparently because she believed technical historians might care about obsolete machine-learning infrastructure. Nobody had requested them until Ivo did.

The archive sent photographs first. Kade's handwriting filled notebooks with diagrams, equations, grocery lists and irritated comments about managers. He drew little coffins beside code he wanted deleted.

"I like him already," Ivo said.

Mara replied, "He deleted files from my recorder."

"I like him provisionally."

One notebook from 2011 contained a section titled DEAD DATA. Kade used the term for source features that no longer retained provenance. During early training, donor material had been transformed repeatedly. A gesture from Helen might become a motion representation, then part of a composite family prior, then part of a distilled production model. By the final stage, the system could reproduce the behavior without retaining a direct pointer to Helen.

"That's why some source fields say unknown," Ivo explained. "The lineage was technically destroyed."

Elias looked at the diagrams. "Destroyed accidentally?"

"Initially, maybe. Then deliberately. Storage constraints. Performance. Privacy. Distillation was normal."

"Except it meant nobody could later tell whose details survived."

"Yes."

Mara sat with June's notebook beside her. "So if my sentence got into the model, eventually it could come back out without my name attached."

"Exactly."

"Like a ghost."

Ivo grimaced. "Don't call it that."

"Why?"

"Because then somebody makes a documentary called Ghost in the Memory Machine and I have to move countries."

Elias turned a page. Kade had drawn a family tree.

At the top were donor families, including VENN. Below them FIRST COPY.

Below that FALLOW PRIOR. Below that MORROW SEED.

At the bottom, a box labeled HOME. Beside it he had written:

Users do not trust accurate scenes. They trust scenes with relational behavior that matches expectation. Home is not geometry. Home is prediction.

Mara read over Elias's shoulder.

"He understood."

"Technically."

"That's worse."

Another note, dated three months later: MV complaint valid. We are leaking identifiable family behavior. Rohe says remove obvious donor markers, preserve relational coherence. Can't do both cleanly.

Then: Built scrubber. Hand morphology fixed. Dialogue targets harder.

Elias looked at Mara. "He may have tried to fix it."

"After taking my recorder."

"Maybe he was testing it."

"That is a generous reconstruction of a man you've never met."

He accepted the correction. The final notebook contained a sealed envelope taped to the inside cover.

The university archivist opened it on camera at Celia's request. Inside was a printed hash string and a handwritten sentence.

FULL FIRST COPY ARCHIVE NOT DESTROYED. COLD STORAGE. IF THEY EVER CLAIM OTHERWISE, ASK FOR ORPHEUS. Ivo stopped smiling.

"What's Orpheus?" Elias asked.

"I don't know."

Mara looked at him. "That phrase has become contagious." Celia searched Morrow's asset inventory.

No Orpheus. Lena searched old Fallow project lists.

Nothing. Tess searched company filings.

Nothing. Then Elias remembered something from Part One's legacy archive: one restricted storage class he had never been able to open, labeled ORP-ARCH.

At the time he assumed ORP meant orphaned research projects. Ivo stared at him.

"Orpheus archive."

The name was fitting in the worst possible way. A project about retrieving the dead.

Ada Mercer's name appeared once in Kade's notes before anyone knew who she was. A.M. understands dead data problem. Trusts provenance more than product.

At the time, Elias assumed A.M. was another engineer. Ivo found a conference program from 2016

listing Ada Mercer as a doctoral researcher presenting a paper on archival uncertainty in synthetic media.

"She was warning about this before it became fashionable," Ivo said.

Mara replied, "Suspiciously competent." The dead-data notebooks also contained evidence Kade had tried to build a provenance scrubber that removed donor identity from outputs while retaining useful generic patterns. The project failed because the very features users found most familiar were often the most identifying.

A mother's particular way of touching a child's hair.
A father's half-laugh before apology.

A sibling's phrase. Strip enough specificity and the reconstruction became generic.

Keep specificity and somebody else's person survived inside it. Kade wrote:

No technical solution to a consent problem. Stop pretending compression will save us. Ivo photographed the sentence.

"Every engineer should have this above their desk."

"Including you?" Elias asked.

"Especially me."

Later in the notebook, Kade described arguing with Rohe about deleting First Copy. Rohe: remove it and system loses relational quality.

Kade: then system should lose relational quality.
Rohe: users reject scenes that feel generic.

Kade: maybe generic is honest. Mara read it twice.

"I like him again."

"Provisionally," Ivo reminded her.

"Always."

Peter Kade's engineering boxes arrived at the university archive in no useful order. A graduate student had created broad categories, but Kade apparently believed dates were a personal attack. Circuit diagrams sat beside grocery receipts. Source-code printouts were used as backing paper for children's drawings. One folder labeled TAX contained notes on voice segmentation and a recipe for lamb stew.

Ivo looked delighted. "Finally, documentation by someone who understood real systems."

Elias opened another box. "You mean chaos."

"Same thing after funding ends."

They worked under the supervision of an archivist who did not care about Morrow and cared intensely about pencil use near originals. Mara liked her immediately.

Kade's notes revealed that First Copy had originally been a performance shortcut. Early hardware could not generate convincing relational behavior quickly enough during sessions, so engineers cached common interaction patterns. Those caches became reusable. Reusable became ranked. Ranked became optimized.

"Technical debt with human faces," Ivo said.

A 2009 notebook contained a diagram labeled FAMILY PRIORS. Beside it Kade had written: Do not allow familiarity score to overwrite source confidence. Different quantities.

Elias stared at the sentence.

"He knew."

"At least this engineer knew," Ivo replied.

Another page showed that his warning had been implemented for six months. Then a later revision merged the two scores for usability. The reason listed was therapist confusion.

Mara read it over Elias's shoulder. "So they made the interface easier by making the truth harder to see."

"That's one interpretation."

"It is literally what happened."

"Yes."

She smiled. "Training works."

They found references to Orpheus as a cold-storage migration project. Kade had been instructed to preserve raw provenance because he distrusted future normalization tools. He created checksums, offline copies and a read-only dependency map. Officially, those archives were later destroyed after Morrow's incorporation.

Unofficially, Kade's notes contained an address.

Ivo photographed it. "Could be decommissioned."

"Could be empty," Elias said.

Mara leaned against a shelf. "Could be a dungeon full of servers humming people's childhoods."

The archivist looked up sharply.

"Metaphor," Mara told her.

"Please keep metaphors away from the boxes."

Near closing time Elias found a sealed envelope addressed to Kade's widow. It had never been mailed. He stopped before opening it.

The archivist noticed. "That isn't part of the unrestricted collection."

"I know."

A year earlier curiosity would have created an argument inside him. Now he returned it to the folder.

Ivo watched. "Character growth. Disgusting."

"I'm tired."

"Whatever helps."

On the train home they reviewed only the authorized notes. Orpheus was no longer rumor. It had been a deliberate technical decision to preserve the ugly version of the data before later systems cleaned it.

Mara sent a message to June: Found evidence the old raw archive may survive. No need to respond tonight.

June replied immediately: Thank you for saying that last part.

Elias read the message twice.

Information could be urgent without making people permanently available to it. Another distinction Morrow had never learned.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gabriel's Upload

The first time Gabriel saw a Morrow reconstruction, he cried for twenty-three minutes. Elias learned this from an old intake form.

"You used the service?"

His father looked embarrassed. "Once."

"When?"

"2014."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"You weren't speaking to me much. Mara was missing. Your mother had been dead seven years. A company said it could rebuild an ordinary morning. I said yes."

They were sitting in Gabriel's living room. Mara had chosen not to come. She said she had reached her weekly allocation of revelations involving their father.

"What morning?"

"Sunday breakfast. Helen making eggs. You and Mara arguing about television."

Elias felt his stomach tighten. "Yellow curtains?" Gabriel frowned. "Maybe."

"We never had yellow curtains."

"Then no."

"Do you remember them now?"

Gabriel closed his eyes. "I see yellow if you ask me. That proves nothing except suggestion works." Elias almost smiled. His father had become inconveniently sensible.

"Did they use your donor materials?"

"I assumed so."

"The source bundle says you uploaded twenty-nine additional recordings in 2014."

"Yes."

"Where did you get them?"

Gabriel went to a cabinet and returned with a hard drive.

"Family backups."

Elias connected it to an offline laptop. Folders appeared by year.

1998. 1999.

2000. Most were digitized tapes.

One folder was called HELEN PRIVATE. Elias did not open it.

"Voice journals?"

"Copies I found after Ternmouth."

"You uploaded them to Morrow?"

"Yes."

"After what Fallow had already done?"

Gabriel's jaw tightened. "I did not know what Fallow had done. I knew they had research tapes. I did not know they had built your mother into other people's families."

"Why upload private recordings?"

"Because I wanted to hear her again."

The answer was so simple Elias had no useful response. Gabriel looked at the hard drive. "The reconstruction was beautiful."

"Was it accurate?"

"I don't know."

"Did that matter?"

"At the time? No."

"And now?"

His father thought for a long moment. "Somewhat. Less than you want it to." Elias sat back.

Gabriel said, "She told me I had done enough."

"Mum?"

"In the reconstruction. She said I could stop apologizing."

Elias knew immediately that the sentence sounded like an Aster House target. Gabriel saw it in his face.

"Not hers?"

"I don't know."

"But probably not."

"Probably not directly sourced."

Gabriel laughed softly. "There you are."

"What?"

"Making it gentler with technical language."

Elias looked down.

"She probably never said it," Gabriel said.

"I'm sorry."

"Why? It helped."

"Because you thought it was her."

"Yes."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

His father leaned back. "It does now because you told me. Before today I had fifteen years of grief and one memory in which your mother forgave me for being alive. You tell me what the correct amount of regret is."

Elias had no answer. Gabriel touched the hard drive. "Don't take everything apart because you can."

Mara's rule in different words. Elias asked, "Do you want the reconstruction file removed from your archive?"

"No."

"Do you want the source lineage?"

Gabriel considered.

"Only if there's something in it that affects another person."

Elias nodded. As he packed the laptop, Gabriel said, "There was one thing that felt wrong even then."

"What?"

"Helen called Mara June."

Elias stopped.

"In the reconstruction?"

"Once. Morrow said it was an audio artifact. I believed them."

June Saye. A girl Helen had never met.

But First Copy had put them in the same family.

Gabriel's 2014 upload surprised Elias because it contained his father's voice speaking to a reconstruction of Helen. He had expected to feel betrayed by the secrecy. Instead he felt embarrassed on Gabriel's behalf, which was worse.

The intake session began with a clinician asking what Gabriel wanted.

"Ten minutes," his father said on the recording. "Not advice. I know it's not her. I just want ten minutes where the house isn't finished with her."

Mara stopped playback.

Nobody spoke.

"You can turn it off," Gabriel said from the sofa.

"Do you want us to?" Elias asked.

"No. I want you to understand why I did it before you decide what it means."

They continued.

The reconstructed Helen was visually poor by modern standards. Her face drifted subtly between source photographs. Her voice was convincing enough to hurt. She asked Gabriel whether he had fixed the leak above the bathroom. He laughed and said no.

"That was real," Gabriel told them. "The leak. She nagged me about it for two years."

Then the reconstruction said, "You don't have to be brave for me."

Mara reached for pause again but stopped herself.

Gabriel's face on the old recording collapsed.

In the present room he looked at the floor.

"I thought that was her," he said. "Not literally. I knew the disclaimers. But emotionally, I thought they had found something she once said."

Elias checked the session provenance. The line was marked RELATIONAL PRIOR, low direct-source confidence, high acceptance estimate.

Its donor path led to June Saye's family.

Mara whispered, "Jesus."

June's father, not Helen, had used a version of that phrase in a recorded hospital conversation. First Copy had transferred it into Gabriel's grief session. Later, because Gabriel responded strongly, the line received a

higher familiarity score associated with the Venn profile.

Then that boosted version entered subsequent family models.

A borrowed sentence became more "Venn" because Gabriel loved hearing it.

Elias felt the mechanism settle into place with terrible clarity.

"Feedback," Ivo said over speakerphone. "The system didn't just borrow. It learned acceptance from the recipient and treated acceptance as evidence for future fit."

Gabriel looked ill. "My reaction trained it?"

"Not intentionally. But yes, your session became data."

"Did I consent to that?"

They checked.

A clause on page fourteen allowed anonymized quality-improvement use.

Mara laughed bitterly. "There it is. Page fourteen. The traditional location of informed human understanding."

Gabriel got up and went to the kitchen. Elias followed after a minute.

His father stood at the sink without turning on the tap.

"I feel stupid," he said.

"You weren't."

"Don't do that."

Elias stopped.

Gabriel turned. "I was grieving. I signed something I didn't read properly. I wanted a dead woman to speak to me. Those are facts. You don't need to turn them into innocence."

The correction sounded like Mara.

Family resemblance.

Elias nodded. "Okay."

Gabriel looked toward the living room where the old reconstruction waited paused. "The worst part is I still like that sentence."

"You can."

"Can I?"

"June's father said it. Morrow moved it. You heard it when you needed it. Those things can all be true."

Gabriel considered this.

"That's an irritating answer."

"I've been told."

They returned to the room. Mara had rewound the clip to before the borrowed line. She did not play it again.

The evidence was already enough.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Home Videos

The home videos became dangerous because they were happy. Elias had expected evidence to feel clinical once

he knew what to look for. Instead he spent an afternoon watching his mother dance badly in a kitchen, his father pretend to conduct an orchestra with a wooden spoon, Mara build a blanket fort and then refuse to let Elias enter because he had "government energy."

The archive team catalogued features in the corner of the screen. Helen tucking hair behind ear.

Gabriel interrupting. Mara deflective humor.

Elias withdrawal after criticism. The labels made him furious.

He understood why researchers used them. A system could not learn relational behavior from the word family. It needed repeated patterns. Who interrupted whom. Who apologized first. Who touched shoulders during arguments. Who left rooms.

But watching childhood become a dataset felt like seeing a house dismantled into useful lumber. Mara sat beside him.

"Pause."

He did. On screen, twelve-year-old Mara held a bowl of popcorn.

"Go back ten seconds."

The video resumed. Helen said something off camera.

Mara answered, "Keep the ugly version." Elias froze.

The timestamp was 2006. Long before Fallow.

Mara laughed. "There. Definitive. I invented language."

"You're unbearable."

"And historically documented."

It was funny until they noticed the next line. Helen entered frame and said, "That's what you always say."

Always. The phrase had existed earlier still.

Mara groaned. "There is no bottom." Elias smiled despite himself.

They continued. At 4:37 p.m., the video showed Helen correcting Elias during an argument about a broken lamp.

"You don't have to win every fact," she said.

Elias went still. Mara looked at him.

"I've heard you say that," she said.

"Where?"

"Last year. To me."

He remembered. During an argument about the police file, he had said, You don't have to win every fact for the truth to matter. Had he borrowed it from Helen unconsciously?

Probably. Was that contamination?

Or inheritance? The distinction suddenly seemed less clean.

People borrowed language from parents constantly. Gestures too. Family resemblance was partly a lifetime of imitation. Morrow had industrialized something human beings already did.

That did not make it harmless. It made the ethical boundary harder to describe.

Mara seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"If I use Mum's phrase, it's mine too," she said.

"Probably."

"If Nia uses it because a machine put Mum in her reconstruction?"

"Also hers, eventually."

"Then what are we protecting?"

Elias looked at the frozen image of Helen.

"Consent to the transfer."

Mara considered.

"And knowledge of the source."

"Yes."

"But if telling someone the source damages a memory they wanted?"

"Then choice about knowing."

"Which requires knowing there's something to choose."

They looked at each other. Consent again.

No finish line. The video resumed.

Near the end, Helen sat close to the camera, adjusting focus.

"Is this on?"

Gabriel said, "Yes."

"Good."

She looked directly into the lens. For a fraction of a second Elias felt the old pull to treat the recording as a message meant for him.

It was not. Helen was testing a camera.

She smiled at Gabriel.

"Keep the boring bits," she said.

Then the tape ended.

The home videos became an informal curriculum in how badly families remember chronology. Gabriel insisted one barbecue happened before Helen's diagnosis. Mara placed it after because she remembered the scarf Helen had started wearing when she lost weight. The tape date supported Gabriel. A newspaper visible on the garden table supported Mara.

"Camera date was wrong," Elias said.

Gabriel looked offended. "I set that camera."

"You also filmed three Christmases labeled January first, 2000."

"Y2K was a stressful period."

Mara laughed. "I was five. I remember you buying bottled water because computers were going to kill the taps."

"That is not what Y2K meant."

"I know that now."

The argument was warm enough that Elias briefly forgot why they were watching. Then Helen appeared on screen carrying the pear-shaped sugar bowl from one counter to another.

Everyone stopped.

The object was ridiculous. Green ceramic, painted freckles, leaf lid. Helen had bought it at a market because Mara said it looked ashamed of itself.

"There," Mara said. "That's the exact chip."

The camera passed close enough to show the missing triangular piece.

Elias noted the timestamp and tape identifier.

On the next video, shot two months later, Helen was reading on the sofa. She tucked her feet beneath her and rubbed the side of her thumb against the book's spine. Nia's reconstruction mother made the same movement.

"Common," Elias said.

"Probably," Mara replied. "Still sourceable."

That became their rule for the afternoon. Common did not mean irrelevant. It meant weak evidence by itself. Every gesture received a label rather than a verdict.

They also found scenes that contradicted the emerging public version of Helen as an endlessly soothing maternal template. She shouted at Gabriel for leaving paint tins in the hall. She snapped at Elias when he interrupted a phone call. In one video she told Mara, "I cannot solve every feeling you have before dinner."

Mara rewound that line and grinned. "Put that in the Pattern Library."

Tess, who had come to collect authorized clips, laughed. "It ruins the saint narrative."

"Exactly."

They selected three clips for the inquiry: one showing the sugar bowl, one containing a phrase later transferred, and one showing Helen irritated and impatient. Celia initially objected to the third as irrelevant.

Mara refused to proceed without it.

"If you're going to establish her as a donor, you don't get to make her into a better mother in the process."

Celia considered. "Fair."

Gabriel sat quietly during the discussion. After Tess left, he played a tape none of them had reviewed. Helen was dancing in the kitchen to music the camera microphone barely captured. Her movements were terrible. She knew they were terrible. That was why she was doing them.

Mara leaned against Elias's shoulder without seeming to notice.

On screen, Helen pointed toward the person filming.

"Keep the boring bits," she said. "You'll all forget the boring bits."

Then the camera swung toward Gabriel, who complained that the battery was dying.

The tape ended.

No one spoke for a while.

Elias did not write the sentence down.

One of the home videos revealed a family argument nobody remembered correctly. Helen and Gabriel were fighting about money. Elias, fourteen, was visible in the doorway pretending not to listen. Mara entered midway, stole a biscuit from the table and said something that made Helen laugh despite herself.

In Elias's memory, he had been the one who broke the tension.

He watched the tape twice.

"That's mine," Mara said, pleased. "I demand historical compensation."

"I remember saying something."

"You said 'Can I have the computer?' while they were arguing about debt. Very heroic."

The tape confirmed her version.

Elias felt embarrassed by how personal the correction seemed. It was a small family moment. Nobody had manipulated it. No Morrow system had touched his recollection. He had simply remembered himself as slightly more useful than he had been.

Mara noticed his expression. "Are you having an identity crisis because fourteen-year-old you was selfish?"

"No."

"Good. I have extensive supporting evidence."

They kept watching.

The episode became a useful control for the wider investigation. Natural memory distortion existed beside technological distortion. If they attributed every mismatch to Morrow, they would recreate the same confidence problem from the opposite direction.

Tess wanted to mention the example in her reporting.

Elias hesitated. "It's family material."

Mara shrugged. "Use the principle, not the clip. Nobody needs Dad's overdraft becoming educational content."

Gabriel agreed enthusiastically.

Later, Elias asked Mara whether she had any memories in which she suspected she had made herself look better.

"Obviously not. I was flawless."

He waited.

She sighed. "I remember being kinder to Mum when she was sick than I probably was. There are tapes where I'm awful. I used to tell myself I was scared. Which I was. I was also awful."

"Both."

"Yes. Don't get smug."

The family videos did not become a corrective master record. Cameras missed rooms. People performed when filming. Dates were wrong. The frame excluded whoever held the device.

Still, they provided friction against polished memory.

Helen's instruction, keep the boring bits, began to mean more than preserving trivial domestic life. Boring records resisted heroic editing. A grocery receipt, a child interrupting an argument, somebody complaining about detergent. These details rarely supported a perfect story.

That was their value.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Other Kitchen

Mara agreed to reconstruct the yellow-curtain kitchen only because the original Fallow session file already existed.

"No new generation," she told Ivo. "No filling gaps. We watch the old render as evidence."

"Agreed."

"Confidence tags visible."

"Agreed."

"And if I say stop, it stops."

"That's generally how stop works."

She glared at him.

"Agreed," he said.

Elias sat in the observation room while Mara entered immersion. He hated being outside.

That was another form of control he had learned to notice. On the monitor, the 2010 reconstruction loaded.

Yellow curtains. A long wooden table.

Helen at the stove. June's father with a newspaper.

Fifteen-year-old Mara at one end. A boy at the other.

Elias leaned closer. The boy was supposed to be him.

He had his dark hair, roughly his height, a version of his nose. But the face was wrong in ways that produced more discomfort than total difference would have.

Mara had said wrong hair. She had been right.

The reconstructed Elias wore it too neatly.

"Morning," Helen said.

Source confidence appeared beside her voice: COMPOSITE 67%. Mara inside the scene did not respond.

The boy looked at her.

"You going to eat that toast or conduct an autopsy?"

Elias stared. That sentence was not in any family recording he knew.

Mara, in the observation feed, whispered, "I remember that." Then June entered the kitchen.

The girls began arguing about jam. The scene was mundane enough to be persuasive.

Nobody declared love. Nobody forgave anyone. The toaster burned one slice. June's father swore because he spilled coffee. Helen told him there was a child present and Mara replied that she had heard worse from Gabriel.

It felt like a family. That was the technical achievement.

Not visual realism. Social rhythm.

People interrupted at plausible moments. Helen responded to June as though she knew her. The fake Elias grew annoyed in a way Elias recognized in himself. Mara laughed before the joke was finished.

Then Helen called across the table.

"June, pass your brother the butter."

Everything stopped inside Mara. The Fallow version of Mara had corrected her immediately.

"He's not her brother."

Helen smiled.

"You know what I mean."

"No. You don't know what you mean."

The scene continued despite the error. Mara pushed back from the table.

"Stop session."

The old recording did not stop because it was a recording of the past. Present-day Mara tore off the headset.

Ivo ended playback. Elias entered the room.

She was breathing hard but not crying.

"I remember leaving after that," she said.

"The recording shows you stayed another eleven minutes."

"I know. That's the problem. I remember walking out."

She looked at him.

"I remember the hallway. Grey carpet. A fire extinguisher. Lena coming after me."

Lena, watching remotely, said, "You did leave eventually, but not then." Mara turned toward the speaker. "When?"

"After the third exposure. Two days later."

Mara closed her eyes. The false memory was not dramatic.

It had simply moved an exit from one day to another. Elias knew exactly how dangerous that could be.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked.

Mara looked at the dead screen.

"No. I want to see Session Fourteen."

Ivo searched. The file existed.

Access level: ORPHEUS COLD STORAGE ONLY. The other kitchen had led them to the archive Kade said was never destroyed.

They watched the yellow-curtain kitchen in a secure room with the generative layers disabled. Without completion, the old Fallow reconstruction looked less persuasive. Edges shimmered. A cupboard changed width between camera angles. The woman's face was built from too few photographs and slipped subtly whenever she turned.

Mara still recognized the room.

"I hate that," she said.

"Recognize what?" Lena asked.

"The feeling. Not the place. The feeling that I should know where the spoons are."

Ivo displayed source confidence. The room geometry came partly from a Saye family kitchen. The curtains came from an unrelated public housing catalogue. The kettle belonged to the Venn archive. The table was generated from a generic furniture prior.

"So nobody had this kitchen," Mara said.

"Correct," Elias replied.

"And several people can remember it."

"Potentially."

She looked at him. "You get one 'potentially' per hour."

The session record showed Mara as an adolescent participant. She sat at the generated table opposite a reconstruction of Helen. The scene had been used to test cross-family environmental familiarity. After three exposures, Mara navigated the room faster and reported increased confidence that the setting resembled a real childhood memory.

Lena's face had gone pale.

"I remember this study," she said. "Not the room. The protocol."

"Did you think she was learning the reconstruction?" Elias asked.

"We called it spatial acclimatization."

Mara stared at her. "You have a clinical term for getting used to fake cupboards."

"We had terms for everything except the thing we were doing."

The bitterness in Lena's answer removed some of Mara's anger without resolving it.

Ivo stripped the scene down layer by layer. Helen disappeared. Then the table. Then generated textures. Finally only direct-source fragments remained floating in black space: a corner of Venn kitchen tile, the Saye window frame, one photograph of a kettle, a yellow curtain catalogue image.

Mara watched the room disassemble.

"That's better," she said.

"Why?" Lena asked.

"Because it looks as uncertain as it was."

At the end of the session file, Ivo found a dependency reference omitted from the later Morrow migration. ORPHEUS RAW PROVENANCE STORE.

The cold-storage address matched Peter Kade's notes.

Celia joined by video and immediately said no one was entering the facility until legal preservation orders were in place.

"How long?" Elias asked.

"Tomorrow morning if the judge signs tonight."

"And if someone deletes it?"

"Then they commit a crime while our preservation request creates a clear timeline. Do not improve the situation by becoming a burglar."

Mara looked at Elias. "She knows you."

"Unfortunately," Celia said.

They left the secure room after midnight. Outside, the real corridor was plain enough to feel artificial after hours of reconstruction.

Mara stopped at a vending machine and bought a packet of crackers. "I keep thinking I remember those yellow curtains."

Elias did not tell her she did or did not.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked.

She opened the packet. "Nothing tonight."

That was becoming one of the strongest answers they had.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Consensus

Orpheus was not a room. It was three sealed servers in a decommissioned data center beneath Morrow's former headquarters, physically disconnected from every network and listed in property records as "legacy environmental monitoring equipment."

Celia stared at the inventory photograph.

"I hate this company."

Ivo looked delighted. "Air-gapped cold storage. Very 2012."

"Why was it hidden?" Elias asked.

"Because somebody wanted to preserve it without admitting it existed," Celia said. "Or because asset management is incompetent. Both are historically plausible."

Access required court authorization, two privacy officers and a hardware specialist old enough to recognize the storage format. It took four days.

During those four days, the story leaked. Not Orpheus.

First Copy. A claimant posted on a private support forum that her released reconstruction contained a hand gesture traced to another family. Someone else posted a dialogue match. Within forty-eight hours, people were comparing transcripts online.

Identical phrases appeared. Similar apologies.

The same joke about burnt toast. A mother in Bristol and a father in Glasgow both said, You were always better at leaving than goodbye.

A dead husband and a dead sister both said, Don't make a museum out of me. The internet did what institutions had failed to do.

It found patterns. It also found false patterns.

By the third day, users were claiming that any shared phrase proved memory theft. News sites published lists. Amateur investigators identified innocent donor families from old videos. One woman received threats because people believed her dead husband's laugh had been used in strangers' reconstructions.

Mara watched the coverage from Elias's sofa.

"This is why Celia wanted verification first."

"Yes."

"I hate when she's right."

"She enjoys it enough for everyone."

Tess refused to publish until they had causal evidence.

"Similarity isn't provenance," she said. "If I print that Morrow copied one dead mother's sentence into a thousand mouths and it turns out to be a common phrase, we become the problem."

On the fourth morning, Orpheus came online in a sealed room. The index contained 9.4 terabytes of old model states, source maps and session renders.

Ivo whistled softly.

"They kept everything."

"Why?" Elias asked.

"Engineers don't delete things when lawyers tell them to. They rename them backup."

They found Session Fourteen. They also found a folder called CONSENSUS TESTS.

Elias opened the documentation first. The purpose was blunt.

