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VILLA UDOLPHO

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 60,000 words

PROLOGUE

Venice, 1994

Venice in June of 1994 was exactly what a young philosopher from New Haven who had spent too long in library stacks required, and knew it: the assault of beauty that makes sustained rational thought temporarily impossible, the city organized against the very composure it takes to live only in one's head. Laurent Moreau had arrived in May on a research fellowship at the Querini Stampalia and had spent three weeks unable to work because the city kept interrupting. The light off the canals. The way the stone absorbed and released heat differently from any stone he had known, its own thermal logic. The sound of the city without cars, which was not silence but a different and more complex register of sound—water, voices, bells, the particular creak of a gondola's oar in its forcola—that required the ear to reorganize itself before it could hear clearly.

He was twenty-seven. He had come from Lyon, where he had spent three years on a postdoctoral appointment and had met, among many people, a young woman from the same university whose work he had admired and whose company he had valued and whose departure for Venice several months before his own had been a loss he had filed without fully examining. He had not come to Venice for Marie-Hélène. He had come for the Querini Stampalia's collection of Venetian manuscript illuminations, which bore on the chapter he was writing about the relationship between visual representation and philosophical argument in early modern Europe.

This was what he told himself and what he told the fellowship committee, and it was entirely true, and it was not the whole truth, which was a distinction he was already familiar with at twenty-seven and would become more familiar with in the thirty years that followed.

Marie-Hélène was at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, cataloguing archival materials related to the Venetian school of painting. She had been there since February and had the particular quality of a person who has stopped being a tourist in a place and become something else, something harder to name—not a resident, because the fellowship was temporary, but a person whose relationship with the city had deepened past the surface. She knew which bacaro opened earliest and which closed latest and what to order at each. She knew the campos the tourists didn't find. She knew the archipelago of islands visible from the Fondamente Nuove on a clear morning and their names and which of them were inhabited and which were not. She told Laurent these things over the first two weeks with the specific pleasure of a knowledgeable person encountering someone worth teaching.

He had always found her easy to be with. In Lyon, where they had been colleagues more than friends, he had noticed this as a quality—the quality of someone in whose presence the continuous low-level management of other people's responses was not required, because she was direct enough to receive directness and curious enough to make conversation produce something other than the exchange of social information. In Venice, away from the

professional context and in the physical environment that seemed to produce in both of them a suspension of their customary reservations, this ease became something more. Not, at first, anything that either of them named. They walked; they ate; they sat on the fondamenta in the evenings with wine and the Venetian summer around them. They talked about philosophy and painting and the specific difficulty of writing things that mattered at a moment in history that did not feel like a moment that rewarded mattering. He told her about his chapter. She told him about the archive.

It was, he would think later—would think for twenty-five years, occasionally, in the specific way one thinks about things that were good before they became complicated—a happy time. The happiness had a quality he associated with completeness: nothing was missing from it, nothing was being withheld or managed, no part of either of them was somewhere else. He had not known many periods of this quality in his life and would not know many after, and the fact that it ended the way it did—that the completeness was followed by thirty years of knowing something that he could not act on and could not forget—did not, he thought, retroactively diminish what it had been. A thing could be good before it became complicated. The complication did not reach backward and erase the goodness.

There was one afternoon in particular that he returned to more than the others, not because it was the most significant but because it had the quality of the things that stay: it was a Saturday in late June, the heat at its summer height, and they

had taken a vaporetto out to the island of Torcello, which was the oldest of the inhabited Venetian islands and the quietest, its cathedral the oldest building in the lagoon. They had walked from the vaporetto stop along the canal path lined with wine bars and old stone houses, and into the cathedral, which had the particular quality of very old religious buildings of having absorbed so many centuries of human feeling that the air itself seemed different inside it—denser, more attentive. Marie-Hélène had studied the Byzantine mosaics for twenty minutes in silence, the Last Judgment on the west wall, the Madonna and Child on the apse, and Laurent had watched her watch them and had thought about what it meant to spend one's working life in proximity to things made for permanence. The mosaics were twelve hundred years old. They had been looked at for twelve hundred years. The looking had not changed them.

Outside they had found a table at a small restaurant near the canal and eaten fish and drunk white wine in the sun and talked about the mosaics and about the specific quality of attention that great art required and whether attention was something you gave to art or something art produced in you, which was the kind of question that in the company of most people would have been pretentious and in the company of Marie-Hélène was simply interesting. A cat had installed itself under their table with the proprietary ease of a cat that had been doing this for years. The afternoon light on the canal was liquid gold. He had been happy in the simple and total way that he would later

understand was the register happiness operated in when nothing was being held back.

"Why philosophy?" she had asked him, at some point in the afternoon—not the first time they had talked about it but asking again, which was her way of finding the thing beneath the prepared answer. "Not what you tell the fellowship committee. Why actually."

He had thought about it. "Because I can't stop wanting to know why things are the way they are rather than otherwise," he said. "And because most of the disciplines that address that question require you to accept a methodology before you begin, and philosophy is the one that allows you to question the methodology indefinitely. Which is inefficient and occasionally maddening and also the only approach that seems honest."

Marie-Hélène had looked at the canal. "That sounds lonely."

"Sometimes," he said. "But you find people who are also doing it. That helps."

She had looked at him then in the way he associated with her most direct attention, the attention that had no performance in it. And he had understood, in the specific way one understands things that are true and too large for the immediate moment, that this was a person he did not want to leave. He sat with this understanding in the afternoon sun on the island of Torcello with the wine and the cat and the twelve-hundred-year-old mosaics half a kilometer behind them, and he did not say anything, because he did not yet know what to do with what he understood.

He met Morandi in July, at a dinner organized by the Bellini family for the scholars and artists connected to the various Venetian foundations that summer, a dinner that mixed the professional and the social in the Venetian manner and took place at a palazzo on the Grand Canal in the kind of evening light that made every surface it fell on look as though it had been waiting for exactly this quality of illumination. Morandi was thirty-one, building a business in import and export that he was not specific about, moving in the circles of Venetian money with the ease of a man who had grown up in them. He was charming. He was genuinely cultured. He talked about painting with precision and about music with the particular warmth of someone who had played an instrument seriously before the instrument was replaced by other priorities. He was, in the immediate impression of a dinner party, someone worth knowing.

Laurent revised this impression across the following weeks. Not dramatically—Morandi did not behave badly, did not display any obvious quality that revised the immediate assessment. It was something more subtle and harder to name: a quality in the way he watched people, a certain precision in his attention that went slightly beyond what social interest required. A quality in the way he asked questions that suggested the questions were not exploratory but confirmatory—as though he knew already and was checking. A quality in the way he attached himself to Marie-Hélène over those weeks, not rapidly or with any pressure that Laurent could specifically identify, but with the patient

regularity of someone implementing a decision rather than following a feeling.

Laurent said nothing about this. It was not his to say. Marie-Hélène was an adult and she was perceptive and she was finding her own way through the Venetian summer, which had its own logic and its own intensities, and he had no standing to offer an assessment of a man he had met four times and had no specific evidence against. This was what he told himself. It was not wrong, exactly. It was incomplete.

In August he received the letter from New Haven that told him his mother was unwell and that he should come home. He packed his materials, said goodbye to the archivist at the Querini Stampalia, and went to find Marie-Hélène. She was on the fondamenta near the Cini, in the evening, and she listened to him explain and looked at the water and then at him with the quality she had that he would remember for thirty years as the quality of a person fully present in a moment that is about to end.

"You'll come back," she said.

"I don't know when."

"It doesn't have to be soon." She was looking at the lagoon. "Venice will be here."

"So will you?"

She paused a moment before answering. "For now," she said.

He understood this was not about Venice. He was twenty-seven and not without intelligence, and he understood the specific weight of for now when it was said in that tone, and the specific form of sadness it named. He understood it and he had no adequate

response to it, because the immediate demands of his life—his mother, the fellowship ending, the chapter unfinished, the distance between Venice and New Haven—were not things he could reorganize around a for now, however much a part of him wanted to try.

He left Venice in August. He did not go back, in the end, until the Alps trip with Emilia twenty-nine years later, and by then everything had been different for a very long time.

The letter telling him what Marie-Hélène had not told him—about the child, about the arrangement, about what Morandi had become in the months since the summer dinner—arrived in New Haven in the spring of 1995. He read it at his kitchen table, in the late afternoon, with his coffee going cold, and sat with it for an hour before he did anything at all. He did not know what to do. That was the honest account: he did not know. He knew that something bad had happened and that a woman he cared for had been pushed into a corner from which there was apparently no good exit, and he understood that the man he had watched attach himself to her with patient regularity over a Venetian summer had turned out to be what the watching had suggested he might be. He understood all of this and he had a mother who was ill and a chapter to finish and a life assembled in New Haven that was not designed to accommodate what he was being asked to accommodate, and he sat at his kitchen table and did not know.

He did not know for twenty-five years. He kept everything—the photographs she sent with the letter, the letter itself, everything—in the locked drawer, in the careful way of a man who

knows that not acting is not the same as not caring and is also not entirely different from it, and who carries the distinction between the two as the specific weight that his life costs him. He taught. He raised his daughter. He read. He sat under the plane tree in the evenings and was, by his own accounting, happy, and the happiness was real and was not the absence of the weight but was what existed alongside it in a life being lived as honestly as he could manage.

He was not brave enough, in the end, to be the person the situation required. He knew this. He wrote it in the journal. He wrote the letter for Emilia and sealed it and gave it to the intermediary in 2021 because by then he understood that the situation was moving toward something and that if it arrived before he had acted, the letter was what he could offer. He could not reach back across thirty years and be different than he had been. He could only leave the evidence and trust the inheritance.

He was right about the inheritance. He did not live to know it. But he was right.

CHAPTER ONE

Briar Hollow

The house called Briar Hollow stood at the end of a gravel drive in Woodstock, Connecticut, half a mile from the nearest road and seemingly a century from the nearest noise. Or so Emilia Moreau had always felt. Her father had named it after a valley in France he had never visited but knew from books with the particular intimacy that certain bookish people reserve for places they have loved only in their imaginations. The name suited the property: a gentle depression in the Connecticut hills, wooded on three sides, with a stone wall along the fourth that retained the ghost of an old kitchen garden. Nothing about it was grand. Everything about it was right.

The house itself was colonial, white clapboard, with dark shutters that her father repainted every few years without visible provocation from any storm. There were seven rooms, too many for two people and not quite enough for the books, which had long since colonized the hallways, the staircase landings, and one bedroom that no longer contained a bed. Emilia had grown up in a house where moving from the kitchen to the bathroom required negotiating Kant, three volumes of Montaigne, and a French dictionary whose spine read 1987 and whose pages had been marked in six different inks. She had found this perfectly normal until she went to college and discovered that other people's childhoods had contained, instead of books, open floor space.

She was standing at her easel on the morning of October the twelfth when she became aware—in the way one becomes aware of very quiet things—that the house was wrong.

It was a Saturday. She had been awake since seven, working on a landscape study: the stone wall at the edge of the property in the early light, the last of the Virginia creeper still blazing against the grey stone. The October sun came in low and yellow through the studio window she had made from what had been a guest bedroom. She had a mug of tea going cold on the table beside her, a brush in her hand, and the particular focused calm that comes only when the work is going well.

Her father was not a man who slept late. By six-thirty each morning, without exception, the coffee maker completed its ritual and the smell of French roast found her wherever she happened to be in the house. By seven he would be in his reading chair with *Le Monde* on his tablet and something philosophical in his lap with the sticky-note flags he used instead of formal annotation. He had never explained the color coding of the flags. Emilia suspected there wasn't one.

It was past eight o'clock. There was no coffee smell. There was no murmur of the news briefing. There was nothing at all except the wind in the old oak outside her window and, somewhere distant, the sound of geese going south.

Emilia set down her brush.

She was twenty-four years old, dark-haired, with wide grey eyes and the kind of stillness that people occasionally mistook for shyness and that was in fact something closer to its

opposite—a quality of attending fully to what was in front of her that left little room for performance. She had spent four years at Yale studying art history, not because she had a clear plan for what came after, but because her father had taught her that understanding how beauty had been made across the centuries was the closest a person could come to understanding what it meant to be human. She had graduated the previous May, moved back to Briar Hollow, and was painting her way toward a vocation she hadn't yet entirely defined. Her father had been glad to have her home. He never said so in words, but she could tell by the way he moved through the house when she was in it: lighter, more present, as though her being there reminded him of something he needed to remember.

She crossed the hall to the staircase.

"Dad?"

Her own voice sounded strange in the morning quiet. She climbed the stairs.

The door to his bedroom was not quite closed. She pushed it open.

He was in bed, very still. His reading glasses were on—the small silver-framed ones she had given him two Christmases ago—and he was lying on his back with his hands at his sides. His face was peaceful in the particular way that faces are only peaceful when they have been done with expression.

She crossed the room and took his hand.

Cold.

She stood for a long time holding it, not thinking, not quite doing anything at all, just holding his hand the way she had held it as a child when they walked. Then she took out her phone and called 911 and sat down on the edge of the bed to wait.

Laurent Moreau had been fifty-six years old, a professor of moral philosophy at Yale, a quiet man of fierce interior life who had published three books that were read seriously in their field and warmly by anyone who happened across them. He had dark hair going silver at the temples and the slight professorial stoop of a tall man who had spent too many years bending toward shorter people's conversations. His colleagues considered him rigorous; his students considered him kind; his daughter considered him both, which was the rarer thing to be. He had raised Emilia alone from the time she was seven, when her mother had died of cancer with a speed and finality that left Laurent altered in ways he never entirely explained and Emilia had eventually stopped asking about.

He was not a secretive man, exactly. He was private. A secretive man conceals things deliberately; a private man simply does not see why certain things require sharing. Emilia had grown up understanding this distinction and, mostly, accepting it. There were territories in her father that remained unmapped: her mother's family, an old estrangement from his sister that had lasted a decade, certain years in Paris before Emilia was born that he referred to occasionally in the abstract—"when I was living in Paris"—but never with any of the specific texture that would have made them feel like a story rather than a reference.

She had learned not to press. He gave her everything else: his time, his attention, his considerable mind, and the particular patience required to let a bright and feeling child grow into a bright and feeling adult without excessive interference.

She had not told him often enough that she loved him. She was thinking this now, sitting on the porch steps with a blanket over her shoulders, watching the ambulance sit in the drive while October went on being beautiful around them with its usual indifference.

The last summer had been the best one. Her father had taken a sabbatical—the first in eight years—and they had spent six weeks traveling: Lisbon in June, Paris in July, and then two weeks in the French Alps in August, hiking the lower trails of the Haute-Savoie. Her father had been different on vacation, easier and more expansive, as though the removal from his study had released something in him that his chair and his books kept compressed. They had hiked for hours without speaking, comfortable in the silence that only certain kinds of love permit. They had eaten badly and slept well and read to each other in the evenings at the small hotel in Chamonix where the proprietress remembered Laurent from a previous visit and called him "le professeur triste" with the warmth that stripped all sadness from the phrase.

It was on the fourteenth day, on a high trail above the valley with Mont Blanc making its impossible claim against the sky, that Emilia heard the guitar.

She heard it before she saw anything—a melodic fragment in a minor key, played on an acoustic guitar, coming from somewhere above and to the right of the trail. She stopped walking. Her father, three steps ahead, stopped too.

"Keep going, Emilia."

But she had already stepped off the trail and was picking her way up over loose scree toward the sound, because she needed to know where it was coming from and what it was looking for.

He was sitting on a flat rock twenty meters above the trail. Twenty-five or twenty-six, French-Canadian from the sound of him when he spoke, with dark eyes and the kind of beard that meant three weeks without thinking about it. He held the guitar the way people hold instruments they have played so long the object has become continuous with the hand. He looked up when she arrived without surprise, as though people climbed off trails toward him regularly.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Mine." He shrugged slightly. "No title yet."

"It sounds like—" She stopped, feeling suddenly self-conscious at high altitude. "Like something looking for somewhere it can't quite reach."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "Yes. That's exactly what it is."

Her father arrived behind her, breathing somewhat harder from the climb, and stood with his hands in his jacket pockets. She introduced them. Val Rousseau; her father, Laurent. The two

men shook hands with the careful courtesy of people who are immediately uncertain of each other.

They stayed perhaps fifteen minutes. Val played the fragment again, and another piece, and they talked about the weather coming in from the west and the best route down. When Emilia and her father descended back to the trail, she glanced back once. Val was watching them go, the guitar resting across his knees.

Her father said nothing for another mile. When he did speak, his voice carried a quality she had heard very rarely—something between warning and appeal.

"Don't pursue that, Emilia."

"He's a traveler. We'll never see him again."

"I know what he is. Promise me—don't pursue it."

She had been about to argue; she could feel the familiar architecture of their small disagreements assembling. But something in his voice—not disapproval, not quite dread, something she could not name—stopped her. She said she would be careful. Which was not the same thing as a promise, and he probably knew it.

That evening, while her father read on the hotel terrace, she went back up the trail. Val was on the flat rock again, or had returned to it, and they sat until the light went, talking about music and painting and the particular loneliness of being in one's mid-twenties and not yet certain what to do with one's abilities. He was recording something in Montreal. She was figuring out what painting meant to her now that it was no longer

coursework. They exchanged numbers. They said goodbye with the formality of people who intend something else.

Her father had not mentioned it again. She had not mentioned it either. By some unspoken compact, the hour on the flat rock became the kind of thing that exists in a family only as silence.

Back in Connecticut, through September and into October, she and Val had texted. Long exchanges that ranged across topics in the way that only the conversations of people who are becoming important to each other do. He was still in Montreal, still recording. She was painting, running, working through her father's second book—the one about contingency and moral luck—because she had read it at twenty and not understood it and wanted to see if she did now. She was not sure she did, but the rereading made her feel closer to him in a way she found difficult to explain.

Her father had noticed the phone without commenting on it. He was not a man who interrogated, but he noticed, and she caught him watching once or twice with the expression he wore when he was forming a thought he had not yet decided to share.

In the last two weeks of September he had begun to seem tired. Not unwell—she asked, directly, and he deflected with the practiced ease of a man accustomed to managing his own discomfort without assistance—but quieter, more inward. He stayed in his study later than usual. She woke at midnight on three separate occasions to see the light still showing under his door. Once she heard him speaking in French on the phone, the words too low to follow but the tone unmistakably tense, not conversational. She

had knocked. He had opened the door looking slightly unfocused, said "Nothing, darling, go back to bed," and closed it again. The call, evidently, had ended.

She had found the journal by accident, the week before he died. She had been looking in his desk for the dental insurance card, which he filed nowhere because he did not believe in filing things, and she had pulled open the wrong drawer. A black Moleskine, worn at the corners. She had not opened it. She replaced it in the drawer, closed it, and told herself she would let it go.

She had not let it go.

On the morning of October the twelfth, at eight-oh-seven, she set down her brush and climbed the stairs and found her father's hand cold, and she understood in the way that certain understandings arrive—total and wordless and complete—that she would not hear the coffee maker again. Not tomorrow. Not ever. The particular smell of French roast at six-thirty, which she had taken so fully for granted that she had occasionally found it irritating, was now a thing she would spend years trying to recover in other kitchens, in other houses, always finding it slightly wrong.

She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand and waited for the ambulance with the peculiar calm of shock, which is not peace but its exact counterfeit.

Outside, October went on making itself beautiful. The geese crossed somewhere overhead, going south. The stone wall caught the morning light.

The Virginia creeper blazed, and blazed, and blazed.