Researchers wanted to know whether two people exposed to the same reconstructed event would gradually converge in their recollections of it.

Not whether they would remember it accurately. Whether they would agree.

Agreement had been treated as a measure of stability. Mara read the sentence aloud.

"They made consensus into evidence."

Lena's voice came through the secure conference line. "That was Rohe's theory. If independently interviewed participants converged on a scene, he believed the reconstruction was approaching a shared autobiographical truth."

"Even if both were trained on the same fake scene," Elias said.

"Yes."

"That's circular."

"Yes."

Mara looked at Session Fourteen.

"Play it."

The recording loaded. Two separate immersion rooms appeared side by side.

Mara in one. June in the other.

They were being shown the same breakfast scene. Afterward, each was interviewed separately.

What color were the curtains?

"Yellow," both said.

Who spilled coffee?

"June's dad."

What did Helen say when Mara refused toast? Both girls repeated the same sentence within two words.

The confidence scores rose with each exposure. By the third session, their answers matched at eighty-nine percent.

A researcher wrote:

CONSENSUS ACHIEVED.

Elias felt sick. The system had created agreement, then cited agreement as proof.

On the final page of the protocol, he found the planned next phase. Family consensus deployment.

Real families would reconstruct disputed events together until their accounts converged. Mara whispered, "Did they do this?"

Lena did not answer quickly enough. Elias looked at the speaker.

"Lena."

Her voice was quiet.

"Yes."

The family-consensus files were worse when viewed in sequence. One session could be dismissed as a crude experiment. Twenty-three looked like a philosophy.

Elias read pre-session interviews first. Family members disagreed in ordinary ways. A daughter remembered her father leaving a hospital room before midnight; her brother insisted he stayed until morning. A husband remembered his wife wearing green at a wedding; she remembered blue. A mother believed her son apologized during a final argument; the son said he had not.

After repeated shared reconstructions, disagreement narrowed. Researchers celebrated.

What the summary charts hid was how narrowing happened. People did not simply remember better. They changed language. "I think" became "I remember." "Maybe" disappeared. Participants began quoting

phrases from the reconstruction back to researchers as though those phrases had preceded the session.

Mara watched one interview until a woman said, "No, I'm sure now," and asked Ivo to pause.

"That's the moment."

"Which moment?"

"She thinks increased confidence means increased accuracy."

Elias knew the mistake intimately. Ivo plotted confidence against source fidelity. In several families, confidence rose while factual support stayed flat. In two, factual support decreased because the shared reconstruction favored one plausible variant and suppressed contradictory evidence.

"Consensus can be useful," Lena said. "Family therapy depends on finding shared narratives sometimes."

Mara looked at her. "Shared narrative is not shared memory."

"Agreed."

"Were they told the difference?"

Lena looked at the old consent language. "Not well enough." One case involved a birthday cake. Three siblings disagreed over whether their deceased mother had baked it herself. The reconstruction chose homemade because family photographs showed flour on the counter. After four sessions, all three remembered her baking.

Later, a receipt was found from a bakery. The mother had bought the cake.

No harm followed. Nobody's life changed. That triviality made Elias more uneasy than a dramatic example would have. The system could manufacture consensus around something nobody would ever investigate because it did not matter.

Most memories were like that. Small.

Unverified. Safe from correction because no one had reason to check.

Mara said, "If they got the cake wrong, how many things do we never catch?" No one answered.

The question was unbounded. Elias closed the file.

"We don't chase every cake."

Mara looked at him, surprised.

"My rule?"

"Your rule."

"This is becoming intolerable."

But she smiled.

Orpheus was colder than Elias expected. Not metaphorically. The data center had been built for machines that no longer generated enough heat to justify the cooling system, so the basement air sat at sixteen degrees and smelled faintly of dust and old cable insulation.

Celia handed out access badges with temporary numbers. "Nothing leaves physically. No personal devices. Every query logged. If anyone attempts to copy raw patient material, I will personally make your remaining week unpleasant."

Ivo held up both hands. "I have seen your pleasant weeks. Threat received."

Three sealed server cabinets stood behind a mesh partition. Their labels were mundane: environmental backup, legal hold, infrastructure archive. Kade had hidden sensitive provenance beneath categories nobody wanted to investigate.

The first boot took twenty minutes.

Mara paced.

"This is less cinematic than crimes against memory should be."

"Mostly loading bars," Ivo said. "That's how civilization ends."

When the archive opened, there was no friendly interface. Directories displayed cryptic identifiers and dependency tables. Ivo smiled with genuine affection.

"Ugly. Beautiful."

Elias sat beside him. The raw provenance store preserved source links that later Morrow systems had normalized away. Instead of saying FAMILY PRIOR: VENN, Orpheus could show the exact tape, timestamp, transcription transform, training use and downstream reconstruction sessions influenced by that fragment.

They searched the phrase from Gabriel's 2014 session.

The path appeared.

Original source: Martin Saye hospital audio.

First Copy transfer: bereavement reassurance set.

Recipient: Gabriel Venn.

Acceptance feedback: high emotional congruence.

Downstream use: 417 sessions.

No one spoke.

"Four hundred seventeen," Mara said eventually.

Ivo checked the scope. "Not necessarily exact dialogue. Could be weighted influence on pattern selection."

"Still."

They opened aggregate statistics, not patient identities. Venn-derived fragments appeared in thousands of early reconstructions. So did Saye, Mercer, Calder and dozens of other families. The system had built composite relational priors from people who never knew one another.

"First Copy wasn't one family," Elias said.

"It was a statistical neighborhood," Ivo replied. "A place where enough families overlapped that the software could borrow what worked."

Mara leaned over the screen. "And Origin?"

Ivo searched.

A dependency tree appeared beneath First Copy. At its root was ORIGIN-HJ.

Helen Journal.

The code was unmistakable.

Elias felt the room narrow.

"How much?"

Ivo opened aggregate weightings. Origin-HJ contributed not the majority of all content but a disproportionately high share of maternal dialogue priors. Helen's recorded journals had been early,

abundant, emotionally varied and cleanly transcribed. The model learned from her because she was available.

Mara walked away from the terminal.

Lena followed but did not touch her.

"They made Mum a default," Mara said.

"An early one," Elias replied. "Not universal."

"I know what the numbers say."

He stopped speaking.

Further in the archive they found an internal study comparing direct-source accuracy against user acceptance. The conclusion was written with bureaucratic calm: strict provenance reduced reported emotional benefit in high-gap reconstructions. Cross-family completion increased narrative continuity.

One recommendation had been highlighted.

Consider acceptance as a primary outcome where factual recovery is impossible.

Celia read it twice. "There."

"The smoking gun you hate," Tess said over secure video.

Mara shook her head. "No. The mistake is older than one memo. This is just where somebody wrote it down."

That distinction mattered. Institutions loved singular bad decisions because singular decisions could be blamed on singular people. Orpheus showed a slower failure. Convenience, grief, interface design, research incentives, legal ambiguity and human hunger for coherent stories had accumulated until uncertainty itself became treated as a defect.

At 3:12 a.m., Ivo found the preserved natural-exposure study index.

Lena stared at the time on the monitor. Elias noticed and almost smiled at the old association.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Progress."

"Be quiet."

For once, the numbers had become intolerable for ordinary reasons: they were tired, cold and hungry. Mara ordered everyone out for breakfast before they made a mistake.

Celia objected that the archive still contained urgent work.

Mara pointed at her. "You too."

Celia looked offended.

Then she smiled.

During the second night inside Orpheus, they found the training feedback loops. The discovery made First Copy less like a library and more like a social organism built from millions of small approvals.

Every session produced post-exposure signals. Did the user say the scene felt right? Did distress reduce? Did they correct dialogue? Did they revisit the scene voluntarily? Those responses affected future ranking.

"Not machine consciousness," Ivo said. "Just optimization."

Mara looked at the charts. "Optimization is doing plenty."

One graph showed a donor-derived maternal gesture increasing in selection probability after repeated high acceptance. Another showed a phrase being gradually abandoned because users found it too formal.

Human reaction curated the library.

The model was not inventing culture alone. People were voting without knowing they were voting.

"This is why the output became so persuasive," Elias said. "Not because the AI understood families. Because thousands of people taught it which borrowed behaviors felt believable."

Lena nodded. "And therapeutic teams treated believability as clinical usefulness."

Celia asked whether any individual user could reasonably have understood that their emotional response would shape future patients.

Ivo pulled up a consent clause.

Anonymized session performance may be used to improve service quality.

Mara stared. "I want to set page fourteen on fire."

"This is page nine," Ivo said.

"Progress."

They found one unexpected result. Some direct-source details decreased in ranking because users repeatedly rejected them. A father who had actually used a certain phrase sounded too harsh in reconstruction, so therapists favored softer variants. Historical truth could lose to emotional plausibility even when the evidence was stronger.

Elias felt something close to anger at mathematics, which he knew was irrational.

"The system was rewarded for making dead people more acceptable," he said.

"Sometimes," Lena replied. "Also for making scenes tolerable enough for patients to continue treatment."

Mara groaned. "And there is the complication again."

"It matters."

"I know. That's why I hate it."

They reviewed outcomes. Some patients benefited. Others later reported confusion. Most had no long-term follow-up capable of distinguishing relief from autobiographical adoption.

The missing data was as important as what existed.

At 4 a.m., Elias found a note from Peter Kade embedded in a test log:

If acceptance becomes truth weight, the model will eventually learn the family people wish they had.

Ivo whistled quietly.

Mara read it. "Did anyone listen?"

The next commit showed the warning field had been removed from the production dashboard six months later because clinicians found it distracting.

No villainous meeting. No order to deceive.

A warning became clutter.

Clutter disappeared.

The consequences remained.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Child Named June

Lena came in person. She said there were some truths that should not arrive through a speaker in a secure room.

Mara replied that this sounded suspiciously like a sentence from Aster House. They met in Tess's office because Mara trusted it more than any clinical building. Lena sat on the edge of a chair, coat folded over her knees, and described the family consensus program.

Between 2010 and 2012, twenty-three families took part. Each family selected an event they remembered differently. A birthday. A hospital visit. A final conversation. A holiday argument. Researchers gathered photographs, messages, recordings and testimony, built a probable scene, then exposed family members to the same reconstruction over several sessions.

Agreement usually increased. Distress often decreased.

Factual accuracy could not always be measured.

"And you called that success," Elias said.

"The team did."

"You were the team."

"Yes."

Mara asked, "Were we one of the families?" Lena looked at her.

"Not officially."

"I hate adverbs."

"First Copy used your family data as a relational baseline. June's data was added because the system needed an adolescent peer relation. In some internal tests, June was modeled as a cousin, family friend, sometimes sister."

Mara stared.

"That's why Helen called her June in Dad's reconstruction."

"Probably."

"Twenty-four years later the model still thought she belonged to us."

"Not thought. The old prior retained a relational association."

Mara gave Lena a flat look. "Thank you for saving us from verbs." Elias asked, "Why June?"

"Her father donated extensive material. She and Mara had unusually high mutual familiarity scores after group sessions. The technical team found the pairing useful."

"Useful," Mara repeated.

Lena nodded. "I know." There was no defensiveness left in her. Elias found that harder to fight than excuses.

June joined by video. When Lena told her, she laughed for nearly half a minute.

"So I'm family."

Mara said, "Unfortunately."

"Do I get inheritance?"

"You can have Elias's notebooks."

"Cruel."

The joke eased something. Then June asked, "Did my dad get used too?"

Lena said yes. June's father, Martin Saye, supplied recordings after his death. His newspaper habit, laugh and certain speech patterns became part of First Copy's paternal cluster alongside Gabriel.

"So strangers remember my dad too," June said.

"Potentially."

"There it is."

Celia, listening, muttered, "I am going to ban that word." June looked down at her notebook.

"I used to think Mara and I were the only people who remembered that breakfast. Then I thought remembering it made it ours."

Mara asked, "Does knowing this change that?" June considered.

"No. It happened to us. The breakfast didn't happen, but being shown it did."

Elias wrote that down. Not because paper was more truthful.

Because some sentences deserved friction before they were lost.

June did not recognize Mara when Lena showed her the old participant photograph. That should have reduced the emotional charge of the discovery, but it did the opposite. If June had remembered a face, everyone could have argued about suggestion. Instead she looked at the photograph of fourteen-year-old Mara and said, "No. I don't know her."

Mara sat across the room with her arms folded.
"Good."

June glanced at her. "Is it?"

"Better than us pretending some mystical childhood bond explains the data."

The natural-exposure index showed the girls had been in adjacent sessions twice and a shared session once. The shared session was coded as cooperative recall. Neither family had been told that material from one child's reconstruction would be used to test familiarity in the other.

Lena read the procedural notes aloud because she had been present and did not want anyone else carrying the burden of translation. The adolescents were shown family scenes with subtle cross-donor insertions. Researchers measured correction rates, emotional disruption and later free recall. Mara corrected aggressively at first. June corrected less often but showed more physiological stress. After repeated exposures both corrected less.

"And that was success," June said.

"At the time, yes," Lena answered.

June looked at her for several seconds. "I appreciate that you don't keep saying 'we didn't know.'"

"We knew pieces. We failed to understand what the pieces added up to. Sometimes we also chose not to understand quickly enough."

Mara shifted in her chair. Elias could tell she wanted to challenge something and was choosing not to yet.

The notes referred to one moment when June began crying during a father reconstruction. Mara, waiting outside her own session, heard her through the wall. A staff member wrote that Mara became disruptive and demanded the session stop.

June smiled faintly. "That sounds like you."

"I don't remember it."

"Still sounds like you."

Mara's expression changed. The sentence carried warmth, but also danger. It was exactly how borrowed familiarity became persuasive.

"Maybe," she said. "Let's not turn personality into proof either."

June nodded. "Fair."

They requested the original corridor audio. It survived only in fragments. For twelve seconds a teenage voice could be heard saying, "She's crying. Why are you still doing it?"

The speaker classifier gave Mara 67 percent.

Elias did not raise the number.

Mara listened twice. "Could be me."

Lena's eyes filled before she looked away.

"Do you remember what happened?" Elias asked her.

"I remember someone stopping the session. I remember Rohe being angry about protocol interruption. I remember thinking the child outside understood the situation better than the adults inside."

Mara stood and walked to the window. "And then you stayed."

"Yes."

"I need that answer to keep being yes. Don't improve it later."

"I won't."

June closed the participant file. "I don't want the audio used publicly."

Celia, who had been waiting for exactly that question, said, "It won't be."

"Even if it proves the study harmed us?"

"Your privacy is not a prosecutorial resource unless you choose it to be."

June looked surprised. "You rehearsed that."

"I've had a difficult year."

They laughed, quietly at first, then enough to change the room.

Elias wrote down only the procedural facts. He did not write that Mara had once tried to stop a stranger's session. It might have been her. It might have fit her too perfectly. The truth did not need every flattering possibility.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Seven Mothers

The audit found seven women whose reconstructed mothers contained identifiable features from Helen. Celia wanted to contact them individually.

Tess wanted to know why only women. Ivo answered that the sample was too small and everybody glared at him until he added, "Which does not mean the question is bad."

Nia volunteered to speak with the other claimants if they consented. Four agreed to a private meeting. They gathered in a conference room with no cameras.

One woman remembered her mother cracking eggs one-handed, a habit traced to Helen's home videos. Another remembered the sentence about not licking the spoon.

A third had Helen's crooked finger. The fourth, Samira Cole, had something stranger.

"My mother hated me touching her hair," Samira said. "But in the reconstruction she used to let me tuck it behind her ear. I loved that detail. It felt private."

Helen tucked her hair behind her right ear when reading. Elias did not speak.

Samira watched him. "It's hers, isn't it?"

"The gesture appears in my mother's source set. We still need direct lineage confirmation."

"You sound like the company."

He looked at her.

"Sorry," she said. "That's unfair."

"Not entirely."

Nia asked the group a question Elias would not have thought to ask.

"Do you want to lose these memories?"

Nobody answered immediately. Samira said, "I don't think I can."

"Want to."

Samira looked at the table. "No." The woman who remembered egg cracking shook her head too.

Another said, "I want to stop believing it happened. That's different." Elias felt the distinction settle into the room.

Factual correction did not erase emotional attachment. One woman began crying and apologized for it. Nia passed her tissues without saying anything.

"My mother was difficult," the woman said. "The reconstruction made her kinder. Not dramatically. Just patient. I knew she wasn't always like that, but I thought maybe I'd forgotten a version of her. Now you're telling me the patience came from someone else's mother."

Elias wanted to say they were still verifying. He did not.

She looked at him. "Was your mother kind?" The question was not technical.

"Sometimes," he said.

"Difficult?"

"Sometimes."

"Good."

She wiped her face. "I don't want to borrow a saint." Mara, who had been silent near the wall, smiled slightly.

After the meeting she said, "That's the story."

"What?"

"Not that Morrow stole people. That it improved them."

Elias thought of Aster House language targets. Parental warmth.

Self-forgiveness. Home safety.

The system had not borrowed random family behavior. It had selected behavior that made reconstructions easier to live with.

The borrowed mother was often kinder than the real one. That was why people accepted her.

Seven mothers became twelve by the end of the week. Then fourteen. The number spread online before the audit team had verified all of them, because a former Morrow employee posted an internal chart stripped of context. Headlines called Helen Venn "the mother inside the machine." Mara threw her phone onto the sofa hard enough to make Gabriel look up from the kitchen.

"She's dead and they have still found a way to make her work overtime," Mara said.

Elias sat beside the laptop reviewing verified cases. "The headline is inaccurate."

"Thank God you're here."

The pattern was real, even if the public version was distorted. Early bereavement reconstructions involving mothers disproportionately used Helen-derived interaction fragments. Not her face in most cases. Not her exact voice. Small things. A hand on a shoulder after conflict. A refusal to finish another person's sentence. A certain practical question offered instead of emotional reassurance.

Lena reviewed claimant interviews for selection bias. People who had seen the news were now more likely to

interpret any maternal similarity as evidence of borrowing. She designed questions that did not mention Helen or known donor patterns.

One claimant, Priya Dutt, described a reconstructed memory of her mother placing sliced apple beside her while she studied. The act felt intensely familiar even though Priya could not confirm it from photographs or family accounts.

Orpheus showed the gesture had been selected from a Venn pattern bundle.

Mara listened to Priya's authorized interview. "Mum did that with me."

Elias remembered oranges, not apples.

Gabriel remembered both.

None of that mattered to Priya's provenance. The exact fruit had been generated from her household shopping history. The relational action came from Helen.

"That's sophisticated," Ivo said reluctantly. "Not magical. Just layered. Their system used personal evidence for surface detail and cross-family priors for interaction structure. Makes the result feel uniquely yours."

"Because half of it is," Elias said.

"Exactly."

The mixed nature of the scenes complicated every public argument. Calling them fake erased authentic source material. Calling them reconstructions concealed imported behavior. Calling them memories surrendered the question entirely.

The release authority drafted a new term: composite autobiographical simulation.

Mara read it and said, "That sounds like a washing-machine setting."

Celia crossed it out.

At a claimant meeting, one man became angry when told his mother's final reconstructed hug included a donor-derived gesture. "She hugged me," he said. "I remember her hugging me before any of this. You don't get to take that because some software used another woman's arm position."

Nobody tried.

That became important.

The team stopped presenting contamination as subtraction. A borrowed detail did not automatically invalidate the surrounding memory. Instead they marked provenance and uncertainty at the smallest defensible level.

Priya chose to annotate the apple scene but keep it.

"My mother did bring me food," she said. "Maybe not like that. Maybe not that day. But I don't want your correction to become another machine telling me what I'm allowed to feel."

Lena thanked her.

After the meeting, Mara told Elias, "The borrowed mother was often kinder because kindness tested better."

"Yes."

"And now people are going to feel guilty for preferring her."

He thought of Gabriel liking June's father's sentence. "Then the release process has to make room for that too."

Mara looked toward the claimant room. "Good luck putting that on a form."

He almost said forms could be improved.

Then he saw her expression and kept the thought to himself.

A claimant named Ruth Bell refused to join the growing group called the Seven Mothers because, as she put it, "I have one mother and she was difficult enough." Her case contained a Helen-derived phrase but none of the other known Venn patterns.

Ruth's reconstructed mother had said, "Put a coat on before you make a tragedy out of the weather."

Mara laughed when she heard it. "Mum said that."

Gabriel confirmed a similar phrase. A direct tape contained the exact wording.

Ruth did not care.

"My mother also told me to wear a coat," she said. "People say the same things. I don't want a television crew deciding Helen Venn raised me."

Her irritation exposed another danger in the public grouping. The label Seven Mothers had turned claimants into a category before the technical relationships were fully known.

Tess stopped using it.

The audit team began describing each case separately, even when that made summaries longer.

Ruth chose to receive only a provenance note for the phrase, not a full reconstruction review. "I know enough."

Mara told Elias afterward, "Every system wants to make a cohort. Researchers, journalists, lawyers."

"Cohorts are useful."

"People are inconvenient."

"Also true."

They kept both facts, as usual.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Pattern Library

The Pattern Library had a user interface. That fact made Elias angrier than the technical documents.

Someone had designed buttons. Ivo restored an internal Fallow application from Orpheus. The screen looked ancient: grey panels, blue tabs, tiny icons. On the left were categories of relational behavior. On the right, donor clips.

MATERNAL REASSURANCE.

PATERNAL HUMOR.

SIBLING CONFLICT.

REPAIR AFTER ARGUMENT.

NONVERBAL AFFECTION.

A researcher could select a target and preview source examples. Helen appeared under MATERNAL REASSURANCE.

A clip showed her sitting beside twelve-year-old Mara after a school argument.

"You don't have to like what happened to survive the afternoon," Helen said.

Elias had forgotten the scene. Mara had not.

"That was after I got suspended."

"You were suspended?"

"See? This investigation is already improving your childhood."

The interface allowed researchers to rate clips for emotional clarity, naturalness and transferability. Helen's clip scored high on all three.

Mara stared at transferability.

"They rated how well Mum could belong to someone else."

No one corrected her. The library included Martin Saye, Gabriel, dozens of other parents, children and spouses. People were not stored as whole people. They were segmented by useful moments.

A laugh. A look across a room.

A hand on a shoulder. An apology.

Ivo opened usage history. Aster House researchers selected clips manually at first.

Later versions automated selection. By 2012 the system could choose behavior patterns based on therapeutic goals.

"There," Elias said.

One setting read MAXIMIZE FAMILIARITY. Another read MAXIMIZE SOURCE FIDELITY.

They were separate sliders. Often moving one reduced the other.

Mara looked at Lena. "Which did therapists choose?"
Lena answered softly. "Usually familiarity."

"Why?"

"Because clients tolerated the session better."

"Meaning they liked it."

"Often."

Celia asked Ivo to export the configuration logs. One statistic stood out.

Across 318 early sessions, average source fidelity had been 61 percent. Average perceived familiarity was 88 percent.

The system had become good at making scenes feel like home before it became good at reconstructing what happened there. Elias looked at the interface.

A button at the bottom read ACCEPT AS BASELINE. He imagined a tired therapist clicking it after a grieving person said, yes, that feels like her.

One click. Then the borrowed detail became the starting point for the next session.

The Pattern Library interface had been built for speed. Elias hated it for that. Every ethical uncertainty that had consumed months of their lives had once been reduced to filters, sliders and colored confidence bars.

Ivo opened a training version disconnected from patient data. "Look at this."

A therapist could choose desired emotional outcome: reassurance, closure, reduced guilt, relational continuity. Under each outcome, the system ranked patterns associated with positive post-session scores.

Mara leaned over his shoulder. "Closure is a menu option."

"Apparently."

"Can I order two closures and a side of fries?"

The joke died when they opened the historical usage notes.

Pattern Fourteen, practical care after vulnerability, had exceptionally high acceptance. Pattern Nine, shared humor after conflict, reduced session abandonment. Pattern Three, explicit verbal forgiveness, tested badly in some cultures and well in others. Engineers had added demographic filters to improve fit.

"They A/B tested grief," Tess said.

Ivo winced. "Technically, yes."

"Do not say technically before something horrible."

Elias studied the old UI. The researchers had believed they were helping clinicians avoid scenes that felt emotionally implausible. A bereaved person rejecting a reconstruction could experience renewed distress. Pattern selection was supposed to reduce that risk.

Then the outcome metric became a goal.

The distinction was visible in version notes. Early releases displayed source confidence above acceptance. Later releases placed emotional congruence first because therapists used it more often. Eventually a recommended pattern could be accepted as baseline

with one click, carrying it into subsequent sessions as if it belonged to the family model.

"There," Elias said. "That's the ratchet."

Mara nodded. "Borrow once, then treat acceptance as evidence you borrowed correctly."

"Then future reconstructions see the borrowed detail as part of the person's history."

Tess wrote that down, then crossed it out. "Too clean?"

"Too clean," Mara said. "Some people probably did have similar behavior. Some borrowed things accidentally matched."

"You are destroying journalism as a profession."

"Aim higher."

They tested a historical donor phrase against later family models. The same basic reassurance moved through six generations of reconstructions, changing slightly each time. A sentence from one father became a gesture in another family, then a combined dialogue-action pattern elsewhere. Provenance became diffuse.

"Like quoting someone who quoted someone who forgot it was a quote," Ivo said.

"Except the quote becomes a memory," Elias replied.

At the bottom of the interface, ACCEPT AS BASELINE remained visible.

Lena arrived midway through the review and stopped when she saw it. "I clicked that."

Mara turned.

"How often?"

"I don't know. Hundreds of times, probably."

"On me?"

"At least once."

The answer sat between them.

Lena did not explain that she had followed protocol. She did not say everyone did it. She simply stood there looking at the button.

Mara walked over and closed the application.

"I don't need to watch you punish yourself," she said. "I need you to help prove what the button did."

Lena nodded.

That afternoon they mapped exactly how baseline acceptance propagated. The result was more damaging than any dramatic confession. A single click could alter which future gaps the system considered already resolved.

The interface had made doubt inconvenient.

That was enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Keep the Ugly Version

Tess published nothing. Instead she wrote the article, printed it, and handed copies to Elias, Mara, Lena, Ivo and Celia.

"Find the places where I'm making it cleaner than it was."

Mara smiled. "You have learned my religion." The draft was forty pages.

It described donor libraries, First Copy, consensus testing and the Pattern Library. It avoided saying memories were stolen because, as Tess wrote, memory could not be moved like property. It said identifiable features were reused without meaningful consent.

Elias circled meaningful.

"Too vague?" Tess asked.

"Maybe."

Mara said, "Keep it. Legal consent existed in some cases. Meaningful is the argument." Lena marked a paragraph calling therapists complicit.

"Too strong?" Tess asked.

"No. Too broad. Some therapists didn't know donor behavior was being reused."

"You did."

"Eventually."

Tess left the sentence and added eventually. Celia objected to publishing the number of donor families until the court notified them.

Tess agreed. Ivo corrected three technical metaphors and one use of algorithm that made him visibly unhappy.

Mara read the ending twice.

"This is too neat."

The final paragraph argued that Morrow had replaced uncertainty with synthetic certainty.

"That's true," Elias said.

"Partly. But some people knew it was synthetic and still wanted it. Dad did, eventually. Nia doesn't want to lose the strawberries even though they weren't hers. The ugly version is that people helped the system work because it gave them something they wanted."

Tess crossed out the ending.

"Write it," she said.

Mara stared at the page.

"I'm not a journalist."

"You are currently the person complaining."

Mara wrote by hand. The danger was not that the machine fooled everyone. Sometimes people knew the scene was uncertain and loved it anyway. Sometimes the false detail became precious before anyone discovered where it came from. The harm begins when comfort is presented as evidence, when borrowed intimacy is hidden, and when a system learns that a person's willingness to believe is proof that it should be believed.

She stopped. Elias read over her shoulder.

"That's good."

"I know."

"I was trying to be supportive."

"Don't start."

Tess used the paragraph almost unchanged. Publication was scheduled for Monday.

On Sunday night, someone released the entire Pattern Library online. Unredacted.

With donor names. Including Helen Venn.

Tess's draft was forty-three pages long and, according to Mara, "suspiciously readable." They met at her office on a Saturday with red pens, takeout containers and a rule that nobody could defend a sentence merely because it sounded good.

The first paragraph called Helen "the unwitting prototype for a generation of synthetic mothers."

Mara drew a line through it.

"Why?" Tess asked.

"Because prototype makes it sound like the system started with her. It didn't. And synthetic mother implies full identity transfer. Most people got fragments."

Tess rewrote.

Elias objected to a sentence saying First Copy created false memories. "Sometimes it reinforced real ones. Sometimes it added false detail. Sometimes we cannot determine which."

"That sentence is unbearable," Tess said.

"Accurate."

"Unbearably accurate."

Lena removed language suggesting all participants were deceived. Some had been told cross-family material could appear, though consent forms were vague and comprehension testing poor. Celia insisted the article distinguish unethical practice from conduct already established as unlawful.

Ivo corrected three technical metaphors and then admitted his replacement metaphors were worse.

By midnight the article was less dramatic and more disturbing.

The story no longer depended on one evil decision. It showed a system learning to treat emotional acceptance as a proxy for truth, institutions preserving ambiguity because outcomes looked positive, and families gradually receiving polished scenes whose provenance had been flattened.

Mara read the final section twice.

"Keep the ugly version," she said.

Tess leaned back. "Meaning?"

"Leave in the part where Morrow helped some people."

Celia looked surprised.

Mara continued. "If you make it useless, then anyone who was helped has to choose between their experience and your reporting. That's how people stop listening."

Tess restored two paragraphs describing trauma patients who valued the system despite later provenance concerns.

At 2:10 a.m. they printed a clean copy.

Tess did not publish.

She planned to wait until Monday so the release authority could notify newly identified donors first.

At 2:37 her phone began vibrating.

One message. Then six. Then dozens.

Ivo checked his laptop and swore.

A public file repository had appeared containing the Pattern Library export. Not the redacted research interface they had reviewed. Raw donor names. Family identifiers. Source snippets. Internal comments.

Helen Venn appeared in hundreds of entries.

So did June Saye.

Mara stood so quickly her chair fell backward.

"Take it down."

"We don't control the host," Ivo said. "Mirrors are already appearing."

Tess stared at her unpublished article as if it had become irrelevant in front of her.

Celia was already calling emergency counsel.

Elias searched the leak metadata. The package had been prepared carefully. Indexes. Searchable names. A README claiming the public had a right to know whose lives trained Morrow.

"This isn't whistleblowing," Mara said. "It's another consent violation."

Elias agreed.

Then he saw something in the archive signature.

A key prefix he recognized.

His own.

Not current. An old 2018 failsafe credential.

He felt the floor of the room tilt without moving.

Tess looked at him. "What?"

Elias did not answer until he verified it twice.

"Part of the release package was signed with a key I created."

Mara's face went still.

"Did you leak this?"

"I don't know."

The old answer returned with all its former ugliness.

Nobody in the room treated it as reassurance.

The leak did something Tess's careful article never could: it made the scandal participatory. Within hours, strangers were searching donor names, matching phrases and building public maps of family overlap.

Most of the maps were wrong.

Some were disturbingly right.

Ivo created a triage system that flagged posts containing protected minors, medical details or raw audio. Lawyers sent takedown notices faster than hosts could respond. Copies multiplied anyway.

Mara watched a livestream in which a self-described memory detective claimed to identify Helen's laugh in twelve unrelated reconstructions.

"That's not even Mum's laugh," she said.

"How certain?" Elias asked.

"Ninety percent."

He looked at her.

"Fine. I deserve that."

The stream had forty thousand viewers.

Tess refused television interviews for two days because producers wanted her to explain "how many people have Helen Venn inside them." She told one producer the question was scientifically meaningless. They asked if she could say that on camera in under eight seconds.

Nia became a target after someone linked her case to the first public hand comparison. Anonymous users accused her of fabricating grief for attention. Others treated her as proof all Morrow clients had fake parents.

"I miss when strangers only misunderstood me in person," she said.

The human consequences changed the investigation's priorities. Finding the leaker remained important, but reducing secondary harm became urgent. Celia established a donor contact line. Mara volunteered because people were more willing to speak to someone whose family data was already exposed.

One caller, an elderly man, asked whether he should tell his children their mother's voice appeared in a leaked training set.

Mara did not answer for him.

"Do they know you used Morrow?"

"No."

"Then maybe start with what you want them to know, not what the internet says is important."

After the call, she stared at the headset.

"This is the part nobody puts in thrillers," she said. "Customer support after catastrophe."

Elias smiled. "It would be a difficult episode."

"Bottle episode. One room. Everyone crying into bad phones."

For six hours they took calls.

By midnight Mara had stopped making jokes.

A teenager called because a leaked donor note suggested her dead father had participated in a grief study she never knew about. She wanted the raw file immediately.

Mara asked her age.

Seventeen.

Mara closed her eyes.

"You have the right to request it. You also have the right not to make that decision tonight."

The girl whispered, "What would you do?"

Mara looked at Elias across the room.

"I spent years wishing somebody had said I could wait. So I'm saying it to you. You can wait."

The line remained quiet for a long time.

"Okay," the girl said.

Afterward Mara removed the headset.

No one spoke.

The leak had been framed as radical transparency.

In practice, it had taken thousands of private choices and made them urgent without permission.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mother Set Three

By morning, Helen's face was everywhere. Clips from the Pattern Library spread across social media under titles like THE WOMAN INSIDE 63 MEMORIES and MORROW'S ORIGINAL MOTHER.

Elias closed his phone after twelve minutes. Mara threw hers against a sofa cushion and missed.

"Original mother," she said. "That's disgusting."

Gabriel called and asked what he should do.

"Nothing," Elias said.

"People are emailing me."

"Don't answer."

"One woman says Helen saved her life."

Mara looked up. Gabriel continued, "She had a reconstruction after her mother died. Helen's voice pattern apparently supplied some sentence. The woman says she doesn't care where it came from."

"Dad, don't engage."

"I didn't."

Then he added, "I wanted to." The leak contained more than names. It included rankings.

Helen was Donor Mother Set 3. High warmth.

High verbal clarity. Moderate conflict realism.

High transferability. Martin Saye was Paternal Set 7.

Gabriel appeared in conflict and humor clusters but not reassurance. Mara found this funny for six seconds before becoming furious again.

The leak also exposed donor families who had never been publicly connected to Morrow. Journalists called them. Strangers contacted them to ask whether particular gestures belonged to their dead relatives.

Celia convened an emergency meeting.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of."

"Who leaked it?" Elias asked.

"Unknown."

"Access list?"

"Twenty-three people, including us."

Mara looked around the table. "Comforting." Tess said, "Not me."

Ivo said, "Not me." Lena said nothing because denial would not narrow anything.

Elias had not leaked it. He believed Mara had not.

Belief was not evidence. That thought still arrived automatically.

The court froze all archive releases. Claimants protested.

Morrow's former clients split into camps almost immediately. Some demanded full provenance. Others demanded that no one disturb their reconstructions. A group called Keep Our Memories formed within hours.

Their statement said: We understand reconstructions may contain inferred material. We do not consent to having emotionally meaningful memories dismantled by third parties in the name of correction.

Elias read it twice. They were not irrational.

That complicated everything. Then Ivo called him privately.

"I found something in the leak metadata."

"What?"

"The files weren't exported from Orpheus last night. They were packaged in 2017."

"Meaning?"

"Somebody prepared this leak nine years ago."

"Kade?"

"Maybe. But the archive bundle has an internal label."

Ivo sent a screenshot.
MOTHER_SET_3_PUBLIC_FAILSAFE.zip

Created by user EV-17. Elias stared at the initials.

EV.

His own legacy identifier. He had prepared the leak.

Before he lost the memory of doing it. The first message to Gabriel arrived at 7:04 a.m.

Your wife was in my mother's memory. Thank you. The second arrived three minutes later.

How much were you paid? By noon there were hundreds.

Some people treated Helen as a public figure. They clipped her home videos into montages, added music, analyzed her speech. One account posted a slowed video of her washing dishes with the caption THE GESTURE THAT FOOLED 63 FAMILIES.

Elias reported it, then stopped because copies multiplied faster than he could remove them. Mara refused to watch any of it.

"I spent half my life trying to stop strangers from deciding who I was from one sentence," she said. "Now Mum gets an algorithmic afterlife as a hand model. Perfect."

Gabriel reacted differently. He read the messages. Elias told him not to.

"Some are kind."

"Some aren't."

"I know."

One came from a man whose wife had used Morrow after losing her mother. The reconstruction included Helen's phrase about surviving the afternoon. The wife later repeated it during cancer treatment. The man said those words became part of their marriage.

Gabriel printed the email. Mara found it on his table and became angry.

"You can't collect these like tributes."

"Why not?"

"Because they came from misuse."

"They also came from people."

"Mum didn't consent."

"No."

"Then why does it make you happy?"

Gabriel looked at the paper. "Because something she said helped someone." Mara turned away.

Elias expected the argument to escalate. Instead Gabriel added, "And I hate how it happened. Both."

Mara sat down. For several minutes none of them spoke.

The leak had turned Helen into a symbol for competing moral positions. To some she was evidence of technological abuse. To others she was proof that borrowed memory could still carry comfort. To Gabriel she remained his wife, though even that role had never contained all of her.

Elias understood why public stories became dangerous. They flattened people into useful meanings. Helen had been used as a donor because her behavior transferred well.

Now the scandal was doing the same thing again.

By sunrise, Helen's name had become a search term. Strangers clipped seconds from family footage and paired them with claimant reconstructions. Some

comparisons were valid. Others were absurd. One viral video claimed Helen's habit of touching her hair behind one ear proved direct contamination in forty-three women.

Mara watched ten seconds and closed the app.

"I do that," Tess said.

"Congratulations. You're Mum now."

The joke did not survive the next notification. Someone had posted the Venn family address from 2008.

Celia moved Gabriel temporarily to a hotel before he could object. Mara refused protective transport and then accepted after a photographer appeared outside her flat.

Elias hated the speed at which private material became public mythology. Helen was no longer their mother in the online conversation. She was Mother Set Three, Origin Woman, the first ghost in Morrow. People made fan art. Conspiracy channels claimed she had secretly founded the company. One account sold shirts with her face before noon.

"Can we sue everyone?" Gabriel asked over video.

"Not efficiently," Celia said.

"I miss when problems were local."

Tess delayed her article again and published only a short statement condemning the leak and clarifying that donor presence did not mean entire memories were fabricated.

The correction spread one tenth as far as the leak.

Elias spent the day helping verify high-risk disclosures. A donor family with a living child had been named. A claimant's abuse-related reconstruction

contained a source tag that could identify another participant. Those were immediate harms, not abstract transparency questions.

Mara joined the triage despite Celia telling her not to.

"My mother is already searchable," she said. "Let me help people whose children aren't."

Near evening Nia arrived with groceries because the office had forgotten food again. She looked exhausted.

"Everyone keeps asking if my mother was real," she said.

Elias looked up. "What?"

"Because Helen's hand appeared in my reconstruction. People online think the whole person was generated. I posted one photo of Mum and now strangers are analyzing whether she resembles donor faces."

Mara's expression hardened. "Delete the post if you want. You don't owe them proof your mother existed."

Nia sat down. "I know. I just didn't expect uncertainty to be contagious."

That phrase stayed with Elias.

The scandal was doing at social scale what Morrow had done individually. It was replacing messy provenance with a cleaner story. Either memories were authentic or fake. Either Morrow had healed people or deceived them. Either Helen was a source or a stolen identity. Binary narratives were easier to distribute.

At 8 p.m. Gabriel called Mara privately. Elias heard only her side.

"No, Dad... I know... Don't read comments... because none of them knew her... yes, I know that includes the nice ones."

After she hung up, she sat beside Elias.

"Someone wrote that Mum's smile saved their life."

He waited.

"I don't know what to do with that."

"You don't have to do anything."

"I know. That's the annoying part."

Across the room, Ivo found the first clue in the leak packaging. The donor files had been exported recently, but the release trigger referenced a dormant safeguard Elias created in 2018.

Someone had not stolen his old key exactly. They had activated a mechanism he had built for a different purpose.

Elias looked at the timestamp.

The trigger changed three days ago.

The investigation turned inward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Promise Gabriel Made

Elias did not tell Mara immediately. That was a mistake.

He told himself he needed verification. He checked the user identifier, access logs and signature key. All pointed to his 2017 research account.

By the time he called her, Tess had already seen the same metadata. Mara answered with, "You had one job."

"I was verifying."

"You were hiding."

"For forty minutes."

"Your favorite unit of moral delay."

They met at Gabriel's house because it was becoming the family headquarters for bad information. Elias showed them the bundle creation record.

Gabriel read it and said, "Did you leak it now?"

"No."

"Did you prepare it then?"

"Apparently."

"Do you remember?"

"No."

Mara sat back. "Of course." Elias resisted defending himself.

Part One had taught him how often missing memory invited moral imagination. He could picture himself in 2017 deciding that if Morrow buried donor misuse, a public archive should exist. He could also picture himself doing it recklessly.

Both versions were plausible. Gabriel went to the wooden letter box and removed another envelope.

"I was told not to give you this unless you asked about Helen's public release."

Elias looked at him. "By whom?"

"You."

Mara laughed once. "Naturally." The envelope was addressed in Elias's handwriting.

DAD. IF MUM BECOMES PUBLIC, READ THIS WITH
MARA PRESENT.

Inside was a letter dated August 2018, shortly before Elias underwent the procedure that weakened his access to those years. Dad,

I made a failsafe copy of the donor library because Morrow is deleting provenance. Do not release it. The point is to preserve evidence, not expose families. I put a delay trigger on the archive that should require two conditions: Morrow denies the library existed, and the court process fails.

If it releases without both conditions, something went wrong. I am sorry for involving Mum again.

At the bottom: Mara knows nothing about this. Keep it that way unless it becomes necessary.

Mara read that line three times.

"You protected me by lying to me. Again."

"Past me did."

"Convenient distinction."

"Not morally. Factually."

She looked away. Gabriel said, "There is one more part."

He unfolded a second page. If the archive releases, find the trigger record before assuming sabotage. I designed it to fail closed. Someone may have changed the conditions.

Elias felt the investigation turn. The leak had been his safeguard.

But he had not intended it to happen now. Someone had altered the trigger.

Elias told Mara about the old safeguard in a windowless interview room because Celia insisted on recording the disclosure. Mara arrived already angry, which saved time.

"Start with the part you didn't tell me yesterday."

He did.

In 2018, before undergoing the reconsolidation procedure that weakened his memory of finding Mara, Elias had created several contingency mechanisms. Most were physical: notebooks, locker material, redundant paper records. One was digital. If Morrow ever attempted to destroy specific legacy provenance tables, an encrypted package would be copied to an external escrow server.

"Copied," Mara said. "Not published."

"Correct."

"And not with donor names exposed."

"Correct."

"So someone changed it."

"Yes."

"When did you remember building this?"

"I didn't. I found the design notes this morning."

Mara laughed once, without humor. "Your past self continues to be the worst colleague in the world."

Elias accepted that.

The safeguard had been elegant by 2018 standards. It monitored checksum changes in a set of files related to Fallow. If too many changed without matching legal authorization, the system copied originals to a

preservation endpoint controlled by a lawyer Elias trusted at the time. It was not meant for public release.

The lawyer had died in 2023. The endpoint migrated twice. Morrow's bankruptcy administrators later absorbed parts of the infrastructure without knowing its purpose.

Ivo traced the altered trigger to a maintenance account used by the release authority.

"Could be compromised," he said. "Could be an insider. Could be a migration script doing something stupid."

Mara looked at Elias. "Could be you?"

"Current me? No."

"Past you?"

He hated the question because it was reasonable. "Possibly."

They searched his old notes.

One page contained a sentence: IF THEY CLEAN IT, MAKE IT UGLY AGAIN.

Mara closed her eyes.

"That's exactly the sort of dramatic rubbish you wrote when you weren't sleeping."

"Agreed."

A second note clarified: ugly means raw provenance preserved for counsel, not public.

"Better," she said.

The distinction gave him relief, which he immediately distrusted.

Celia questioned him for two hours. She was not gentle. Had he shared private keys? Had he created

dead-man triggers? Did any safeguard reference public repositories? Could old code interpret a failed escrow endpoint as permission to fall back elsewhere?

On the final question Elias hesitated.

Ivo noticed. "What?"

"I used distributed mirrors for one research archive in 2017. Not patient data."

"Same library?"

"Maybe."

They found it after another hour. The safeguard reused a generic preservation module. A fallback option existed but had been disabled. Three days ago someone enabled it and changed the payload from a narrow checksum set to the full Pattern Library.

Not accidental.

Mara stood beside the whiteboard. "So somebody found your old escape hatch and turned it into a bomb."

"Yes."

"Who knew it existed?"

Elias listed names.

Lena.

Jonah Quill.

Possibly Rohe through internal audit.

Two former security engineers.

And Celia, after 2025.

Celia wrote her own name on the board without comment.

That mattered to Elias. Institutions usually began investigations by removing themselves from the suspect list.

Mara stared at the names. "I hate all of you."

"Reasonable," Ivo said.

"You're not on the list."

"Give it time."

The safeguard had protected evidence once. Now someone had weaponized the same design against privacy. Elias felt no satisfaction that the original intention had been different. Tools outlived intention.

He thought of Morrow itself.

The parallel was unpleasant enough to be useful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mara's Seaside

Mara remembered Ternmouth with red railings. The railings were green.

She knew because photographs showed them, municipal records showed them, and the town council had apparently used the same shade of green since 1996 because local government could achieve continuity when families could not.

Still, when she pictured the promenade, the railings were red.

"Why are we here?" Elias asked.

They stood near the old storage facility while gulls fought over something unidentifiable.

"Because I have a memory I want to check."

He waited.

"Mum and me. Here. Just us. I was maybe thirteen. She told me she was scared about her headaches."

"Do you have a reason to correct it?"

Mara smiled faintly. "My rule. Annoying when used against me."

"You asked to check."

"Because if Mum's voice journals came from here, maybe the memory is based on them."

They walked toward the pier. Mara pointed to a bench.

"There."

A plaque on the bench dated its installation to 2013. Mara swore.

"Could have been another bench."

"I know."

They kept walking. At the end of the pier, she stopped.

"This is what Fallow did to me before it did anything else. It turned being wrong into an emergency."

Elias looked at the sea.

"I did that without Fallow."

"Yes. You were naturally gifted."

She leaned on the railing, green beneath her hands.

"I remember Mum saying she was afraid of losing words. That might be real. Dad says she was. The recording says it. But I don't know if she told me here."

"Does it matter?"

Mara considered.

"Not legally. Not medically. Maybe emotionally."

"Do you want to know?"

"I want to want not to know."

Elias understood that perfectly. They did not search.

Instead they bought coffee and walked back through town. Near the station, Mara stopped at a charity shop.

In the window was a red cardigan. She laughed so suddenly a passerby looked at her.

"What?" Elias asked.

"Nothing. Everything. Nia's cardigan. Dad's red coat. My red railings. We should ban red from memory research."

Elias smiled. Then Mara's phone rang.

It was June. Her first sentence wiped the humor away.

"Someone sent me a reconstruction I never requested."

Ternmouth looked smaller than Mara remembered and far less red. She had insisted on going because the leak contained a cluster labeled SEASIDE FAMILY COMFORT SET, and several entries traced to Venn recordings from a childhood holiday.

"The railings were red," she said as soon as they left the station.

They were green.

Municipal archive photographs confirmed they had been green during every year Mara could have visited.

"Paint can change between records," Elias offered.

She looked at him. "Don't help."

"Right."

The hotel where they had stayed was still open under a different name. The breakfast room had been renovated, but the windows remained. Mara stood near one and described white tablecloths, a waiter with a scar, Helen stealing marmalade packets into her handbag.

Gabriel confirmed the marmalade theft over the phone.

"She called it recovering the room rate," he said.

Mara smiled. "That part is ours."

The hotel archive held old promotional photographs. The railings visible from the dining room were green. The tablecloths were cream, not white.

"Close enough," Mara said.

"For what?"

"For memory. Not evidence."

That distinction had become almost casual between them.

They found one stranger detail. Mara remembered a ceramic gull on every table. No photograph showed gulls. Instead a Fallow reconstruction of the Ternmouth breakfast room had inserted small white bird ornaments from another hotel source.

Mara stared at the screen when Ivo sent the match.

"I hate those gulls."

"Do you remember hating them at the time?" Elias asked.

"I remember thinking they were tacky."

"Which could have formed after the reconstruction."

"Yes. I know."

She walked outside alone.

Elias waited five minutes before following. Mara sat on the sea wall eating chips despite the wind.

"You can stop checking on me," she said.

"I wanted chips."

"Liar."

He sat anyway.

For a while they watched gulls harass tourists. Real gulls, loud and unpleasant.

"If the red railings are wrong, the tablecloths are wrong and the ceramic birds are borrowed, what do I have left of this trip?" Mara asked.

"Mum stole marmalade."

She laughed.

"Dad remembers that too," Elias continued. "There's a receipt from the hotel. Photos show we were here. You remember getting sick on the pier and I remember being furious because you vomited on my shoes."

"That was your fault for standing there."

"The point is, memories don't collapse because details fail."

Mara looked at the water. "You would have hated that sentence two years ago."

"I still dislike it."

"Better."

Her phone rang.

June.

Mara answered with a joke, then stopped smiling.

Someone had sent June a reconstruction she never requested. No link, no app prompt. A video file delivered through an anonymous encrypted drop.

It showed a hotel breakfast room.

White tablecloths.

Her dead father sitting across from her.

A ceramic gull between them.

Mara stood before June finished describing it.

The sea, the railings and the argument about memory disappeared from importance.

Someone was no longer merely leaking old data.

Someone was generating new scenes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

White Hotel

The file sent to June was forty-two seconds long. It showed a hotel breakfast room with white tablecloths. Martin Saye sat across from her. He had been dead twenty-two years.

June was thirty-one in the reconstruction, not fifteen. That meant it was newly generated.

She had not authorized it. Martin looked toward her and said, "You kept the notebook. Good."

Then the file ended. Elias watched it three times.

"Source confidence?"

"Stripped," Ivo said.

"Metadata?"

"Also stripped. But the render engine fingerprint looks like late Morrow Vela, not Fallow."

June appeared on the secure call, furious rather than frightened.

"Somebody used my dad to send me a message."

"Yes," Elias said.

"Can the system know I kept the notebook?"

"If whoever generated it knew."

"So this is a person."

"Almost certainly."

That mattered. They were not dealing with autonomous AI behavior.

Someone was using reconstruction technology as a communication medium because the message would be emotionally impossible to ignore. Mara said, "Why a white hotel?"

June frowned. "What?"

"The room. Do you recognize it?"

"No."

Nia, who had joined the claimant working group, did.

"I do."

She found a photograph in her own source bundle. A hotel in Brighton where Rosa Vale attended a conference in 2019.

White tablecloths. Brass lamps. Same room.

"That's my mother's hotel," Nia said.

The new reconstruction had borrowed setting material from another claimant. Ivo stared at the screen.

"Whoever did this has access to the released source bundles."

Celia said, "Which narrows to staff, contractors and anyone who downloaded their own records."

"And the leak," Elias replied. "Some source assets are public now."

June leaned toward the camera. "Why tell me I kept the notebook?" Mara looked at the paper copy beside her.

"Maybe because they want us to read something in it."

They returned to June's entries. One line near the end had been overlooked because it appeared to be a school note.

White hotel. Room 14. Peter says First Copy has a parent. Elias read it aloud.

"A parent?"

June shook her head. "No memory." Ivo searched Orpheus.

A project dependency appeared. FIRST COPY parent model: ORIGIN.

The composite family was not the oldest model. Something had come before it.

June refused to watch the unauthorized reconstruction a second time. That decision forced the investigators to work from a forensic copy while respecting her request not to receive content summaries beyond what was necessary.

"I already saw enough," she told Elias. "I don't need to become the best witness to my own violation."

The file was technically sophisticated but not magical. It used released photographs of Martin Saye, audio from a legitimate family archive and environmental textures from the leaked Pattern Library. The face model had artifacts around the teeth. The voice contained breath timing errors. A careful evaluator could detect generation.

A grieving daughter receiving it unexpectedly might not begin with evaluation.

The scene lasted forty-two seconds. Martin sat at a table and said, "You don't have to keep the good version of me."

June had never heard him say that.

The phrase did not exist in direct Saye sources.

It did appear in a Mara interview from 2011: Keep the ugly version.

Not identical. Same relational pattern.

"They're composing deliberately," Ivo said. "Not just replaying leaked material."

Elias examined metadata. The generator used an obsolete Morrow branch, likely reconstructed from leaked research code. Whoever made it understood enough about First Copy to exploit provenance confusion.

"Could be one person?" Celia asked.

"Could. But the delivery infrastructure suggests preparation."

June joined by audio only. "What do they want?"

No demand had arrived.

That was worse.

Tess suggested ideological motive: prove that once source libraries were public, anyone could recreate Morrow's harm. Mara rejected the romantic framing.

"If your demonstration requires violating people, you're not exposing the problem. You're auditioning for it."

A second clue appeared in the project dependency file. The generator called an ancestral model named ORIGIN.

First Copy was not the root.

Orpheus contained only partial references to Origin because later migrations treated it as infrastructure rather than a patient model. Ivo found a manifest listing ORIGIN-HJ, ORIGIN-ENV and ORIGIN-VOICE.

HJ was Helen Journal.

ENV referenced early environmental priors.

VOICE referenced a speaker-neutral prosody model trained from multiple families.

Mara looked at the screen. "So Origin is not Mum."

"Not entirely," Elias said.

"Good. Because the internet has already made her the Virgin Mary of fake memories."

They traced the anonymous reconstruction's rendering signature to a machine that had authenticated once against a defunct Morrow research license. The license belonged to St. Anne's Hospital.

Room 4C appeared in the associated study records.

Lena went quiet.

"You know it," Elias said.

"I know the wing. Fallow used it for natural exposure work after Aster House ran out of space."

June asked what natural exposure meant.

Lena answered slowly. "Testing whether people absorbed reconstructed material without being told which parts were synthetic."

No one spoke for several seconds.

June said, "That sounds less natural when you explain it."

The unauthorized file had just connected a current attacker to the oldest undisclosed phase of Fallow research.

Elias saved the dependency manifest to the legal evidence set.

He did not need a dramatic theory yet.

They had an address.

The forensic analysis of June's hotel scene produced one strange clue: the generator had deliberately reduced visual quality in several frames. Ivo initially assumed processing limits. Then he compared renders.

"It's hiding seams," he said.

By lowering detail around the face and hands, the attacker made source inconsistencies harder to notice. The result resembled older Morrow output, which users associated with archived authenticity.

"They're making it look old on purpose," Elias said.

"Yes. Like adding film grain to fake footage."

Mara looked disgusted. "Nostalgia as camouflage."

The audio did something similar. Small compression artifacts matched formats used in early family video transfers. A modern, clean voice might have felt generated. Slight damage made it feel recovered.

Whoever created the file understood not only Morrow's code but the psychology of evidence.

Tess called it counterfeit provenance.

Mara allowed the phrase because, for once, clever was accurate.

They built a profile of the sender's choices. Technical sophistication. Access to legacy code. Knowledge of Fallow's philosophical debates. Familiarity with current claimant cases. A desire to demonstrate that provenance could be manufactured as convincingly as memory.

Samuel Vey fit.

So did at least three former engineers.

Celia warned against narrowing too soon.

Elias agreed, then noticed how satisfying the suspect felt. A named person transformed systemic harm into a chase. The story suddenly became easier.

That was reason enough to remain cautious.

June joined the call near the end. "Can I ask the impolite question?"

"Always," Mara said.

"If they wanted to prove a point, did it work?"