CHAPTER TWO

What Remained

The first thing Emilia did, after the ambulance left and the neighbor who had appeared unbidden on her porch with a casserole finally accepted that she did not want company, was go back upstairs. She stripped her father's bed. She did not know why she felt this was urgent. Something about the cold that had been in his hand made her want the sheets gone, the windows open, the room aired out and given back to ordinary use. She put the sheets in the washing machine and stood in the laundry room for a long time listening to the drum turn.

The casserole sat on the kitchen counter. She could not eat. She drank coffee standing at the window and watched the stone wall go from morning light to afternoon shadow to the early dark of an October evening, and she thought about the fact that she was now the only person in the world who knew that her father color-coded nothing. The sticky-note flags on his books were entirely random. She had asked him once, as a teenager, what the yellow ones meant, and he had looked at her with the particular blankness of a man whose mind is elsewhere and said he used yellow when he ran out of blue. She had laughed. She had thought about it intermittently for years afterward as a minor mystery. Now it was resolved, and the resolution felt like a door closing.

She slept badly, in her own bed, and woke at intervals to silence.

On the second day she went into his study.

She was not ready for it. She had thought she was—she had a practical purpose, the insurance papers, the mortgage documents, the kind of bureaucratic necessity that grief arranges as a reason to be vertical—but standing in the doorway of the room she understood immediately that readiness was not the point. The room smelled like him. Books and old wood and the very faint cedar of his sweater drawer from the closet down the hall. The reading lamp was on, the same one he always left on because he claimed he would be back shortly, a claim the lamp had been refuting since Emilia was twelve. There was a marked-up journal article on the desk, a Yale mug with two inches of cold coffee in it, three blue sticky notes and a yellow one flagging different sections of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. She stood in the doorway and could not go in for several minutes.

When she did go in, she found the insurance policy in the second drawer down, exactly where it should not have been. She read it at the desk. Five hundred thousand dollars, her as beneficiary, administered by a trustee until her twenty-fifth birthday. She read the clause three times. She had been twenty-four for six weeks. Her birthday was in September. The trust would be unreachable for eleven months.

She sat with this for a moment.

Then she opened the bottom drawer—the wrong drawer, still, hunting for the mortgage documents—and found instead a small brass key on a paper clip, the kind of key that fit a lockbox or a desk drawer of a different desk, worn smooth in a way that

suggested it had been handled often. She had not known her father kept a key like this. She looked at it for a long time.

The locked drawer was in the left pedestal, third from the top. She had noticed it was locked two years ago and assumed, without curiosity, that it was simply stuck. She put the key in. It turned.

Inside: a manila envelope, unsealed, containing three photographs. A woman she did not recognize—dark-haired, perhaps thirty, standing in front of a building she could not place, somewhere European. In two of the three photographs the woman was looking directly at the camera and smiling in the slightly self-conscious way of someone who has been asked to smile. In the third she was looking away, unaware of being photographed, and her expression was different: private, absorbed, and very beautiful. Emilia turned the photographs over. Nothing written on the back. She looked at the woman's face and had the unsettling feeling—not rational, she knew it was not rational—that she was looking at someone she ought to know.

Underneath the envelope: a Moleskine journal, black, the corners worn. And beneath that, several pages of a letter in French, handwritten, that she could read well enough to understand that it was addressed to her father and that the subject was money and that the tone was not friendly. She could not make out all of it. She photographed the pages with her phone and put them back.

She opened the journal to the first page.

Her father's handwriting, smaller than usual, as though he had been trying to compress something:

Emilia—if you're reading this, I'm gone. I'm sorry. There are things I should have told you. Things about your mother. About our family. But I was a coward, and I wanted to protect you from the truth, and I kept thinking there would be more time. There isn't, or you wouldn't be reading this. Trust no one. Especially not—

The sentence stopped. The next several lines had been crossed out so heavily that the paper had taken on a slight ridge. Whatever name had followed the dash was entirely illegible.

Emilia sat very still at her father's desk for a long time.

Her phone rang. An unknown number with an Italian country code. She almost let it go to voicemail. She answered.

"Emilia? Darling, it's Aunt Celine." The voice was warm and slightly breathless, the accent softened by years of Italian living. "I just heard. I'm absolutely devastated."

Emilia had not spoken to Celine Cheron in ten years. She was her father's younger sister, the estrangement of unknown origin that had been one of the unmapped territories of Emilia's childhood. She existed mainly as a name, an absence, and the occasional remark from her father along the lines of your aunt sends her love, offered in a tone that discouraged follow-up questions.

"How did you get this number?" Emilia said.

"I'm your father's sister, darling. I have resources." A pause. "I'm flying in for the funeral. We have so much to discuss."

"We haven't spoken since I was fourteen."

"Which is a tragedy I intend to correct. You're my family, Emilia. My only family now. We need to stick together."

She rang off before Emilia could respond. Emilia held the phone for a moment and looked back at the journal on the desk. Especially not—

The funeral was on a Thursday, one week later. A grey Connecticut Thursday that couldn't quite commit to rain but held the threat of it steadily through the service like a bad mood that won't resolve. Twenty-three people came: colleagues from the philosophy department, two neighbors, several of his former students who had driven from as far as Boston, and Celine Cheron.

Celine was forty-two and looked, as Emilia's first impression recorded it, expensive. Not merely well-dressed but expensive in the way of a person who has spent a long time deciding what impression to make and has arrived at a definitive answer. Designer coat, dark and perfect. Hair in a chignon that had taken either great skill or great money to produce. She dabbed at her eyes with a small folded handkerchief and stood beside Emilia at the head of the graveside assembly with the self-possession of a woman accustomed to being looked at.

"Do I look all right?" she murmured, almost before Emilia had properly registered she was there. "Not too much?"

"We're at a funeral," Emilia said.

"I know, darling. Grief is still worth—one wants to be appropriate."

Emilia looked away.

Professor Chen delivered the eulogy with the measured warmth of a man who had admired Laurent Moreau genuinely and knew how to say so without excess. Laurent had believed, he said, that the examined life was not merely worth living but was the only form of living that deserved the name. He had been rigorous without being cold, demanding without being unkind, and had possessed that rarest of academic qualities: the willingness to be wrong. Emilia listened to this and found it entirely accurate and entirely insufficient, which is the nature of eulogies.

Beside her, Celine shifted and adjusted and turned her face at small angles to the grey sky. Emilia heard the faint sound of a phone camera shutter and went very still.

"What are you doing?" she said quietly.

"Nothing. Just—"

"Put it away."

"I'm processing—"

"He was your brother." Emilia's voice came out louder than she intended. Several heads turned. "Act like it."

Celine's composure fractured, just briefly. Her eyes went bright with something that was at least partly real. She put the phone in her pocket and it stayed there.

Afterward, at the graveside, Emilia stood alone watching the casket being lowered and cried without trying not to. The sound of it was unfamiliar to her; she had not cried like this since

her mother died, seventeen years ago, and she had been too young then to understand what the sound meant. She understood it now. It meant that the particular configuration of the world that had contained her father was permanently closed.

Celine appeared beside her, cautious.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You were right. I was being insensitive."

Emilia did not look at her. "Thank you."

"I know we're not close. But I want to help. I'm staying a few days." A beat. "Your future needs thinking about. The house. Finances. You shouldn't have to manage this alone."

Emilia turned to look at her aunt for the first time with any real attention. Up close, Celine's beauty was more complex—there were lines in it, and the eyes, dark brown, held something she hadn't expected: a quality of fatigue that the presentation was working very hard to conceal.

"Why are you being kind to me?" Emilia asked.

Celine was quiet for a moment. "Because we're family. And because—" She stopped. Something crossed her face that was not part of the performance. "Because I know what it is to lose everything," she said, more quietly. "And I know you don't want to hear that from me. But there it is."

For a moment Emilia almost believed her. Then Celine glanced briefly at her own reflection in the large surface of a headstone nearby, and whatever had been real receded.

"Besides," Celine added, "grief ages you terribly. We need to take care of each other."

Emilia almost laughed, which she suspected was the intended effect.

Morrison arrived that evening at Briar Hollow with a soft briefcase and the preemptive apology of a man who has delivered bad news professionally for long enough that the apology has become structural. He spread papers across the dining table and sat across from Emilia and Celine and folded his hands.

"I'm afraid the situation is complicated," he said. "Your father's estate is significantly underwater."

He laid it out with the clarity of someone who had arranged bad news often enough to know that clarity is a form of mercy. The house was mortgaged. The mortgage had been refinanced twice. There were outstanding debts: her mother's medical bills from seventeen years ago, still partly unpaid; research expenses; a private loan of indeterminate origin. When everything was tallied, the estate would break approximately even. There would be nothing liquid.

"The life insurance," Emilia said.

"Yes." Morrison looked at his papers. "Five hundred thousand, as you know. But the trust requires a trustee to administer the funds until you reach twenty-five. As per your father's instructions."

Emilia stared at him. "I'm twenty-four. I have a degree. I'm a legal adult."

"You are. But your father established the trust with a specific provision. At twenty-four, if there is concern about the beneficiary's capacity to manage a sum of this size—"

"What concern? He never expressed any concern to me."

Morrison adjusted his glasses in the way of a man buying time. "The provision is standard in trusts of this kind. The trustee manages and disburses the funds. Without a trustee's approval, you cannot access them."

"Who is the trustee?"

Morrison's eyes moved to Celine.

The silence that followed lasted long enough that Emilia counted her own heartbeats.

"No," she said.

"Emilia—" Celine began.

"He named you? You haven't spoken to him in ten years. Why would he—"

"He was still my brother."

"That's not an answer."

Morrison cleared his throat. "You can contest the designation in court. But that process typically takes eight to twelve months, during which the trust is frozen. No access for either party. The house would go to foreclosure within thirty days."

Emilia looked at the table. At the papers. At the coffee mug her father had left in his study, which she had washed and put away, and which was now just a mug. "And if I don't contest it?"

"Then Miss Cheron assumes trusteeship and you have access to the funds for reasonable living expenses, at her discretion."

"At her discretion," Emilia repeated.

"At her discretion," Morrison confirmed, in the tone of a man who has used that phrase in rooms like this many times and has arrived at something approaching genuine sympathy for everyone in them.

Emilia looked at Celine. Celine's expression was carefully composed: attentive, not triumphant, making no more claim than the situation required. It was, Emilia noted, a very skilled expression.

"There is one further matter," Morrison said. "Given the foreclosure timeline, there is the question of where you'll live."

Celine placed both hands on the table, a gesture that was either comfort or claim. "She'll come and stay with me. In Milan. The apartment is large. It will be good for her."

Emilia looked at her aunt. "I don't want to go to Milan."

"You don't have a choice, darling," Celine said, not unkindly. "Neither of us does."

Outside, the rain that had been threatening all day finally arrived, settling against the windows of Briar Hollow with the patience of something that has been waiting a long time. Emilia listened to it and thought about her father's journal, the sentence that ended in a dash, the name she could not read. She thought about the photographs in the locked drawer and the woman's face turned away from the camera. She thought about Val's text, received the morning her father died, still unanswered: Saw the news. I'm so sorry. Please let me know if there's anything I can do.

She had not answered it. She had not been able to explain why, even to herself.

"Fine," she said. "Milan."

She said it the way you agree to something that has already happened.

CHAPTER THREE

Milan

The house went to the bank on the twenty-ninth of October, which was a Tuesday, and Emilia left for Milan the following morning. She had packed a carry-on and a single checked bag, which was not very much for a life, but then she had not been given very much time. The movers Morrison had arranged went through Briar Hollow while she was at the attorney's office signing the papers that surrendered it, which was either thoughtful or cowardly of Morrison and she couldn't decide which. When she came back to collect her bags the house was clean and emptied and she stood in the doorway of her father's study for one final minute, looking at the absence where the desk had been, the pale rectangle on the hardwood floor where the reading chair had sat for twenty years, the single blue sticky note she had found on the windowsill and put in her jacket pocket because she could not bring herself to throw it away.

She took the journal. She took the photographs. She took three of her father's books—the Parfit, because she had been rereading it; his copy of Montaigne's essays, because the margins were dense with his handwriting; and a small paperback Larousse French dictionary, the 1987 edition, which was entirely useless for anything but sentiment and she took it anyway. She took her painting supplies, reduced to the essentials. She left everything else.

The flight was seven hours and she slept for none of them. She sat in the window seat with her father's journal in her lap, the overhead light on, and tried to make sense of what she could. His handwriting was clear in most places—a professor's handwriting, trained into precision—and the early entries, from what appeared to be a decade ago, were reflective and literary in a way that reminded her painfully of the man she knew: notes on philosophy, on teaching, on the Connecticut landscape, on Emilia herself at fourteen and fifteen, observed with a parent's mixed awe and trepidation. Then a gap of several years where the journal was either empty or had been removed. Then the later entries, which were different—shorter, more clipped, names she didn't recognize, references to events whose context she lacked. And the one she kept returning to. The last one. Emilia—if you're reading this. The sentence that stopped.

She watched the Atlantic in the dark below and wondered what name had been crossed out and why her father had felt the need to cross it out and not simply close the journal and be done. The crossing out had taken effort. Ink pressed hard. He had wanted to write the name—had written it—and then thought better of it, or thought worse of it, in a way that made him go over it again and again until the paper beneath had nearly given.

The Alps appeared below the wing as the sky began to lighten. Ranks of white peaks, the morning sun finding them one at a time, each throwing a long shadow over the one below. She had been among them three months ago with her father, and the memory arrived so suddenly and completely that she had to close

her eyes for several seconds. When she opened them the Alps were still there.

Celine met her at Malpensa in a cream-colored coat with a silk scarf and the expression of a woman determined to make this work. There was a hug, genuine enough if brief, and then they were in a car with a driver named Paulo who navigated the autostrada with the fluid aggression of a man for whom the road is a language he was born speaking, and Milan appeared around them through a grey November morning: the industrial outskirts giving way to the corso-lined avenues of the city proper, the trams, the palazzi with their enormous doors, the tight geometry of the streets.

"It'll grow on you," Celine said, watching Emilia's face. "Everything does, eventually."

"I know," Emilia said.

"I mean the city. It looks severe at first. But there's warmth in it, once you know where to look."

Emilia nodded and looked out the window and thought that warmth was not what she was looking for.

Celine's apartment was in the Brera district, on the third floor of a building whose seventeenth-century facade had been preserved while the interior was stripped and rebuilt into something that would have photographed beautifully, which was in fact its primary function. The apartment was large by any standard: high ceilings, the original plasterwork, floors of pale oak. The walls were white. The furniture was spare and precisely arranged and everything was, Emilia noticed immediately,

positioned at angles that caught the light in particular ways. There were two ring lights on adjustable stands in the living area. There was a ring light in the kitchen. There was a small tripod in the corner of the main hallway.

There were no books.

This was not the kind of apartment Emilia would have noticed the absence of books in, had she not grown up in a house where the presence of books was as fundamental as walls. She noticed it now with the force of a displacement—as though the removal of something structural had left the air in the room uncertain of itself.

"Your room's through here," Celine said, leading her down a hallway. "It's small but the light is good in the mornings. I had Paulo bring fresh flowers."

The room was small and tidy and had a window that looked onto a narrow street where a greengrocer had set out a display of late-season persimmons in a wooden crate. The flowers were pale pink roses in a white vase. Emilia put her bag on the bed, took out the journal and the three books, and stood them on the windowsill because there was no shelf.

"There's a café on the corner," Celine said from the doorway. "Wonderful cornetto. I'll show you everything when you're settled. We'll find a rhythm." A pause. "I know this is hard."

"I know you do," Emilia said. Which was the kindest thing she could find.

The first two weeks in Milan had the quality of a waiting room—time that existed not in itself but as an anteroom to something else, without the courtesy of indicating what that something else might be. Celine's days were structured around her work with the precision of a small business, which was what it was: the morning workout, the content planning, the shoots, the brand partnerships, the meetings with the PR people who managed her image, the appearances, the collaborations. Emilia understood, watching this from the margins, that Celine Cheron at forty-two was not a frivolous woman but a professional one, and that the medium through which she worked—beauty, aspiration, the curation of a visible life—was not less serious for being superficial. It required judgment, consistency, and a specific kind of intelligence. It was simply an intelligence applied to a set of questions that Emilia did not find interesting.

She was not, she knew, an easy houseguest. She was quiet in the way of the recently bereaved, which is a quality that makes other people uncomfortable, as though grief were a contagion against which cheerfulness is the only defense. She ate what Celine put in front of her and thanked her and did not eat enough. She went to bed early and did not sleep well. She did not take Celine up on the yoga, the shopping, the introductions to the Milan women who formed the soft social fabric of her aunt's daily life. She went to a café on the Via Brera most mornings with her laptop and her father's journal and sat for two or three hours, which was the one thing that felt approximately right.

It was on the ninth morning that she picked up her phone to text Val and discovered the messages had never sent. She looked at this fact for a moment, and then understood. She went to her contacts. His number was blocked. She sat with the information for several seconds, understanding its implications—Celine must have taken her phone while she was asleep, or in the shower, sometime in the first days before Emilia had thought to guard against it—and then she felt a specific type of anger that was cleaner and colder than the general grief she had been carrying, and was in some ways a relief.

She unblocked the number. She went home.

"You blocked Val's number," she said. Celine was at the kitchen counter reviewing the day's shooting schedule on her tablet and did not look up.

"Your father asked me to keep an eye on that situation."

"My father is dead."

"His wishes—"

"Are not your jurisdiction. My phone is not your jurisdiction. Unblock Val means I've unblocked Val. I'm telling you as a courtesy, not asking permission."

Celine set down the tablet. She was, Emilia could see, marshaling the measured tone she used when she felt she was in the right and had the patience to remain elegant about it. "He came to the funeral, Emilia. A man you met once on a hiking trail, who has been texting you for months, who shows up at your father's funeral uninvited. Don't you find that a little—"

"Devoted," Emilia said. "I find it devoted."

"I find it obsessive."

"You find it threatening."

"I find it—" Celine paused. "Your father was right to be concerned."

"You said that before. That you knew my father better than I think. What does that mean?"

A beat, half a second too long. "It means he and I were siblings. I knew his mind."

"You hadn't spoken in ten years."

"People can know each other's minds without speaking." Celine picked up her tablet. "I'm not fighting with you about this. He's a musician, Emilia. He doesn't have a career. He doesn't have a plan. You're twenty-four and grieving and he's—"

"His last wife was sixty-eight and had dementia," Emilia said. "How old was yours?"

The silence that followed had a different quality from the ones that had preceded it. Celine's face went through something Emilia had not seen before: not the managed hurt of a woman who has been outmaneuvered, but something older and rawer. Her eyes went bright. She said nothing for several seconds.

Then: "Get out of my kitchen."

Emilia went to her room and sat on the bed and felt bad, and felt that feeling bad was correct, and did not apologize.

Three days later, in the café on the Via Brera, she opened her laptop and searched for Luca Morandi.

She had not intended to do this. She had heard the name—Celine had mentioned it with the careful casualness of someone

who wants something to sound accidental—and she had filed it away with the vague distaste one feels toward names produced too smoothly. He was a friend, Celine had said, when pressed. A businessman. Someone who had been kind to her when she first moved to Milan.

The search returned sparse results. A LinkedIn profile for an import and export firm, Morandi Commerciale SpA, with no photograph. A brief mention in a society column from 2019, a charity dinner, the name listed among other names. A mention on the website of a Venetian auction house.

She refined the search. His name and the word moglie—wife. His name and morte—death.

The first result was in Italian, an article from a Veneto regional newspaper dated four years ago. She ran it through the translation tool. The headline rendered as: "Tragic accident in Dorsoduro: young woman drowned in canal." The text: Francesca Morandi, twenty-nine, wife of Milan businessman Luca Morandi, had been found in a canal near the Ca' Rezzonico in the early hours of a Saturday morning. The investigation was ongoing. The husband was inconsolable.

Closed, six weeks later. Accidental fall. No further action.

She found the second article more quickly, once she knew to look. Giulia Morandi, thirty-four, second wife, had died eighteen months ago in what was described as a hiking accident in the Dolomites. She had been found at the foot of a section of trail above Cortina d'Ampezzo. Her husband had been in Venice at the

time, attending a business meeting, witnesses present. Ruled an accident. Investigation closed within three weeks.

Emilia sat back from the laptop.

She was an art history graduate with no legal training and no investigative experience. She knew that accidents happened. She knew that widowers existed and that the coincidence of two dead wives, while statistically improbable, was not impossible. She knew that grief and suspicion were not the same thing, that she had reason to be suspicious of any arrangement Celine entered into because Celine controlled her money, that her objectivity in this regard was not reliable.

She also knew what she had just read.

She took screenshots of both articles and sent them to herself. Then she sat for a moment looking at the street outside—the Milanese going about their Milanese business with the specific unhurriedness of a city that has been important for long enough to have nothing to prove—and her phone rang.

Val.

She picked up.

"You answered." His voice had in it the particular quality of relief that has been waiting long enough to have prepared itself for disappointment. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Celine blocked the number. I just found out."

"Celine—" A pause, the kind that absorbs something before responding. "How long?"

"Since the first week. I'm sorry. I thought you just—I thought you'd stopped."

"I wouldn't stop."

"I know that now." She looked at the articles still open on her laptop. "How are you?"

"I'm in Montreal. Still recording. Terrible at it, if I'm honest—can't focus. How are you, Emilia? Really."

She considered the question. Outside the café window a tram went past with the even, reliable sound of a city moving on schedule, and she felt the full distance between herself and anything familiar. "I'm in a café in Milan. I have no money and no job and no home. My aunt controls everything until I'm twenty-five. And I think—" She stopped.

"You think what?"

"I think the man she's seeing killed his last two wives."

The silence on his end had a different quality from silence. It was Val listening, which was something she had noticed about him on the mountain in August: he had the capacity to listen as if what you were saying was the only thing happening in the world. "Tell me," he said.

She told him. The articles. The timeline. The alibis that were perhaps a little too solid, the investigations that closed a little too fast. Celine's refusal to hear it. The way Morandi had already, in a handful of conversations Celine had relayed, positioned Emilia as unstable, as ungrateful, as a source of difficulty.

"Leave," Val said, when she finished. "Come back. Or come here."

"With what money?"

"I have—"

"I'm not taking your money. This is—I need to deal with this myself." A pause. "And I'm not sure I can leave even if I wanted to. If I contest the trusteeship it freezes the trust for a year and the estate goes to zero. If I accept it and stay, at least I can watch what she's doing. Watch what he's doing."

"That's not a plan, Emilia. That's a reason to stay somewhere dangerous."

"Yes," she agreed.

There was a pause in which she could hear him thinking and not liking what he thought.

"Then I'm coming to Milan."

"Val—"

"Not to rescue you. I know you don't want that. But I'd like to be in the same city as you while you do whatever you're going to do. Can I be in the same city?"

She looked at the tram tracks gleaming in the thin November sun. Briar Hollow was eleven months gone from her in the financial sense, and weeks gone from her in every other sense, and what she had of it now was a journal and three books and a blue sticky note in her jacket pocket that she had not yet looked at. She was in a café in Milan because a man she barely knew controlled her money and a woman her aunt was falling in love with had possibly killed two previous women, and the only person she could imagine telling all of this to without feeling she was burdening or frightening was currently in Montreal in a recording studio he said he couldn't concentrate in.

"Yes," she said. "You can be in the same city."

That evening she came back to the apartment to find Celine at the mirror in her bedroom, in a dress that was the precise grey of a November sky, applying the particular attention to her lipstick that women give to things they intend to be looked at.

"I'm going out," Celine said to her reflection.

"With Luca Morandi?"

The name produced, in Celine's face, the involuntary brightness of someone who has been trying to be neutral about something and has run out of neutrality. "He asked me to dinner. He's been very kind."

Emilia sat on the edge of the bed. She had thought about how to have this conversation and had arrived at the conclusion that there was no good way to have it, and that the choice was between having it badly and not having it at all, and that not having it was worse. "His first wife drowned in Venice," she said. "His second wife fell while hiking in the Alps. Both ruled accidents. Both investigations closed within weeks."

Celine's hand with the lipstick paused in the air.

"He's been widowed twice," Emilia continued. "Both women in their late twenties and early thirties. Both wealthy, or connected to wealth. Both dead within three years of the marriage. I found the articles today."

Celine set down the lipstick and turned. "You were researching him."

"Yes."

"Emilia." Her aunt's voice was not angry. It was the careful gentleness of someone navigating a situation they find painful.

"I understand why you're doing this. I understand that everything feels threatening right now. Your father just died. You've lost your home. You're in a country that isn't yours with a person you don't know well. That is—that is a great deal to bear. And I know you don't trust me. But this—" She gestured at nothing and everything. "You are looking for reasons to be afraid."

"His wives are dead."

"Yes. Tragically. As people sometimes are." She turned back to the mirror. "I am forty-two years old. I have made a number of poor decisions in my life and I've lived with all of them. I know what manipulation looks like. I know what a man who wants something from me looks like. Luca is—he's different. I know you don't believe that. But I'm going to dinner, and I'd like you not to wait up."

She picked up her bag and left before Emilia could say anything else. Emilia heard the front door close and listened to the absence that followed and thought: he knew she would say that. He knows how to seem different. That's the whole point.

She went to her room and opened the journal to the section in the middle she had not yet fully deciphered—the entries from the year before he died—and worked through them slowly in the lamplight. Most were illegible to her: references too compressed, names without context. But on a page she had previously skipped over because the ink was faded, she found, written in the margin

in what was clearly a different pen, perhaps added later, three words:

Famiglia Morandi. Diffida.

The Morandi family. Beware.

She sat very still with the journal open on her knees and listened to Milan outside the window, and thought about the locked drawer and the photographs and the letter in French and the name crossed out until the paper was nearly gone through, and understood—not knowing yet what she understood—that whatever had followed her father through the last year of his life had been waiting in this city before she arrived in it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luca

Val texted three days after the phone call to say he had booked a flight to Milan. He had not asked. He had simply booked it, and sent her the confirmation number, and added: I know you said you could handle this yourself. I believe you. I just want to be nearby in case you need someone to hold the ladder. She read this three times and then replied: Thank you, and set the phone face down, and sat for a while with the particular warmth of being known.

The dinner invitation arrived the following morning, via Celine, in the form of a note slipped under Emilia's bedroom door before she was awake. Written on stationery—actual stationery, cream-colored, with a small embossed crest at the top that Emilia did not recognize—in a hand that was precise and unhurried: Miss Moreau, Celine tells me you are interested in Italian Renaissance art. I have some pieces at the apartment you might enjoy seeing. I will have dinner sent from Cracco on Thursday evening—nothing formal, just family. I hope you will join us. Sincerely, L. Morandi.

Family.

She turned the word over. It was the right word to use—inclusive, warm, presuming nothing while assuming everything—and it had been chosen by someone who understood what words were for. She set the note on her windowsill next to the journal and the

three books and looked at them all together for a moment, and then wrote back through Celine: I'll be there.

She spent the next two days in the Brera Pinacoteca, working through the Renaissance collection with the focused attention she had once applied to coursework and now applied to preparation. She was not, she told herself, preparing for a dinner party. She was reminding herself of what she knew—what Mantegna's dead Christ looked like in person, how a Tintoretto organized light, the particular way the Venetians handled water, always water, the lagoon always present in their sense of depth and shadow. If Luca Morandi wanted to discuss Italian painting, she would be ready to discuss Italian painting. And she would be watching everything else.

He arrived at seven on Thursday in a dark overcoat that he gave to Paulo—who had appeared from nowhere, apparently a feature of Morandi's movements—with the ease of a man who has always had someone to take his coat. He was taller than Emilia had imagined from Celine's descriptions: broad-shouldered, perhaps fifty, with dark hair silvering at the temples in a way that made him look distinguished rather than old. His face was carefully maintained, not vain but attentive to itself, with the particular quality of a face that has been looked at often enough to know how to present. His eyes were dark and intelligent and moved, Emilia noticed immediately, with a professional quickness—assessing the room, assessing her, filing things away.

"Emilia," he said, as though confirming a hypothesis.
"Finally, we meet properly. I'm Luca."

His handshake was firm without being a demonstration. His English was fluent and only faintly accented, Italian vowels rounding the edges of certain words. Celine, behind him, had the expression of a woman watching two important things happen in the same room and trying to keep track of both.

"I understand you've been to the Pinacoteca this week," Morandi said, accepting a glass of wine from Celine.

Emilia paused. "Celine mentioned it?"

"She did. The Mantegna, I assume?"

"The Mantegna, the Bellinis. The Piero della Francesca. There's a portrait in the first room—a Madonna—that I've looked at in books for years and wasn't prepared for in person."

"The Palma Vecchio." His interest, she noted, was genuine; the slight forward lean, the specific quality of attention of someone who is not performing enthusiasm but having it. "The reproductions flatten it. The original has a quality in the gold of the background—not light, exactly, more like stored heat—that photographs cannot transmit."

"Yes. That's exactly it."

A silence fell between them, of the kind that follows agreement on something real. Celine, watching from the kitchen doorway, looked pleased with herself.

Morandi said, "Celine tells me you paint as well as study."

"I paint. Whether it's as well or in addition is something I'm still working out."

He smiled. It was a good smile, Emilia observed—wide enough to be warm, controlled enough not to oversell. "You know the

difference between knowing a thing and doing it. That's rarer than it sounds. Most people confuse fluency with mastery."

"My father used to say the same thing."

"He sounds like a man worth knowing."

"He was." The past tense landed in the room. Morandi's expression shifted—not performed sympathy, she noticed, but a kind of careful neutrality, as though he were giving her space rather than filling it with condolence. It was, she thought, the right response. It was very possibly also calculated.

The food arrived then: a sequence of small dishes from Cracco, delivered in a succession of insulated cases by a driver who disappeared so efficiently he seemed to dematerialize. Paulo set the table with an ease that suggested the routine was familiar. They sat.

Morandi was, at table, a different instrument than he was standing. Seated, he became expansive—stories emerged, observations, the kind of conversation that moved between topics with the confidence of someone who has read widely and traveled widely and has learned to make this seem natural rather than effortful. He had grown up in Venice—"the city teaches you either resignation or cunning, and usually both"—and had built the import business from an office in the Cannaregio when he was twenty-seven, and had spent a decade learning what he did not know and another decade using what he had learned. He spoke of art with precision and of food with pleasure and of politics with a detachment that Emilia recognized as the performance of neutrality rather than the thing itself.

She ate and listened and watched.

Celine across the table was, in a word, illuminated. Not merely happy—Emilia had seen Celine in various social moods and some of them involved a kind of manufactured vitality that she wore like a costume. This was different. This was a woman who had arrived somewhere she had been trying to reach for a long time and found the ground solid. Emilia felt, watching it, the complicated mix of warring instincts that had defined the past weeks: the desire to protect Celine, who was her father's sister and her only living family and who was clearly in some real sense lonely; and the cold certainty, gathering with each passing minute across the dinner table, that the man producing this effect in her aunt had done so before with other women and that the other women were dead.

"My collection at the villa is modest," Morandi was saying, "but the setting makes up for the scale. The Tintoretto's were my grandfather's—he bought them during the war, which I've always found a rather uncomfortable provenance, though I've never been able to establish anything more specific. Two studies in brown and gold, figures in torchlight. They look better in the Alps than they would in a gallery. Paintings sometimes need to be slightly inconvenient to find."

"Where is the villa?" Emilia asked.

"Above Gressoney, in the Val d'Aosta. A nineteenth-century construction—my great-grandfather built it—but on the foundations of something much older. There are rooms in the lower level that have walls three feet thick. Stone from the mountain itself."

"It sounds isolated."

"Magnificently so." He regarded her with that quickness she had noted earlier—assessing, not unkind. "You make isolation sound like a criticism."

"I grew up in a house at the end of a gravel drive," Emilia said. "I'm in favour of isolation. I'm just noting it."

"Then you would appreciate it. You should visit. Both of you." He glanced at Celine. "In the spring, perhaps. The alpenrose comes in May—those slopes above the treeline go entirely pink. Extraordinary."

Celine said something warm about the spring. Emilia filed the villa away.

She waited until the second course was cleared. Then, because there was no good time and she had stopped looking for one: "Can I ask you something directly?"

Celine went still. Morandi set down his glass. "Of course," he said.

"Your first wife drowned in Venice. Your second wife fell in the Alps. Were they accidents?"

The question sat in the room. Celine closed her eyes briefly.

Morandi looked at Emilia for a long moment, and what she saw in his face was not the flush of a man caught or the coolness of a man defending himself. It was something more unsettling: a kind of recognition, as though he had been waiting for this and had decided some time ago how he would respond to it.

He said: "Yes. They were accidents. Francesca fell from a towpath in the dark—she had had a great deal to drink, and the fog was very thick, and the railing was not what it should have been. The city repaired it afterward. Giulia lost her footing on a section of trail she knew well and had walked many times. Both investigations concluded what I have just told you. I have their files, if you'd like to read them."

"You have the investigation files?"

"I requested copies. In case anyone asked." He said this without irony or apology. "You are the fourth person who has asked me this question directly, Miss Moreau. A detective in Venice. A journalist from a Veneto newspaper who was, I believe, angling for a story he did not find. And Celine, who asked me before she agreed to have dinner with me for the first time."

Emilia looked at Celine. Celine said nothing.

"I answered the detective honestly because I was required to and because I had nothing to conceal," Morandi continued. "I answered the journalist because I prefer to control narratives before they control me. I answered Celine because she was entitled to know. I'm answering you because—" He considered. "Because I imagine you will keep asking until you are satisfied, and an unsatisfied person at the table makes everyone uncomfortable."

He said all of this in a voice of measured reasonableness, as though they were discussing a contract dispute. He picked up his wine glass.

"I loved both women," he said, more quietly. "Whatever you decide to believe about me, I loved them. Their deaths were the worst things that have happened in my life. I don't say this to earn your sympathy. I say it because it's true."

Silence.

Then: "Are you satisfied?" he asked.

"No," Emilia said honestly.

He laughed. A real laugh, full and unguarded, and Celine laughed too, and somehow the table reconstituted itself around the laughter, and the dinner resumed.

He left at ten, kissing Celine's cheek in the hallway with the ease of a man who has established a right to do this, nodding to Emilia with a neutrality that said nothing and possibly meant everything. The door closed. Celine turned.

Emilia braced.

But Celine did not start with anger. She stood for a moment in the hallway looking at the door and then said, quietly, "How dare you" in the tone of a woman who has decided that anger is the correct response and is about to perform it with care.

"I'm sorry," Emilia said. "I couldn't not ask."

"You could absolutely not ask. That was a choice. You chose to interrogate a guest in my apartment over dinner—"

"He answered. He was prepared for it."

"That's not—" Celine stopped. Took a breath. "He was prepared for it because he's been through it before. Because people assume the worst about him. That's not evidence of guilt. That's evidence of having been wrongly suspected."

"Or evidence of having prepared very carefully."

"Emilia." Celine sat down on the arm of the sofa, which was not a thing she usually did—she was a woman who sat properly, deliberately—and the informality of it struck Emilia as the most genuine gesture she had made all evening. "I am going to say something and I need you to hear it as something I mean rather than something I'm performing. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"I have been alone for most of my adult life. My first marriage was a transaction. My second marriage—" She stopped. "I don't have close friends in the way you mean. I have contacts and collaborators and people who respond to my posts. I have a following of eight hundred and fifty thousand people who feel they know me because I have allowed them to see a version of me, and none of them actually know me at all. Luca—" She paused. "He looks at me and I have the feeling of being seen. Not the version. Me. I know that sounds—I know it sounds like exactly what someone being manipulated would say. I'm aware of that. But it's what I have, and I can't give it up on the basis of suspicion."

Emilia was quiet for a moment. "What if the suspicion is correct?"

"Then I'll have made a very bad decision. Again." Celine stood. "But I've survived my bad decisions. I don't think you're going to talk me out of this one. I just need you to—try. To try to be in the same room with him without treating him like a suspect."

Emilia thought about the villa in the Alps. The walls three feet thick. The alpenrose in May. "I'll try," she said.

Celine nodded and went to her room. Emilia sat on the sofa in the dark for a while, listening to Milan settle into its late-night register: fewer cars, the distant bell of a tram, a couple arguing somewhere below in the street with the passionate imprecision of people who know the argument by heart.

She was not satisfied. The phrase had sat with her since he said it—not a performance of hurt, just the flat acknowledgment of a fact. You are the fourth person who has asked me this question. He had rehearsed the answer, she had no doubt about that. But there had been a moment, just one, during the middle section of his answer—between I have their files, if you'd like to read them and she had had a great deal to drink—where something in his eyes had moved, some very small internal adjustment, too brief to be sure of and too specific to ignore. Not guilt, exactly. Not grief. Something that looked, in the moment before it was suppressed, like calculation.

She went to her room and took out her phone and found Val's last message—I just want to be nearby in case you need someone to hold the ladder—and wrote: He was exactly as prepared as I expected. There's something I can't prove. I think your ladder theory may be correct. She sent it and lay down on her bed in her clothes and looked at the ceiling of a Milanese apartment and thought about her father's journal and the name that had been crossed out and the three words in the margin and the photographs of the woman she didn't know.

Her father had come to Italy before she was born. He had met someone connected to the Morandi family. He had spent the last year of his life making late-night phone calls in French and locking drawers and writing a warning he could not bring himself to complete.

She thought about this until she fell asleep, still dressed, the journal on the pillow beside her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Val

He arrived on a Thursday afternoon, three weeks after the dinner with Morandi, on a direct flight from Montreal that landed at Linate at two-fifteen. Emilia knew the flight number and the terminal and had spent the morning alternately telling herself she was not counting down the hours and counting down the hours. She was painting when his taxi message came through—a small study of the persimmons in the greengrocer's window across the street, which she had been working on in instalments because the light changed drastically between ten and noon—and she cleaned her brushes with more care than was strictly necessary, put on a coat, and went downstairs.

She had been thinking about this meeting, in the way one thinks about things one cannot fully control, since the phone call in the café. The Alps had been three months ago. In the Alps they had been strangers who had recognized something in each other and had two hours on a flat rock and then several months of text messages, which was a very specific kind of knowing—intimate in some ways, incomplete in others—and she was not entirely sure who would step off a taxi on the Via Brera. She was not entirely sure, either, who would be standing on the pavement to meet him.

The taxi pulled up. Val got out.

He was exactly as she remembered and she had, she realized, been worrying without knowing it that memory had improved him. He had the same dark eyes, the same unhurried way of moving, the

same quality of presence—the guitar had been replaced by a worn canvas duffel bag, but he carried it with the same ease, as though whatever he was carrying were simply part of the day and the day were fine. He saw her and stopped and for a moment neither of them said anything, which was its own kind of sentence.

Then he said: "You look tired."

"Thank you," she said. "You look the same."

"I am the same. Mostly." He came forward and hugged her with the directness of someone who has decided not to be uncertain about this, and she leaned into it and stayed there longer than was necessary and felt, for the first time in six weeks, something that was not grief or suspicion or calculation, but just: this.