Nobody answered immediately.

June continued. "The file scared me because I knew it was unauthorized. But for about five seconds when Dad spoke, I wanted it to be real. So yes, whoever did this proved the old method still works on me."

Lena said, "That doesn't mean the violation was necessary to demonstrate it."

"I know. I'm asking whether we should admit the demonstration had power."

Elias nodded. "Yes."

The attacker had weaponized the very thing Morrow once optimized: the moment when emotional recognition outran source evaluation.

June laughed softly. "Great. I'm evidence again."

"Only if you choose to be," Mara said.

June was quiet.

"Then I choose the technical part. Not the content. You can say I experienced immediate familiarity before verification. Nothing else."

Celia documented the boundary.

The distinction entered the case file.

The investigation would use June's experience without owning it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Woman in 4C

Origin was not a family model. It was Helen.

Not literally. Not completely. But the earliest surviving experimental model in Orpheus had been built almost entirely from Helen's voice journals and home recordings because Rohe needed a single person

with enough domestic material to test whether a system could infer behavior between recorded moments.

The project label was ORIGIN PERSONA H-1. Ivo stared at the documentation.

"They built a predictive model of your mother before they built First Copy."

Elias felt no immediate emotion. The sentence was too large. Mara asked, "When?"

"Late 2008."

A year after Helen died. Before Mara entered deeper stages of Fallow.

The model did not generate immersive scenes yet. It predicted likely speech and gestures in missing intervals between recordings. If Helen was shown making cake in one video and washing dishes later, Origin tried to fill plausible behavior between them.

Researchers compared generated segments to unseen real recordings. Accuracy was poor.

Familiarity ratings were high. Mara said, "Of course."

One test report described an evaluator named SUBJECT 4C who consistently rated generated Helen segments as authentic. Elias asked, "Who was 4C?"

The identity field was sealed under deceased participant privacy. Celia obtained access.

Subject 4C was Gabriel Venn. Their father had evaluated synthetic versions of his dead wife in 2008.

Elias called him. Gabriel listened, then said, "I thought those were restored tapes."

"They told you that?"

"They said some sections were reconstructed from damaged video."

"Some sections never existed."

Gabriel was quiet.

"I couldn't tell."

"Most people couldn't."

"No. I mean I was proud that I could tell. I wrote notes. I told them when Helen's jokes were wrong."

Mara had joined the call.

"Dad, did they ever ask you whether generated clips felt more like her after repeated viewing?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"They did."

Mara covered her face. Origin had been tuned using Gabriel's grief as a feedback signal.

The system learned which synthetic Helen felt most like Helen to the person who missed her most. That model then became part of First Copy.

First Copy became Fallow's relational prior. Fallow became Morrow.

Elias looked at the lineage tree. A private bereavement experiment conducted with his father had become one ancestor of millions of reconstructed moments.

The origin of the system was not an AI deciding what humans were like. It was a grieving husband saying, yes, that sounds like her.

The Origin model's evaluation forms included Gabriel's handwritten comments. Wrong laugh.

Too patient. She would have interrupted here.

Helen never called me darling unless she wanted something. This hand movement is right.

Elias read them aloud until Gabriel asked him to stop.

"I sound awful."

"You sound precise."

"Same family illness."

Gabriel had rated some generated clips as more authentic than actual recordings when researchers secretly mixed them. That result appeared in a paper draft but was never published.

"They tricked you?" Mara asked.

"Apparently."

"Did you consent to deception?"

Gabriel laughed. "I don't remember the form." Celia found it. The study allowed blinded authenticity testing but did not explain that researchers might present synthetic footage as genuine during evaluation.

"Legally arguable," she said.

Mara groaned. "Your favorite category." More revealing were Gabriel's comments after repeated exposure. Early sessions called generated Helen wrong. Later notes said close, then feels right, then no issue.

The model improved. But Gabriel also adapted.

The experiment could not separate those effects. Ivo demonstrated by showing Gabriel one synthetic clip from 2008 without identifying it. Helen stood at a counter, reached for a tea towel and said, "Honestly, Gabe."

Gabriel watched twice.

"Fake."

"How do you know?" Elias asked.

"She says honestly too cleanly. There was always more breath first when she was annoyed."

Ivo checked. Synthetic.

Gabriel looked pleased for half a second. Then ashamed of being pleased.

Mara touched his arm. "You get one victory against reality. Family policy." He smiled.

That tiny success complicated the story again. Familiarity was not meaningless. People who knew someone could detect real patterns. The problem was treating their detection as infallible, then training a system to maximize it.

No single metric could carry the weight Morrow had given it.

Origin had not been one model but a set of shortcuts built before anyone expected memory reconstruction to become a product. This emerged slowly from Orpheus, one dependency file at a time.

Helen's journals provided clean maternal speech because she recorded regularly and spoke naturally when alone. Other donors supplied fathers, siblings, rooms, household sounds and emotional scenarios. Origin's purpose was calibration: give the system enough human texture to test whether reconstructed scenes felt coherent.

Nobody initially intended recipients to remember Origin material as autobiography.

That intention lasted less than two years.

Mara sat with a printed dependency tree across her knees. "So Mum became important because she talked a lot."

Gabriel, on video, smiled sadly. "She did."

"You say that like you weren't worse."

"I had opinions. Your mother had commentary."

The difference mattered emotionally. Helen had not been selected because she was an ideal mother. She had been selected because her recordings were abundant, varied and technically useful. The system learned her hesitations, interruptions and practical forms of care because those patterns were available.

Elias found that oddly comforting until he noticed the comfort and became suspicious of it.

Nia joined the review. She wanted to understand why Helen's hands and phrases appeared in her mother reconstruction. Ivo showed her the pipeline at aggregate level.

Direct Farah photos defined face and clothing.

Farah messages informed vocabulary.

Household records shaped environment.

Where evidence was missing, maternal interaction priors supplied posture, timing and low-confidence dialogue choices.

Helen-derived patterns had scored well for emotional congruence, so they were often selected.

"Basically the software used my mother where it had her," Nia said, "and somebody else's mother where it didn't."

"That's simplified," Elias replied.

Mara held up one finger. "Hourly quota."

He stopped.

Nia smiled. "Simplified is fine for me today."

They ran a blind familiarity test with consenting relatives. Participants were shown short gestures from direct family footage, Helen-derived reconstructions and unrelated controls. Recognition rates were above chance for real family material, lower but still significant for emotionally plausible borrowed material.

One result surprised Elias. Nia correctly rejected most Helen-derived gestures once she viewed them outside the reconstructed scene.

"Context did part of the persuasion," Lena said. "A familiar face, room and voice can make an imported gesture feel native."

The model was not implanting a fully foreign person. It was placing a stranger's behavior inside a structure already saturated with truth.

That was more psychologically believable and more difficult to defend against.

Mara studied the results. "Could this happen without AI?"

"Of course," Lena said. "Family stories, mistaken photos, repeated anecdotes."

"Then what makes Morrow different?"

Elias answered. "Scale, authority and persistence. The system generated a coherent scene, repeated it, measured acceptance, then reused acceptance as evidence."

Nia nodded. "And it looked official."

That may have been the simplest part. People trusted the reconstruction not because machines were magical but because Morrow presented uncertainty with professional confidence.

Before leaving, Nia asked to see one direct clip of Helen. Mara hesitated, then chose a public family video already released with consent.

Helen appeared carrying laundry and complaining about a broken dryer.

Nia watched for twenty seconds.

"She doesn't feel like my mother," she said.

Mara exhaled.

It was not proof of anything technical.

It mattered anyway.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Original Tape

One of Helen's voice journals contained a warning about Adrian Rohe. They found it on a cassette from Ternmouth that Gabriel had mislabeled TAX 2006.

Helen sounded tired.

"Dr. Rohe came again. He likes the idea that people are patterns more than I do. He says if enough ordinary behavior is recorded, a system can preserve not only what I said but what I would probably say. I asked him

why anyone needs that. He said because most things we want from the dead were never recorded."

A pause.

"That is either kind or obscene. Possibly both."

Mara stopped the tape and laughed softly. "Mum understood the entire company in one sentence." Helen continued.

"I said I would donate recordings if the system always marked what was real and what was inferred. He agreed. I want that written down because Gabriel thinks verbal agreements are charming."

Gabriel, listening beside them, said, "She was right." The tape changed everything legally.

Helen had consented to research. She had also set a condition.

Inference must remain visible. Fallow later removed confidence warnings during immersion.

Morrow marketed seamless reconstructions. The ethical breach was no longer only about broad consent after death. It was a violation of an explicit preference preserved in Helen's own voice.

Tess asked Gabriel, "Did Rohe know this recording existed?"

"He may have heard it."

"Did you send it?"

"I sent all of them."

Celia immediately froze any public use of Helen's donor set and prepared a notice to the inquiry. Mara listened to the tape again.

"She said most things we want from the dead were never recorded."

Elias looked at her.

"That's the whole business model."

"Yes."

"And the trap."

Mara rewound the cassette a few seconds. Helen's voice filled the room.

That is either kind or obscene. Possibly both. Mara said, "Keep that line."

Elias reached for his notebook. Then stopped.

"Already recorded."

Mara smiled. It was a small joke.

It felt like relief. Until Ivo called.

A second unauthorized reconstruction had been sent. This one was addressed to Elias.

The sender used Helen's voice.

Helen's cassette from Ternmouth had been recorded late at night. The first two minutes were ordinary notes about medication and whether Gabriel had remembered to call the insurance company. Then her tone changed.

"Dr. Rohe came again. He likes the idea that people can leave continuity behind. I told him continuity is not the same as me. He said of course. Men say 'of course' when they want you to stop noticing the difference."

Mara made a sound halfway between laughter and pain.

The tape continued.

Helen worried that Rohe's team wanted recordings not simply to preserve her voice but to test how family members responded to generated versions. She did not accuse him of deception. She wrote down questions she wanted answered.

Who owns an inferred sentence?

If Elias hears something I might have said, does that become part of what he remembers me saying?

What if Mara likes the generated version better?

Elias stopped the tape.

"She asked it."

Mara stared at the cassette player. "Before any of us."

Gabriel shook his head. "Helen asked every frightening question before breakfast. Don't make this destiny."

Again he protected her from becoming a symbol.

They resumed.

The warning was practical, not prophetic. Helen wanted explicit labels on generated material. She wanted the children told when a scene contained inference. She wanted raw recordings kept separately so future systems could not overwrite the originals.

"That sounds like Kade," Ivo said.

"Maybe Kade heard her," Elias replied.

Orpheus notes later confirmed a meeting between Helen and Kade. Another causal path. Not genius independently foreseeing everything, but people influencing one another.

The cassette ended with Helen complaining that Ternmouth coffee tasted like "hot roofing material."

Mara laughed.

They preserved that line too.

At 11:18 p.m., Elias received an encrypted file notification.

No sender name.

The subject line read: YOU ASKED THE WRONG QUESTION.

Celia instructed him not to open it on his device. Ivo transferred it into a forensic sandbox.

The file contained a reconstruction.

Helen sat in a hospital room.

Her face was older than in the Ternmouth recordings. She looked directly toward the virtual camera and said, "Eli, if you're hearing this, they already taught you to prefer the version that forgives you."

Elias felt every muscle in his body go rigid.

Mara stood beside him. "That's not Mum."

The voice was excellent.

The sentence was not in any known source.

Yet part of it sounded familiar enough to hurt.

Ivo stopped playback before the reconstruction continued.

"We analyze it first."

Elias nodded.

His body wanted the rest.

That was precisely why he did not watch it.

The sender had understood something intimate about him. Not merely his family data. His weakness. The need to know what came next when uncertainty was aimed personally.

Mara took the cassette of real Helen and put it in its case.

"We have her voice," she said. "We don't need theirs tonight."

Elias looked at the paused generated face.

For once, restraint felt less like deprivation than control.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Nobody's Sentence

Elias did not play the file alone. That decision surprised him.

A year earlier he would have considered witnesses contamination. Now he asked Mara, Ivo and Lena to be present, and he recorded the screen externally so the original file could not quietly change.

The reconstruction showed no person. Only a kitchen table.

Not Alder Row. Not Nia's kitchen.

A generic room assembled from First Copy. Helen's voice came from off screen.

"Elias, the trigger was not changed. You forgot the third condition."

He felt the sentence physically. Mara paused the file.

"That is not Mum."

"I know."

"Say it."

"That is a generated voice using Mum's model."

"Good."

They continued.

"The archive releases if Morrow denies the library, the court process fails, or a donor lineage is at risk of permanent deletion. You designed the third condition after Kade showed you Orpheus."

Elias looked at Ivo.

"Can this be true?"

"We can verify the trigger code."

Helen's voice continued.

"Nobody changed it. The release happened because somebody tried to delete Orpheus."

The file ended. Lena said, "Whoever sent that knows your 2017 failsafe."

"Could be past me. Scheduled message?"

Ivo shook his head. "Not with a 2026 render fingerprint unless something regenerated it now."

"Who knew about the trigger?"

Elias asked Gabriel first. No.

Mara no. Lena no.

Celia no. Tess no.

Ivo searched access logs. One user had opened the old failsafe documentation three weeks earlier.

The account belonged to Adrian Rohe. Mara swore.

Rohe had been cooperating with the inquiry under supervised archive access. He had legal permission to review materials relevant to his testimony.

He had also accessed Orpheus deletion procedures. Celia said, "I can suspend him from the archive. I cannot accuse him of attempted destruction without logs."

Ivo found the logs. Deletion command issued.

Failed because Elias's safeguard released the Pattern Library and locked Orpheus read-only. The leak was not sabotage against Elias's failsafe.

It was the failsafe working exactly as designed. Elias felt no triumph.

His design had preserved evidence by exposing private families. The safeguard had done what he told it to do.

The consequences were his too. Mara looked at him. "Past you built a bomb with a privacy policy."

"Yes."

"You going to defend him?"

"No."

That answer mattered more than Elias expected. After the unauthorized Helen message, Elias slept badly and woke convinced he had dreamed a second sentence.

You put the third condition in because you stopped trusting yourself. He sat on the edge of the bed at 4:16 a.m. and wrote it down, then immediately hated the note. By breakfast, the sentence felt like part of the file.

Mara arrived at nine and found him replaying the reconstruction.

"How many times?"

"Four."

"Stop."

"I need to know whether I heard something."

"No, you need to know whether the file contains it. Those are different."

She took the keyboard and opened the audio waveform. Search found no match. The sentence was not there.

Elias stared.

"I dreamed it."

"Probably."

"Or generated it after hearing the first sentence."

"Also possible."

"It feels like her voice."

Mara closed the laptop.

"Of course it does. You spent fifteen years carrying a version of me saying something to you that I said to a camera. Your brain has excellent casting."

He laughed despite himself. Then she became serious. "This is exactly why whoever sent the file used Mum. A plain email would be information. Her voice turns it into an event."

Elias understood. The sender had weaponized intimacy without threatening anyone physically. The message became harder to ignore, harder to evaluate, harder to keep outside autobiography.

"Ada Mercer said she needed attention."

"Then she used the method she claims to oppose."

"Yes."

Mara looked at him. "People are very consistent that way." He kept the dreamed sentence in his notebook but marked it DREAM/POST-EXPOSURE, not FILE.

A small act of provenance. It made him feel better.

He no longer mistook feeling better for proof.

They analyzed the Helen file in pieces so nobody had to experience it as a continuous scene. Audio first. Video second. Text last. The process made the reconstruction ugly enough to think about.

The voice used direct Helen samples for phonemes but generated prosody from Origin-Voice. The face came from hospital photographs. The room matched St. Anne's 2008 layout. The wording combined phrases from Elias's own therapy records, Mara's interviews and Helen's journals.

No sentence existed whole anywhere.

"Nobody's sentence," Mara said.

Ivo nodded. "Composed from everyone."

The phrase about forgiveness came partly from a 2018 session in which Elias told Lena he wanted a memory of Mara he could live with. The attacker had access to material that was never in the public Pattern Library leak.

Celia's expression changed. "Internal breach."

"Or Orpheus," Ivo said. "Some 2018 continuity records were preserved there."

Access logs showed only five authorized accounts had queried that partition in the last month.

Elias.

Ivo.

Celia.

Lena.

Ada Mercer, the court-appointed technical custodian.

Mara looked around the room. "Excellent. A mystery where every suspect is already annoying."

Lena did not smile. "My account was used from St. Anne's two nights ago. I was home."

"Can you prove that?" Celia asked.

"No. I can provide phone and building records. You know as well as I do those are not proof of presence."

Elias almost laughed at the echo of his own first case.

They reviewed login details. Lena's credential had authenticated through a legacy certificate tied to Room 4C, not her modern device. Someone was using old infrastructure to impersonate current users.

"Why send Elias the file?" Ada asked over video.

Mara answered first. "To make him open it."

"And then?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe the point is showing they can still make a convincing family scene from stolen pieces."

Elias disagreed. "The wording is targeted. Whoever sent it knows my history with voluntary reconstruction."

"That's public now," Tess said.

"Not the exact therapy phrase."

Silence followed.

They needed to visit St. Anne's.

Before leaving, Elias created an external record of the analysis. Not because he feared forgetting, but because the chain of custody mattered. He wrote the source components, uncertainty levels and decisions not to view the full scene.

At the bottom he added: Emotional response cannot establish authenticity.

Then he crossed it out.

Mara noticed. "Why?"

"Too obvious."

"Sometimes obvious deserves writing."

He rewrote it in simpler language.

It felt real. That proves only that it felt real.

Mara read the line and nodded.

A small act of provenance.

It made him feel better.

He no longer mistook feeling better for proof.

The team debated whether to let Elias watch the full generated Helen scene only after technical analysis was complete. There was no investigative necessity. Every code path and source fragment could be examined without immersive playback.

Elias still wanted to see it.

He hated how simple the desire was.

Mara knew. "You think there might be a clue in how it feels."

"Possibly."

"Or you want to hear Mum say something to you."

He looked at her.

"Both can be true," she said.

The phrase had become family shorthand for refusing false choices.

Lena recommended against full exposure because Elias had a history of autobiographical adoption under repeated reconstruction. One viewing was unlikely to produce the same effect, but the risk was not zero.

"I'm not asking you to protect me from information," Elias said.

"I'm not. I'm describing a risk and letting you decide. That's what should have happened more often."

That stopped the argument.

Elias chose not to watch.

Instead he read the generated transcript with every source fragment color-coded. Helen's apparent statement about forgiveness was built from four people. One clause from Helen. One from Mara. One from Elias himself. One connector phrase generated statistically.

On the page, the sentence lost its authority.

"It looked like Mum," Mara said.

"Yes."

"It sounded like her."

"Yes."

"And the sentence was nobody's."

"Yes."

They preserved the reconstruction as criminal evidence but restricted playback. Celia argued that investigators might need it later. Mara insisted any viewing require documented necessity.

The compromise felt bureaucratic and good.

Before leaving, Elias asked Ivo to show him the exact source of the phrase they already taught you to prefer the version that forgives you.

Part came from a 2018 session where Elias told Lena he wanted a goodbye he could live with. Another part came from Helen's journal warning Gabriel not to make her nicer after death.

The attacker had combined mother and son into a sentence neither ever said.

Elias stared at the source map.

"It is almost an argument between us."

Mara nodded. "That's why it works."

The scene did not need magical knowledge. It only needed enough intimate fragments to build something psychologically plausible.

For the first time, Elias understood the attacker's method as a form of editing rather than intelligence.

The horror became smaller.

And more human.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Release Freeze

The court froze everything. No source bundles.

No Orpheus access except preservation. No new claimant notifications until privacy review.

People who had waited years to learn what Morrow held about their families were told to wait again. Outside the release office, protesters gathered with signs.

MY MEMORY, MY DATA.

DON'T CORRECT MY MOTHER.

OPEN THE ARCHIVE.

KEEP IT CLOSED.

Contradictory demands occupied the same pavement. Elias watched from an upstairs window.

Nia stood beside him.

"That's what it feels like in my head."

"What?"

"All the signs at once."

She had decided to keep the yellow-cardigan reconstruction file but attach a written source map to it. She called this "putting the warning label back on."

"Do you still see your mother in the red cardigan?" Elias asked.

"Sometimes."

"Does it bother you?"

"Less since I know why. More when I forget why."

Mara arrived carrying sandwiches.

"You two are doing introspection near glass. Dangerous."

She handed Nia a paper bag. The claimant group had grown quickly. Some members wanted total disclosure. Others wanted a right not to know. Mara had become an unwilling mediator because she could say, with unusual authority, that both positions made sense.

At noon, Celia announced that Rohe had requested an emergency interview.

"He says he can explain the deletion attempt."

Mara said, "I can explain it. He tried to delete something."

"He claims Orpheus contains material that should never be released because it includes unauthorized family consensus experiments."

"We know."

"He says there is something worse."

Nobody reacted well to that. Celia continued. "A deployment test involving living participants who were never told they were participants."

Elias looked at Lena. She had gone pale.

"You know."

"I know what he might mean."

"What?"

Lena sat down.

"The natural exposure study."

Mara's face hardened. "Explain."

"Researchers wanted to know whether reconstructed details could spread without immersion. Through ordinary conversation. One participant experienced a generated scene, then spoke about it with family members who had not seen the reconstruction. Later the family members were interviewed."

Elias felt disgust before she finished.

"They measured contagion."

"Yes."

"Did it work?"

Lena looked at the protest signs below.

"Too well."

On the second day of the freeze, a woman named Priya Nand pushed a handwritten letter beneath the

release-office door because security would not let her upstairs.

Elias found it while leaving. My father died in 2020. Morrow reconstructed his last birthday. I know there are inferences. I do not care. Please stop journalists from telling me which parts are borrowed. I am asking not to know.

He read it in the station while commuters moved around him. The right not to know had sounded abstract in meetings. Priya's letter made it concrete.

He showed Mara. She read it and said, "We need an opt-out before the audit notifications."

"If identifiable donor material is in her file, don't we have an obligation to disclose?"

"We have an obligation to tell her there is material she may choose to learn about. Not force the detail into her head."

"What if it affects a legal claim?"

"Then different rule."

"What if it's medical?"

"Different rule."

Elias smiled slightly.

"Your rule has subclauses now."

"That's what happens when you invite lawyers."

Celia helped draft a layered notice. It did not say your father borrowed another man's laugh. It said: Your reconstruction contains material whose source may not be specific to your family. You may choose full provenance, summary provenance, or no additional detail unless legally required.

Priya selected no additional detail. Elias felt an urge to know what was in her file anyway.

He did not open it. The archive recorded his non-access as nothing.

There was no field for restraint. Maybe there should have been.

The release freeze created a queue of people who had already waited too long. Elias saw their names only as case numbers, but the delay acquired human shape through calls. A son waiting to learn whether his father's final reconstruction contained borrowed dialogue. A woman who had postponed scattering her mother's ashes until she understood what part of a Morrow scene was sourced. A family in court over whether reconstructed childhood abuse could be introduced as evidence.

The judge's order was legally sensible. Preserve privacy while the leak was investigated. No new source bundles until exposure risks were mapped.

Sensible decisions could still hurt.

At the release office, staff began taking calls in pairs because abuse had increased. One caller screamed that Morrow had stolen his dead wife twice, first by generating her and now by refusing to release the files. Another thanked them for delaying because he had realized he did not want to know yet.

"Same policy, opposite reaction," Lena said.

Elias listened to a voicemail from a claimant named Samuel. "Please don't send me anything until I ask again. I thought I wanted every source. I don't. Not this week."

The system had no field for uncertainty over time. Lena added one manually.

Mara spent the afternoon with privacy counsel drafting a right-to-defer protocol. She hated the phrase but liked the substance. People could pause release without forfeiting future access. They could designate which categories they wanted: direct recordings, inference labels, donor overlaps, or none.

"Choice architecture," Ivo said.

Mara glared. "Say that again and I'll architect your face."

He changed it to options.

The freeze also stopped Elias from accessing a file tied to his own 2018 treatment. He saw the identifier during an audit. VENN-E CONTINUITY, UNRESOLVED DONOR DEPENDENCY.

His hand remained over the mouse.

For a moment the old logic returned. If it concerned him, access should be justified. If it might explain the current attack, not opening it could be irresponsible.

Then he read the scope notice. The file also contained material from another participant whose consent status was pending.

He withdrew his hand.

Ivo, beside him, noticed. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"Real yes or professional yes?"

"Annoyed yes."

"Healthiest kind."

At the end of the day, the court allowed one narrow exception: technical metadata necessary to investigate unauthorized reconstructions could be queried without exposing content. That gave Ivo a path toward St. Anne's certificate history.

The attacker had used legacy authentication exactly four times.

One was the Helen file sent to Elias.

One was June's hotel scene.

Two had not yet been delivered to known recipients.

"Can we identify targets?" Celia asked.

"Payload encrypted separately."

"Stop delivery?"

"Maybe."

Ivo worked while Elias watched the unresolved file remain visible in his own queue.

He did not open it.

The archive recorded his non-access as nothing. No achievement. No refusal. No data point.

There was still no field for restraint.

Mara later said, "Maybe that's healthy. Not every decent choice needs a badge."

Elias disliked how much sense that made.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Celia's Reason

Celia had known about the natural exposure study for three years. Mara nearly walked out when she admitted it.

"You kept this buried."

"I kept identities sealed while lawyers determined whether contacting people would itself cause harm."

"That's a magnificent sentence."

"It's also true."

Celia opened a file. Eight families participated indirectly. One person in each family consented to reconstruction. Other family members did not know researchers were measuring whether details spread through conversation.

In six families, at least one nonparticipant later reported a generated detail as a personal memory.

"How generated?" Elias asked.

"Small details. A song playing. A color of clothing. A sentence."

"Any consequential details?"

Celia looked at him. "One." A participant reconstructed a childhood argument with his father. The system inferred that the father had thrown a plate.

The participant later told his sister. Six months afterward, the sister independently described remembering the plate.

There was no evidence a plate had ever been thrown. The siblings then reinforced each other.

Years later, both cited the incident when describing their father as physically threatening.

"Was he?" Mara asked.

"Possibly. There were other reports of violence. That's why this is difficult. The false plate may have attached itself to a true pattern."

Elias understood the danger. Correcting the plate could be used to discredit genuine abuse.

Leaving it uncorrected preserved a fabricated event. Celia said, "That is my reason. Every disclosure has consequences outside the laboratory. You think I hide things because institutions protect themselves. They do. I also hide things because evidence can injure people when released without context."

Mara looked at the file.

"And who decides when context is enough?"

"That is the problem."

For once, Celia sounded tired. The natural exposure study had another implication.

Morrow did not need immersive technology to alter family memory. One confident person could carry a reconstructed detail home.

Then ordinary conversation did the rest. Elias thought of his own kitchen memory. How many people had he told? Police. Therapists. Gabriel. Partners. Colleagues.

His false memory had entered other people's understanding of Mara for fifteen years. He had been a transmission mechanism.

The AI made one reconstruction. Humans distributed it.

Celia's admission about the natural-exposure study arrived without drama, which made Mara angrier. There was no discovered secret file. No cornered confession. Celia simply said during a legal strategy meeting, "I have known of the 2010 exposure protocol since the bankruptcy review."

Mara put down her pen. "How long is that in normal human language?"

"Three years."

"Three years."

"Yes."

Elias watched Celia's face. She was not emotionless. She was disciplined. The distinction had fooled him before.

Celia explained that the files contained identities of minors, abuse histories and clinical information. When she discovered them, she froze access and sought legal guidance. Counsel advised against notifying participants until the records could be validated because some identifiers were incomplete and contact itself might reveal private participation to families who did not know.

"And then?" Mara asked.

"Litigation. Morrow restructuring. Two injunctions. A judge who retired. Then the current release authority."

"You could have told us the study existed without naming people."

Celia paused. "Yes."

The word removed her best defense before Mara could attack it.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I believed disclosure would destabilize the entire release process before we could protect the subjects. I also believed I could control timing better than I could."

Mara laughed bitterly. "Everyone in this story thinks timing belongs to them."