"Okay," she said, stepping back. "You can hold the ladder."

"I brought tools as well," he said. "In case the ladder isn't enough."

They did not go to the apartment. Emilia had sent Celine a message that morning—Val is arriving today; I'd like to spend the afternoon with him—and Celine had responded with a string of emoji whose net meaning was either fine or resigned, and in any case Emilia was not ready to introduce them in Celine's kitchen with the ring lights on. She took Val instead on a walk, no particular route, the way she had begun to learn the Brera without intending to: the back streets behind the pinacoteca, the canal at the edge of the district, the small piazza where a bar set out its tables on mild days and a group of old men played

cards under a plane tree with a competitiveness that suggested serious money.

They walked and she talked and he listened in the way she had remembered from the mountain, the full attention of him, no part of his mind visibly elsewhere. She told him everything in sequence: the locked drawer, the photographs, the journal, the French letters she had photographed but not fully deciphered, the research in the café, the dinner with Morandi and his calm and rehearsed responses, the micro-adjustment she had caught in his eyes that she could not prove meant anything.

"The photographs," Val said. "The woman in the pictures. You don't know who she is?"

"No. Dark-haired, thirty or so, somewhere European. Her face is—" Emilia stopped. She had been trying to articulate this since October. "It's like looking at a relative I've never met. There's something familiar in the structure of the face. The eyes especially."

"Could be anyone," Val said, carefully.

"Could be. Probably is. But my father locked them in a drawer with a journal that warns me to trust no one and a hostile letter about money and a three-word note about the Morandi family, so I'm inclined to think they're relevant."

"Have you searched for her? Run the photo through anything?"

"Reverse image search, yes. Nothing. The building in the background—I've been trying to place it. It's stone, older construction, might be Venetian but it could be anywhere in the north. There are shutters on the upper windows, green, the paint

peeling. A particular ironwork railing on the balcony." She had studied the photographs so many times she could reconstruct them from memory. "I keep thinking if I could place the building I'd know something."

Val was quiet for a moment. They had reached the canal, the Naviglio Martesana, the water dark and slow between its stone banks, a cyclist going past on the towpath with the unhurried efficiency of the Milanese on two wheels. "The French letter," he said. "You photographed it."

"All three pages. My French is decent but the handwriting is difficult and some of the vocabulary is—it's legal or financial, I think, and specific to a context I don't have. I've been working through it."

"I have better French than you."

She looked at him.

"Canadian," he said, by way of explanation. "Show me."

They found a café on the canal and took the corner table away from the windows, and Emilia spread her phone between them and enlarged the photographs of the French letter one page at a time. Val read slowly, his finger tracking across the screen, occasionally asking her to zoom in on a word. He read all three pages twice without speaking.

"Right," he said finally.

"Tell me."

"It's a demand. Someone addressing your father—Laurent, the salutation says—about a debt. Not money exactly, or not only money. It says—" He zoomed in again. "Something like: the

arrangement made in good faith has not been honored. The terms we agreed upon in the matter of the Cheron estate remain outstanding. You understand what is owed and to whom it is owed. Do not mistake my patience for indifference."

Emilia stared at the screen. "The Cheron estate."

"Yes."

"That's Celine's married name. Her first husband was Pierre Cheron."

"I know. There's more. The third page—" He scrolled to it. "This part is harder, the handwriting changes. But roughly: matters of paternity cannot be undone by silence. What was acknowledged cannot be unacknowledged. The child is owed what is owed, whatever your arrangement with the mother. My client will not wait indefinitely."

The canal moved slowly past the window. Someone on a bicycle called out to someone on the towpath. The coffee machine behind the bar produced its controlled burst of steam.

"Matters of paternity," Emilia said.

"Yes."

"Whose paternity?"

"I don't know. Your father is Laurent. He's the one being addressed." Val set the phone down on the table between them with the care of someone placing something fragile. "Emilia. Is there any possibility—"

"I don't know." She picked up the phone and looked at the letter again. The handwriting on the third page was different—more urgent, the pen pressing harder. A different session,

perhaps, or a different emotional state. "I don't know anything my father didn't tell me. Which, apparently, was a great deal."

They sat with this for a moment.

"The woman in the photographs," Val said quietly.

"Yes," Emilia said. She did not elaborate and he did not press, because neither of them needed to say what they were both thinking, which was that the familiar structure of an unknown woman's face and a letter about paternity and a name crossed out with such force the paper nearly tore were things that, taken together, pointed toward something she was not ready to name yet.

They stayed in the café for two hours. Outside, November settled into the canal district with its flat grey propriety, and the afternoon light softened, and Emilia felt, gradually, the specific relief of having another person in the room who knew what she knew. Not a solution—nothing had been solved; if anything, the French letter had added weight rather than removing it—but the knowledge itself was no longer hers alone, and that was something.

They talked about other things too. Montreal, the recording that he had finally completed in the two weeks after he booked the flight, three songs he was pleased with and two he wasn't. The café in the Brera where Emilia had spent her mornings, the woman who ran it who called everyone cara regardless of gender or acquaintance, the cornetti that were flaky and light in a way that Chicago and Montreal, apparently, had not yet mastered. Emilia told him about the Pinacoteca, the Palma Vecchio Madonna and the quality he could not see in reproductions. He told her

about a series of concerts he was supposed to give in January in Quebec City that he was now reconsidering, and she felt the weight of that—the thing he was reconsidering them for was her, or was her situation, which was becoming the same thing.

"You don't need to stay in Milan indefinitely," she said.

"You have work."

"The concerts are January. That's two months. I'll deal with it."

"Val—"

"I'm not arguing about this." He said it without heat, just as a fact. "I'm here. I'd like to be useful. If at some point I'm not useful, I'll reassess. But right now I'm in Milan with you and that's what I want."

She looked at him across the small café table and thought about the mountain in August, the flat rock, the way the music had sounded before she saw where it was coming from, and how she had climbed off the trail toward it without deciding to. There were things you moved toward before you understood them. She had been moving toward this for three months.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"You can be useful." She picked up her coffee. "You already have been. The letter."

He smiled. It was a specific smile, slightly sideways, that she had not seen since the mountain and had been aware, in the months since, of the gap where it belonged. "Good," he said. "I brought the tools."

The message from Celine arrived at six-seventeen, while Emilia was walking Val to the hotel she had found him two streets from the apartment—not the apartment, they had agreed; Celine needed a few days to adjust to the fact of him before she encountered him in her kitchen. The message was a link. Emilia opened it.

Instagram. An account she didn't recognize, no profile picture, the username a string of characters. Two photographs. Both taken today—she could see the Via Brera in the background of the first, the café tables on the canal in the second. In the first: Emilia and Val at the café table, leaning toward each other over the phone, faces close. In the second: the two of them walking on the towpath, her arm through his. Both photographs were clear, professionally composed, shot with a long lens from a distance. Neither of them had seen anyone.

Both photographs had been tagged to Celine's account.

"Val," she said.

He looked at the phone. His expression went through something she had not seen in it before: not anger, which would have been simpler, but a careful steadiness, the face of someone realizing that the situation is larger than they had mapped it.

"Someone was following us," he said.

"Yes."

"All afternoon?"

"Probably from the moment you arrived. I should have thought—" She stopped. She should have thought. Three weeks of watching Morandi's performance across a dinner table and she had

let herself believe that his range of operations was limited to the apartment and the restaurant and the circles Celine moved in. That had been naive. "He knew you were coming," she said. "Celine would have mentioned it. He prepared."

Val was quiet for a moment. "He's telling you he can see you. Whenever he wants. Wherever you go."

"Yes. And he's telling Celine—" She looked at the tags again. "He's telling Celine that I have someone here. That I'm not isolated. From his perspective, that's a problem to be managed."

Her phone rang. Celine.

She answered. Celine's voice had the brittle quality of someone controlling themselves with visible effort. "Who is this person and why is he in Milan?"

"His name is Val Rousseau. He's a friend. He's staying in a hotel."

"Emilia, I told you—"

"You told me your opinion. I heard it. He's here and he's staying. He's not in the apartment."

"People are asking me who he is! It's all over—my followers are—it looks like I'm harboring some kind of romantic—" Celine's composure broke briefly. "This is my professional reputation, Emilia."

"Someone followed us today and photographed us with a long-lens camera and tagged you in it," Emilia said. "Your followers are the least alarming part of this."

Silence.

"Someone followed you," Celine said slowly.

"Yes. The photos weren't taken by a street photographer. Look at the focal length. Look at where they were taken from."

Another silence, longer. When Celine spoke again the brittle quality had been replaced by something flatter and less certain.

"Stay where you are. Come home when you're ready. We'll talk."

She rang off. Emilia put the phone in her pocket and looked at Val.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You've been here eight hours."

"I've been here eight hours and already someone has been photographing us without our knowledge and using it as a message," Val said. "So I'd say things are progressing." He said this with a dryness that was not indifference but its opposite—the tone of someone keeping themselves level because the situation requires it. "Go home. Talk to Celine. I'll be at the hotel."

"Val—"

"I'm fine. Genuinely. Go." He touched her face briefly with one hand, just briefly, the way you touch something you want to be sure is real. "I'll be here tomorrow. And the day after."

She went.

Celine was waiting in the living room with her laptop open to the Instagram account. She had pulled up both photographs at full size and was examining them with the focus of a woman who understands images professionally. She looked up when Emilia came in but did not speak immediately, which was, Emilia thought, more considered than her first response on the phone had been.

"The focal length," Celine said finally. "You're right. This was deliberate. This was planned."

"Yes."

"Who would do this?"

Emilia sat down. "Who knew Val was coming to Milan?"

Celine looked at the photographs and said nothing.

"I mentioned it to you," Emilia said. "You may have mentioned it to Luca. Even in passing—Emilia's friend is arriving, the musician she met in the Alps. That's all it would take."

"I may have—" Celine closed the laptop. "I did mention it. A few days ago. He asked how you were settling in."

"And you told him I had someone coming."

"I thought—I was trying to show him that you had a life. That you weren't just—" She stopped. "I didn't think he would—"

"He knows everything we tell you, Celine. That's what this means. He's been managing the information from the beginning."

Celine sat with this for a long time. The ring lights were off and in the ordinary lamp-lit dark of the apartment she looked, for the first time since Emilia had arrived, her age.

"I'll talk to him," she said.

"About this?"

"Yes. I'll ask him directly."

"He'll deny it. He'll have an explanation that sounds reasonable. He's very good at reasonable explanations."

"I know," Celine said quietly. "But I have to ask." She looked at Emilia. "Your Val—he's trustworthy?"

"Yes."

"You're certain?"

Emilia thought about the café table, the French letter on the phone screen, Val reading it twice without speaking before he told her what it said. The careful way he set the phone down between them. The fact that he had flown from Montreal, given up two months of January concerts, and arrived with tools. "Yes," she said. "I'm certain."

Celine nodded once. "Then be glad of him," she said. "People who are certain of someone are very lucky. I've never been certain of anyone in my life." She said this without self-pity, simply as an accounting. "Not once."

She picked up her laptop and went to her room.

Emilia sat for a while in the dark of the living room. The ring lights stood folded in their corners like sleeping herons. Outside, Milan moved through its evening with its usual certainty, and in a hotel two streets away Val Rousseau was probably playing guitar, or trying to, or lying on a hotel bed staring at the ceiling in the way that people stare at ceilings when they are deciding to stay somewhere they have not been asked to stay.

She took out her phone and texted him: Celine asked if you were trustworthy. I said yes. She said people who are certain of someone are very lucky.

His reply came quickly: She's right. Sleep well, Emilia.

She went to bed with the journal. On the page with her father's handwriting she had read so many times it had become a

kind of prayer—Emilia, if you're reading this, I'm gone—she looked again at the crossed-out name, the black column of obliterated ink. She held the page up to the lamp. Nothing resolved. Whatever name lay beneath the crossing out remained private.

But she had the French letter now, and its translation, and the words the Cheron estate and what was acknowledged cannot be unacknowledged, and she understood, lying in the lamplight in Milan, that her father had come to Italy before she was born for a reason that was connected to everything that was happening now and that the photographs of the unknown woman in the locked drawer were not coincidence and not nostalgia and that the answer, when it came, would be something she had been circling since October without knowing what she was circling.

She fell asleep with the lamp on. The journal lay open on the pillow beside her, its pages unmoving in the still Milan air, keeping its secrets in the careful way of things written down precisely so they could not be said aloud.

CHAPTER SIX

Five Weeks

The rhythm they found was not one either of them had planned. It arrived the way rhythms do, from the accumulation of small decisions made separately that turned out to point in the same direction. Emilia went to the café on the Via Brera each morning at eight-thirty. Val, after the first week, appeared there at eight-forty-five with his own coffee already in hand, having stopped at the bar on the corner that made better espresso than the café did but had nowhere comfortable to sit. They occupied the corner table by the window—the one Emilia had claimed by repetition as her own—and spread the evidence between them: the journal, the photographs, the translated letter, the printed articles about the dead wives, and the notes they had each accumulated separately and were now accumulating together.

The mornings were for the archive. The Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense kept print runs of major Italian newspapers going back to the 1960s, and the Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Bertarelli held photographic and visual records that went further still. They worked through both in alternating shifts, Emilia handling the Italian with the focused competence of someone who has never quite been fluent but has always been determined, Val covering the French-language materials with a native ease that was, in the cramped reading room of the Braidense, enormously useful. They had learned, over the first weeks, each other's research habits: Emilia built outward from a center, expanding concentrically; Val

started from the edges and worked inward, building a frame before filling it. Together they covered ground that neither would have covered alone.

The afternoons were for the apartment, or for the streets—Val had developed a particular interest in the Navigli district, the old canal network at the city's southern edge, which he said had the same quality as certain parts of Montreal, the lived-in beauty of neighborhoods that had been useful before they were fashionable and still remembered their first purpose. They walked there on mild days with coffee and talked about what they had found, testing theories the way you test ice, careful about where you put your weight. In the evenings they usually ate together—not at Celine's, by unspoken agreement; Celine's evenings increasingly belonged to Morandi, who appeared four or five nights out of seven in the apartment's hallway with wine and the quiet authority of a man establishing a domestic presence—and then Val went back to his hotel and Emilia went back to her room and the journal.

It was a good life, she thought, for a life that was also a siege.

They had been in Milan five weeks when Val found the insurance records.

He had been working through financial filings at the Camera di Commercio, the public business registry, drilling into Morandi Commerciale SpA and its subsidiaries with the patient lateral thinking of someone who understands that the most revealing information is usually three steps away from the obvious starting

point. The company itself was clean to the visible eye: import and export, artworks and luxury goods, properly registered, regularly audited, no outstanding violations. But its parent company, a holding structure called Serenissima Patrimoni registered in Lugano, had acquired two life insurance policies in the years immediately preceding each of Morandi's marriages. Both policies were substantial. Both had paid out, following the deaths of the insured, within their standard settlement periods.

He brought the printouts to the café and set them in front of Emilia without comment.

She read them. She looked up.

"He insured them before he married them," she said.

"The policies were taken out through the holding company, not personally. Technically he's not even the named beneficiary—the company is. But he owns the company."

"Is this legal?"

"It's not illegal for a company to hold life insurance on persons connected to its principals. It's done in business arrangements all the time. You insure key individuals against whose continued existence a company has a financial interest." He paused. "Usually that means partners, officers, people whose death would disrupt the business."

"Not wives."

"Not ordinarily wives, no."

Emilia looked at the figures. The policies were denominated in Swiss francs, one for three million, one for four and a half. Combined payout following both deaths: nearly nine million Swiss

francs. At current exchange, somewhere in the vicinity of ten million dollars.

"Is this evidence?" she asked.

Val considered this with the honesty she had come to rely on. "It's suggestive. A competent defense attorney would argue that insuring the lives of people important to you is prudent, not sinister, and that the policies paying out following accidental deaths is exactly what insurance is for. The investigations already ruled both deaths accidents. Without something that contradicts those rulings—a witness, a forensic anomaly, something—this is suspicious but it isn't proof."

"But it's more than we had."

"Considerably more than we had."

She photographed the printouts and added them to the folder on her phone—seventeen items now, a mosaic of suggestion and implication whose individual pieces were all defensible and whose collective shape pointed somewhere she could not yet take to a court but could not stop seeing. She thought about the detective in Venice that Morandi had mentioned, the journalist, the questions answered with the precision of rehearsal. He had known this would be found by anyone who looked hard enough. He had prepared for it. Whatever the answer to that preparation was, it lived somewhere she hadn't reached yet.

"There's one more thing," Val said. He produced a second sheet—a photocopy of a social page from a Venetian newspaper, dated seven years ago, showing a group at a charity dinner. He pointed to a woman in the background of one photograph. Dark-

haired, about thirty, in a black dress. Standing beside a man Emilia did not recognize. "I ran a reverse image search against the photos from your father's drawer," he said. "This is as close as I could get. Same facial structure, same eyes. I can't be certain—the resolution is low and she's not looking directly at the camera."

Emilia took the sheet. The woman in the background. The specific arrangement of her features. "This is a Venetian society page," Emilia said.

"Yes. The dinner was for a conservation charity—the Venetian heritage foundation. The caption lists the principal guests but she's not among them." He pointed at the caption. "The man beside her, though—" A name in the list of attendees, not captioned to the photograph but present in the text. "Marco Bellini. His daughter was Francesca Bellini. Who became Francesca Morandi."

Emilia stared at the sheet. The woman in the background had been photographed beside Francesca Morandi's father, seven years ago, at a Venetian charity dinner. Which put her in Venice. Which put her in the Morandi orbit.

"Who is she?" Emilia said. It was not really a question, because it had stopped feeling like a question several seconds ago, but she said it anyway, because some realizations need to be stated aloud before they become real.

"I don't know yet," Val said. "But she's connected. To Venice, to the Bellinis, to the Morandi world. And your father kept her photographs locked in a drawer."

Emilia set the sheet down on the table beside the journal, which she had brought that morning because she had been rereading the faded middle section, the entries from the year before his death. The journal lay open to a page that contained, in her father's compressed late handwriting, a word she had read and reread without context: Venezia. Venice. And below it, in brackets, what she had taken for a date but which she now understood might be something else: (F.B.-1994).

Francesca Bellini. Nineteen ninety-four. Thirty years ago, when her father would have been in his mid-twenties, living in Paris, in the years he had never explained.

"Val," she said.

"I know," he said.

That evening she went to his hotel for the first time. Not because anything had been decided but because the afternoon's discoveries had the particular weight of things that should not be carried alone and she did not want to go back to the apartment and Celine's careful neutrality and the room that smelled like cut roses and not at all like home.

His room was small and orderly in the way of a person who has lived out of a bag often enough to have a system. The guitar was in its case in the corner. His laptop was open on the desk beside a stack of papers she recognized as archive printouts. On the windowsill: a paperback, a half-drunk glass of water, and—she noticed this and felt something shift in her chest—a small rock, dark and triangular, that she was almost certain was a piece of Alpine scree.

"From the mountain?" she said.

He looked up from the desk. "I picked it up the morning after we met. I don't know why. It seemed like the kind of thing you hold onto."

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him and thought about the months of text messages and the phone call in the café when she had said I think I might be in danger and he had said where are you, I'm coming right now, and the fact that he had come. Not right now—she had told him not yet, and he had waited—but eventually, when she said the word, he had come. With tools, as promised.

"Play something," she said.