Celia accepted that too.

Elias asked whether the current attacker could have learned about Room 4C through Celia's sealed review.

"Possible. Four external firms handled portions of the archive. Two court technicians. Bankruptcy administrators. Morrow counsel."

The suspect pool expanded instead of narrowing.

Later Mara found Elias alone in the stairwell.

"You're not furious enough," she said.

"I am furious."

"You look like you're doing probability."

He had been.

She sat beside him. "You know what bothers me? Every person who hid something had a reason. Lena had a reason. Dad had a reason. You had a reason. Celia had a reason. Rohe had fifty reasons."

"Reasons aren't exoneration."

"I know. But they're how harm survives intelligent people. Nobody wakes up wanting to become the villain in somebody else's testimony."

Elias thought of his false kitchen memory. For fifteen years his police statement had shaped how investigators, journalists and his family interpreted Mara's disappearance. He had been wrong, yet he had not lied. His certainty had still become infrastructure.

"I transmitted it too," he said.

"What?"

"My memory of you. I told everyone you were frightened in that kitchen. The sentence was real, but the scene wasn't. That version of you entered police files, articles, Dad's understanding."

Mara leaned against the wall. "Yes."

He looked at her.

"You want me to tell you it's different because you didn't know," she said. "It is different. It also still happened."

Again the two facts stayed together.

Elias nodded.

Mara nudged his shoe with hers. "Congratulations. You have discovered moral complexity at thirty-five."

"Thirty-four."

"Emotionally thirty-five."

He laughed despite himself.

The AI had generated one reconstruction. Humans had distributed it for years because a grieving brother sounded certain.

Scale did not erase responsibility. It multiplied the places responsibility could sit.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Public Hearing

The emergency hearing was streamed live. Elias hated this immediately.

Cameras changed behavior even when nobody admitted it. Lawyers became more quotable. Witnesses paused before sentences. Protesters outside watched on phones and reacted faster than testimony could develop context.

Rohe appeared by video from his solicitor's office. He looked older than he had eight months earlier.

Celia questioned him first.

"Did you attempt to delete Orpheus?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. The room shifted.

"Why?"

"Because it contains raw source material from participants who never consented to public release. The court's preservation order did not adequately protect them after the Pattern Library became discoverable."

"You knew deletion would trigger a failsafe."

"I learned that too late."

"You accessed Elias Venn's trigger documentation."

"After initiating deletion."

Ivo had already verified the timestamps. Rohe was telling the truth about sequence. The hearing became less satisfying.

Mara watched from a side room with Elias.

"I wanted him to be lying."

"So did I."

Rohe admitted authorizing consensus studies and defending First Copy. He denied knowing identifiable donor features survived into later Morrow products.

Lena testified next. She contradicted him on one point.

"Adrian knew by 2010 that hand morphology transferred between subjects. Mara Venn and June Saye reported it. I documented it."

Rohe looked at her through the screen.

"I knew artifacts occurred. I did not know they persisted after the scrubber."

"You chose not to verify."

"We verified sampled outputs."

"You verified clinical tolerability."

The distinction sat there. Later, Elias was asked about the failsafe leak.

"Did you create it?"

"Yes, according to records. I do not retain direct autobiographical memory of doing so."

"Do you accept responsibility?"

He looked at the families seated behind the lawyers.

"For designing it, yes. For the decision to activate it, the code did that based on conditions I wrote. That distinction explains causation. It does not remove responsibility."

Mara looked at him from the side room monitor. He could not tell whether she approved.

For once he did not need to. After the cameras shut off, Rohe remained seated on the screen while lawyers packed papers around him. Mara walked into the main hearing room before Elias could stop her, not that he had any authority to.

"One question," she said.

Rohe's solicitor objected. Rohe waved him off.

Mara stood three meters from the screen. "Do you remember me telling you the hand was wrong?" Rohe looked at her for a long time. "Yes."

"What did you think?"

"That you were observant."

"Not unstable?"

"Not at that moment."

"When did I become unstable to you?"

The room stopped moving. Rohe's face tightened. "When your objections generalized. You began interpreting unrelated administrative errors as deliberate manipulation."

"Some were deliberate."

"Some. Not all."

Mara nodded. Elias realized she was not trying to trap him.

"So I was right enough to be dangerous and wrong enough to dismiss."

Rohe said nothing.

"That's what happened, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Mara absorbed the answer.

"Thank you."

She left. Outside, Elias asked, "Why thank him?"

"Because I needed one person from that place to say both things. I was right. I was also wrong sometimes. They used the second to erase the first."

Elias looked back at Rohe's blank screen. Mara said, "Don't make this a victory."

"I wasn't."

"Your face was considering it."

He smiled.

"Annoying skill."

"Family resemblance."

The public hearing took place in a civic auditorium designed for school concerts. The acoustics were terrible and the lighting made everyone look slightly ill. Outside, protesters carried signs reading MEMORY IS MINE and STOP SYNTHETIC GRIEF. Another group held signs saying MORROW SAVED MY LIFE.

The two crowds shouted at each other as if personal outcomes were mutually exclusive.

Elias entered through a side door and still saw cameras. He disliked the instant awareness of his own face, where to look, what his hands were doing. Testimony changed under observation even when the facts did not.

Nia testified first. She described loving a reconstruction of her mother before learning some gestures came from Helen. A lawyer asked whether she now considered the experience fraudulent.

"No," Nia said. "I consider the labeling fraudulent. The experience happened to me. The sources were misrepresented. Those are different things."

The room quieted.

June testified by choice about the unauthorized hotel file but refused to describe its most personal content. When pressed, she said, "You do not need to hear my father's generated words to understand that somebody sent them without consent."

Mara watched from the witness area and smiled.

Rohe's counsel attempted to frame cross-family patterns as ordinary statistical priors similar to any generative system. Ivo responded that the issue was not using priors in itself. It was allowing specific donor-derived relational fragments to become hidden baselines inside autobiographical reconstructions, then measuring recipient acceptance as if it increased historical confidence.

"In plain English?" the chair asked.

Ivo hesitated.

Mara whispered from behind Elias, "This should be good."

Ivo said, "If the machine guessed something comforting and you liked it, later versions became more likely to treat the guess as part of your past."

That sentence made the evening news.

Elias testified after lunch. He expected questions about Morrow. Instead the first question concerned his own false kitchen memory.

"Mr. Venn, you personally experienced a reconstruction as autobiographical memory for years?"

"Yes."

"Did Morrow force you to undergo the procedure?"

"No. I consented to a process whose long-term effects were not fully understood. I also requested part of the reconstruction."

A murmur passed through the room.

"Then why should the public regard you as evidence of corporate misconduct rather than personal misuse?"

The question was designed to provoke defensiveness.

Elias answered slowly. "They should regard me as evidence that consent does not make every outcome acceptable, and that a person can participate in a harmful decision without understanding what repeated reconstruction will become inside memory. My case is not clean. That's why it matters."

He saw Mara look down, hiding something like approval.

During a break, a woman approached Elias in the corridor. Security moved toward her, but she stopped several feet away.

"My husband died in 2020," she said. "Morrow gave me a scene where he apologized. I know now the wording was generated. I also slept through the night for the first time in two years after that session. What am I supposed to call it?"

Elias could not answer in one word.

"Something that helped you and wasn't what it claimed to be," he said.

She nodded, tears in her eyes. "That's annoying."

"I've been told."

Mara found him afterward. "You're developing a brand."

"Terrible business model."

"Family resemblance."

For once the phrase felt like theirs rather than the system's.

During the hearing lunch break, Elias was trapped in a side corridor with Rohe for ninety seconds while security cleared protesters from an entrance. Neither man had planned the encounter.

Rohe looked at him. "You seem better."

Elias disliked the sentence immediately. "Compared with what?"

"The last time we spoke privately."

2018.

A period Elias now knew through documents more than memory.

"Do you remember that conversation?" Elias asked.

Rohe hesitated. "Some of it."

"I don't."

"I know."

The answer carried too much history.

Rohe said that in 2018 Elias had accused Morrow of making people easier to live with by editing uncertainty. Rohe had replied that medicine always altered experience.

"Did I threaten you?" Elias asked.

"Yes. With regulators, journalists and once, memorably, a chair."

Elias frowned. "A chair?"

"You picked it up. You did not hit anyone."

"That sounds inefficient."

Rohe almost smiled.

Elias felt the danger of the moment. A charming anecdote could become memory material. He had no independent record of the chair.

"Is that documented?"

Rohe's smile disappeared. "Probably somewhere."

"Then I won't keep it yet."

"You really have changed."

"Maybe."

Security opened the door.

Before leaving, Rohe said, "For what it's worth, your criticism then was more correct than I admitted."

Elias looked at him. "For what it's worth is doing a lot of work."

Rohe nodded. "Fair."

The exchange lasted under two minutes and contained no revelation. Yet it affected Elias more than the public testimony. He had met a version of his own past through the memory of a man he distrusted.

Back in the hearing room, he wrote one note:

Rohe claims I lifted a chair in 2018. Unverified.

Mara saw it. "Please let that be true."

"Why?"

"Because it would be the first interesting thing you've ever done with furniture."

He laughed at exactly the wrong moment and had to hide it as the chair called the room to order.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Duplicate Laugh

A laugh identified the leaker of June's unauthorized reconstruction. Not the Pattern Library leak. That had been Elias's failsafe.

The personalized messages were different. Ivo compared generated voice artifacts in the two files. Helen's voice and Martin Saye's voice contained the same tiny timing anomaly after inhalation, a quirk of a private rendering tool built by one Morrow engineer.

The engineer was Peter Kade. Kade had been dead six years.

"So we're back to ghosts," Mara said.

"No," Ivo replied firmly. "We're back to reused software."

The renderer had survived in a private research package. Only three known copies existed.

One in Orpheus. One in Kade's university archive.

One checked out in 2019 by a researcher named Dr. Ada Mercer. Mercer now ran a small grief-tech nonprofit called Lantern.

Elias knew the name. Lantern provided free digital memorial tools to families who could not afford private

services. It was widely praised for refusing immersive reconstruction.

Mara read the website.

"They do voice archives, letters, timelines. Very ethical. Suspiciously ethical."

"That's not evidence."

"I know. I enjoy saying things before you can."

Ada Mercer agreed to meet. She was forty-four, wore no makeup, and greeted Elias by saying, "I wondered how long Kade's renderer would take you."

They met at Lantern's office, a converted library branch full of donated computers.

"You sent the files," Elias said.

"Yes."

Mara leaned forward. "Why use dead parents as puppets?" Mercer flinched. "Because you opened every ordinary channel and then froze them. June had evidence nobody was reading. Elias had a failsafe nobody understood. I needed your attention."

"You could have emailed."

"I did. Seven times. Compliance routed me into review."

Celia, present by phone, said nothing. Mercer looked at Elias. "Kade gave me a copy of his tools before he died. He was afraid Morrow would erase provenance. He also believed you were building a preservation trigger."

"Did you know it would leak donor names?"

"No."

"Did you try to delete Orpheus?"

"No."

"Why tell June about the notebook?"

"Because Kade left one instruction: if First Copy becomes public, find June's first notebook and the room where people agreed."

Mara said, "We found consensus testing." Mercer shook her head.

"Not that room. A real room."

She handed them an address. It belonged to a disused wing of St. Anne's Hospital.

Room 4C.

The laugh appeared in three unauthorized reconstruction files. Not the same recorded laugh, but the same synthesis artifact: a tiny pitch discontinuity at the inhale, caused by an obsolete prosody module Morrow stopped using in 2016.

Ivo isolated it and played the waveform rather than the sound itself after June asked not to hear generated family voices again.

"Module name?" Celia asked.

"Plover."

Mara stared at him. "Of course it was called Plover."

"Engineers name important things after whatever is near the desk."

"Was there a bird?"

"Probably a biscuit packet."

Plover had been deployed at only two sites during the natural-exposure period: Aster House and St. Anne's.

The current files contained a custom patch signed by developer initials AK.

Ada Mercer frowned. "Not me."

"We know," Ivo said. "Different era."

The initials belonged to Anton Kess, a former Fallow contractor who later worked in hospital simulation systems. Public records showed he died in 2021.

"Convenient," Tess said.

"Dead people are not automatically conspirators," Elias replied.

"I know. I'm a journalist, not a podcast."

Kess's archived code repository had been acquired by a medical software vendor. That vendor currently maintained legacy visualization servers for St. Anne's.

Celia obtained an emergency order for logs.

The unauthorized files originated from a dormant server in the disused wing. It should have been decommissioned years earlier but remained powered because nobody could identify which old clinical archives depended on it.

"Infrastructure by fear," Ivo said. "Never turn it off because something mysterious might break."

Access required physical presence or an internal hospital network connection.

They reviewed entry records for the wing.

Maintenance staff.

Archive contractors.

A court-appointed scanning team.

One name made Lena sit forward.

Dr. Samuel Vey.

Elias knew the name only from Fallow correspondence. Vey had been a junior behavioral statistician in 2010. Later he published research on memory confidence and left academia after a data-integrity dispute unrelated to Morrow.

"Alive?" Mara asked.

"Very," Tess said after searching. "Consults for litigation firms."

Vey had entered St. Anne's four times in the last month under an archival access contract.

"Motive?" Celia asked.

Lena looked at the old natural-exposure papers. "He believed the study was scientifically important. He argued that people absorb social memory constantly and that hiding cross-family influence was dishonest only because the public had unrealistic ideas about memory purity."

"That could justify exposing it," Elias said.

"Or demonstrating it," Mara added.

The address in Celia's hand belonged to a small office Vey rented near St. Anne's.

Before anyone moved, she called police. Mara looked disappointed.

"I know this concept is new to the Venn family," Celia said, "but we will not confront a suspected data offender in a basement ourselves."

"What if the basement has answers?"

"Then the police can enjoy them."

They did not find Vey at his office.

They found a handwritten note taped beneath his desk.

NOTHING IS BORROWED IF MEMORY WAS ALWAYS COLLECTIVE.

Under it was the room number.

4C.

Police found no evidence Samuel Vey had entered Room 4C on the nights the unauthorized scenes were rendered. His access badge appeared in the building, but camera footage showed a contractor carrying a stack of badges on a lanyard while testing doors.

"So the strongest suspect just became administrative sloppiness," Mara said.

Celia looked almost pleased. "Which is why we verify."

Vey answered his phone the next morning and agreed to an interview through counsel. He denied sending the files but admitted he had used the legacy server weeks earlier to recover natural-exposure study data.

"Why?" Elias asked during the recorded call.

"Because your release authority was sanitizing history."

Celia's expression hardened.

Vey argued that deleting raw cross-family mappings would make future researchers unable to understand what happened. He considered the privacy-first reduction plan intellectually dishonest.

"Did you alter Elias Venn's safeguard?" Celia asked.

"No. I didn't know it existed."

"Did you generate June Saye's hotel scene?"

"No. And whoever did has made my argument harder to make without sounding deranged."

Mara muted the call. "I hate when suspects are funny."

Vey provided his system images voluntarily. Forensics later showed his environment could read the old server but lacked the rendering keys used in the attack.

Not cleared entirely. Less likely.

The investigation widened again.

Elias felt almost disappointed and recognized the feeling as narrative hunger. He wanted the named antagonist because stories moved better with one.

Reality refused to cooperate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lena Under Oath

Before they went to St. Anne's, Lena asked to testify again. Voluntarily.

Her solicitor advised against it. She did it anyway.

Under oath, she disclosed that the natural exposure study had included one session at St. Anne's Hospital involving bereaved families waiting for neurological consultations. The setting was chosen because people

there were already discussing memory, symptoms and family history.

"Were they told they were part of research?" the chair asked.

"No."

A murmur moved through the room.

"Who authorized it?"

Lena looked at Rohe.

"Adrian approved the protocol. I approved the clinical observation plan."

"So you participated knowingly."

"Yes."

Elias watched her hands. Steady.

"Why disclose this now?"

"Because I spent too many years deciding that future harm justified present secrecy. Sometimes it did. Often it protected me from having to find out."

The sentence had no polish. That made Elias believe it more.

She described Room 4C. A participant from Fallow was given a reconstruction containing a fabricated detail about a hospital corridor. He then sat with relatives in 4C and discussed the memory naturally. Researchers observed from another room.

Within an hour, two relatives repeated the fabricated detail. Within a week, one believed she had witnessed it.

"What detail?"

Lena paused.

"A nurse dropping a metal tray."

Elias frowned. He remembered a metal tray falling in a hospital when his mother was ill.

The image arrived sharply. Silver instruments.

A nurse swearing. Mara beside him.

He looked at Mara in the side room. She was staring back.

She remembered it too. Lena saw them.

Her face changed.

"The Venn family was not listed as part of that study," she said.

Elias's pulse increased.

"Then why do we both remember the tray?"

Nobody in the hearing room answered. Lena's second testimony cost her more than the first.

The medical board had tolerated her earlier disclosures as part of institutional review. Admitting participation in undisclosed observation of nonconsenting relatives triggered a new investigation.

Her solicitor told her before the hearing that she could lose her license permanently.

"Did that affect your decision?" Elias asked later.

"Of course."

"But you testified."

"Yes."

"Why now?"

Lena looked at him with irritation. "Do not turn delayed ethics into bravery." He accepted that.

She had spent years believing disclosure could be timed to minimize harm. Sometimes she had been right. A public release of raw trauma files would have been

cruel. But timing had become habit, then authority. She became the person who decided when other adults were ready for facts about themselves.

"Mara changed that," Lena said.

"How?"

"She kept asking who gave me permission to protect her. I always had an answer. Parent. protocol. prior consent. clinical risk. The answers were real. None gave me permanent ownership of the decision."

Elias thought of his own past consent to memory alteration. Lena had honored it long after the person who gave it was gone.

"You thought past me had more authority than present me."

"Yes."

"Sometimes he did know more."

"Yes."

"No clean rule."

"No."

Lena smiled faintly. "You finally sound like a psychologist."

"Insulting."

"Accurate."

Lena's second testimony was harder because she volunteered what nobody had yet forced her to say. Her solicitor sat beside her with the expression of a person watching a client set fire to billable advice.

"In 2010," Lena began, "I participated in a session at St. Anne's in which two adolescent subjects were

exposed to reconstructed family material without being told which relational details came from outside their direct archives. I raised concerns after the session. I did not withdraw from the project."

The chair asked why.

Lena looked toward Mara before answering. "Career ambition. Belief in the therapeutic goal. Deference to senior researchers. Fear that leaving would remove one of the few people objecting internally. All of those explanations are true. None makes the decision harmless."

Mara's face did not change.

Lena described Samuel Vey as the statistician most interested in natural exposure. He argued that explicit provenance labels disrupted measurement by making participants search for errors. To study ordinary acceptance, he wanted uncertainty hidden until after recall testing.

"Was informed consent obtained?" counsel asked.

"Not for that specific concealment. Broad research consent existed through guardians. In my current professional opinion, it was inadequate."

"Did participants experience distress?"

"Yes."

The old study report said no significant distress observed.

Lena explained how that conclusion had been produced. The metric measured sustained physiological elevation and session withdrawal. Anger, confusion and

later doubt were not counted if participants completed the protocol.

Mara whispered, "No distress observed."

Elias heard the old phrase differently now. A measurement could be technically accurate and morally absurd because the definition had been narrowed first.

After testimony, Lena found Mara in the corridor.

"You don't need to talk to me," Lena said.

"I know."

They stood beside a vending machine making compressor noises.

Mara asked, "Did you ever think I was unstable?"

Lena answered without delay. "I thought you were distressed, angry, sleep-deprived and sometimes reckless. I did not believe your objections were delusional."

"Did you write that?"

"Not clearly enough."

Mara looked at the floor. "That's the part I can't forgive easily. Not the study. The notes. Everyone could look at my anger and call it symptom because you people had cleaner handwriting."

Lena swallowed. "Yes."

"Stop saying yes like it's penance."

"What would you prefer?"

"I don't know. Something less professionally correct."

Lena gave a tired, almost angry laugh. "Fine. I hate that I did it. I hate that I can explain exactly why and the explanation changes nothing. I hate that I remember thinking if I stayed I could protect you, because that

story makes me sound better than I was. And I hate that I still think leaving might have made things worse."

Mara stared at her.

"Better," she said eventually.

Lena wiped at one eye. "Insulting."

"Accurate."

The exchange did not repair fifteen years. It did something smaller and more useful. It replaced clinical remorse with a person Mara could argue with.

When Lena returned to the hearing room, her shoulders were less controlled.

Elias thought she looked more trustworthy that way, then reminded himself that appearance was not evidence.

Some habits survived for good reasons.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Nia's Missing Afternoon

Nia had lost an afternoon in 2022. Not from amnesia.

From paperwork. Her Morrow file listed a four-hour session block she remembered as forty minutes. The discrepancy had seemed administrative until St. Anne's.

"I was at a hospital that day," she said.

"Which one?" Elias asked.

"St. Anne's. Mum's oncology follow-up. I did the reconstruction remotely from a Morrow suite nearby, then went to meet her."

The dates aligned with a later natural-exposure replication. Nia had not consented to it.

Her reconstruction contained the yellow cardigan and strawberries. Afterward she spent three hours with Rosa.

"Did you tell your mother about the scene?" Mara asked.

"Probably. I told her everything then."

"Did she ever start remembering any of it?"

Nia closed her eyes.

"She said the cardigan sounded familiar."

Elias felt the implication. A daughter had received a synthetic memory of her living mother.

Then told the living mother. The mother may have begun accepting the generated detail about herself.

The direction of reconstruction had reversed. Not dead to living.

Child to parent. Nia stood and walked to the window.

"Mum was alive. She could have corrected it."

"People don't always know what they wore," Elias said.

"She trusted me."

Nobody answered. Nia turned back. "Do we have recordings from that afternoon?"

Celia searched. Hospital CCTV existed but no audio.

Nia's phone had an accidental voice memo lasting twelve minutes. She had never listened to it.

Mara asked, "Do you want to?" Nia nodded.

The recording contained traffic, footsteps, a lift bell. Then Rosa's voice.

"Yellow? I don't remember yellow."

Nia, younger and tired: "You had one. With the wooden buttons."

"Maybe."

"I remember it."

Rosa laughed.

"Then you remember better than me."

The recording continued into another topic. Nia stopped it.

Her face had gone pale.

"That's how easy it was."

Elias understood. No machine entered Rosa's mind.

Her daughter did. With confidence.

After hearing the accidental voice memo, Nia asked to visit Rosa's grave. Not because she expected evidence there. She said she needed somewhere to be angry where nobody would ask her to fill a form.

Mara went with her. Elias did not. Later Nia told him they sat on damp grass and argued about whether telling a dead person the truth was inherently ridiculous.

"Your sister said yes. Then she talked to her mum for twenty minutes."

"That sounds right."

Nia told Rosa about the yellow cardigan. About the red one. About the strawberries. She told her that the sentence about spoons came from Helen Venn.

Then she said, "I don't know what you really remembered after I told you. I'm sorry if I gave you something that wasn't yours." Mara stopped her.

"Your mother was alive. She heard a story from her daughter. Families do that every day. The unethical part was the company putting the story in you without telling you where it came from. Don't inherit their entire blame."

Nia cried then. Not because the argument absolved her completely.

Because it returned scale. When she later told Elias, he wrote the sentence down: DO NOT INHERIT ENTIRE BLAME.

Then crossed it out because it looked like an Aster House target. Nia laughed when she saw.

"You're impossible."

"Occupational."

She kept the crossed-out page.

Nia's missing afternoon began as a billing discrepancy. Her 2022 Morrow account showed a four-hour block. She remembered arriving after lunch, sitting through one guided reconstruction and leaving before three. The clinic records listed two additional activities: acclimatization and free recall.

"I thought acclimatization meant headset setup," she said.

Lena read the protocol code. "In that period it usually meant repeated environmental exposure before the primary scene."

"Repeated how many times?"

"Could be three to six."

Nia laughed in disbelief. "I don't remember six anything."

They requested the session log under the new emergency exception. Content remained sealed, but timing metadata showed Nia had indeed spent nearly three hours inside immersion.

Her exit interview contained one line: participant reports session felt shorter than expected.

"That sounds sinister," Nia said.

"Time compression in immersive environments is common," Ivo replied. "Games, VR, focused tasks. Doesn't imply memory manipulation."

"Thank you for ruining my conspiracy."

The unusual part was a dependency call to St. Anne's Plover module during environmental acclimatization. That code should have been retired six years earlier.

Ivo traced the call. Morrow's modern system had used a legacy compatibility service when Nia's source archive included an old Fallow-format family video. The service imported not only format conversion but historical priors.

"So 2010 code touched my 2022 session because somebody didn't rewrite a converter," Nia said.

"Basically."

Mara shook her head. "The future is built out of things nobody wanted to replace."

They reviewed Nia's handwritten journal from the week after the session. She had written about dreaming

of a yellow kitchen and waking with a feeling that her mother had once owned a pear-shaped sugar bowl.

Her family never had one.

Nia stared at her own handwriting. "I forgot I wrote this."

Elias understood the particular discomfort of meeting evidence from oneself that felt foreign.

"Do you believe you wrote it?" he asked.

"Yes. That's not the same as remembering writing it."

"Exactly."

The journal provided a timeline. The borrowed object entered her imagination immediately after the session, years before the current scandal could have suggested it.

Nia crossed out one sentence in the notebook: I think Mum had the pear thing when I was little.

Then she stopped.

"Why cross it out?" Mara asked.

"Because it's wrong."

"The sentence was true when you wrote it. You thought that."

Nia looked at the page.

After a moment she drew one line through it instead of scribbling it away. The words remained readable.

"Keep the ugly version?"

Mara smiled. "Careful. That's becoming merchandise."

Nia wrote a note in the margin: belief formed after 2022 Morrow session; source uncertain.

Elias approved more strongly than he wanted to show.

"You look proud," Nia said.

"Occupational."

She kept the crossed-out page.

Nia chose to revisit the clinic building where her 2022 session occurred, but only after setting rules. No reconstruction. No staff telling her what she should remember. No entering rooms not necessary for the technical review.

The clinic had become a dental practice.

"Apparently all traumatic architecture becomes dentistry," Mara said.

Nia laughed nervously.

The former immersion room now contained a reclining chair beneath a bright lamp. Nia stood in the doorway and said, "This isn't it."

Elias asked, "Meaning the room changed or you remember a different room?"

"I remember no window. This has a window."

Building plans showed the window existed in 2022.

Nia stared at it.

"Great. Add that to the list."

Lena explained that immersion sessions often darkened windows with blackout panels.

The old clinic photos confirmed removable coverings.

Nia exhaled. "So my memory was right enough."

"About not seeing a window," Elias said. "Not necessarily about there being none."

"You are exhausting in physical locations too."

They found the former equipment closet. Network documentation showed the legacy compatibility server

had been installed there. It connected Nia's session to St. Anne's Plover service.

A dentist passed in the corridor and apologized for interrupting. Nia looked at the trays of instruments and said, "Honestly, current use is more frightening."

The joke helped.

On the way out, she stopped in reception. "I remember a blue chair here."

Current chairs were grey. Old photographs showed blue.

She smiled.

"One point for me."

Elias smiled back. "Memory isn't a score."

"Today it is."

She wrote BLUE CHAIR in her journal and put a check beside it, then beneath it wrote WINDOW: remembered absent, actually covered.

The page became a small map of how memory could be wrong and still preserve an experience accurately at another level.

"I think I like this better than being corrected," she said. "Not right or wrong. More like what happened to the memory."

Lena nodded. "That's closer to how autobiographical memory works."

Mara groaned. "Do not turn her notebook into a therapy model."

"I wasn't."

"You were thinking it."

Lena smiled.

Outside, Nia kept the crossed-out page and added the clinic notes behind it.

Her archive was getting uglier.

She seemed increasingly comfortable with that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Archive Fire

There was no fire. The alarm at Orpheus went off at 2:13 a.m., and for eleven minutes every person involved believed somebody was burning the archive.

Elias arrived to find firefighters outside a data center that smelled only of wet concrete and old dust. A cooling fan had failed.

Smoke sensor false positive. No sabotage.

No cinematic destruction. Mara arrived in pajamas beneath her coat and looked almost disappointed.

"I have been trained badly by television."

Celia was furious. "Everyone is." The false alarm mattered because it revealed something else.

Orpheus's emergency power log showed a second sealed storage node that had remained dormant during earlier access. Ivo found it behind an obsolete environmental controller.

"Kade hid backups like nesting dolls."

The node contained no source media. Only audit logs.

Every time a researcher altered a confidence display, accepted a baseline, or manually selected a Pattern Library feature, the action had been recorded.

Names. Dates.

Reasons. The archive that seemed most dangerous because it held memories turned out to contain something more useful.

Accountability. One log from July 2010 read:

MV-17 confidence tags suppressed by A. Rohe override. Reason: participant fixation on uncertainty interfering with therapeutic engagement.

Mara read it without expression. Another:

JS-08 hand morphology complaint acknowledged. Continue exposure to assess adaptation. June swore over video.

Then Elias found a 2017 entry under his own account. EV-17 provenance export initiated.

Reason field: If this becomes a product, somebody will eventually need to know what we did.

He recognized the tone. Past Elias had not been heroic.

He had been frightened. That was more believable.

The fire alarm at Orpheus activated at 2:13 a.m. Every monitoring system reported smoke except the physical sensors inside the server room. That contradiction triggered evacuation anyway.

Elias arrived in yesterday's clothes to find firefighters outside, Celia arguing with a building manager, and Ivo

standing barefoot because he had put on the wrong shoes in a hurry and abandoned them when one split.

"No fire," Ivo said. "Someone spoofed the building management interface."

"Could they access Orpheus?"

"Not through that system. Different network."

"Then why trigger the alarm?"

Mara arrived behind him. "To see who comes."

Celia looked at her. "Explain."

"If you don't know which people have active interest in an archive, create an emergency and watch the parking lot."

Police requested surrounding camera feeds.

A vehicle had arrived six minutes before the alarm and left when emergency services entered. Its plates were obscured. The driver never exited.

"Or distraction," Elias said. "While something else happens."

They checked Orpheus integrity. No physical breach. No missing drives. Audit logs unchanged.

Then Ivo found one outgoing DNS request from a monitoring appliance that should not communicate externally. The request encoded a short identifier.

VENN-E-2018-FALLBACK.

Elias felt immediate recognition without memory.

His old safeguard.

The spoofed alarm had activated a dormant monitoring path. Whoever did it was probing whether Elias's contingency infrastructure still responded.

"They know your code better than we do," Ivo said.

"Or they have the documentation."

Celia asked where that documentation existed.

Elias listed three places. One was destroyed. One remained in sealed Morrow legal archives. The third might be in his locker materials from 2018.

Mara looked at him. "Pember?"

"I emptied the locker."

"Did you inventory everything?"

He had. He thought he had.

They returned to his apartment at dawn and opened the archival box containing the Pember materials. Paper notes. Audio recorder. train schedules. Consent copies. Beneath a cardboard divider was a folded sheet Elias did not remember seeing.

The handwriting was his.

IF ORPHEUS SURVIVES, DO NOT TRUST CLEAN
MIGRATIONS. TEST THE ALARM PATH.

Below it: 2:13.

Ivo read over his shoulder. "Past you scheduled chaos like a hobby."

Elias felt cold.

"Maybe the alarm wasn't the attacker."

"What do you mean?" Mara asked.

He showed them the note.

His 2018 safeguard apparently included periodic integrity tests triggered by date or system conditions. The current migration work could have activated one automatically.

The mysterious vehicle remained unexplained, but the alarm itself might have been his own code behaving exactly as designed.

Elias sat on the floor beside the box.

For several minutes he had been certain someone was escalating against them. Evidence had produced another possibility.

Mara crouched beside him. "Disappointed?"

"Relieved."

"Same face."

At the bottom of the note, past Elias had added one sentence.

If this scares you, good. Fear makes you verify.

Current Elias disliked the tone.

He recognized the person who wrote it anyway.

Not heroic. Not prophetic.

Frightened enough to build alarms for a future self he did not trust.

The mysterious vehicle outside Orpheus was identified two days later. It belonged to a freelance photographer who had followed a rumor that emergency crews were entering the Morrow archive.

Mara stared at the police summary. "That's it?"

"That's it," Celia said.

"No secret attacker observing the evacuation?"

"A man hoping for a photograph of you looking frightened."

"Somehow worse."

The finding reduced the alarm incident almost entirely to Elias's own legacy code and media

opportunism. No active sabotage. No criminal escalation.

Tess laughed when she heard. "Nobody will believe this version."

"Then don't improve it," Mara said.

Tess published a short correction to earlier reporting that had described a suspected attempted breach. The correction received little attention.

Elias kept a copy anyway.

False suspense had its own provenance too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Checksum

The audit logs solved one mystery and created another. One file had a checksum that did not match.

It concerned Helen's Origin model. Ivo compared backups.

The version in Orpheus had been modified in 2016.

"What changed?" Elias asked.

"One voice-journal segment removed."

"Which?"

The audit log named the file: HJ-09. Gabriel's Ternmouth set contained no tape nine.

Rohe claimed not to remember it. Lena remembered only that Helen had recorded twelve.

Mara stared at the gap.

"We have eleven?"

"Ten complete, one fragment. Nine is missing entirely."

Tess searched Kade's notes. One reference appeared.

HJ-09 proves H understood transfer risk. Do not let legal call consent broad. Helen understood transfer risk.

Not just inference. Transfer.

If HJ-09 survived, it could establish that Helen had explicitly rejected reuse of her identifiable behavior in other families.

"Who deleted it in 2016?" Mara asked.

Ivo opened the audit signature. User: CELIA.DAIN.

Everyone looked at Celia. She did not deny it.

"I removed the file from active legal discovery."

Mara stood. "You what?"

"Because it contained information about a living minor who had never consented."

"Who?"

"I could not disclose that then. I can now because the person is an adult and has waived privacy."

Celia opened a sealed court authorization. The minor was Mara.

HJ-09 contained Helen discussing her daughter's participation in early memory research. Before Mara had supposedly joined Fallow.

Mara read the date. 2007.

She was thirteen.

"I was in research before Mum died."

Lena looked genuinely shocked. Celia said, "That's what the tape appears to show."

The family history shifted again. Fallow had not begun after Helen's death.

Something had started before it.

The checksum mismatch concerned a version of Helen's Origin model saved in 2016, five years after Mara disappeared and eight years after Helen died. Someone had altered the dependency record without changing the visible model outputs.

"That sounds deliberately boring," Mara said.

"The best kind of suspicious," Ivo replied.

The raw 2009 copy listed Helen's journal entries as direct calibration sources. The 2016 copy replaced several labels with FAMILY-DERIVED PRIORS and removed the individual donor identifier. No content vanished. Provenance did.

Celia leaned over the comparison. "Why 2016?"

Ivo checked migration history. That was the year Morrow prepared its first major hospital licensing package. Individual donor names created legal complications. Engineers standardized categories so partner institutions could ingest models without receiving raw identities.

"Privacy measure," Lena said.

"With a side effect," Elias replied. "Once the name disappears, later users can't distinguish Helen-derived priors from generic family priors."

Mara laughed without amusement. "We found the machine that launders a mother into a category."

The change request had been approved by three people. Rohe. Peter Kade. A legal officer named Miriam Sloane.

Kade's approval surprised Ivo. "He was obsessed with provenance."

They searched his notes and found an explanation. Kade supported pseudonymizing donor identities in downstream systems only if Orpheus retained reversible mapping under legal control. His condition appeared in the engineering memo.

The 2016 production migration omitted the reversible mapping layer.

"Who removed it?" Tess asked.

The code commit belonged to an engineer following a legal specification. The legal specification came from Sloane. Sloane had died in 2019.

Another dead end with paperwork.

Elias resisted the impulse to turn it into conspiracy. Institutions often produced irreversible harm through routine handoffs. One team requested privacy. Another simplified implementation. A third inherited the abstraction and assumed it had always been generic.

Then Ivo found a second modification in 2016.

A new source tag: PRE-FALLOW FAMILY PILOT.

The date range began in 2007.

Mara went still. "Before Aster House."

"Before the Fallow adolescent program," Lena said.

"Mum was alive."

They queried only aggregate metadata. Helen had participated in a small pre-Fallow pilot at St. Anne's

during treatment. The records were absent from the public research registry.

Gabriel, called immediately, remembered meetings with Rohe before Helen died but believed they concerned recording tools for terminal patients.

"Did Mum undergo reconstruction?" Elias asked.

Gabriel shook his head on screen. "Not that I knew. She recorded journals. They showed her some voice synthesis. Once they made a version of your grandmother saying hello. Helen hated it."

"Why?"

"She said it was too polite."

Mara smiled despite herself.

The family history shifted again. Fallow had not begun after Helen's death as a response to grief. The technical and ethical questions had already been tested with Helen while she was alive.

That meant Helen had not merely become a donor by accident.

She had been a participant who asked questions the later company chose not to preserve alongside her data.

CHAPTER FORTY

Not a Crime Scene

The hospital room where Helen recorded HJ-09 had been demolished. Elias stood in the replacement corridor at St. Anne's and felt relieved.

No preserved chair to fetishize. No wall to touch. No physical object pretending to deliver certainty. Mara leaned against a vending machine.

"You look disappointed."

"I'm not."

"Progress."

Hospital archives showed Helen attended a neurology research clinic in 2007 for headaches and word-finding problems. One optional study involved autobiographical memory under stress.

Mara had accompanied her twice. That was the beginning.

Not Fallow. Not grief therapy.

A hospital research protocol. Rohe was a consultant.

Lena was not involved yet. The study asked family members to describe the same past events and compared differences.

No immersive reconstruction. No AI.

Just interviews. Mara had been thirteen when a researcher asked her what color coat Helen wore on a seaside trip.

Mara said yellow. Helen said red.

Elias stopped reading. The coat.

The family argument that later became their private example of ordinary memory error had originated in research. Mara laughed softly. "Of course it did."

A photograph later showed yellow. Helen had been wrong.

The researchers used the disagreement to discuss memory confidence. Then Rohe proposed something new: using recordings to help participants revisit uncertain events.

The seed of Fallow. Helen's illness and the Venn family's disagreements had not merely supplied training data.

They had helped inspire the entire concept. Mara looked around the replacement corridor.

"I keep wanting this to be a crime scene."

"Why?"

"Because then we'd know what kind of story it is."

A nurse pushed a trolley past them. No metal tray fell.

Mara watched it go.

"It's just a hospital," she said.

"Yes."

That was harder.

St. Anne's had renovated the old oncology wing twice. Room numbers changed, walls moved, and the room where Helen participated in the pre-Fallow pilot no longer existed as a distinct space. Elias was relieved.

He had learned to distrust preserved places. Physical continuity tempted people to treat architecture as testimony.

A hospital facilities manager led them through the current corridor. "Based on old plans, your room would have been roughly here."

Here was a linen alcove beside a staff sink.

Mara looked around. "Excellent. Mum's historical legacy is now towels."

The manager did not know whether to laugh.

They carried no immersive equipment. Only printed plans, authorized logs and an old cassette recovered from Helen's files. Lena had insisted the visit remain non-reconstructive.

"You don't want to see it?" Elias asked Mara.

"See what? A generated room built from plans? No. We've learned this lesson."

They met a retired nurse named Althea Price in the hospital cafe. She had worked on Helen's floor and remembered Rohe's research visits because he brought equipment that blocked the corridor.

"Your mother was funny," Althea told Mara. "Not sweet funny. Mean funny."

Mara smiled. "That sounds promising."

Althea remembered Helen objecting to a demonstration in which a synthesized version of a dead relative was made to say a new sentence. "She said if the machine wanted to use her mother's voice, it could at least let the woman keep her bad manners."

Gabriel's memory aligned loosely with that.

Elias asked whether Helen signed research forms.

"Probably. We signed people into everything then. But she asked for copies. She was particular about copies."

The hospital archive contained consent packets from the pilot, but Helen's was missing.

Mara stared at the gap in the index. "Of course."

Althea thought for a moment. "She kept papers in a blue plastic folder. She used to make me put discharge summaries in it because she said hospital systems ate documents."

Gabriel remembered the folder.

He thought it had been thrown out after her death.

Mara asked, "Do you remember anything else she said about the research?"

Althea hesitated. "Only that she liked the recording part. She wanted you to have her ordinary voice. She disliked the part where they guessed what she would say."

The distinction sounded so consistent with later Helen tapes that Elias felt an immediate surge of belief.

He forced himself to ask, "Did you hear her say that directly?"

Althea smiled. "Good question. I think so. Or maybe your father told me later. It's been almost twenty years."

Mara thanked her instead of looking disappointed.

Outside the cafe, Elias said, "You wanted a firmer answer."

"Yes."

"You okay with not getting one?"

"No."

She pressed the lift button. "That's the point, isn't it?"
The doors opened.

Elias followed her into a space neither of them tried to remember as the old hospital.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The Inheritance

HJ-09 survived on a cassette in June Saye's notebook box. Nobody understood why until June remembered Mara giving her a tape in 2010.

"You said if they took your recorder again, I should keep one thing somewhere stupid."

"And you put it with school notebooks."

"Extremely stupid."

The cassette label was in Mara's fifteen-year-old handwriting.

MUM 9.

They listened together. Helen's voice was weaker than on earlier journals.

"Mara came to the memory appointment again. She hates the questions because she says adults change their answers and then act like children are inconsistent. Fair."

A breath.

"Dr. Rohe showed me a test where the computer filled a missing bit of video. The movement looked like me. It wasn't me. Gabriel said he couldn't tell until they told him. I could. Maybe because it's my body."

Paper rustled.

"I said they can use my recordings to study reconstruction, but not to put my habits into somebody else. He says the model doesn't work like ownership. I said people do. If some other woman ends up with my hands, I want her told they're mine."

Nobody moved. Nia, listening through secure video, covered her mouth.

Helen continued.

"Mara says that's dramatic. She's right. I am allowed one dramatic thing."

Mara began crying silently. The recording ended with Helen complaining about hospital coffee.

No grand statement. No final message.

Just evidence. Celia had removed it from discovery to protect thirteen-year-old Mara's research participation.

In doing so, she had also hidden the clearest proof of Helen's conditions.

"I thought I was protecting you," Celia said.

Mara wiped her face. "Everyone's favorite hobby."

"Yes."

This time Celia did not defend herself. Helen had named the problem eighteen years earlier.

If some other woman ends up with my hands, I want her told they're mine. Nia looked at her own fingers.

"She was talking about me."

Elias said, "Not specifically."

"I know."

She smiled through tears.

"That's the point."

HJ-09 became the most requested file in the inquiry and the one Mara least wanted public. Helen's sentence about another woman ending up with her hands was legally powerful and emotionally irresistible. Every journalist wanted to quote it.

Mara refused broad release.

"Mum recorded that while sick. It includes things about me at thirteen. Use the relevant excerpt in evidence, not the whole tape."

Tess agreed immediately. Several lawyers argued the full recording would strengthen public understanding.

Mara said, "Public understanding is not a magic phrase that cancels privacy." Celia looked almost proud.

The court admitted a thirty-two-second excerpt under seal and later authorized a transcript of only Helen's consent condition. This frustrated people who had begun to treat the Venn family archive as cultural property.

Elias understood the temptation. More context felt like more truth. But a life was not a transparency project.

That evening, Mara asked if he wanted to hear the rest of HJ-09 privately.

"Do you?"

"I already did."

"Then no."

She looked surprised.

"There may be things Mum said about me."

"Yes."

"You're not curious?"

"Very."

"And?"

"Not mine."

Mara studied him for a moment.

"You have become deeply inconvenient."

"Learned from you."

She smiled.

The cassette marked HJ-09 arrived in June Saye's evidence box because Mara had once given June a tape during the 2010 study. June remembered the exchange only after seeing the label in a photograph.

"You told me to keep it somewhere stupid," June said. "I put it inside a box of school certificates. Apparently I obeyed."

Mara had no memory of giving it to her.

The tape contained Helen's voice.

Not a reconstruction. Not a generated sentence. A direct recording made during the pre-Fallow hospital pilot.

Helen spoke to Rohe for forty minutes about what she wanted preserved for her children. She wanted stories, not advice. She wanted her voice saying ordinary things. She did not want a system completing unfinished thoughts.

"If I haven't said it," Helen said, "don't improve me by deciding I meant to."

Mara covered her mouth.

Elias paused the tape.

"Do you want to stop?"

"No."

He waited until she nodded.

Rohe asked whether she would allow researchers to generate low-confidence variants if they were clearly labeled.

"For research, maybe. For my children, only if they can see the label every time. Not buried in paperwork. Every time."

The room became very quiet.

There it was. Consent with a condition.

The condition had not survived into later systems.

Celia immediately requested legal authentication of the cassette. Chain of custody was imperfect. Mara to June, then decades in a private box. But voice comparison, tape age and contextual references supported authenticity strongly.

"It's not courtroom-perfect," Tess said.

"Nothing in this story is," Mara replied.

A second section was harder. Helen discussed Elias and Mara directly.

She worried Elias would turn memory into duty after her death. She worried Mara would treat being misunderstood as proof nobody could help her. The observations were loving and unfair in equal measure.

Mara laughed through tears. "Rude."

Elias smiled. "Accurate."

"Don't encourage her."

Helen said, "If they use this later, make sure the children know I'm guessing about them too. Mothers aren't reliable narrators just because we're mothers."

Elias stopped writing.

Mara noticed. "No notebook?"

"She already said it."

They listened to the end.

Rohe thanked Helen. She replied, "Don't thank me until you show me what you built."

The tape clicked off.

For several minutes nobody moved.

Then Mara picked up the cassette carefully. "She gave us the rule before we invented it."

Elias shook his head. "She gave herself a rule. We made ours later."

Mara looked at him and smiled. "Learned from you."

"Unfortunately."

She handed the tape back to June, not the release authority.

"It's yours until you decide otherwise."

June blinked. "Technically it's your mother's."

"She's bad at storage now."

The joke broke the tension just enough.

Ownership, once again, did not become simple because evidence was valuable.

Authenticating HJ-09 required experts who knew nothing about the family. Elias preferred that. A forensic audio lab dated the tape stock, analyzed magnetic

degradation and compared Helen's voice against undisputed recordings. Confidence was high but not absolute.

The report used cautious language.

Consistent with.

No evidence of splicing.

Likely recorded between 2007 and 2010.

Mara read the phrasing and smiled. "Finally, a document that knows how to be unsure."

The legal team wanted a cleaner conclusion for the inquiry. Celia refused.

"The expert wrote what the evidence supports. We do not improve it for communication."

Mara looked at her. "You may be learning."

"Do not spread that rumor."

HJ-09 also contained room tone. Ivo compared it to St. Anne's archived acoustic measurements and found a ventilation frequency consistent with the old oncology wing. Another supporting detail, not proof by itself.

The accumulation mattered.

Elias thought about his original kitchen memory. Multiple independent sources had once placed him elsewhere. Here, multiple independent indicators supported the tape's authenticity. The method was the same even though the emotional direction was opposite.

He trusted the process more because it could disappoint him either way.

Gabriel asked to hear the cassette alone once before the inquiry. Mara hesitated.

"It's Mum," he said. "Or likely Mum. I would like ten minutes without a committee."

They gave him the copy.

Afterward he returned it without describing what he felt.

Elias nearly asked.

He stopped.

Gabriel noticed. "Thank you."

The small exchange moved Elias more than he expected.

Later Mara admitted she had listened to one section again by herself, the part where Helen said mothers were unreliable narrators too.

"I like hearing her undermine herself," Mara said. "Everyone else keeps trying to make her authoritative."

"Including us."

"Especially us."

They agreed the inquiry should play only the portions directly relevant to consent conditions. The personal section about Elias and Mara would remain private.

Tess complained that it was emotionally powerful.

Mara stared at her.

Tess raised both hands. "I know. That was me identifying temptation, not asking permission."

"Good recovery."

The tape was evidence because of what Helen said about labels and generation.

It did not become public property merely because it also contained a beautiful dead mother's voice.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Mara Remembers Wrong

Mara's clearest memory of Helen's funeral was impossible because there had been no funeral. They had held a small memorial service three weeks after the death, but Mara remembered standing beside an open grave while Elias held her hand.

She told him this at two in the morning.

"Why now?"

"Because HJ-09 made me think of Mum dying. Then the grave came back."

They sat in Elias's kitchen. The blue cup was on the shelf. Neither looked at it.

"Do you want to check?"

"No. I know there was no burial. She was cremated."

"Then where did the image come from?"

Mara laughed tiredly. "You see? That's your disease."

"Question."

"Same haircut."

She rubbed her eyes.

"Maybe television. Maybe another funeral. Maybe Fallow showed me one. Maybe I dreamed it when I was fourteen and kept it."

"Does it feel real?"

"Completely."

Elias understood. Mara looked at him. "I keep wanting you to tell me it's okay."

"It is."

"And then I hate that because maybe the whole industry began with people wanting that sentence."

He did not say anything. After a while she added, "I remember you holding my hand."

"Maybe I did at the memorial."

"Maybe."

"Does it matter?"

Mara considered.

"Not tonight."

They made toast. It burned.

Elias almost said something about conducting an autopsy, then stopped because he no longer knew whether the joke belonged to his family, First Copy or some engineer in 2009.

Mara saw his face.

"Say it."

"No."

"Coward."

He said it. She laughed.

Whatever its source, the joke was theirs now.

Mara's impossible funeral memory returned after HJ-09. She described standing beside an open grave, holding Elias's hand while rain soaked her shoes. The image was vivid enough that she could name the cemetery gate and the smell of wet cut grass.

There had been no burial.

Helen had been cremated. The family held a memorial three weeks later in a church hall. No grave. No cemetery.

"I know," Mara said. "Still there."

They traced possible sources without reconstructing the scene. A school friend's father had been buried that same year. Mara attended. Photographs showed the cemetery gate she described. A television drama Gabriel watched around the same time included an open grave in rain. Fallow later used cemetery imagery in a grief protocol.

Three plausible contributors. No way to determine the exact path.

"So the answer is boring," Mara said.

"The answer is unresolved."

"Same thing to television."

Elias asked what the memory meant to her now.

She thought for a while. "It used to be proof I was there when Mum was put somewhere. Even though she wasn't. Maybe my brain wanted a location. Cremation is annoyingly administrative."

"That sounds like Lena."

"Don't insult me."

They visited the church hall instead. It now hosted a dance school. Children in bright shoes ran past them while parents waited with phones.

Mara remembered the memorial tables being covered in blue cloth. A photograph showed cream. She remembered Gabriel speaking. He had been unable to. An aunt read his words.

She did remember one thing correctly: Elias had made a joke so inappropriate that she laughed during the service.

"What did I say?" he asked.

"You said Mum would hate the flowers because lilies smell like funeral homes."

"That's not a joke."

"You said it while standing at her memorial surrounded by lilies. Timing made it a joke."

Gabriel confirmed later that both children had laughed and then been horrified at themselves.

"Your aunt thought you were having a breakdown," he said.

"Maybe we were," Mara replied.

The memory became warmer through corroboration, which made Elias wary. He noticed the impulse to improve it.

Mara noticed him noticing.

"You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The one where a memory has one verified detail and you want to promote the entire scene."

He laughed. "Probably."

Outside the hall, she looked toward a cemetery visible beyond the main road.

"Maybe that's where I got it," she said.

"Maybe."

"You know what bothers me least now?"

"What?"

"Being wrong about the grave."

"What bothers you more?"

"That I spent years thinking the wrongness meant something had been done to me. Sometimes memory is just bad."

Elias nodded.

Mara nudged him. "Say the lilies thing."

"Why?"

"I want to know if it's still funny."

He said it.

She laughed.

Whatever its exact source, the joke belonged to them now.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The Boy in the Red Scarf

A claimant named Daniel Hsu remembered a boy in a red scarf at his father's hospital bedside. No such boy existed in family records.

The scarf traced to Rebecca Holt. Elias's university friend.

He stared at the source match.

"How did Rebecca get into Morrow?"

Ivo checked lineage. Not Rebecca herself.

A photograph from Elias's 2011 phone backup showed her in the scarf outside the humanities building. That backup entered Elias's 2018 research archive. The

image became part of a generic winter-clothing prior used in a hospital reconstruction in 2024.

Elias felt violated in a new direction. His data, collected to reconstruct Mara, had leaked outward into strangers.

He had been a donor without knowing it. Daniel did not care about the scarf.

"I care about the boy," he said. "I thought he was my cousin. I spent years trying to remember which cousin."

The boy's face was composite. Part Elias at nineteen. Part another donor. No actual person.

Daniel laughed when told.

"So I invented a cousin with your coat friend's scarf."

"The system assembled him."

"And I adopted him."

"That's one way to put it."

Daniel shrugged. "He sat with me while my dad was dying. I know that didn't happen. But when I remember that week, I'm less alone because he's there. What do I do with that?"

Elias thought of the blue cup.

"You don't have to do anything."

Daniel looked relieved. The answer would once have offended Elias.

Now it felt precise.

Daniel Hsu's red-scarf boy became a useful warning against overfitting. Daniel remembered a child standing near his father's hospital bed during a reconstructed

scene. The boy wore a red scarf. No such child appeared in family records.

The scarf matched a photograph of Rebecca Holt from Elias's university archive.

Tess immediately suspected a cross-donor leak.

Elias did too, which is why he distrusted the conclusion.

They traced the scarf image. It had entered a general clothing prior after Morrow licensed a large public photo dataset. Rebecca's photograph was among millions. The model had not borrowed a person from Elias's life. It had generated a common red scarf from a broad visual distribution.

"So coincidence," Daniel said.

"Maybe," Elias replied.

"You people never say yes."

"Sometimes we can. Here, we can say there is no evidence the scarf came specifically from Rebecca."

Daniel considered this. "That's almost yes."

The boy itself turned out to be stranger. His posture matched a hospital visitor in Daniel's direct childhood photographs, but his face was generated. The reconstruction had combined real spatial memory with an inferred child because a gap in the image looked person-shaped to the scene model.

"A visual completion error," Ivo said.

Daniel laughed. "My ghost was a compression problem."

"Not exactly compression."

"Let me have one joke."

The case never reached headlines because it did not support the larger narrative people wanted. No donor conspiracy. No hidden Helen fragment. Just a model making a plausible mistake and a human mind finding a personal connection afterward.

Elias found the case more important than many dramatic ones.

At a claimant workshop, he used the red scarf example to show how investigation could create false certainty in both directions. Once researchers knew the Venn archive well, they began seeing Venn patterns everywhere.

"Experts can be suggested too," he said.

Mara, sitting in the back, raised her hand. "Can confirm. My brother once saw our mother in a sugar bowl."

"That was a verified object transfer."

"And he remains unbearable."

The room laughed.

Daniel later asked Elias privately whether uncertainty ever stopped feeling like unfinished work.

Elias thought about the question.

"Not always. I think you get better at deciding which unfinished work belongs to you."

Daniel nodded. "The boy in my memory can stay?"

"It's your memory. The annotation can say the figure is generated with low source confidence. You don't have to delete your experience of the scene."

"Even if he never existed?"

"The experience existed. The boy's historical existence is unsupported."

Daniel smiled. "That's an incredibly annoying answer."

"I've been told."

He looked relieved anyway.

The answer would once have offended Elias because it did not collapse uncertainty into one category. Now precision felt kinder than certainty.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Helen's Letter

The sealed letter from Ternmouth had remained unopened.

GABRIEL, IF YOU'RE STILL WORRYING.

Gabriel finally opened it with Mara and Elias present. Helen had written three pages about practical things.

Insurance documents. The boiler.

Mara's school trip. Elias needing money for university applications.

Then: You are going to want to make recordings mean more after I'm gone. Please don't. A tape is a tape. The children will remember different things. Let them. If the research becomes useful, good. If it starts telling them what they ought to remember, stop.