He got the guitar. He sat in the desk chair with it and played the fragment she had first heard on the mountain in August—the minor-key melody she had described as something looking for somewhere it can't quite reach—and then, without stopping, moved into something else, longer and more resolved, the same quality of yearning but with somewhere to go, a harmonic arrival that felt like it had been earned.

"Is that new?" she asked.

"Since Montreal. It needed an ending."

"Did you find one?"

He looked at her. "Yes," he said.

She went home at midnight, not because she wanted to but because the situation required a kind of clarity she was determined to maintain for as long as things were this uncertain. There were decisions being made in this city that could end

badly, and she needed to be able to think, and she could not quite think in his presence with the music still in the room. She kissed him at the door of his hotel and walked back through the Brera streets with her hands in her pockets and the cold November air around her and the melody in her head, and felt, alongside everything difficult, the complicated grace of having something worth protecting.

November deepened. Celine began to change in ways that were individually small and collectively significant. She canceled two of their standing dinners—"Luca's having people over" was the first explanation; "I completely forgot, I'm sorry" was the second—and when Emilia saw her in the apartment she had the slightly distracted quality of a person whose attention is organized around something Emilia was not part of. She was kinder, in a way: less apt to push the yoga and the shopping and the integration into Milanese society, as though she had decided that Emilia's recalcitrance in these matters was no longer her problem to solve. But she was also less present, and the gap between them, which had been constituted mainly of suspicion and wary goodwill, was quietly being filled with something Emilia liked less: absence.

Morandi came and went with increasing ease. He had begun to bring things to the apartment—a bottle of wine that he placed in the rack as though he had always done so, a small framed print of a Venetian canal scene that appeared one day on the wall of the hallway, a cashmere throw in Celine's preferred color that materialized on the sofa. Each object was small and each one was

perfectly chosen and together they constituted a claim. Emilia watched this process with the attention she might have given to a time-lapse: too slow to see the change happening, apparent only in the comparison between a given Tuesday and the Tuesday three weeks before.

He spoke to Emilia, when they were in the same room, with a warmth that had exactly the right temperature—neither overclaiming nor dismissing, the warmth of a man who has decided on a policy toward a difficult element in his environment and is implementing it consistently. He asked about her research with the Pinacoteca. He asked once about Val with an entirely neutral curiosity that was, Emilia thought, the most frightening thing he had done yet. He never mentioned the Instagram photographs. He never mentioned the French letter, or the insurance records, or anything that indicated awareness of what she and Val had spent the past five weeks assembling. He was, in all observable respects, a man who had nothing to conceal.

It was worse than if he had seemed guilty.

The engagement ring appeared on a Sunday evening in late November. Celine came home from a weekend in Venice—her first, Emilia had not been invited and had not asked to be—with a different quality in her movements, something Emilia could not immediately name and then did: she was being careful with her hand. She kept it slightly closed, or tucked, until she sat down across from Emilia in the living room and opened it.

The ring was extraordinary. An oval sapphire flanked by two smaller diamonds in an antique setting, almost certainly a piece

of some age. It caught the lamp-light with the particular depth of a stone that has been looked at for a long time.

Emilia looked at it for a moment.

"He proposed in Venice?" she said.

"On the water. At sunset. He had a boat." Celine's voice had in it the quality of someone describing a dream they know to be a dream and are not yet ready to wake from. "I know what you're going to say."

"I don't think you do."

"You're going to say it's too fast. That I don't know him well enough. That the dead wives—"

"I'm going to say," Emilia said carefully, "that in the five weeks since Morandi had us photographed by a long-lens camera and used the pictures to manage your opinion of Val, you have told me nothing about it. I'm going to say that in those five weeks his things have been appearing in this apartment in the way that an occupation happens—gradually and then completely. And I'm going to say that I have found, in the public business registry, evidence that he took out substantial life insurance policies on both of his wives before he married them, through a holding company in Lugano, and that both policies paid out in full following their deaths."

Celine looked at the ring.

Emilia waited.

"The insurance," Celine said finally. "Is that illegal?"

"Not by itself."

"Then it's—" She paused. "It's unusual."

"It's a pattern, Celine. Not one piece—a pattern. The wives. The insurance. The investigations that closed quickly. The way he manages information. The photographs. The—" She stopped. She had been about to say: the woman in the photographs in my father's drawer who is connected to Venice, to the Bellini family, to a year in your brother's life he never explained. She stopped because she was not ready. Because that particular door, once opened, led somewhere she was not certain she could navigate and was not going to open in the middle of a conversation that was already going badly. "Celine. I have been gathering evidence for five weeks. So has Val. We have more than I had at the dinner. Considerably more."

"But you still can't prove anything."

"Not yet."

"Then it's still suspicion." Celine looked up. Her eyes were clear and unhappy. "I hear you, Emilia. I do. I'm not foolish. I know the case you're building. But I—" She looked at the ring again. "I said yes. It's done."

"It's not done until you're married."

"No," Celine agreed quietly. "It's not." Something in her tone shifted, just briefly, in a way that Emilia registered without fully understanding. "The engagement party is in three weeks. In Venice. At the Palazzo Morandi." She looked directly at Emilia. "I want you there. Both of you, if Val will come. I want you there and I want you to watch him. Everything you've been doing from a distance—do it from inside. If you find something

real, something I can look at and believe—" She paused. "Then tell me. I'll listen. But I need you there to find it."

Emilia was quiet.

"You think I'm walking into this blind," Celine said. "I'm not blind. I'm—" She closed her hand around the ring, the stone disappearing into her palm. "I'm choosing to believe the best possible version of this man because the alternative is that I have fallen in love with someone who has killed two women, and I can't hold that and function. So I'm choosing to believe. But I am not asking you to believe it. I'm asking you to come to Venice and keep your eyes open."

"I'll come," Emilia said.

"Thank you."

"Val too."

"Good." Celine stood and went to the kitchen, and Emilia heard the refrigerator door, the sound of wine being poured, the ordinary sounds of an evening that had become something else. She sat in the living room with Morandi's cashmere throw on the arm of the sofa beside her and the canal print on the wall and the ring's afterimage in her mind—the sapphire, probably the Venetian heritage, possibly taken from a dead woman's hand—and thought: three weeks.

She texted Val: Venice in three weeks. Engagement party at the Palazzo Morandi. Celine wants us there. She knows what she's doing and is doing it anyway. I think she's braver than either of us.

He replied: Or more frightened. Sometimes they look the same.

She considered this for a long time. Outside, the first real rain of November fell on the Brera rooftops, coming down the drainpipes and out along the street gutters toward the canal, carrying the city's autumn with it, and Milan's lights scattered on the wet stone in the way of light that has found more surfaces than it expected.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Venice

They took the early train from Milano Centrale on a Friday morning in December, the fast Frecciarossa to Venice Santa Lucia, and Emilia sat in the window seat watching the Po valley open up around her—the flat agricultural plains of Lombardy, the poplar windbreaks, the winter fields grey and cream under a low sky—and felt the specific anxiety of someone traveling toward something they have prepared for and cannot fully prepare for. Val was beside her reading; Celine was in the seat ahead with Morandi, their two heads inclined toward each other over something on his phone, occasional low laughter. The scene had the quality of a rehearsal and she was not sure what it was rehearsing for.

She had found Isabella Ricci eleven days earlier, through the website of the Venetian heritage foundation that had hosted the charity dinner in the old social page photograph. Isabella was listed as a former board member, with a contact email and a note that she had stepped down from the board three years ago due to personal circumstances. Emilia had written to her twice: once with no response, and then again with more detail—my aunt is engaged to Luca Morandi; I believe he killed Francesca; I need to understand what happened—and had received, four days later, a reply of three lines. I know who you are. I know what he is. I will meet you once, somewhere public, during the day. After that I cannot help you.

Caffè Florian, Saturday afternoon, two o'clock. A place public enough to be safe, which told Emilia something about the level of Isabella's fear.

She had not told Celine about the meeting. She had not told Celine about Isabella at all. She had told Val, who had said: good. He had been more terse than usual since they left Milan, and she understood this as a form of focus rather than distance—the same quality of concentration she had seen in him in the Braidense reading room when he was working through difficult materials, the deliberate reduction of noise.

The train crossed the long causeway over the lagoon and Venice appeared ahead of them through the grey December morning, rising from the water with the patient implausibility of something that has been doing this for a thousand years and has stopped expecting anyone to believe it. The city did not look real in the way that cities generally look real—did not look like a place that existed because geography or economics required it. It looked like a choice made long ago by people who understood that necessity was not the only reason to build, and that the water and the stone and the slow persistent beauty of the thing were themselves a kind of argument, possibly the most durable kind.

"First time?" Val said.

"I came once at sixteen with my father. A school trip, three days. I thought I understood it."

"You didn't."

"No."

The train pulled into Santa Lucia and they stepped out onto the platform and through the station doors and there was the Grand Canal immediately, the step from train to water-city without transition, the vaporetto stop and the gondola moorings and the opposite bank of the canal with its succession of palazzi in the morning light, each façade a different argument for the possibilities of stone and water and time. The air smelled of salt and cold stone and something else that Emilia had no word for, some mineral quality of a city that has been settling into its foundations for centuries and has arrived at a particular equilibrium between what is above the water and what is below it.

Morandi had arranged a private water taxi. It was waiting at the bank, a polished wooden launch with a driver who greeted Morandi by name and took their luggage with the smooth efficiency of someone paid to make transitions effortless. They moved out into the canal and Venice began.

She had forgotten, or the memory of sixteen had not been adequate to retain, how the Grand Canal worked on you. It was not the scale—she had expected the scale—but the intimacy of it alongside the scale. The buildings came directly to the water with no margin between stone and canal, no setback or buffer, the city and the water in constant direct contact, and the effect was that you moved through it not as a tourist on a street but as something else, something the city had always accommodated alongside its gondolas and its trading barges, a presence it was accustomed to on its terms. The light moved differently here. Reflected off the water onto the undersides of the bridges, it

created a second illumination from below, a brightness that had no equivalent on land.

She made herself look at it carefully, not as a person approaching danger but as a person approaching something she had spent four years studying and was now inside. The Ca' d'Oro passed on the right, its Gothic tracery resolved in the grey morning light into something between lace and bone. The Ca' Rezzonico on the left—where Francesca had drowned, somewhere near its foundations, in the dark of a foggy night four years ago. Emilia looked at it and then looked away.

The Palazzo Morandi was in the Dorsoduro sestiere, set back slightly from the main channel behind a water gate of rusted iron, the approach a narrow side canal whose stillness was a different quality than the bustle of the Grand Canal—darker, more contained. The building itself was fifteenth century at its core, with eighteenth-century additions visible in the upper floor windows: a certain regularity of spacing, a slightly different stone. The facade had been allowed to show its age without quite being permitted to deteriorate, and the effect was of something maintained to the threshold of acceptability and no further, as though the building's dignity lay precisely in the evidence of duration.

Morandi helped Celine from the boat with the attentiveness of a man who is being watched and knows it and performs the gesture anyway because the performance has become so habitual it is indistinguishable from the act. He led them through the water gate and up a set of stone stairs and into the palazzo's androne,

the entrance hall at water level, where the smell of salt and stone was strongest and the wall sconces threw an amber light over old marble and a set of painted wooden chests that were either authentic sixteenth century or excellent reproductions. Emilia could not immediately tell, which meant they were either the former or the reproduction was extraordinarily good. Either way it was a statement.

"The piano nobile is upstairs," Morandi said, as though conducting a tour of something he owned with sufficient confidence that pointing out its quality was unnecessary. "Your rooms are in the east wing. The party tomorrow evening will be in the portego—the long hall on the first floor. The view of the canal from the portego is"—a small pause—"worth being present for at dusk."

The portego, when they crossed it to reach the east wing staircase, was a revelation. It ran the full width of the building from the canal-facing windows to the courtyard-facing windows at the rear, a space perhaps twenty meters long and ten meters wide, with a ceiling of painted beams and walls hung with paintings that Emilia slowed to look at. The two Tintoretto's Morandi had mentioned at the dinner in Milan were here: large canvases, figures in torchlight, the warm darkness and kinetic energy of Tintoretto's mature style, the light striking upward from somewhere below the frame in a way that made the figures seem to be emerging from the darkness rather than illuminated against it. Beside them, a Veronese; smaller, a devotional

subject, the blue of the Madonna's robe still astonishing after four hundred and fifty years.

"Genuine?" Val said quietly, beside her.

"Yes," she said. "Both of them." She was looking at the Tintoretto on the left, at the face of a figure in the upper right of the composition—a woman, dark-haired, looking down at the scene below her with an expression of composed attention. The particular angle of the face. The set of the eyes. "Val," she said.

"I see it," he said.

The figure in the painting had the same facial structure as the woman in her father's photographs.

Their rooms were in the east wing, on the second floor: Emilia in a room overlooking the courtyard, Val in a smaller room further along the corridor. The rooms were furnished with the careful impersonality of a house accustomed to accommodating guests—good linen, adequate heating, the furniture old enough to be authentic and not so old as to be uncomfortable, flowers on both dressers. Emilia put her bag on the bed, took out the journal and set it on the desk beside the flowers, and went to the window. The courtyard below was stone, with a well at its center of the ornamental kind that had not drawn actual water in centuries, and at its edges a few winter-bare shrubs in stone pots. In the far wall, a door, closed, with a heavy padlock of new manufacture on old iron fittings.

She noted the padlock. She noted the door.

In the afternoon, while Celine rested and Morandi took a phone call in his study—the kind of phone call whose announcement in a host functions as a permission to disappear—Emilia and Val walked.

Venice in December had a quality she had not anticipated and could not have anticipated from sixteen or from books, which was a quality of intimacy. The summer tourists were gone. The city in winter moved at its own pace, which was neither hurried nor performative; the shopkeepers and the residents and the acqua alta preparation boards propped against the lower doorways were going about the business of a city that had survived plague and siege and the indifference of the modern world and was not especially concerned about what any given December would bring. The narrow calli—the alleys, some of them barely wide enough for two people to pass—turned and intersected with a logic that was not grid logic but the accumulated logic of a thousand years of people walking from one place to another and finding the most useful route, which was not always the shortest. They got lost twice, which Venice seemed to intend.

They found the Campo Santa Margherita by accident, the large irregular campo of the Dorsoduro with its fish market and its students from the nearby Ca' Foscari and its morning light slanting across the uneven paving stones. They drank coffee at a bar where the barista knew their neighbors by name and called out to a man crossing the campo about something that appeared to be a long-standing disagreement about football. The ordinary human friction of a place that is a city and not only a monument.

"The figure in the Tintoretto," Val said.

"I know."

"It might be coincidence. Tintoretto used models from the Venetian merchant class—he painted what was available. Any number of dark-haired Venetian women of the period could produce that facial type."

"Yes."

"But your father had those photographs. And the notation—F.B., 1994."

"Francesca Bellini was born in 1994," Emilia said. "She would have been about thirty when she died. The woman in the photographs looks about thirty. And she's in a painting in Morandi's palazzo, in a style that requires the model to have been available to Tintoretto in the 1570s, which obviously she wasn't, so Tintoretto either imagined that face or found it in the Venetian gene pool at a four-hundred-year remove."

"None of which tells us who the woman in your father's photographs is."

"No. But it tells us she has roots here. Or someone who looked very like her did." She wrapped both hands around her coffee cup. "Isabella will know. If anyone does."

Val nodded. "Tomorrow at two."

"Tomorrow at two."

They walked back through the calli to the palazzo in the late afternoon light, which in Venice in December comes almost horizontally off the water and turns everything it touches briefly gold before the dark comes in, and Emilia thought about

her father at twenty-five in Paris writing to a woman in Venice, or traveling to Venice to meet one, or being written to by one—the French letter had been addressed to him, not from him—and understanding that something he had been part of in 1994 was still in motion and had arrived, with considerable force, in 2024.

Isabella Ricci was already at the table when they arrived, fifteen minutes before two, in a corner of the Caffè Florian's inner room that she had chosen with the deliberateness of someone who had thought carefully about where to sit. The Florian was the oldest café in Europe, its interior a series of small gilded rooms with frescoed ceilings and mirrored panels and red velvet banquettes worn soft by two hundred and fifty years of use, and at the height of the tourist season it was so crowded as to be almost impossible to think in. In December it was nearly empty, and the two elderly couples at separate tables and the waiter moving unhurriedly between them gave the room the quality of a stage between performances.

She was thin, perhaps thirty-eight or forty, with eyes that had the particular quality of someone who has been carrying something heavy for a long time and has become so accustomed to the weight that they no longer put it down even when they have the opportunity. Dark hair, pulled back. She looked at the door when they came in with the alertness of a person who checks the door reflexively, and when she saw them her expression cycled very quickly through assessment and resolution and landed on a kind of exhausted relief.

"You came," she said. "Both of you. Good."

She did not offer her hand. Emilia sat across from her; Val beside Emilia. A waiter appeared and they ordered without consulting the menu and the waiter went away.

"You said in your email," Isabella said, "that you believe he killed Francesca."

"Yes," Emilia said.

"Why do you believe this? What do you have?"

Emilia told her: the insurance records, the timeline, the investigations that closed quickly, the pattern across both marriages. Isabella listened without expression, her hands flat on the table. When Emilia finished she was quiet for a moment.

"You have the same things the detective had," she said. "The detective from the Questura who came to me three years ago. He was convinced. He had the insurance, the timeline, the same anomalies in the investigation records. He was building a case."

"What happened to the case?"

"His superior closed it. Insufficient evidence, they said. But the detective—" She paused. "He believed it was closed for other reasons. He said Morandi had connections at a level he couldn't reach."

"Political connections?"

"Financial. Some of the same people who close investigations have investments with Serenissima Patrimoni. The Lugano holding company. It's not a conspiracy—it's simpler than a conspiracy. It's just money talking to money in the way that money always has."

The waiter brought their coffee. Isabella waited for him to leave.

"Francesca called me," she said then, in a different register—quieter, as though the sentence had been waiting inside her for a long time and was finally being permitted out. "The night she died. At eleven-forty-three, I have the call record. I have tried to give it to the police three separate times and three separate times it has been explained to me why it is insufficient."

"What did she say?" Val asked.

"She said she was leaving. She had packed a bag. Luca was at a dinner—a business dinner, forty minutes away, witnesses who confirmed it, which is the alibi that closed the case. She had called a water taxi, private, a company she trusted. She was going to come to my apartment in the Cannaregio and then in the morning she was going to take the first train to Milan and from Milan to her sister in Lyon. She had it planned." Isabella looked down at her coffee. "She had been planning it for two weeks. She hadn't told me until that night because she was afraid I would be visible—that if I knew, he might find out through me. She said she would call me from the taxi. I waited."

She stopped. In the mirrored panels of the Florian the room replicated itself and the four of them—Emilia, Val, Isabella, and Isabella's reflection—sat in the amber light of a December afternoon that was now entirely still.

"The call never came," Emilia said.

"They found her body at six in the morning, in the canal near the Ca' Rezzonico. The water taxi company—the one she had called—said no booking was made from her phone that night. Which contradicts the call log from her phone showing an outbound call to their number at eleven fifty-one. Eight minutes after she called me."

"Someone deleted the booking," Val said.

"Or someone at the water taxi company was paid to say no booking was made. I don't know which. I know that she called me, she was alive and frightened and had a plan, and eight minutes later she called a water taxi, and two hours after that she was found in the canal." Isabella put her hands around her coffee cup. "His alibi is forty minutes away. He had time, if he left the dinner immediately after she called him. But he didn't leave—the witnesses said he stayed until midnight, when they all went together, and the body was found at six a.m. and the coroner placed death between midnight and two."