Gabriel stopped reading.

"I failed that."

Mara said, "Yes." Elias looked at her.

She continued, "And you were grieving. Both are true." Gabriel nodded.

The letter ended: Do not preserve me so well that nobody else gets to change.

Mara laughed through tears. "She really did write like she expected committees." Elias smiled.

Gabriel folded the letter carefully.

"What do I do with all the reconstructions?"

"What do you want to do?" Elias asked.

"Keep one."

"Which?"

"The breakfast. Even if she never forgave me in it."

Mara looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because you two are there."

The reconstruction was inaccurate. The family in it had borrowed behavior.

Helen called Mara June once. Gabriel wanted it anyway.

They let him.

Helen's sealed Ternmouth letter had survived because Gabriel was too afraid to open it and too sentimental to throw it away. The envelope had softened at the edges from years of being moved between drawers.

Mara placed it on the table. "Still your choice."

Gabriel stared at his name.

"If I open it now because everyone else is investigating her, am I letting the scandal choose for me?"

Elias did not answer.

Mara said, "Maybe. Or maybe the scandal reminded you the letter exists. Those aren't the same."

Gabriel laughed faintly. "You two have become impossible to ask simple questions."

He opened it.

The first page was about insurance, passwords and a complaint that the freezer needed defrosting. Helen had written during treatment when she was frightened enough to plan and practical enough to be irritated by appliances.

The second page addressed Gabriel's habit of trying to make the children feel better by giving confident answers.

Don't tell them you know what I'll want after I'm gone. You won't. I change my mind while alive. Death should not make me more consistent.

Mara closed her eyes.

Gabriel read on.

Helen asked him not to use recordings to simulate conversations unless Elias and Mara were old enough to decide for themselves. She allowed archiving. She allowed research copies under explicit labeling. She did not give blanket permission for generated speech.

The language aligned with HJ-09.

Then the letter became personal again. She worried about Gabriel sleeping. She told him to stop buying the wrong detergent. She wrote that Mara would pretend not to need help and Elias would pretend help was a factual question.

"Rude again," Mara said.

Gabriel laughed and cried at the same time.

The final paragraph contained no warning about technology.

Helen wrote: If the children remember me wrong, leave some of it alone. I have remembered my own mother wrong for years and still loved her accurately enough.

Elias felt an immediate desire to underline the sentence.

He did not.

"That's going to become the quote," Tess said quietly. She was present only because Gabriel had invited her to witness authentication.

Mara shook her head. "Not if we can help it."

Gabriel looked at the letter. "Why not?"

"Because then strangers will put it on posters and make Mum sound like she solved the ethics of memory in one sentence."

"It is a good sentence."

"She also wrote about the freezer. Publish that too."

Tess smiled. "Deal."

There was one oddity. Halfway down page two, Helen wrote, June will understand this better than the boys.

She had crossed out June and written Mara above it.

Mara stared.

"June?"

Gabriel frowned. "Your mother's cousin June?"

There was, in fact, a cousin June. Sixty-eight, living in Bristol.

Mara began laughing so hard she had to put the letter down.

For weeks they had treated every appearance of the name June as potentially connected to June Saye. Here was a completely ordinary explanation from family history.

"Keep that correction public," Mara told Tess. "I want one example where the conspiracy is just Mum forgetting which June she meant."

Gabriel wanted the crossed-out word preserved in the copy.

They let him.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Rohe's Confession

Rohe asked to speak without lawyers. Celia refused.

He settled for lawyers who remained silent.

"I did not set out to manufacture memory," he said.

Mara replied, "Nobody thinks villains wake up with mission statements." Rohe accepted the hit.

They met in a plain hearing room. Elias sat beside Mara. Lena sat opposite Rohe.

"Origin worked better than it should have," Rohe said. "Gabriel could not reliably distinguish generated Helen from authentic recordings. I found that extraordinary."

"You found grief useful," Elias said.

"I found familiarity measurable."

"Same problem."

Rohe looked tired. "Yes. Eventually." He admitted the central mistake.

The team treated subjective familiarity as validation because objective ground truth was often unavailable. If a bereaved spouse said, that feels like her, the score went up.

Then they optimized for the score.

"We thought we were preserving personality," he said. "We were preserving expectation."

Mara leaned forward. "And expectation is easier to satisfy than a person."

"Yes."

Rohe looked at her. "You told me that at fifteen. Not in those words."

"I told you you were stealing with maths."

A faint smile. "That too."

"Why didn't you stop?"

He took a long time.

"Because people improved. They slept. They stopped blaming themselves. Families reconciled. Every objection had a suffering person on the other side who

said the system helped. I used outcomes to excuse uncertainty."

Lena said, "And ambition." Rohe looked at her.

"Yes. And ambition."

No single confession solved the story. But Elias believed that sentence.

Rohe's account of success was supported by numbers he still seemed to believe mattered. Depression scores improved in early bereavement trials. Sleep improved. Rumination decreased. Family conflict sometimes fell after consensus sessions. These outcomes were not fabricated.

"If the treatment helped," Rohe said, "we had an obligation to understand how to make it safer, not simply abandon it."

Mara replied, "And did you?"

"Eventually."

"People keep using that word around me."

Elias asked, "When did you know familiarity and fidelity were diverging?" Rohe looked at him. "2009."

Earlier than Elias expected.

"Why keep optimizing familiarity?"

"Because fidelity was often unknowable. We had dead subjects, sparse evidence, contradictory families. Familiarity was measurable."

"Measurable isn't the same as valid."

"I know that now."

Ivo, present as technical advisor, asked, "Did you know the First Copy prior was carrying donor-specific identity after the scrubber?" Rohe hesitated.

"I knew residuals existed. I believed they were too small to matter."

Mara said, "My mother's hand mattered."

"Yes."

"June's father's laugh mattered."

"Yes."

"You defined matter by average outcome."

Rohe looked at her. "Yes." The repeated admission did not satisfy anyone.

That was perhaps appropriate. Elias had spent years expecting truth to produce emotional resolution. Often it produced only a more accurate discomfort.

Rohe's confession was not legally a confession because his lawyers objected to the word. He called it a voluntary factual statement. Mara called it "a confession wearing expensive shoes."

He agreed to meet in a neutral conference room. No Morrow branding remained anywhere. The company that had once occupied glass towers had become boxes, court orders and people arguing over data retention.

Rohe looked older, but Elias resisted reading morality into age.

"I did not intend to create false autobiographical memory," Rohe said.

Mara leaned back. "We know. That's not the interesting part."

Rohe looked at her.

"The interesting part is when you knew the system could do it and kept building."

He was silent for several seconds.

"2010," he said.

Lena closed her eyes.

Rohe described the natural-exposure study. Participants repeated inferred details after sessions. Initially the team treated it as ordinary reconstructive memory behavior. Memory researchers already knew suggestion could alter recall. The surprise was persistence. Immersive scenes produced stronger autobiographical adoption than text or therapist suggestion.

"And you stopped?" Celia asked.

"We stopped that protocol."

"Not the underlying product."

"No."

Why?

Because other outcomes were good. Trauma patients slept. Bereaved clients reported reduced intrusive distress. Witnesses sometimes recovered verifiable environmental details. Families valued the scenes.

"So you separated the risk from the benefit in your mind," Elias said.

Rohe nodded. "We believed labeling and clinical supervision would control adoption. Later product teams weakened the labels because users found them disruptive. I approved some of those changes."

Mara asked, "Did Helen tell you not to?"

Rohe looked at the authenticated transcript of HJ-09 on the table.

"Yes."

The answer landed quietly.

"Did you remember that?" Mara asked.

"Not until I heard the tape again."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

She stared at him. "Stop agreeing with me."

For the first time, Rohe looked angry. "What would you prefer? That I defend it? I can explain every decision. I can show you data that made those decisions look reasonable. I can show you patients who would still choose the treatment knowing what we know now. None of that changes the fact that we allowed acceptance to become evidence."

The anger made him more human and therefore less satisfying as a villain.

Elias asked about Samuel Vey.

Rohe's expression hardened. Vey had argued that memory was always socially constructed and that hiding cross-donor influence was scientifically dishonest only if researchers falsely promised purity. After the 2010 study was curtailed, Vey wanted to publish. Rohe blocked him to protect participants and the program.

"Protect the program," Mara repeated.

"Yes."

"There it is."

Vey left Fallow bitter. Years later he accused Morrow privately of turning shared-memory research into proprietary technology while pretending reconstruction was individualized.

"Would he send unauthorized scenes now?" Elias asked.

"I don't know."

Rohe looked exhausted.

Mara's final question was simple. "If you could go back, would you build it?"

His lawyers moved. He ignored them.

"Not the way we did."

"That's not what I asked."

A long pause.

"Yes," Rohe said. "I would still try."

The answer offended everyone more than a perfect apology would have.

It also felt true.

After Rohe's formal statement, Mara asked to speak with him for five minutes without lawyers. Celia said no. Rohe's lawyers said absolutely not. Mara said she would then ask the same questions in public testimony.

Five minutes were granted with counsel present but silent.

Mara sat opposite Rohe. "Did you ever like me?"

The question surprised everyone.

Rohe considered. "Yes. You were difficult. I liked that when it was intellectually interesting and disliked it when it threatened the work."

"That's probably the most honest thing you've said."

"Probably."

"Did you believe I was sick?"

"I believed you were grieving and distressed. I also believed some of your suspicion exceeded the evidence available to you at the time."

"Exceeded the evidence available to me or the evidence available to you?"

Rohe looked at her.

The distinction landed.

"To me," he said.

Mara leaned back. "That's what I needed."

Elias understood. For years Mara's objections had been judged against information she was not allowed to see. Researchers knew more about the system and still used her lack of proof as evidence of irrationality.

Mara asked one final question. "When I said the memories were changing, did you ever consider I was right before you considered what diagnosis explained why I thought that?"

Rohe's face tightened.

"Not soon enough."

She nodded.

The conversation ended there.

Outside, Elias asked whether she felt better.

"No."

"Good?"

"Don't make a philosophy out of it."

They walked toward the lifts.

Mara said, "I kept imagining he'd say something that made the whole thing clear. That he knew exactly what he was doing. Or that he was secretly sorry from the beginning."

"He didn't."

"No. He was a man who kept choosing the work when the work got morally inconvenient. That's much less satisfying."

"More plausible."

"Unfortunately."

The lift arrived.

Before the doors closed, Rohe appeared at the corridor end and looked toward them. He did not wave.

Mara did not either.

There was no final confrontation music. No confession that repaired the past.

Only a man who would still build the technology differently, and a woman who had finally forced him to answer the question he had once converted into a symptom.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Pattern Fourteen

Pattern Fourteen was not a sentence. It was an interaction.

One person says something vulnerable. The other person does not answer immediately.

Instead they perform a small practical action: refill a cup, move food, straighten clothing. Then they answer indirectly.

The Pattern Library labeled it CARE THROUGH TASK.
Helen scored highest.

Mara discovered she did it constantly. So did Elias.

"We learned it from Mum," she said.

"Probably."

"Or First Copy."

"We lived with Mum before First Copy existed."

"Good point. I would like one uncontaminated trait."

They were in Elias's kitchen. Mara had just told him she was considering moving in with Sam. Elias responded by refilling the kettle.

She pointed at him.

"Pattern Fourteen."

"I hate this investigation."

"You love this investigation."

He put the kettle down.

"Are you happy?"

"Mostly."

"Do you want my opinion?"

"Not really."

"Good."

She smiled. The discovery of Pattern Fourteen did something unexpected.

It showed that borrowed behavior and inherited behavior could look identical from outside. The difference was not visible in the gesture.

It was history. Consent.

Relationship. A machine could reproduce the shape of care without possessing the relationship that gave it meaning.

That did not make the gesture fake to the recipient. But it changed what evidence the gesture provided.

Elias wrote none of this down. He made tea.

Pattern Fourteen looked harmless when reduced to text. One person says something vulnerable. The other does not immediately answer. Instead they perform a practical act: refill a cup, move food closer, straighten a blanket, adjust the room temperature. Verbal reassurance follows only if needed.

The pattern had high acceptance across cultures and age groups.

Helen used it frequently.

So did millions of people who had never heard of Helen.

That made attribution difficult.

At a workshop, Ivo showed two clips. One direct Venn recording. One unrelated family video found in a licensed archive. Both mothers responded to a distressed child by placing food nearby rather than talking.

"Which is Pattern Fourteen?" he asked.

Mara raised her hand. "The answer is the concept is stupid."

"Correct."

The library had turned ordinary human behavior into numbered units because software needed categories. Once numbered, the units began to look like discoverable psychological objects rather than engineering conveniences.

Lena explained that the pattern's clinical success likely came from reducing conversational pressure. Practical care allowed a distressed person to remain connected without producing a response.

"So the insight isn't false," Nia said.

"No. The problem is treating a useful pattern as donor-specific evidence, then reusing it without transparent provenance."

Mara frowned. "And treating people's reactions as proof the pattern belongs to them."

"Yes."

The group reviewed a claimant scene where a reconstructed father silently cut an orange after his son disclosed fear. The direct family archive contained many oranges, no record of that conversation, and several examples of the father responding to stress with food.

The exact act could have happened.

It also matched Pattern Fourteen.

No system could resolve the historical question.

The claimant, Mateo, chose to keep the scene annotated as plausible composite.

"My dad absolutely would have cut fruit rather than discuss feelings," he said. "If the machine guessed right, that doesn't make it a memory. But it also doesn't make the guess emotionally stupid."

Elias admired the phrasing and did not write it down until Mateo gave permission.

That evening, after everyone left, Elias found Mara in the staff kitchen making tea. She had received a difficult call from Gabriel and was irritated.

He started to ask what happened, then stopped. Instead he moved the sugar toward her and checked the kettle.

Mara stared at his hand.

"Pattern Fourteen," she said.

Elias withdrew it. "Sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous."

She poured the water.

"The fact somebody numbered it doesn't mean we have to stop being people."

He leaned against the counter. "That's annoyingly sensible."

"Learned from you."

"You keep saying that as an insult."

"It is."

They drank tea without discussing Gabriel for several minutes.

The gesture might have been learned from Helen. Or Gabriel. Or adulthood. Or ordinary social behavior. Provenance could matter without requiring every act of care to submit a source list.

Elias made no note.

He let the tea become tea.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

User Correction

The claimant working group proposed a new release system. Not correction.

Annotation. Users could keep reconstructions while attaching visible provenance layers: directly sourced, inferred, cross-donor, generated dialogue target, unknown lineage.

They could choose how much to see. Default would show uncertainty rather than hide it.

Mara called it "putting Mum's condition into software eighteen years late." Celia called it administratively expensive.

Ivo called it obvious. Nia called it enough to start.

The harder proposal was user correction. If a client knew a detail was wrong, should their correction become new source evidence?

Morrow had often said yes. That created feedback loops.

A person accepted a yellow cardigan, then later told the system yellow was correct, increasing confidence in the false detail. Ivo proposed separating autobiographical preference from factual source.

"You can say, this is how I want the scene represented, without pretending it's evidence."

Elias liked that. Mara did too.

"A memory can have an edit without calling the edit history."

The court approved a pilot. Nia became the first user.

She kept the yellow cardigan. Beside it, the provenance layer read: borrowed visual feature, Bell donor family, not supported by Rosa Vale records.

Nia looked at the scene.
"Still Mum," she said.
Then she corrected herself.
"Still my memory of Mum."
The difference was small. It mattered.

The new correction interface refused to use the word corrected. Mara had won that argument after threatening to withdraw from the claimant group.

"A person isn't a corrupted file," she said. "You annotate what the system did. You do not correct somebody's memory like spelling."

The final design displayed layers.

DIRECT SOURCE.

INFERRED FROM PERSONAL DATA.

CROSS-DONOR PRIOR.

GENERATED FOR CONTINUITY.

UNRESOLVED.

Users could reveal or hide layers. They could attach their own notes. They could mark a detail as emotionally meaningful without claiming factual confidence. Most importantly, the system never silently promoted an accepted generated detail into direct history.

Ivo hated the interface aesthetically. "It looks like tax software."

"Good," Mara said. "Maybe people will stop falling in love with it."

Nia volunteered to test it on her mother scene.

The pear-shaped sugar bowl glowed amber: CROSS-DONOR OBJECT, probable Venn source.

Helen-like hand posture: CROSS-DONOR
INTERACTION PRIOR, source family cluster uncertain.

Farah's blouse: DIRECT PHOTO SOURCE.

Kitchen window: DIRECT PERSONAL PHOTO
SOURCE.

Dialogue: mixed, mostly generated.

Nia watched the scene with labels visible.

It was less immersive. Less beautiful. More truthful
about construction.

"I hate it," she said.

Ivo looked alarmed. "The interface?"

"No. I hate knowing exactly where the joins are."

Mara asked whether she wanted to stop.

Nia shook her head.

The reconstructed Farah reached toward a cup. The
hand carried an amber outline.

Nia started crying.

Lena moved toward the stop control. Nia held up one
hand.

"I'm okay. I just thought finding out would make the
whole thing feel fake. It doesn't. That's harder."

Afterward she chose to keep the scene in her archive
with provenance layers available by default.

"Still my memory of Mum," she said.

Elias almost corrected the word memory, then did
not. It was her memory of experiencing a reconstruction
of her mother. Human language did not need to become
a technical manual every time.

The claimant group proposed another feature: a personal annotation field where users could write what they believed before and after provenance release.

That created arguments. Lawyers worried such notes could be mistaken for clinical evidence. Psychologists worried people would over-monitor themselves. Users wanted somewhere to preserve their own changing understanding.

Mara suggested plain text with a warning: THIS IS YOUR NOTE, NOT A SYSTEM FINDING.

Everyone agreed.

She looked disappointed. "I expected more resistance."

Celia said, "We're tired."

The difference between the old and new interface was small in code. Labels remained visible. Acceptance did not change source confidence. Users controlled whether they wanted more detail.

Small design choices had helped create the original problem.

Small design choices could not repair all of it, but they could stop repeating the same mistake.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

The Room Where People Agreed

Room 4C at St. Anne's was now a staff break room. A microwave beeped while Elias, Mara, June, Nia and Lena stood where the natural exposure study had taken place.

No hidden speakers. No observation glass.

Just a table, lockers and a notice asking staff not to steal yogurt. June laughed. "This is disappointingly ordinary."

Lena pointed to a wall. "The observation window was there. Covered during renovation." Mara looked at the room.

"Do I remember being here?"

Lena said, "You were. Once."

"For the study?"

"No. With Helen. Before Fallow."

Mara closed her eyes. The metal tray memory came again.

Elias had it too. They searched hospital incident logs.

A tray had fallen in this corridor in 2007. A nurse recorded a minor sharps exposure.

So the memory might be real. Mara laughed.

"After all that."

"What?" Nia asked.

"The stupid tray happened."

Elias felt an absurd relief. Then caught himself.

The tray being real did not prove either sibling witnessed it. Mara saw his face.

"Don't."

He smiled.

"I wasn't going to."

"Liar."

They stood in the room where researchers once measured agreement. Nobody agreed on exactly what they remembered.

That felt healthier.

Room 4C had become a staff break room. Someone had put a motivational poster above the microwave. A half-empty jar of instant coffee sat beside a sink. The ordinariness irritated Mara until she realized she preferred it to preservation.

Samuel Vey was not there.

Police had searched the room earlier and found the legacy server concealed inside a locked maintenance cabinet. No dramatic laboratory. No hidden headset. Just aging hardware still connected because decommissioning paperwork had failed.

The unauthorized reconstructions had been rendered there remotely through hospital credentials.

Vey's fingerprints appeared on the cabinet, but that proved only authorized archival work.

Nia stood where an old floor plan placed the observation chair. "This is where they did the exposure study?"

Lena nodded.

"Do you remember the room?"

"Not like this."

Mara looked around. "I remember orange chairs."

The surviving photos showed blue chairs.

"Could have been replaced," Elias said, then caught Mara's look. "Sorry. Quota."

June laughed.

They had come not to recreate the study but to understand physical logistics. The room had one-way observation glass in 2010. The wall was now solid. Audio speakers had been built into ceiling tiles. Researchers could introduce environmental sounds or voices without participants seeing equipment.

"Did they?" Nia asked.

"Sometimes," Lena said. "For contextual priming."

"Meaning?"

"Playing sounds associated with source material before reconstruction."

June shook her head. "You all had wonderful names."

They found an old maintenance schematic showing speaker zones and synchronization ports. Vey's natural-exposure papers referenced those exact ports.

The technical system was plausible. Limited. Local. Nothing like an omnipotent AI secretly reaching into minds. It relied on repetition, context, suggestion and human memory doing what human memory already did.

That made the room more unsettling.

Mara sat at the break table. "I keep expecting to feel something."

"Do you?" Elias asked.

"Hungry."

She opened a packet of biscuits left for staff. Lena objected that they were not theirs. Mara put fifty pence beside the jar.

June sat opposite her. "I don't remember you here."

"I don't remember you either."

"Good."

"Good."

Nia smiled. "This is a terrible support group."

"We reject the premise," Mara said.

For ten minutes they drank bad coffee in the room where researchers once measured agreement and distress. Each person remembered different things about buildings, sessions, relatives and their own reactions. Nobody tried to harmonize the accounts.

When they left, Elias looked back at the microwave, the poster and the coins beside the biscuit jar.

The room did not feel important.

That felt healthier.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Gabriel and Mara

Mara asked Gabriel why he had not stopped Fallow when she complained. No researchers.

No Elias. Just the two of them.

Elias knew about the conversation only because Mara told him afterward. Gabriel said, "I thought you were grieving."

Mara said, "I was."

"I thought the program might help."

"It sometimes did."

"I thought your certainty that it was harming you was part of being frightened."

"That was the problem."

Gabriel nodded. Then he apologized without explaining himself again.

Mara did not forgive him immediately. They made dinner.

He burned onions. She corrected the heat.

He told her Helen used to do that. Mara said, "Maybe I got it from her."

Gabriel replied, "Or maybe onions burn when I'm cooking." She laughed.

That was all. Elias liked the story because nothing resolved cleanly.

Mara told Elias about the conversation with Gabriel two days later, while they were waiting for a delayed train. She gave him the short version first.

"I asked Dad why he didn't stop Fallow when I complained."

Elias looked at her. "What did he say?"

"He thought the treatment was helping me. He thought I was grieving and suspicious and that the researchers knew more than he did."

"Did he apologize?"

"Eventually. I made him work for it."

She bought coffee from the platform machine and grimaced after one sip.

The longer version emerged gradually. Gabriel admitted he had been frightened by Mara's insomnia

and anger after Helen died. When clinicians described her resistance as part of grief, the explanation relieved him. It transformed a daughter he could not help into a patient with a plan.

"He said he needed them to be right," Mara said.

Elias understood that too well.

"What did you say?"

"That needing an explanation doesn't make you evil. It makes you easy to sell explanations to."

Gabriel had cried. Mara had become angry because crying tempted her to comfort him before she was finished.

"So I waited," she said. "Very therapeutic of me."

They sat on a metal bench as trains announced further delays.

"Did you forgive him?" Elias asked.

Mara looked genuinely annoyed. "Why does everyone want forgiveness to be a yes-or-no setting?"

"Fair."

"I believe he loved me. I believe he failed me. I believe he was grieving. I believe he signed things he shouldn't have. I believe he has spent years being sorry. That's enough information for one relationship."

Elias nodded.

"Then he asked whether I remember Mum burning onions," Mara continued.

"Why?"

"Because he remembers the smell whenever he thinks about the week before she died, and now he's terrified it came from some reconstruction."

"Was there a reconstruction with onions?"

"Of course you ask that."

"Occupational."

Mara called Gabriel later and told him she remembered the onions too. Elias asked whether she was sure.

"No," she said. "I told him exactly that. I remember it. I don't know why."

Gabriel replied, "Or maybe onions burn when I'm cooking."

Mara laughed.

That was all.

No forensic investigation of onions. No source map. No family tribunal.

Elias liked the story because nothing resolved cleanly and nobody mistook that for failure.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The Deletion Key

Orpheus could not remain forever. The archive contained raw patient data no institution could justify preserving indefinitely. The court ordered a controlled reduction: preserve provenance maps and accountability logs, destroy unnecessary intimate source media after claimants had access choices.

Elias was asked to help design deletion. The irony was almost rude.

He, Ivo, Celia and claimant representatives built rules. No source deleted while an unresolved claim depended on it.

No donor identity retained where a non-identifying provenance tag would suffice. No model state preserved simply because engineers disliked deleting history.

No automatic failsafe capable of public release. Mara attended the final review.

"You are building a system that forgets."

"Deliberately."

"How does that feel?"

Elias considered.

"Necessary."

The first deletion batch included duplicate copies of Helen's recordings. Gabriel had originals.

The court retained hashed proof of provenance, not the intimate media itself. Elias pressed the authorization key with two other people.

Nothing dramatic happened. A progress bar moved.

Data disappeared. For years he had treated destruction of evidence as nearly immoral.

Now he understood that keeping everything could be its own form of harm.

The deletion hearing lasted longer than the criminal investigation. Everyone agreed Orpheus could not remain intact forever. Nobody agreed what responsible destruction meant.

Researchers wanted aggregate historical data preserved. Claimants wanted provenance. Privacy advocates wanted raw family media destroyed once legal claims ended. Lawyers wanted everything kept until every appeal expired. Engineers wanted checksums and dependency maps. Mara wanted the entire room dropped into the sea, then admitted this was not a serious policy proposal.

The court ordered controlled reduction.

Direct raw recordings belonging to people without continuing consent would be deleted after verified provenance summaries were created. Accountability logs, model dependency maps and evidence necessary for litigation would remain under public-interest trust. Generated reconstructions could be returned to users or destroyed at their request.

Elias found himself unexpectedly distressed by the deletion plan.

"You spent years afraid evidence would disappear," Lena said.

"Yes."

"Now some should."

"I know."

Knowing did not remove the old fear.

On deletion day, authorized observers watched hashes verify before each source package was destroyed. No dramatic animation. File counts decreased. Drives were cryptographically wiped and later physically shredded.

One folder contained raw adolescent recordings of Mara.

She had the right to preserve them.

"Do you want copies?" Celia asked.

Mara looked at the list. Therapy sessions. Free recall. Exposure study. Clinical interviews.

"No. Keep the minimum needed for the inquiry, then delete the rest."

Elias felt himself react.

Mara noticed. "Say it."

"Some of those recordings may contain things you don't remember."

"Exactly."

"They may also answer questions later."

"Exactly."

He understood the symmetry. His instinct treated future knowledge as automatically valuable. Mara treated future access as a cost as well as a benefit.

"Your choice," he said.

"Look at you."

The files were deleted.

Nothing changed in the room.

Mara did not become less herself because data vanished.

Later Elias reviewed his own raw 2018 therapy archive. He chose to preserve consent documentation and technical logs but destroy several full-session recordings once the legal hold ended.

Lena asked whether he was certain.

He laughed. "No."

"Good answer."

The deletion key required two authorized signatures. Elias and an independent privacy trustee confirmed the list.

When the final raw session disappeared, he felt grief. Not because he wanted to watch it, but because possibility had ended. Evidence he might someday use was gone by choice.

For years he had treated destruction of evidence as nearly immoral.

Now he understood that keeping everything could become a claim on every future version of a person.

Some uncertainty deserved preservation.

Some data deserved an ending.

The deletion process also forced a question nobody had anticipated: what to do with family recordings that had become evidence in other people's claims. Helen's tapes belonged to the Venn estate, but fragments from them appeared in hundreds of provenance maps. Deleting every copy could weaken those maps. Keeping full recordings would extend the original consent violation.

The technical solution was less elegant than either side wanted. Orpheus generated cryptographic fingerprints and narrow source descriptors sufficient to prove a dependency without retaining full personal media. In some cases, a few seconds of source had to remain under sealed legal custody. The rest could go.

Mara reviewed each proposed Venn retention item.

"Why do they need Mum saying the entire sentence?"