"So he couldn't have done it himself."

"Not unless the coroner's window is wrong. Which the detective thought possible but couldn't prove."

Val said: "Or he had someone do it. The water taxi company."

"Or someone else. Someone who was at the Ca' Rezzonico that night and has never been identified. The investigation closed before they looked hard at the canal-side access points."

Emilia set down her cup. "Isabella. The woman in this photograph." She showed her the picture on her phone—the social

page from seven years ago, the woman in the background beside Francesca's father. "Do you know who this is?"

Isabella leaned in and looked for a long moment. Something crossed her face—recognition, then a careful stillness. "Where did you get this?"

"It was in a public archive. A society page."

"Yes." Isabella looked at it a moment longer, then sat back. "Her name is Marie-Hélène Aubert. She was French—she lived in Venice for several years in the 1990s. She knew the Bellini family. She knew—" She stopped. "She knew Luca Morandi, before he was who he is now, when he was building the business and moving in those circles."

The name hit Emilia like cold water. Aubert. Not a common name, but not an impossible coincidence. Her father's name. Her father's name, written in its original French form, before the family had anglicized it across generations to Moreau.

"What happened to her?" Emilia managed.

"She left Venice. In 1995, I think—I was very young, I know this from older people who knew the circles. Something happened—a scandal, or a disagreement, or both—and she went back to France. I don't know anything more about her. I don't think she's alive now." Isabella looked at Emilia with the eyes that had been carrying something heavy. "You have her face."

The room was very quiet. Through the Florian's windows the Piazza San Marco extended in its winter emptiness, the pigeons and the tourists of summer replaced by the low grey sky and the pale stone and the distant sound of water, and Emilia sat in the

oldest café in Europe with the name Marie-Hélène Aubert turning over in her mind and the journal in her bag with its crossed-out name and her father's handwriting asking her to trust no one, and understood, with the particular clarity of something that has been trying to be understood for weeks, that the woman in the photographs was not a stranger.

"Thank you," she said to Isabella, when she could speak again. "For meeting us."

Isabella nodded. She looked, Emilia thought, slightly lighter than when she had arrived—the way people look when they have finally put down something they have been carrying alone for too long. "Stop him," she said. "If you can. For Francesca. For—" She stopped herself. "Just stop him."

She left quickly, without looking back at the door.

They sat in the Florian for a long time after she had gone, not speaking. The waiter refilled their coffee without being asked. Outside, the sky over the piazza had gone the dark grey of late afternoon in December, and the first lights were coming on in the arcades.

"Marie-Hélène Aubert," Val said finally.

"Yes."

"Your father's name."

"The French version of it. Before the anglicization." She had the journal open on the table now, and was looking at the notation: F.B.—1994. Francesca Bellini, born 1994. And below it, two pages on, the line she had read a dozen times without

placing: M-H, Venice, mai 1994. M-H. Marie-Hélène. Venice. May 1994. Nine months before Francesca Bellini was born."

She closed the journal. Val watched her.

"He locked her photographs in a drawer," Emilia said. "He crossed out a name he couldn't bring himself to leave legible. He came to Italy the year Francesca Bellini was conceived and he never spoke about it and then a man connected to the Bellini family threatened him in a letter about paternity and what is owed and the Cheron estate." She looked at the Florian's gilded ceiling, at the frescoed allegories of the seasons. "Celine married Pierre Cheron. Pierre Cheron's estate would have been in Celine's control after his death. Which is what the letter was about—not Laurent's money but the estate that would pass through Celine."

"Someone was pressuring Laurent about money that would come through Celine," Val said slowly. "About a debt connected to a child—"

"And then Celine ends up as my trustee, controlling my trust, and Morandi materializes in her life within months of my father's death." She looked at him. "I don't think my father died of a heart attack."

Val was very still.

"I don't think it was natural," Emilia said. "I think it was arranged. And I think whoever arranged it needed him out of the way before something—some claim, some truth about Francesca Bellini's parentage—became impossible to contain."

She said it quietly, in the gilded back room of the oldest café in Europe, with the winter dark coming in off the lagoon, and Val reached across the table and took both her hands in his and held them without saying anything, because there was nothing to say that was equal to what she had just understood.

After a while she said: "Tomorrow night. The party. I need to get into his study."

"Yes," Val said.

"I need to find what he has. Whatever he's been managing all this time, whatever documents or records—there will be something physical. Men like him don't operate without records."

"We don't know the layout of the palazzo."

"No. But we have tonight." She put the journal back in her bag and picked up her coffee and looked out at the piazza. "And I noticed a door in the courtyard with a new padlock on old iron fittings, which means the door was not locked before recently and the room behind it has been locked for a reason."

Val looked at her for a moment with the expression she had first seen on a flat rock above an Alpine trail in August, of a person who has been surprised by someone and found the surprise entirely welcome. "You're not who I expected," he said. "On the mountain. I didn't expect you."

"Neither did I," she said. "Let's go find the layout of the palazzo."

They left the Florian and stepped out into the Piazza San Marco as the last of the light left the city and Venice became its nighttime self: darker, narrower, the water invisible under

the bridges, the reflections of the lights in the canals shifting with the tide, and somewhere in the distance the bell of a campanile marking the hour with the patience of something that has been marking hours since before the idea of the hour was established.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Portego

They had walked the palazzo for two hours the previous night. After dinner—a quiet family meal in the palazzo's smaller dining room, Morandi at his most urbane, the engagement party treated as a charming imminence rather than a thing that required preparation—Morandi had excused himself and Celine had gone to bed early, giddy with a happiness that Emilia found heartbreaking to observe, and Emilia and Val had moved through the lower floors on the pretext of admiring the building. The androne at water level. The androne's second room, deeper in, with a stack of painting crates and a smell of linseed oil and age. The kitchen wing with its separate stair. The portego on the piano nobile, silent and dim, the Tintoretto's watching from the walls. And Morandi's study, its door closed with a lock of the modern type, a keypad that required a code.

The courtyard door was more interesting. Emilia had taken a penlight from her bag—a small LED, her father's, transferred instinctively on the day she packed—and examined the new padlock by its beam while Val stood watch at the archway. The lock was a standard five-pin security model, heavy brass, perhaps three weeks old going by the lack of weathering on the shackle. The door behind it was eighteenth century, solid, with a frame that had settled out of true over three hundred years so that the gap at the top left corner was nearly a centimeter wide. Wide enough, with the penlight, to see that the room beyond contained

shelving, and on the shelving, a series of cardboard file boxes arranged with the precision of someone who intended to find things again.

She had taken a photograph of the padlock's model number and sent it to a locksmith-supply forum on Reddit at eleven p.m. A response had come back by midnight from a user who had a great deal of specific knowledge about five-pin security padlocks and was apparently delighted to share it. Val had read the response and looked at Emilia.

"Can you do that?" she said.

"I once replaced the entire brake system on a 1972 Volkswagen using a video tutorial and a set of borrowed tools," Val said. "This seems comparable."

They needed a tension wrench and a pick, neither of which they had. In the morning, while Emilia breakfasted with Celine and Morandi maintained his perfect-host performance, Val walked to the Rialto district and found a hardware shop whose proprietor, after a conversation conducted in a mixture of Val's French and the proprietor's Venetian Italian, produced from a back drawer a small case of locksmith tools of the kind used by locksmiths and, apparently, occasionally sold to musicians from Montreal who explained that they had locked themselves out of a storage space. The case also contained, folded into a foam slot at the bottom, something that looked like a pendant camera: a small lens set into an oblong of brushed metal on a chain, the whole assembly slightly larger than a typical locket. The proprietor demonstrated its function with the ease of a man who

does not ask questions. One hour of recording, voice-activated, downloadable via the USB port in its base.

Val paid without bargaining.

He was back at the palazzo by noon. They went over the plan in the courtyard, standing near the locked door with their voices low, while the December sun made its brief and unconvincing appearance over the rooftops and a gull complained somewhere above them.

The plan was not complicated. It did not need to be. Simple plans were harder to improvise around when they went wrong.

Emilia would wear the pendant. During the party, when the portego was crowded enough to mask an absence of twenty minutes, she would find the courtyard door and open it. She would photograph everything in the file boxes. She would return to the party. If Morandi questioned the pendant, it was a piece of her mother's she always wore.

Val would be in the café across the narrow canal that ran beside the palazzo's east wall—a position from which he could see Emilia's window and the courtyard door. His phone, connected to a second recording app, would serve as a monitor if Emilia needed to transmit sound. He would call her on a second number—a burner SIM he had bought at the same hardware shop—if anything changed from outside.

"And if he catches you in the room," Val said.

"Then I have the pendant recording whatever he says, and I walk out past him into a party full of witnesses."

"And if he locks the door first?"

She looked at him. "Then you'll hear it."

He didn't like this. She could see the precise quality of his not-liking-it-not overprotective, not theatrical, just the honest accounting of a person who has been paying attention. He said: "Okay," because there was no alternative that was better, and they went inside to dress for the party.

The portego at seven-thirty in the evening was transformed. The palazzo's staff—Emilia had counted five people she hadn't seen at any meal, which suggested a level of operational infrastructure that Morandi kept tactfully invisible during ordinary days—had arranged the room with the unhurried competence of people who had done this before. Candles in the wall sconces and in a series of tall floor candelabras at intervals down the length of the room; not modern electric light made to look like candles but actual candles, their flames still in the closed air of the palazzo so that the light was warm and slightly unstable and threw the Tintoretto's into a depth that their pigment alone did not produce. The windows that faced the canal were open despite the December cold, the sounds of the water and the distant city filling the upper air of the room while below, the fifty or sixty guests moved and collected and dispersed in the way of people who know each other and know how to be known.

Celine stood near the canal windows with Morandi, the sapphire ring visible at twenty meters, and she was, Emilia thought with a complicated feeling that was not untouched by genuine admiration, magnificent. She wore a dress the color of old ivory and she had her hair up in a way that showed the line

of her jaw and throat, and Morandi beside her was attentive without being possessive—the good husband's preview—and the two of them received their guests with the practiced ease of people who understood that a party was also a performance and had decided to perform it well.

Emilia wore the pendant on a chain at her collarbone, under the neckline of a dark dress. She had tested the voice activation in her room: a conversation at normal volume triggered it reliably. She touched it once, lightly, as she entered the portego, and went to find a glass of wine.

Morandi found her within ten minutes, which she had expected. He extracted himself from a conversation with two men who had the specific bearing of people accustomed to having conversations extracted from, and came to her with a glass of his own and the expression of a man performing warmth in the key of formality.

"Emilia. You look beautiful."

"Thank you. This is extraordinary." She gestured at the room. "The candlelight."

"The palazzo requires candles. Electric light makes it look like a hotel." He glanced at the Tintoretto. "You've been looking at those since you arrived."

"The figure in the upper right of the left-hand canvas."

He turned to look at it. The dark-haired woman, looking down. "She's been debated," he said. "There's an attribution argument about whether she's a specific figure from Venetian

history or simply a compositional element. The Tintoretto scholars cannot agree."

"She has a very distinctive face."

"Yes." He looked at Emilia with a quality of attention she had learned to recognize over the weeks in Milan: the assessment that ran beneath everything social, cataloguing and filing.

"Come. There are people I'd like you to meet."

He steered her through the room with the light authority of a host, introducing her to a director of the Biennale, a Venetian architect of some international standing, a Swiss couple whose specific connection to Morandi was not explained but whose deference to him suggested a financial one. Emilia shook hands and said the correct things and let the evening move around her and maintained the pendant at the correct angle for its lens.

She was watching for the moment when the room would achieve the density of noise and movement that makes a single absence invisible. It arrived at eight forty-five, when a late wave of guests came in through the water entrance and the portego briefly became too crowded for anyone to track anyone specifically. She set her glass on a side table, said excuse me to the Venetian architect with whom she had been discussing restoration techniques, and walked toward the interior of the palazzo.

The staircase down to the androne was unlit and empty. She had taken the route three times in her mind since the previous night and her feet found it without hesitation: through the androne, out the side door into the courtyard, across the stone to the locked door. The palazzo rose around her on three sides,

its lighted upper windows throwing yellow rectangles across the courtyard's dark stone. The well at the center was a shadow. From above, faintly, came the sound of the party.

She took out the tension wrench and the pick.

Val had talked her through it twice that afternoon. The principle was not complex: the tension wrench applied rotational pressure to the lock cylinder while the pick moved each pin to its shear line. The difficulty was tactile—the feedback through the tools was subtle and required a quality of attention that could not be rushed. She had practiced on a padlock Val had bought specifically for this purpose and had managed it once in seven attempts. Once was enough to understand the sensation.

She inserted the tension wrench. She felt the cylinder's resistance. She inserted the pick and began to move it through the pin stack, working from the back, maintaining the tension, feeling for the slight give of each pin reaching its shear line. The December cold made her fingers less responsive than she wanted. She adjusted her grip. She worked.

Ninety seconds. The cylinder turned.

She pushed the door open and went in.

The room beyond was exactly what the penlight had suggested: shelving, floor to ceiling on three walls, with cardboard file boxes labeled in a system she didn't immediately understand—numbers and years, not names. She photographed the shelving in its entirety, then began working through the boxes in order. The first three contained what appeared to be ordinary business records for Morandi Commerciale SpA, quarterly filings and

correspondence. The fourth contained insurance documents—she photographed these thoroughly, multiple pages each—and recognized among them the policies Val had found in the Camera di Commercio records, now in their original form rather than as filed copies, with additional annotations in a handwriting she did not recognize. Numbers. Dates. A series of initials.

The fifth box was different from the others. It had no label. Inside: three folders, each sealed with a rubber band.

She opened the first. Photographs, printed on plain paper, several pages of them. She worked through them with her phone camera, photographing each page. Faces she didn't know. Locations she couldn't place. Then a face she did know: a younger Morandi, perhaps thirty-five, standing with a group of men she didn't recognize in what appeared to be a Venetian interior. And beside him, her hand on the back of a chair, a woman whose face Emilia had been looking at for two months.

Marie-Hélène Aubert. At the Palazzo Morandi. Not in a social page photograph from across a charity dinner, but here, in this building, belonging to this room.

She photographed it.

The second folder: letters, in French and Italian. She photographed them all without reading them—there was no time to read. The third folder: a single document, several pages, a legal instrument of some kind, in Italian, dense with provisions and subclauses. She photographed each page.

She was replacing the third folder when the light came on.

Not the penlight. The room's overhead light, a single bulb in a ceramic fixture, which filled the room with a flat white brightness that was entirely different from the amber warmth of the portego upstairs. Emilia stood with the file box in her hands and did not turn around immediately.

"The padlock," Morandi said, from the doorway, "is a model I chose specifically because it resists amateur picking attempts. I estimated it would take an expert eight to ten minutes." A pause. "You managed it in less than two. I'm genuinely impressed."

She set the file box back on the shelf, with care, and turned.

He was in the doorway in his dinner jacket, one hand on the frame, and his face had the quality she had glimpsed once before, at the dinner in Milan, and only briefly: the face beneath the performance, not angry, not theatrical, but cold in the way of something that has made its calculation and arrived at the number. He was not surprised to find her here. He had known she would come here, which meant the padlock and the resistance time and the two minutes had been a test she had not known she was taking.

"What are you looking for, Emilia?" he said.

She said nothing.

"The insurance documents, I imagine. You've already found those through the public registry—I know. The photographs." His gaze moved to her phone in her hand. "How much have you photographed?"

"Enough."

A slight pause. "Enough for what?"

"Enough to understand the pattern. Enough to know about Marie-Hélène Aubert."

Something moved in his face. Not surprise—she had the feeling that very little surprised him—but a kind of recalibration, a man updating his assessment of how much she knew. It was, she thought, the most honest thing she had seen him do.

"You've been thorough," he said.

"So have you. The investigations that closed. The alibi witnesses. The water taxi company that had no booking on its records." She kept her voice level with an effort of will that she felt in her hands, which she was careful not to clench. "Francesca called Isabella Ricci at eleven forty-three the night she died. She had a plan. She was leaving you. And she never arrived."

He looked at her for a long moment. He was very still, in the way of a man who uses stillness as a tool.

"Venice," he said finally, "is full of canals." He said it quietly, without inflection, the way a person states a fact about geography. "It is a beautiful city and it is also a city in which accidents happen with a particular frequency. The water is everywhere. The nights are dark. People who are not careful—" He stopped. "I hope you are being careful, Emilia."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the same advice I gave you in Milan. I'm consistent." He took a step into the room. "Give me the phone."

"No."

He took another step.

"There are sixty people upstairs who will notice if I don't come back," Emilia said. "Val is across the canal. He has been listening to this conversation." She touched the pendant at her throat, deliberately. "Everything you've said is on this recording."

He looked at the pendant. Something in his expression shifted: not fear, not quite, but a new and serious attention. He understood what it was. He was calculating how much damage it could do, which told her it could do damage.

"Venice is full of canals," she said. "You said it. You threatened me. It's recorded."

"A figure of speech."

"Perhaps." She held the pendant steady. "But you said it to a woman whose father you may have killed, about a city in which your last two wives drowned and fell. I don't think any jury would hear it as a figure of speech."

The calculation behind his eyes ran faster. She watched it happen and felt fear and also a strange cold clarity, the clarity of someone who has nothing left to lose that they haven't already lost and finds, to their surprise, that this is a kind of freedom.

He moved toward her. She stepped back. The shelving was behind her and she had perhaps two meters and she was calculating the distance to the door when the door opened.

Celine was dressed for the party, the ivory dress and the sapphire ring and the chignon, but her face had none of the party's warmth in it. She looked at Emilia first, a fast assessment—unhurt, standing, afraid but upright—and then at Morandi, and the expression that crossed her face then was something Emilia had not seen in it before: not the managed performance, not the careful presentation, not even the genuine vulnerability she had shown in the apartment on the sofa arm. It was simpler than all of those. It was a woman looking at something and seeing it clearly for the first time.

"What is happening in this room?" she said.

"Emilia has been going through my private files," Morandi said. His voice had returned to its performance register, the measured reasonableness that had handled every challenge so far. "I came to ask her to stop. We were discussing—"

"He threatened me," Emilia said. "Specifically. Venice is full of canals. Those words. They're recorded." She held up the pendant.

Morandi began to explain. The figure of speech, the exasperation of a man finding a guest in his private rooms, the understandable loss of composure, the regret. He was good. He was, Emilia thought, very nearly good enough—she could see Celine's face moving through the explanation, weighing it, the familiar architecture of wanting to believe being assembled again from familiar materials.

Then Celine said: "Luca. Stop."

He stopped.

"I was on the staircase," Celine said. "I heard you from the staircase. The landing above the androne." She looked at him. "Venice is full of canals. I heard it. I know what it sounded like." A pause. "It didn't sound like a figure of speech."

The room was very quiet. The party above them was a murmur, a world away, sixty people drinking champagne in the candlelight while in the courtyard room below, something that had been building for three months arrived at its crisis.

Morandi's face went through a change that Emilia would think about later, trying to describe it. The performance didn't fall. It receded, the way a tide recedes, steadily and completely, and what was underneath it was simply what he was without the performance: a man who had made a calculation and found the number and was not troubled by the number. Not guilty, in the theatrical sense. Not cornered. Just-present. The thing he actually was, standing in a room with two women who could not prove it.

"Emilia," Celine said. "Go upstairs."

"Celine—"

"Please. Go upstairs. I'll come in a minute."

Emilia looked at her aunt's face and made a decision that was not entirely rational and was entirely necessary: she trusted her. She walked past Morandi—he did not move; she felt the proximity of him as a physical thing, a cold precise attention—and through the door and across the courtyard and up the staircase and back into the warmth and the candlelight and the

sixty people who had no idea what had just happened in the room below them.

Val's call came four minutes later. His voice was level. "I heard everything. Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. I'm in the portego."

"The recording is clean. His voice, the threat, everything."

"Good." She was standing near the canal windows with a glass of wine she was not drinking, watching the room. The Venetian architect had found someone else to talk to. The Swiss couple were examining the Veronese. Morandi had not yet come back upstairs. "He knows about the pendant. He knows what we have."

"Then he'll move tonight," Val said.

"Yes."

"Can you get Celine out?"

"I don't know. She told me to go upstairs. She's still down there with him."

A pause. "Emilia. If he decides we're a threat that needs to be managed—"

"I know."

"The recording by itself isn't enough. Venice is full of canals is menacing but a lawyer could neutralize it."

"I know. But the photographs are on my phone. The files. The document in the third folder—I don't know what it was but I photographed all of it."

"If he gets the phone—"

"Then I lose the photographs. But I sent them to you. Ten minutes ago, while I was still in the room. Everything is on your phone."

A silence in which she could hear him breathing and the sound of the canal outside wherever he was sitting. Then: "You planned for him finding you."

"I planned for the possibility."

Another pause. "I love you," he said. Not a declaration of high emotion—his voice was steady, practical, the tone of a man stating a fact that is relevant to the current situation. "I want to say that now, while there's a moment to say it."

She stood at the canal window of the Palazzo Morandi with sixty oblivious guests around her and her father's pendant camera at her throat and the photographs of Marie-Hélène Aubert on her phone, and felt the words land in her the way the melody had landed on the mountain in August: completely, from outside, and then immediately belonging.

"I know," she said. "I know. Don't leave the café yet."

She put the phone in her pocket and turned back to the room just as Celine came through the door from the interior staircase. Her hair was slightly disturbed. The sapphire ring was on her left hand. Her face was composed in the way of a person who has made a decision and is not ready to explain it.

She walked directly to Emilia.

"Not here," she said, quietly, beneath the party's noise. "Not tonight. Tomorrow morning, early. You, me, Val. We leave the palazzo before Luca wakes." She looked at Emilia with the

exhausted clarity of someone who has stopped choosing the best possible version of a thing and is choosing instead the true version. "I believe you," she said. "I should have believed you three months ago."

"Celine—"

"Not here." Her aunt touched her arm briefly and then walked away into the party, toward a group near the Tintoretto's, and resumed her performance as the radiant fiancée with a completeness that was, Emilia thought, one of the most remarkable things she had ever watched a person do.

Emilia stood at the canal windows and listened to the party and waited for Morandi to come back upstairs, and thought about the third folder and the legal document she had not been able to read and the fact that whatever it contained had been the thing he came downstairs to protect. He had timed it—the two minutes, the test—which meant he had been watching. Which meant he had known she would go there. Which meant everything since the Instagram photographs in Milan had been a controlled approach, and she had been walking toward him as much as toward any evidence, and the question she was left with, standing in the candlelight while the party moved around her, was whether he had let her find what she found because he could contain it, or whether he had underestimated her.

Morandi came back upstairs at nine fifty-five. He went directly to Celine, touched her back lightly with one hand, said something into her ear that made her smile—a performance, Emilia now knew, of extraordinary quality—and then looked across the

portego and found Emilia's eyes with his, directly, across the length of the room and the heads of the guests and the candlelit distance, and held them for a moment without expression.

Then he smiled and looked away.

She did not sleep that night.

CHAPTER NINE

The Canal

Celine knocked on Emilia's door at four-fifteen in the morning, two soft taps, and when Emilia opened it she was dressed for travel: a coat, boots, a bag over one shoulder. She looked like someone who had also not slept, but had used the sleeplessness productively.

"He sleeps until seven," she said, at the threshold, in a voice below speech. "Paulo is Luca's. Don't use Paulo. There's a private water taxi company near the Rio Nuovo, eight minutes' walk. I've called them already. Val?"

"I'll text him now."

"Don't text from the palazzo's WiFi. Use your data."

Emilia looked at her aunt—this woman who three months ago had taken selfies at her father's funeral and who was now standing in a Venetian palazzo at four in the morning with the operational clarity of someone who had been doing this in her head all night—and felt a complicated surge of feeling that was not quite admiration and not quite relief but contained elements of both.

She texted Val on cellular data: Now. Rio Nuovo. private water taxi. He responded in forty seconds: Out already. See you there.

They went down the palazzo's service stairs, which Celine had identified during some private reconnaissance Emilia had not known she was conducting, and out through the kitchen to a back

entrance that opened directly onto a calle too narrow for anyone to stand in comfortably and dark in the way of Venice's interior streets at four a.m., a darkness composed not just of the absence of light but of the presence of stone on both sides and the smell of cold water very close. They walked quickly and without speaking. Celine led, which surprised Emilia until she remembered that her aunt had been living in Italy for ten years and had been coming to Venice for at least five of them, and that the version of Celine Cheron she had constructed from the ring lights and the Instagram posts was not the whole of the woman.

The city at this hour was not empty but it was intimate in a way the daytime city was not—the delivery boats on the wider canals, the bakeries with their lights on and the smell of bread from somewhere nearby, a man in waterproof trousers walking a dog across a bridge with the particular unhurried quality of someone for whom four a.m. is simply a time rather than an emergency. The fog was in off the lagoon, which was normal for December in Venice and which meant that the street lights, where there were street lights, bloomed rather than beamed, and the water of the canals they crossed on the bridges appeared and disappeared in the grey.

Val was already at the Rio Nuovo stop when they arrived, the canvas duffel over his shoulder, his breath misting. He took in Celine with a look that was not hostile and not warm but was something she thought he had been practicing during the walk—the neutral regard of someone suspending judgment in the interest of a shared immediate situation.

Celine looked at him with the directness that was, Emilia had come to understand, her best quality and her most consistently undervalued one. "You're Val," she said.

"Yes."

"Emilia trusts you entirely."

"I know."

"Then I trust you contingently. Is that acceptable?"

"Entirely," Val said. "I find contingent trust more honest than the unconditional kind anyway."

Something in Celine's face relented very slightly. The private water taxi arrived and they got in and the driver took them up the canal and out into the wider water toward the station, and Venice fell behind them in the fog, its lights going soft and then disappearing entirely as they moved, until there was only water and dark and the sound of the motor.

Santa Lucia in the pre-dawn had the specific atmosphere of transit spaces at hours when ordinary people are not traveling: the particular emptiness of a building designed for crowds currently occupied by only the necessary minimum, the fluorescent light making everything equally flat, the cleaning equipment and the early-shift workers and the handful of people on overnight journeys who had the stunned patience of people who have accepted discomfort as temporary.

Val bought tickets at the machine: first available to Milan, seven forty-two, with a change at Mestre. Two hours and twenty minutes. They found seats in the waiting area away from the doors and Celine went to get coffee and Emilia sat with her bag in her

lap and the pendant in her coat pocket, which she kept touching the way you touch something you need to be sure is still there.

She had the photographs. Forty-three images on her phone of the five file boxes, sent to Val before Morandi found her in the room, now backed up to her cloud storage from three different angles of redundancy because she had done this the moment she got back to her room the previous night, before she lay awake watching the ceiling. The recording: the confrontation in the file room, his voice, the threat. Whatever the document in the third folder had been, she had six photographs of its pages in Italian dense enough that her standard reading speed was not adequate, but which Val could work through on the train.

Celine came back with three coffees. They sat in the waiting area and drank them and the station filled gradually around them and the departure board updated and Emilia allowed herself, for the first time since Morandi's smile across the portego, to breathe with something approaching regularity.

Two carabinieri came through the main entrance at six-oh-seven.

She saw them before Val did—the dark uniforms, the deliberate movement of people who know where they are going in a building they know well—and had three seconds of hoping they were going somewhere else before they came directly to the waiting area and one of them said, with the official courtesy of an institution that has found formality useful in difficult situations, "Miss Emilia Moreau? Monsieur Val Rousseau? And you

are Signora Celine Cheron?" and produced a document that Emilia did not need to read fully to understand.

The Questura di Venezia was in Santa Croce, a twenty-minute walk from the station in the early morning light, and they walked it flanked by the two carabinieri and a third who appeared from somewhere at the station's entrance, and Venice watched this procession with the indifference of a city that has seen considerably worse in its thousand years and has generally declined to comment. The fog was lifting. The first direct sunlight of the morning was finding the upper floors of the palazzi, the gilded mosaics above a church door, the green bronze of a gutter spout on a building whose lower floors were still in shadow. Emilia looked at all of it with the attention of a person who does not know when she will see it again and does not want to waste the seeing.

They were taken to separate rooms. This was the thing that was most immediately frightening and Emilia had known it was coming and the knowing did not make it less frightening. Celine's face when they separated her in the corridor was the face of someone implementing a decision already made: she looked at Emilia and gave a single precise nod that said I'm all right and I will continue to be all right and trust me, and then she was taken through a door and gone.

Emilia's room was small and clean with a table and two chairs and a window that looked onto a courtyard where a laurel bush in a terracotta pot was doing its winter best. A woman officer sat across from her with a notepad and a tablet and the

composed attention of someone who has conducted a great many of these conversations and has learned that patience is more productive than pressure.

"Miss Moreau," she said. "I'm Lieutenant Ferri. I'd like to ask you about last night."

Emilia gave her version steadily and completely: the file room, the padlock, the files she had photographed, the confrontation, the recording, the threat. She played the recording from the pendant on the table between them. Venice is full of canals, in Morandi's precise and unhurried voice. Lieutenant Ferri listened without visible reaction and made notes.

"You broke the padlock," Ferri said. Not an accusation. A clarification."

"Yes."

"Using tools you had obtained for this purpose."

"Yes."

"And entered a private room in a private residence without the owner's permission."

"Yes."

"In Italy, Miss Moreau, Mr. Morandi's lawyers will argue that evidence obtained through unauthorized entry into private property is inadmissible in criminal proceedings. The photographs you took—" She glanced at her tablet. "Mr. Morandi's legal representative has filed a request for their suppression as illegally obtained. He has also filed a complaint of violation of private property and theft of confidential business documents."

Emilia looked at the laurel bush in the courtyard.

"The recording," she said.

"The recording poses a separate question. In Italy, recording a private conversation without the consent of all parties is a criminal offence under Article 617 of the Penal Code. The content of the recording—the phrase you characterize as a threat—will need to be evaluated by a magistrate in the context of the legality of the recording itself." A pause. "Mr. Morandi's representative argues that the phrase was an expression of general anxiety for your safety, given the location."

"He said Venice is full of canals to a woman whose father may have been murdered and whose aunt he is engaged to after two previous wives died in this city."

"That context," Ferri said carefully, "would need to be established through a formal investigation, which would require a complaint lodged with supporting evidence of sufficient substance to open a file. The materials you photographed—which are currently on your phone, which we have asked you to surrender—will certainly be challenged. The recording is legally compromised. What remains?"

"The public insurance records. The pattern across three years and two deaths."

Ferri was quiet for a moment. "I know about Morandi," she said. This was not an official statement. She said it in a different register, the register of a conversation that was happening alongside the formal one, just below it. "There was an investigation three years ago. It was closed."

"I know. Connections."

"I can't comment on that. I can tell you that a complaint based on publicly available insurance records and the testimony of a witness who has already provided that testimony to this Questura is not likely to produce a different result from the last time." She looked directly at Emilia. "You need something that wasn't in the file room. Something that speaks to cause rather than consequence."

"The document in the third folder," Emilia said. "The legal instrument. I photographed it. I don't know what it was."

"If the photographs are suppressed—"

"They're backed up off the phone. If you take the phone, the images already exist outside it." Emilia held Ferri's gaze. "I didn't photograph those files to use them in this building, Lieutenant. I photographed them so that they exist. So that whatever happens to me, whatever Morandi does, the information is in the world."

Ferri looked at her for a long moment. Then she stood and went to the door and said something to someone outside. She came back and sat down.

"You'll be held for four hours," she said. "Standard procedure following a property violation complaint. After that you'll be released. Mr. Morandi's representative has not requested charges at this time—a fact I find, personally, more informative than the complaint itself."

Emilia understood this. If Morandi pressed charges it opened proceedings, and proceedings meant scrutiny. He didn't want scrutiny. He wanted her gone.

"And Celine?"

"Signora Cheron has not been charged with anything. She is being held as a witness. She will be released at the same time as you."

"She said she was leaving him."

Ferri was quiet for a moment. "What people say in moments of crisis and what they subsequently do are not always the same thing. That is not a judgment. It is an observation." She picked up her notepad. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Emilia thought about Marie-Hélène Aubert and the notation in her father's journal and what it meant and how far she was from being able to prove any of it. "Not yet," she said.

She was in the room for three hours and fifty minutes. They brought her a coffee at the two-hour mark, which she drank, and a small plate of biscuits that she did not eat. The laurel bush in the courtyard maintained its posture with admirable consistency. She thought about her father—not the grief of thinking about him, which had become as constant and structural as breathing, but the specific thought: he had been to Venice in 1994. He had known a woman named Marie-Hélène Aubert who had known the Bellini family and by extension the Morandi world. The French letter had been about money and paternity and what was owed, addressed to him, from someone who knew the Cheron estate would eventually be relevant. And he had locked everything away and crossed out a

name and written Diffida and then died at fifty-six of what was officially a cardiac arrest, in a house in Connecticut, three months after making late-night calls in French about something that frightened him.

The document in the third folder. She had six photographs of it and it was backed up and she could not read it adequately in Italian but Val could read Italian and between them they could find someone who could, and whatever it said had been the thing Morandi came downstairs to protect. Not the insurance records, which were in the public registry anyway. Not the photographs, which were damaging but not criminal. The document. The legal instrument in the third folder of the unlabeled box.

She thought about this for three hours and fifty minutes.

They were brought together in a ground-floor waiting area at just past ten a.m. Celine first, then Val, then Emilia. Val looked at Emilia with the compressed assessment of someone confirming that everything important is intact; she gave him the smallest nod. Celine looked as though she had been through something that had cost her something specific—not broken, not diminished, but changed in the way that a precise and unavoidable expenditure changes the balance of an account.

Their belongings were returned in manila envelopes. Emilia's phone: the photographs were still present on the device, the suppression request having been filed but not yet processed. She noted this and sent the images to a second cloud storage immediately, standing in the waiting room while the officer at the desk watched without intervening.

Outside, Venice was fully in its December morning, the fog entirely gone, the light hard and specific on the water and the stone. The Fondamenta San Lorenzo ran along its canal with the Tuesday quiet of a city conducting its ordinary business, and the contrast between the ordinary beauty of the morning and the previous twelve hours was so complete that Emilia stood on the pavement for a moment simply absorbing it.

"He won this round," Val said. Not bitterly. As an accounting.

"Yes."

"The photographs are safe?"

"Three separate backups. The recording is the same."

Celine had her phone out. She was reading something, and as Emilia watched, her face went through a sequence of expressions that ended somewhere Emilia could not easily read. She lowered the phone. "He's texted me," she said. "He says he's sorry for the misunderstanding. He says he overreacted to finding Emilia in the room. He says he hopes we can talk."

Emilia said nothing.

"He says the engagement stands, if I want it to."

Still nothing.

"I know what you're thinking," Celine said. She put the phone in her pocket. "You're thinking I'll go back to him. You're thinking the Questura and the four hours and everything I said last night wasn't enough to change the fundamental situation."

"I'm thinking," Emilia said carefully, "that you're the only one of the three of us who is free to be near him, and that last

night I found a document I can't read and he came directly to protect it, and that we still don't have enough."

Celine looked at her for a long moment. Then she looked at Val, who had the neutral expression of a man who has decided this is not his conversation.

"What kind of document?" Celine said.

"Legal. In Italian. Several pages. I have photographs of it."

"Send them to me."

Emilia looked at her.

"I read Italian," Celine said. "I've lived in Milan for seven years. Send them to me and give me twenty-four hours."

Emilia sent the six photographs of the document to Celine's number. Celine looked at the first image and something in her face tightened—a specific recognition, the face of someone seeing a form they have seen before in a different context. She scrolled through the remaining images without speaking.

"I need to go back to the palazzo," she said.

"Celine—"

"To get my things. My passport, my laptop. Things I need." She looked at Emilia steadily. "I'm not staying. But I need to go back once, today, while he's in a conciliatory mode and his lawyer is managing the situation. If I vanish from the Questura he'll know something has shifted. If I go back normally and collect my things over two days, he'll believe I'm reconsidering." A pause. "He wants to believe it. He's invested now. He'll believe what serves him."

"And then?"

"Then I'm gone. And in the meantime I'll read the document and I'll tell you what it says." She looked at the canal beside them, the green water in the December light. "The wedding is three weeks from Saturday. He has a villa in the Alps." She looked back at Emilia. "I think that's where he intends to take me."

Val said: "Don't go to the villa."

"No," Celine agreed. "I won't. But I have to give him reason to believe I will." She picked up her bag. "Go to Marseille. Both of you. Don't come back to Italy until I tell you it's safe. He has eyes in Milan—he's had someone watching Val since November. Marseille is outside his network, I think." A slight pause. "I think."

Emilia looked at her aunt, standing on the Fondamenta San Lorenzo in the December morning, and thought about everything Celine Cheron was, and everything she had refused to see in her, and the fact that she was standing here at all—that the woman who had taken a selfie at Laurent Moreau's funeral was now proposing to walk back into the palazzo of the man who might have killed his daughter's mother and position herself as a source inside enemy territory.

"Be careful," Emilia said.

"I always am," Celine said. "I'm just not always careful about the right things. This time I will be."

She walked away along the fondamenta, her coat straight, her bag over one shoulder, toward the water taxi that would take her

back to the Palazzo Morandi. Emilia watched her go until she turned the corner and was gone.

They took the train to Milan and from Milan the high-speed to Marseille, arriving at Saint-Charles station in the late evening with seven hours of travel behind them and the specific exhaustion of a day that had begun at four a.m. in a Venetian palazzo and passed through a police interrogation room and was ending now in a city that smelled of the sea and diesel and the particular Mediterranean urban roughness of a port that has been receiving the world for two thousand years and has declined to be impressed by any of it.

Val had translated most of the document on the train.

It was a paternity agreement, thirty years old, drafted in the Italian legal style of the 1990s with its formal subordinate clauses and its careful enumeration of parties. The first party was Luca Morandi. The second party was Marie-Hélène Aubert, described as a French citizen resident in Venice. The subject was a child born in January 1995, named in the document as Francesca, and the instrument established Morandi's legal acknowledgment of paternity and a schedule of financial support conditional on the child's mother making no public claim on the Morandi name and removing herself and the child permanently from Venice.

Emilia read this in a window seat on the TGV south from Lyon, the Rhône valley dark outside and the carriage almost empty.

"He's Francesca's father," she said.

"Yes."

"He paid Marie-Hélène Aubert to leave Venice and not use his name." She looked at the translated notes on Val's phone. "And then thirty years later he married Francesca. His own daughter."

Val said nothing. The train moved.

"He may not have known," Emilia said, thinking it through. "If Marie-Hélène left when Francesca was an infant and they never—" She stopped. "But the document exists. He signed it. He knew he had a daughter named Francesca born in January 1995. And Francesca Bellini was born in January 1995 and he married her in—"

"2019," Val said. "She was twenty-four."