Ivo checked. "They don't. The dependency is tied to six words and a timestamp."

"Then keep six words."

Elias felt the old archival instinct protest again. Context mattered. Whole recordings could prevent future misinterpretation.

Mara read his face. "Say it."

"A fragment can be misleading without context."

"True."

"So sometimes preserving more protects truth."

"Also true."

They negotiated case by case. Some tapes stayed whole under seal because context was legally necessary. Others were reduced to short evidentiary extracts. Many were deleted entirely after hashes and dependency summaries were verified.

There was no universal privacy principle that solved every source.

That, Elias had learned, was usually a sign they were finally dealing with people rather than systems.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Morrow's Last Reconstruction

One reconstruction remained under dispute. A 2025 session generated for a dying client named Evelyn Price.

Evelyn had asked Morrow to reconstruct a childhood afternoon with her sister. The scene used First Copy priors heavily because almost no direct evidence survived.

Evelyn died believing the afternoon was substantially real. Her sister, still alive, wanted the file destroyed.

Evelyn's daughter wanted to keep it. The court asked Elias to mediate.

He hated mediation. The sister said, "She remembered me kinder than I was."

The daughter said, "Maybe she needed that." The sister replied, "She deserved the truth."

The daughter said, "She was dying." Neither was wrong.

Elias proposed the only solution that did not pretend to solve grief. Keep the file privately for the daughter.

Mark provenance clearly. Do not treat it as family history without annotation.

Give the sister the right not to view it. They both disliked the compromise.

They accepted it. Morrow's last active reconstruction became not a memory to believe or destroy, but a document with conditions.

It seemed a fitting end for the company.

Evelyn Price's reconstruction became Morrow's final unresolved case because she had died before the scandal and left contradictory instructions. One document requested that her childhood scene be preserved for her

sister. Another asked that all generated material be destroyed after her death.

The dates differed by six months.

The later instruction favored deletion, but the sister argued Evelyn had changed her mind verbally during hospice.

Normally this would have been an estate dispute. Morrow complicated it because the scene contained First Copy priors and direct material from both sisters.

Elias reviewed the reconstruction only after the court authorized a narrow panel.

Two girls sat under a table during a thunderstorm. One told the other a joke. The wallpaper came from direct family photographs. The storm was supported by weather records. The exact dialogue was generated. The gesture of one sister placing her hand over the other's ears came from a cross-donor prior.

Evelyn's surviving sister, Ruth, watched the provenance view and cried.

"She did cover my ears," Ruth said. "Maybe not that night. But she did."

There was one direct photograph of Evelyn covering Ruth's ears at a fireworks display years later.

Could the childhood act have happened too? Yes.

Could the reconstruction have moved the later gesture backward? Yes.

No answer could be stronger.

Ruth asked to keep the scene privately.

The estate lawyer objected based on the deletion instruction.

Mara, serving as claimant representative, asked the obvious question. "Can the generated scene be destroyed while Ruth keeps a provenance transcript and her own memory of having watched it?"

Everyone paused.

The lawyer said yes.

Ruth considered. "I don't need the video. I need to know what I saw and what parts came from us."

They created a document listing direct sources, generated elements and unresolved details. The immersive file was deleted.

Morrow's last reconstruction therefore survived only as a record of conditions.

No cinematic final server shutdown followed. The platform had already been inactive for months. Employees had moved on. Logos disappeared from buildings. Products became litigation archives.

Elias found that appropriate.

Companies rarely ended at the emotional moment stories wanted. They dissolved through contracts, severance, court orders, technical migrations and people carrying boxes to cars.

Ruth signed the provenance document.

"This is enough," she said.

Enough did not mean complete.

For once, nobody treated the difference as a defect.

Ruth asked one more question after Evelyn's immersive file was destroyed.

"What happens if I remember the generated joke ten years from now and forget it came from Morrow?"

Lena answered, "That may happen. We cannot control future memory perfectly. The provenance document is there if you ever want to check."

"So the correction itself isn't guaranteed to stick."

"No."

Ruth laughed softly. "At least you're honest now."

The remark stayed with Elias. Much of the old Morrow philosophy assumed that better information could permanently settle memory. But provenance knowledge was also remembered by human beings. Labels could be forgotten. Corrections could fade. A person could know a scene was generated and still dream it as childhood years later.

The goal could not be perfect internal policing.

It had to be access to records, honest labeling at the point of use, and freedom from institutions claiming certainty they did not possess.

Ruth folded the provenance transcript into her bag. "My sister used to hate paperwork. She would find this ending hilarious."

"Do you know that?" Elias asked.

Ruth smiled. "No. But I'm keeping the guess."

He smiled back.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The Refusal

Ada Mercer offered Mara a reconstruction of Helen built only from direct source. No First Copy.

No cross-donor priors. No therapeutic dialogue targets.

Only authenticated recordings and explicit gaps.

"It would be ugly," Mercer said. "Faces may freeze where video is missing. Dialogue would cut out. Some rooms would remain blank."

Mara looked interested. Elias said nothing.

This was her choice. Mara asked, "Would it be more true?"

"More source-faithful. Not necessarily more representative of what it felt like to know her."

Mara smiled. "Good answer." She thought for a week.

Then refused.

"Why?" Elias asked later.

"Because I have recordings. I have Dad. I have you. I have things I remember and things I don't. I don't need a room I can walk into."

"You used to."

"Yes."

"Changed your mind?"

"Allowed."

Elias nodded. He had once refused his own missing 2018 reconstruction.

Mara's refusal was different. Not fear of another false memory.

Simply lack of need. That felt like freedom.

Ada Mercer offered Mara a direct-source reconstruction of Helen because the court's new tools could now build scenes with all generative completion disabled. Gaps would remain black or silent. No cross-donor priors. No inferred dialogue beyond visible labels.

Mara read the proposal and handed it back.

"No."

Ada blinked. "You don't want time to think?"

"I have thought."

Elias felt surprise before he could hide it.

Mara saw. "You want it."

"I didn't say that."

"Your eyebrows did."

The proposed scene used Helen's home videos, journals and hospital recordings. It could assemble a chronology of one afternoon in 2008 with explicit gaps. Technically, it represented almost everything Elias had once wanted Morrow to become.

"It would be useful," he admitted.

"For what?"

He had no immediate answer.

Mara continued. "I have her tapes. I have Dad's stories. I have things I remember and things I don't. I don't need to stand inside a room with a version of her to prove I loved her."

There was no fear in the refusal. That mattered.

Later Elias asked Ada to show him the non-immersive source timeline instead. He wanted dates, not a scene. They reviewed Helen's final months as documents, photographs and audio clips kept separate.

The experience was less emotionally satisfying and more informative.

At one point a gap of eleven days contained almost no recordings.

Old Elias would have felt compelled to fill it.

He left it blank.

Mara joined near the end and listened to a direct clip of Helen complaining about grocery prices.

"She sounds alive when she's annoyed," Mara said.

"She was alive."

"You know what I mean."

They did not create a reconstruction.

On the way out, Ada asked Mara whether she worried she might regret refusing.

"Of course. I regret lots of things. That's not a reason to do all possible things in advance."

Elias wrote that sentence down only after asking permission.

Mara rolled her eyes and said yes.

Her refusal was different from his earlier refusal to restore 2018 memories. He had refused because he feared another convincing substitute for truth. Mara refused because she did not need the product anymore.

The distinction felt like freedom rather than caution.

A week after refusing the Helen reconstruction, Mara mailed Elias a small envelope with no note. Inside was a photocopy of a grocery list in Helen's handwriting.

Milk. Bread. Batteries. Apples. Call plumber. Tell Elias dentist Thursday. Mara shoes.

Nothing profound.

Elias called her.

"Why did you send this?"

"Because Ada keeps offering us historically authenticated emotional material and I wanted you to possess Mum remembering you had a dentist appointment."

He looked at the list again.

"This is very moving."

"Exactly. Batteries. Shoes. Human legacy."

He pinned the copy above his desk, not because it proved anything important but because it resisted importance. Helen had existed outside the sentences later selected for hearings and ethics papers.

Months from now, visitors might ask why he kept an old shopping list.

He would tell them because his mother wrote it.

That answer required no confidence score.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The Testimony

The final public inquiry lasted three days. No single witness delivered the truth.

Gabriel testified about signing donor forms while grieving. June testified about recognizing Helen's hand.

Nia testified about the yellow cardigan and her mother's willingness to trust her. Ivo explained model distillation without metaphors.

Celia explained why privacy could become both protection and concealment. Lena admitted where she objected and where she stayed.

Rohe admitted optimizing familiarity when ground truth was absent. Mara testified last.

She did not read a statement.

"The first thing I want to say," she told the panel, "is that I was not right about everything. I was fifteen. I was angry. I misunderstood people. I made bad decisions. Please do not turn being correct about one danger into proof that I was a perfect witness. That's another way of making a person into a story."

Elias watched from the gallery.

"The second thing is that some reconstructed memories helped people. That does not excuse hiding how they were made. Comfort is not fraud by itself. It becomes fraud when you sell comfort as evidence."

She paused.

"My mother said if some other woman ended up with her hands, she wanted that woman told where they came from. We can do that now. Not perfectly. But enough."

The room remained quiet. Mara looked toward Elias once.

Then back at the panel.

"Leave room for people to be wrong. That's all I wanted when I was fifteen. I just didn't know how to say it without shouting."

Elias smiled. Mara saw and nearly smiled too.

After Mara finished, the inquiry chair asked whether she believed memory reconstruction should be banned. Mara laughed softly.

"No."

The answer surprised half the room.

"Why not?"

"Because photographs change memory. Families change memory. Therapy changes memory. Reading an old message changes memory. The idea that we can preserve some untouched natural memory by banning one technology is fantasy."

She looked toward the claimant gallery.

"But technology changes scale, authority and repetition. A machine can present one plausible version with a confidence people mistake for neutrality. So require provenance. Require uncertainty. Separate comfort from evidence. Let people choose not to know. And stop treating acceptance as validation."

The chair asked, "Do you still use reconstructed memories?"

"No."

"Would you tell others not to?"

"Also no."

"Then what do you believe people should do?"

Mara smiled, tired now. "I think people should be allowed to make complicated decisions without

institutions turning those decisions into universal policy."

There was restrained laughter. Elias looked at Lena. She was smiling too.

Later, outside, reporters shouted questions at Mara. She ignored all of them except one.

"Do you forgive Morrow?"

Mara stopped.

"Morrow is a company. That's not how forgiveness works."

Then she kept walking.

The final inquiry lasted three days and disappointed anyone expecting a single revelation. No witness could carry the whole truth.

Gabriel testified about signing donor forms while grieving. He did not ask the panel to absolve him. He described what he thought he was authorizing and what he failed to read.

June testified about recognizing language that belonged to another family and about choosing not to hear certain original sources even after access became available.

Nia testified about the yellow kitchen, the borrowed hand and the strange fact that annotation did not erase emotional attachment.

Lena testified about clinical decisions, concealed distress and the meanings hidden inside measurement definitions.

Ivo explained system architecture without pretending engineering caused every failure. "Software amplified institutional choices," he said. "It also made those choices repeatable at scale."

Celia described delaying disclosure and accepted criticism that privacy protection had become paternalism.

Rohe testified last among former Morrow leadership. He did not change his earlier answer. He still believed memory reconstruction could be beneficial. He also admitted the company treated therapeutic acceptance as evidence too often and allowed provenance to disappear behind user experience.

Mara's testimony came on the final afternoon.

She did not speak as a scientist.

"When I was seventeen," she said, "adults wrote that I was unstable because I kept insisting something about my memories was changing. Some of them thought they were protecting me. Some were protecting research. Some probably thought I was an annoying teenager. All of that can be true. The part I want written clearly is that disagreement with an institution is not evidence of illness, and emotional relief is not evidence that a reconstruction happened."

A panel member asked what compensation she wanted.

Mara looked irritated. "For me personally? That's not why I'm here."

"Then what outcome?"

"Labels that stay visible. Consent that can be withdrawn. Raw source ownership that does not disappear because somebody made a model from it. A right not to know. A right to delete. And no system calling confidence truth because a person stopped arguing with it."

The room was quiet.

Afterward reporters followed her down the steps asking whether she forgave Morrow.

She stopped once.

"Morrow is a company. That's not how forgiveness works."

Then she kept walking.

Elias followed at a distance because she had asked him not to stand beside her for cameras.

He understood the request.

For years his story had sat over hers. Missing sister. Guilty brother. False kitchen memory. The inquiry ended with Mara speaking in her own name.

He did not need to enter the frame.

On the final evening of the inquiry, the panel released preliminary recommendations. They were less poetic than testimony and more likely to matter.

Generated autobiographical scenes could no longer be presented without persistent source labeling in regulated clinical use. Cross-person donor material required explicit opt-in. Acceptance metrics could not alter historical confidence. Users had rights to defer disclosure, annotate, export provenance and request deletion subject to legal holds. Minors required

independent advocacy for any immersive memory research.

Mara read the document on the courthouse steps.

"This is almost boring enough to be useful."

"High praise," Celia said.

One recommendation disappointed Elias. It did not ban reconstructive memory therapy. Instead it required stricter controls and longitudinal monitoring.

"You wanted a ban?" Lena asked.

"Part of me did."

"Why?"

"Cleaner ending."

She smiled. "You've learned nothing."

He smiled back.

The technology would continue in some form because it had real benefits. The danger had never been reducible to existence. It was how uncertainty, consent and emotional outcomes were handled.

Mara folded the recommendations. "Good. Now everyone can spend ten years arguing about implementation."

"That is how regulation works."

"Terrible season finale."

Elias looked at the courthouse, the reporters, the people carrying signs. "Maybe that's fine."

Mara nodded.

For once, continuation did not feel like failure to resolve the story.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

The Ordinary Version

Six months later, the release authority became smaller. The protests stopped.

News moved on. The scandal remained in laws, consent standards, court decisions and an exhausting number of training modules.

Elias returned to teaching part-time. His students disliked his rule that every reconstruction report include a section called WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW.

He considered this educational success. Nia worked with Lantern on provenance interfaces.

June kept her notebook. Tess won an award she pretended not to care about.

Celia moved into regulatory consulting and sent Elias an invoice as a joke after he asked her one legal question by text. Lena's license was suspended for a year, then restored with restrictions. She chose not to return to clinical reconstruction work.

Rohe left the industry. Gabriel kept one inaccurate breakfast reconstruction.

Mara moved in with Sam. Elias met him properly and discovered he was a structural engineer who spoke less than Mara, which seemed statistically useful.

At dinner, Sam told a story about Mara getting lost on a train platform. Mara corrected him.

"It was you who got lost."

"No, you went to Platform Six."

"Platform Four."

They argued for three minutes. Elias knew the station had cameras.

He did not check. Mara noticed.

She raised her glass slightly. He ignored her.

She looked delighted.

Six months later, the release authority occupied one floor instead of four. Most emergency cases had been processed. Lawsuits continued. Regulations were drafted badly, revised, and drafted badly again. The scandal stopped trending and became paperwork.

Elias found this reassuring.

He returned twice a week as an independent evaluator, mostly reviewing provenance disputes. The work was less dramatic than Morrow. No immersive suites. No polished scenes. Many cases ended with labels like unresolved or insufficient evidence.

He liked that.

Mara took a job advising a patient-rights organization three days a week and complained that advocacy involved too many spreadsheets. She refused every request to become a public spokesperson for "memory survivors."

"I survived being seventeen," she said. "The rest is branding."

Gabriel returned home. Someone had painted over the graffiti outside his gate. He started gardening seriously and continued losing arguments with the fox.

Lena taught ethics and clinical memory practice at a university that initially wanted to advertise her as a whistleblower. She threatened to leave if they used the word in promotional material.

Ivo joined a medical software company with a policy forbidding emotion-optimization metrics. He sent Elias a photograph of the clause in his contract like a proud parent.

Nia kept her annotated reconstruction. She watched it less often.

June never watched the original Helen source for the borrowed phrase from her father scene. She knew where it came from. That was enough.

One Friday Mara and Elias met at a small bar near the station. Nothing investigative had happened that day. No files. No testimony. No missing source.

Mara complained about a colleague who used the phrase lived truth in every meeting.

"What does that mean?" Elias asked.

"Whatever makes disagreement impossible."

He smiled.

She asked whether he still kept notebooks.

"Yes."

"Do you trust them?"

"As records that I wrote something."

"God, you're exhausting."

"You asked."

Their relationship had not become magically close. They argued. Mara sometimes disappeared from messages for weeks. Elias sometimes asked questions

she refused to answer. The difference was that absence no longer automatically became emergency.

When she did not reply, he could dislike not knowing without turning it into a case.

At closing time she raised her glass. "To ordinary problems."

"That's sentimental."

"Drink."

He ignored her.

She looked delighted.

The first genuinely ordinary crisis arrived when Gabriel fell from a ladder while trying to cut a branch himself. He broke no bones, bruised his hip and lied to Mara about the height of the ladder until Elias found the receipt.

"Why do you have the receipt?" Gabriel demanded from his sofa.

"You left it on the table."

"This family has learned nothing about privacy."

Mara confiscated the ladder.

For two hours the three of them argued about painkillers, gardening and whether Gabriel was allowed to drive the next morning. Nobody mentioned Morrow. Nobody reconstructed anything. Nobody asked which version of the fall was true beyond the practical details needed to stop Gabriel doing it again.

At one point Mara said he had fallen from the fourth rung. Gabriel insisted third. Elias counted dirt marks on the ladder and concluded the evidence supported at least the third and possibly fourth.

Mara threw a cushion at him.

"Not every contradiction is a case."

He caught the cushion.

"I know."

"Prove it by shutting up."

He did.

Later, making tea in Gabriel's kitchen, Elias realized this was the future he had once been unable to imagine during Mara's disappearance: not certainty, not perfect repair, simply enough family left to argue about ladders.

It was not a small thing.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Borrowed Lives

A year after the Pattern Library leak, Nia invited Elias and Mara to a small exhibition at Lantern. Not an art exhibition exactly.

A provenance exhibition. Families had volunteered reconstructed details they now knew came from elsewhere.

A cardigan. A joke.

A kitchen lamp. A father's laugh.

A mother's crooked finger. Each object or clip had two labels.

WHAT I REMEMBER.

WHERE IT CAME FROM.

Nia's display showed the yellow cardigan.

WHAT I REMEMBER:

My mother washing strawberries in our kitchen after school.

WHERE IT CAME FROM:

Rosa Vale's face and voice. Vale family kitchen photographs. Bell donor cardigan. Helen Venn hand morphology and one sentence. Weather and lighting inferred.

Below it Nia had added a third card herself.

WHAT IT MEANS TO ME:

Mine, now. Not evidence. Mara read it twice.

"I like that."

Nia smiled. "I stole it from you."

"Good."

At the far end of the room was Helen's display. No reconstruction.

Only the forty-seven-second audio fragment. Visitors could press a button to hear her complain about burned dinner, Elias sulking about Bristol, Mara stealing a blue scarf, Gabriel pretending not to worry.

The boring parts. Elias listened once.

Then stepped away. Outside, Mara waited with two coffees.

She handed him one.

"Cold already," she said.

"Perfect."

They walked toward the station. A woman passed them wearing a yellow cardigan. Mara noticed. Elias noticed Mara noticing.

Neither said anything. At the crossing, Mara reached out and straightened the collar of his coat.

Pattern Fourteen, he thought. Helen used to do that.

Perhaps Mara had learned it from her. Perhaps Elias remembered Helen doing it because Mara did.

Perhaps some gesture did not need a single owner to be real. The light changed.

Mara stepped into the road, then looked back because Elias had not moved.

"You coming?"

He joined her. They crossed with everyone else.

After leaving the Lantern exhibition, Elias and Mara stopped at a small café near the station because Mara wanted cake and Elias had skipped lunch.

He ordered coffee. She ordered tea, then took his coffee when it arrived and said the tea looked suspicious.

"That's not how ordering works."

"It is now."

They sat beside the window. Outside, commuters crossed under electronic signs. Nobody around them knew or cared that Helen Venn's hand had once been rendered into dozens of families.

Mara opened the exhibition booklet. On one page was a statement from an anonymous participant:

I found out the sentence I remember my father saying came from a therapeutic language target. I still

hear it in his voice. I no longer say he said it. I say I remember him saying it. That is enough difference for me.

Mara handed the booklet to Elias.

"You like that."

"Yes."

"Because it's precise."

"Yes."

"You are predictable."

He looked at her. "Pattern library." She kicked him under the table.

The coffee cooled. At another table, a mother told a child to put on his coat properly or he'd catch his death. Elias looked toward Mara. She was already looking at him.

Neither laughed until they were outside. On the platform, an announcement changed their train from Track Three to Track Five. Mara insisted it had originally said Four. Elias had heard Three.

They checked the board. Five.

"Useful," Mara said.

"Doesn't answer the original."

"Exactly."

The train arrived. They found seats opposite each other. Mara rested her head against the window and closed her eyes.

Elias noticed the collar of her coat was folded inward. He reached across and fixed it.

She opened one eye.

"Pattern Fourteen."

"Shut up."

She smiled and closed her eye again. The train moved.

Elias watched buildings give way to wet fields. Somewhere in the archive, records still existed of families who had borrowed from his. Somewhere in other people's lives, Helen's phrases had become useful, inaccurate, loved, resented, forgotten. Some transfers would be found. Most would not.

He no longer felt compelled to locate every one. When Mara woke twenty minutes later, she asked whether she had been asleep long.

"About twenty minutes."

"Feels like five."

"Could be seventeen. I didn't check."

She stared at him.

"Who are you?"

He smiled. Outside, their reflections moved faintly across the train window, layered over fields neither of them was trying to remember.

A year after the Pattern Library leak, Nia invited Elias and Mara to an exhibition in a converted warehouse called Lantern. It was not quite art and not quite archive. Families had volunteered objects, phrases and gestures they once believed belonged uniquely to them and later discovered appeared elsewhere.

A chipped green sugar bowl sat behind glass beside six photographs of similar fruit ceramics from unrelated homes.

Mara stopped in front of it. "They cleaned ours."

"Conservation," Elias said.

"Vandalism. The grime was provenance."

Beside the bowl, a label explained that one specific chipped object had entered early Morrow priors through Venn family footage, while the broader pear design was commercially common. The text resisted both stories people had wanted: singular stolen relic and meaningless coincidence.

Further in, headphones played common family phrases spoken by dozens of volunteers.

I'm here.

Eat something.

Call when you get there.

Don't tell your father.

I was going to do that.

None belonged to one family. All could feel intimate.

June had contributed a photograph of her father's hands but no audio. Nia contributed the annotated yellow-kitchen still. Gabriel donated Helen's complaint about the freezer with the condition that it be displayed beside her more famous sentence about memory.

"Dad finally understood your campaign against sainthood," Elias said.

"Took him long enough."

The final room contained no reconstructions. Visitors could write one memory on a card and, optionally, mark how certain they were about factual details.

People struggled with the percentage.

Some wrote 100, crossed it out, wrote 80. Others refused the number and wrote things like enough or ask my sister.

Mara picked up a card.

"What are you writing?" Elias asked.

"None of your business."

"Fair."

She wrote for almost a minute, folded the card and placed it in a sealed box.

Elias chose not to write one.

Outside, Nia joined them with paper cups of terrible gallery coffee. She looked calmer than she had during the hearings.

"People keep asking whether the exhibition proves memory is unreliable," she said.

"What do you tell them?" Elias asked.

"That hands are unreliable too and we still use them."

Mara laughed. "That's irritatingly good."

"I learned from all of you. Regrettably."

They stayed until closing.

On the train home, Mara sat across from Elias by the window. Fields passed under a sky beginning to darken. Their reflections appeared faintly in the glass, layered over houses and trees.

"Do you ever wonder what Mum would think of all this?" Mara asked.

The old Elias would have answered. He had enough recordings now to generate probabilities, enough letters to infer likely reactions, enough family history to make a convincing guess.

"Yes," he said.

Mara waited.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

She smiled and looked outside.

After several minutes she said, "I wrote about the kitchen."

He felt his attention sharpen.

"Which kitchen?"

"Exactly."

He laughed.

Mara rested her head against the window. "I don't remember the blue cup."

"I do."

"I know."

"It wasn't there."

"I know that too."

They let both sentences remain.

At the next station a child climbed aboard with his mother and sat across the aisle. He stared openly at Elias for several seconds, then asked, "Are you famous?"

His mother looked horrified. "Sam."

Elias smiled. "No."

The child considered him with the seriousness of a small investigator. "Then who are you?"

For years Elias might have answered with occupation, family role, evidence. Memory specialist. Mara's brother. The man who remembered a night he never lived.

He looked at Mara.

She raised one eyebrow.

"Elias," he said.

The child accepted this and returned to his game.

Outside, their reflections moved faintly across the train window, layered over fields neither of them was trying to remember.

Before they went to the station, Nia persuaded them to stay for the volunteers' closing meal in a cafe behind Lantern. Folding tables had been pushed together. People who had spent months appearing in case files now argued about pizza toppings and whether the exhibition labels used too many semicolons.

Elias sat beside June and across from a man whose reconstruction had once contained Helen's phrase about weather. He had expected the gathering to feel like a support group. It did not. The participants had too little in common beyond having used the same technology.

Some wanted every Morrow-derived scene deleted. Some kept them. One woman said she still spoke to a reconstruction of her father in dreams and had no interest in correcting the dreams. Another man refused to watch any family video now because provenance anxiety had become exhausting. Nia listened without trying to make their choices consistent.

"This is why the exhibition doesn't have a conclusion room," she told Elias.

"You considered one?"

"The curator wanted visitors to leave with a statement about what memory means. Mara threatened him."

Across the table, Mara was explaining to June why a particular supermarket marmalade was objectively inferior.

"Threatened is strong," Elias said.

"She asked whether he wanted to become an example of imposed narrative closure."

"That's a threat."

Nia smiled.

Later Gabriel arrived unexpectedly. He had taken the train despite being told the event would be crowded. Mara saw him from across the cafe and looked annoyed before she looked pleased.

"You said you weren't coming."

"I changed my mind. I'm old. We're allowed to do that without committee approval."

He had brought a photograph of Helen that was not in any Morrow archive. At least he believed it was not. A disposable-camera print, badly exposed, showing Helen asleep on a beach with a newspaper over her face.

"Why bring this?" Elias asked.

Gabriel shrugged. "Because everyone keeps showing serious pictures of her."

Mara studied the photograph. "She'd kill you for displaying this."

"Exactly."

They did not add it to the exhibition. Gabriel kept it in his wallet.

The meal continued around them. Someone opened wine. A child belonging to one of the volunteers crawled

beneath the table and emerged holding a dropped fork like treasure.

Mara leaned toward Elias. "Do you realize none of these people would know each other if Morrow hadn't made a mess of their families?"

"Yes."

"Don't make that beautiful."

"I wasn't going to."

"Good. Because harm producing community doesn't make harm secretly good."

"I know."

She looked suspiciously at him. "You really are getting less irritating."

"Temporary condition."

When they finally left, Gabriel hugged Mara and shook Elias's hand because, for reasons nobody understood, he sometimes became formal when emotional. Nia stood in the doorway waving until the crowd inside pulled her back into another conversation.

On the walk to the station, Mara was quieter.

"You okay?" Elias asked.

"Yes."

He waited.

She glanced at him. "That's the whole answer. Don't clinical-interview me."

"I wasn't."

"Your face was."

They stopped at a crossing. Across the street, an advertisement on a digital screen showed a new consumer service promising to organize family archives

using AI. Not immersive reconstruction. Just searchable videos, automatic transcripts and "memory highlights."

Mara read the slogan.

YOUR PAST, MADE CLEAR.

"Oh, for God's sake."

Elias laughed.

"Should we report them?" she asked.

"For marketing?"

"There should be a regulator for adjectives."

The light changed.

They crossed without photographing the advertisement, researching the company or deciding whether the new service represented history repeating itself.

Some problems did not become theirs merely because they recognized the shape.