The night moved past the window. Emilia thought about the French letter to her father—about paternity and what was owed and the Cheron estate, and the timing of it arriving in the year before his death, and what her father had known about Marie-Hélène Aubert and what he had decided to do with that knowledge and what had become of him when someone needed him to be silent permanently.

"The Cheron estate," she said.

"Pierre Cheron died in 2021," Val said. He had been working through the timeline since Lyon. "His estate went to Celine. Who then became your trustee. Which gave someone a route to—" He stopped. "Who was Pierre Cheron, Emilia? How did Celine meet him?"

"In Venice," Emilia said. "She told me once. She moved to Venice in her early thirties and met Pierre Cheron there and they married and moved to Milan when his health declined."

"Venice," Val said.

"Venice."

They sat with this as the train carried them south and the Rhône delta opened into the coastal plain and the first salt smell of the Mediterranean found its way into the carriage through some improbable gap in the sealed windows, and Emilia held the phone with the translated document on the screen and thought about a woman named Marie-Hélène Aubert who had gone to Venice as a young woman and met a man who would later marry her daughter and she thought about her father who had known her and locked her photographs in a drawer and written her initials beside the year they had presumably met, and she thought about the journal's last unfinished sentence and the name that had been crossed out until the paper nearly gave, and she understood—not knowing yet what she would do with it—that the name beneath the ink was Morandi's.

CHAPTER TEN

Marseille

Marseille in December was not a city that made itself agreeable. It was a city that made itself available, which was a different proposition entirely. The wind came off the Mediterranean cold and direct, the mistral that scoured the Vieux-Port and pushed the fishing boats against their moorings and drove the pigeons off the cornices, and the city received it with the indifference of something that has been receiving difficult weather from the sea for two and a half millennia and has formed no opinion about it. The streets of the Panier quarter climbed steeply above the port with the accumulated informality of centuries of people who built where space allowed, and the result was a neighborhood that was simultaneously ancient and provisional, its walls plastered in the colors of the southern palette—ochre, terracotta, the particular faded blue that appears only in places with strong sun and salt air—and its narrow staircase streets smelling of diesel and baking and the specific mineral quality of old stone that has been rained on many times.

They found a hostel on the Rue du Panier, two small rooms on the third floor with windows that looked onto a courtyard where a fig tree had shed its leaves against the coming winter and a cat of considerable self-possession conducted its business without reference to the humans who shared its space. The rooms were clean and cheap and entirely without character, which was appropriate for people who were not ready to have characters in

the ordinary sense—who were suspended, rather, between what had happened in Venice and what would happen next, in a place that knew nothing about either and could not be asked.

Emilia paid for two weeks with the emergency card Celine had transferred funds to before leaving the palazzo—a Wise account, international, not connected to the trust—and they ate at the small restaurants of the Panier where the price was honest and the bouillabaisse was genuine and the proprietors were accustomed to people who ate without wanting to be talked to, which was the majority of the Panier's clientele in December. The tourists were gone. The city was itself.

She painted. She had her supplies, reduced to essentials; she had found a hardware shop on the Cours Julien that sold the canvas boards she needed; she set up at the courtyard window each morning and painted the fig tree and the cat and the particular quality of light that came off the Mediterranean at angles that no other light in her experience managed, light that seemed to arrive having already thought about what it wanted to illuminate and having made its decisions. It was not Briar Hollow. It was not consolation. But it was the thing her hands knew how to do and it kept the part of her mind that was not investigating from going somewhere she could not come back from easily.

Val recorded. He had a portable interface and a pair of condenser microphones that he set up on the desk in his room and used to lay down the material he had been accumulating since Montreal, the songs that had not been finished because they were waiting for something—for the right room, the right distance from

everything else—and Marseille apparently provided it. Emilia could hear him through the wall between their rooms some evenings: the guitar, then the voice, then both together, then a long silence while he listened back, then again from the beginning. She found the sound, even muffled, one of the more stabilizing things in her life at that moment, and did not examine this too closely.

She spent the mornings of the first week in the bibliothèque on the Cours Belsunce, where the French national newspaper archive was accessible through a university login that a librarian of radical generosity allowed her to borrow on the understanding that she was a researcher. She was, she thought, a researcher. The research had just not previously been this personal.

Marie-Hélène Aubert had been born in Lyon in 1968. Emilia established this through a birth record accessible in the digitized civil registry for the Rhône department. She had attended the Université Lumière Lyon 2, where she had studied art history—the same department, Emilia noted, that her own father had visited on several academic exchanges in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She had moved to Venice at some point in the early 1990s, the specific date not traceable in the French records, and had lived there until approximately 1995, when the paternity agreement had been signed and the financial arrangement established. After 1995, the French records showed: nothing. No permanent address filed. No tax declarations. No national identity renewal at the standard intervals.

She was not dead—Emilia checked the Institut national de la statistique's published death registries as far back as they were digitized. No Marie-Hélène Aubert born 1968 appearing in any French death record.

She had simply stopped being officially present.

"She took money from Morandi and disappeared," Val said, when Emilia told him this. They were sitting in the courtyard of the hostel in the weak December sun, the cat installed between them on the bench with the air of a moderator.

"That's one reading. The other is that she was given no choice about disappearing. That the money was not voluntary."

"But she was alive in the records until 1995. And then nothing. No death record."

"In France. She might have been living under a different name elsewhere. She might have—" Emilia stopped. She had been circling this for three days. "She went back to France, I think. The French letter to my father was written from somewhere with a French postcode—the postmark on the envelope was Lyonnais, I photographed it. Someone in Lyon, or near Lyon, was still tracking this situation as recently as last year." She looked at the fig tree. "If she's alive she's sixty-six years old and she's been invisible for thirty years and someone who represents an interest connected to her is still corresponding with my father about paternity and what is owed."

"Your father," Val said carefully. "Not Morandi. The letter was to your father."

"Yes." This was the part she had been turning over most. "The letter says: the arrangement made in good faith has not been honored. What was acknowledged cannot be unacknowledged. It's addressed to Laurent and it's about paternity. But we know from the document in the file room that Morandi is the one who acknowledged paternity of Francesca." She looked at him. "So what did my father acknowledge? What arrangement did he make in good faith?"

Val was quiet.

"He went to Venice in 1994," Emilia said. "He met her—M-H, Venice, mai 1994. They were both art history people. The same university. He could have known her from Lyon years earlier." She paused. "He kept her photographs in a locked drawer. He wrote her initials in his journal with a date. And when he died the year someone was writing him threatening letters about a thirty-year-old arrangement—" She stopped. "I think he knew what Morandi was. I think he'd known for thirty years. And I think someone needed him to stop knowing it."

The cat stood up, stretched with the ceremonial deliberateness of cats, and departed across the courtyard without explanation. Emilia watched it go.

"I want to find her," she said. "Marie-Hélène. Before we go back to Italy."

"Do you think she'd talk to you?"

"I think I look like her. Isabella said so. I think if I found her and she saw me she would understand what I was there

for." She looked at Val. "I think she's been waiting for someone to find her for a long time."

Celine messaged on the fourth day, and then again on the seventh, and the messages were the primary way Emilia tracked what was happening at the Palazzo Morandi from the distance of the Panier quarter.

The first message was brief: I've read the document. We need to talk properly. Call me on this number (a number Emilia didn't recognize) not my regular phone.

Emilia called from a café on the Rue de la République, her back to the wall, the noise of the espresso machine providing useful cover. Celine answered on the second ring.

She had read the document twice. She was, she said, sitting in the palazzo's smaller drawing room with Luca in his study thirty meters away, and she was going to tell Emilia what the document said in a voice that sounded like she was discussing Milan Fashion Week, because Luca was thirty meters away.

"It's a paternity acknowledgment," Emilia said. "Val translated most of it."

"Then you know who he is to Francesca. What you probably don't know—" A slight pause, the slight stiffening of someone maintaining performance while delivering information entirely at odds with the performance. "There is a second provision on the third page. Beyond the financial arrangement with the mother. It provides that in the event the child Francesca should predecease the father, or in the event of the child's death without surviving issue, Morandi's financial obligations under the

arrangement terminate immediately. And that any claim against the Morandi estate by the child or her heirs becomes null."

Emilia set down her coffee.

"He was her father," Celine said. "He had a legal obligation to her as his heir. If she had lived and discovered who he was—and a DNA test would have established it instantly—she would have had a claim on the Morandi estate that would have been very difficult to defend against. The insurance policies protected his business from the financial consequence of her death. This provision—" Another pause. "This provision protected his estate from the financial consequence of her life."

"He married her," Emilia said. "His own daughter."

"I have been thinking about this for four days," Celine said, in the tone of someone describing the weather. "I have been thinking about whether he knew. Whether he could not have known, given the document he signed thirty years ago, a document in which she is named. Francesca. The same name. And the timeline places her birth within weeks of the date he signed the agreement." A pause. "I think he knew."

Emilia thought about Francesca Bellini at twenty-four, dark-haired, meeting a charming and cultured Venetian businessman at the opera—her mother had been from Lyon, perhaps she had not grown up knowing Venice, perhaps she had not known the circles, had not known to be careful. She thought about what it meant to pursue and marry a woman you knew to be your daughter, to take out insurance on her life through a holding company, to arrange her death in a Venetian canal and wait for the settlement.

"The second wife," Emilia said. "Giulia."

"Also named in Morandi's records as a beneficiary of Serenissima Patrimoni. I found this in the portfolio documents he keeps in the study—he left them out last week, I photographed them. Giulia Ferrara, maiden name, had an inheritance from her grandfather of approximately four million euros held in a Venetian property trust. The trust dissolved on her death. The property was liquidated. The proceeds—" Celine paused again, a fractionally longer pause. "I can't trace where they went yet. But I have the documents."

"Celine. Get out of there."

"Two more days. I need the papers from the study—the portfolio he leaves open—and then I'm done." A slight sound that might have been Morandi's study door. "He's asked me to come to the villa for the wedding. Gressoney, in the Val d'Aosta. Two weeks from Saturday."

"Don't go to the villa."

"I know." A pause in which Emilia could hear the apartment's ambient sounds, the Venetian hum of water and stone. "Emilia. The woman in your father's photographs. Marie-Hélène Aubert. Find her, if you can. I think she knows things no document does."

The second message, three days later, contained six photographs of the portfolio documents from Morandi's study and a single line: I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Meet me in Lyon.

In the evenings of the second week, when the research was done and the messages analyzed and the plan still forming, they walked. Marseille at night was a different proposition from the

daytime city: the Vieux-Port lit and lively, the boats rocking, the restaurants along the quai doing brisk business with the specific loud warmth of southern port-city restaurants in December, the customers bundled against the mistral and making up for it in noise. They walked along the water and up through the winding streets above it and occasionally stopped in a bar for something warm, and the conversations they had were both the most ordinary and the most important Emilia had ever been involved in.

Val talked about Montreal, about his father who had been a session musician and his mother who had been a schoolteacher, about growing up in a house where music was neither remarkable nor especially valued—it was what one person in the family did, like another person baked, functional rather than transcendent—and how the transcendence had been something he'd had to find elsewhere, on his own, which was perhaps why it mattered as much as it did. He talked about the Alps and about the fact that he had been sitting on that rock for three hours before she appeared, having climbed up from the trail below because the view was better and the silence was better and he had wanted to play something that needed space. He had not expected anyone to climb up after him. He had, he said, been expecting solitude.

"And instead you got me," Emilia said.

"Instead I got you. Which was significantly better than solitude, though I didn't know that immediately."

"How long did it take?"

He considered this with the seriousness she had learned to recognize as genuine thought rather than performance. "By the

time you described the music back to me. Something looking for somewhere it can't quite reach. I thought: this person hears things correctly." A pause. "That's rare."

She thought about her father, who had also heard things correctly and had kept a woman's photographs in a locked drawer for thirty years and had written a warning he couldn't complete and had died at fifty-six in the middle of something he hadn't finished. She thought about what it meant to hear things correctly in a world that preferred you not to, and about what it cost.

"My father heard things correctly," she said.

"I know."

"He knew Morandi was dangerous. He had known for thirty years. And he still ended up—" She stopped.

"Knowing a thing and being able to stop it aren't the same thing," Val said.

"No."

"But knowing it and refusing to let it stay buried is something. Even if it costs you." He was quiet for a moment. "He left you the journal. He left you the photographs, the letter. He locked them in a drawer where you would find them."

"Or where they would be found if something happened to him."

"Yes. He could have destroyed everything. He didn't."

She thought about this—the choice not to destroy, the small act of preservation against the instruction to vanish—and felt, alongside the grief, something that was not quite pride and not quite gratitude but contained elements of both.

They were standing on the Corniche, the coastal road that ran along the clifftops east of the city, the Mediterranean below them black and white in the dark, the wind from the north so consistent it had become simply the texture of the air. Val put his arm around her and she leaned into him and they stood for a while watching the water and Emilia thought about her father on his preferred plane-tree bench at Briar Hollow watching the summer evenings and about the fact that certain kinds of looking-at water, at the sky going dark, at the specific quality of light on something you love—were their own form of argument. Against the things that would prefer you not to see.

They went to Lyon on the ninth day, a four-hour drive in a rental car that Val drove with the particular competence of a Canadian who has grown up treating winter roads as a negotiation rather than a confrontation, north along the Rhône valley through country that grew greener and greener as the coastal dryness gave way to the northern rain.

Marie-Hélène Aubert lived—Emilia had found her by the simple method of cross-referencing the Lyonnais postmark with the art history program at the Université Lumière Lyon 2, where a former student named M-H Aubert appeared in a 2003 staff photograph as an administrative coordinator, a role she had apparently held until her retirement several years earlier. The university's emeritus staff directory listed a home address in the 4th arrondissement, Croix-Rousse, the old silk-workers' quarter on the slopes above the city. Emilia had sent a letter from Marseille. She had not received a reply. She went anyway.

The building was nineteenth century, tall and narrow, on a street of silk-workers' canuts houses with the characteristic double windows designed to admit maximum light for the looms. The interphone listed a name: Vasseur. Not Aubert. Emilia rang anyway.

A long silence. Then a voice: "Qui est là?"

"Je m'appelle Emilia Moreau," Emilia said. "Mon père était Laurent Moreau. Je pense—"

The interphone clicked off. The door unlocked.

She was on the fourth floor, in an apartment whose windows looked north over the Croix-Rousse rooftops toward the hills. She was sixty-six, as Emilia had calculated, and she was thin and upright and had white hair cut close, and her face—Emilia had been preparing herself and it was still not adequate preparation—had the particular quality of a face that Emilia had been looking at for months in a photograph of a thirty-year-old woman, now translated into age. The same eyes. The same structural arrangement of the bones around them. Seeing it in person was a different order of experience from seeing it in a photograph.

Emilia stood in the doorway and Marie-Hélène Aubert stood at the far end of the hallway and they looked at each other for a moment that lasted longer than it was.

Then she said, in French, which Val translated quietly at Emilia's shoulder: "You look like me. When I was your age." A pause. "Come in."

She had been waiting, it emerged, for a very long time. Not specifically for Emilia—she had not known Emilia existed, not

with certainty—but for someone. For the information to move, finally, after thirty years of having been paid to be still. She had taken the money from Morandi in 1995 because she had a three-month-old child and no resources and he had people who could do things to a woman alone with an infant that she did not want done. She had given the child to the Bellini family—to Marco Bellini, an old acquaintance of hers from her Venetian years, who had agreed to raise her as his own—because she had no capacity to protect her and believed Marco could. She had gone to Lyon and constructed a life that was not her life under a married name she had taken from nowhere in particular and had not seen Francesca again.

"Did you know what happened to her?" Emilia asked.

"I knew she was married. I knew—" Her voice was very steady. It had the steadiness of something that has been held still for so long it has forgotten how to move. "I knew who she married. I saw his name in an Italian newspaper. I thought it was coincidence. I told myself it was coincidence."

"Did you know she died?"

"Yes."

"When did you know it wasn't an accident?"

She looked out the window at the Croix-Rousse rooftops. "The same week she died. When I understood that he would have known who she was. That he had the document naming her." A long pause. "I wrote to Laurent. I had been writing to Laurent for several years, through a third party who knew how to find him. Trying to—I don't know. Trying to make him act on what he knew. He had been

a witness in 1994. He had been present when Morandi and I were—involved. He knew things. He had always been too frightened to use them."

"He's dead," Emilia said. "He died in October."

She was quiet. Then: "I know. I know that too." She looked at Emilia. "Are you going to stop him?"

"Yes," Emilia said.

Marie-Hélène Aubert looked at her for a moment with an expression that was not hope—she was sixty-six and had paid for thirty years to know the difference between hope and something sturdier—but was its pragmatic equivalent. She went to a desk in the corner of the room and took from its top drawer a sealed envelope, old, the paper slightly yellowed. She held it for a moment. Then she handed it to Emilia.

"Laurent gave this to the third party in 2021," she said. "He asked them to hold it until either he asked for it back or someone came who should have it. I've been holding it since September."

Emilia took the envelope. Her father's handwriting on the front: For E.

For Emilia.

She stood in an apartment in Lyon in December with her father's last message in her hands and Val beside her and outside the Croix-Rousse the afternoon light going gold across the old silk-workers' rooftops, and she did not open it immediately. She held it. She thought about the journal and the locked drawer and the name crossed out until the paper nearly tore, and the blue

sticky note she had taken from the windowsill of Briar Hollow and never looked at and which was in the inside pocket of her jacket, and she held the envelope and let herself, for just a moment, have the feeling of being known across a distance and a silence that had cost everything.

"Thank you," she said to Marie-Hélène Aubert.

"Go," the woman said. Not unkindly. "Do what he couldn't."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Letter

She opened it that night in the hotel Val had found, a small place near the Presqu'île with a desk lamp and a window that looked onto a courtyard and nothing that reminded her of anything. She had carried the envelope for six hours without opening it—on the drive back from the Croix-Rousse, through dinner at a brasserie near the Place des Terreaux where neither of them had tasted much, through the checking in and the quiet conversation about tomorrow that was really a conversation about not being ready—and Val had not asked about it and she had not explained and the envelope had sat in her jacket pocket against her ribs the way something sits when it is both present and not yet permitted.

She was alone when she opened it. Val had taken the room next door, as in Marseille, with the same unspoken understanding that there were hours she needed to inhabit without the management of another person's presence. She sat at the desk with the lamp on and the Lyon night outside and the envelope in her hands, and she thought about her father's handwriting on the front—For E., nothing more, the same compressed precision he applied to everything—and she thought about him writing it and folding the pages and sealing it and giving it to someone in 2021, two years before the French letters started arriving, when he already knew enough to know it might be needed.

She opened it.

Three pages, handwritten, in English, the pen the black fine-point he always used, the handwriting small as it had been in the late journal entries.

She read.

Emilia, if you have found this then two things are true: I am gone, and you have been more tenacious than I had any right to hope. I am sorry to leave you the work. I have been trying, for three years, to do it myself, and I have not managed it, and I need you to understand why without finding me contemptible for it, because the truth is that I was afraid and the fear was not irrational and neither, I think, is it inexcusable, though you may judge for yourself.

I met Marie-Hélène Aubert at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 in 1989, at a seminar on Venetian painting that we were both attending for reasons connected to our respective research. She was twenty-one and brilliant and I was a visiting academic from New Haven and already somewhat lost, which is the condition I have spent most of my adult life in though I have concealed it competently. We were friends for three years in Lyon and then in Venice in 1994 when she was working at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and I was on a research fellowship at the Querini Stampalia. We were more than friends. I do not need to be specific. What matters is that I knew her well enough to know when she had changed, and she changed in the spring of 1994 in a way I could not account for and she would not explain to me.

I know now what I did not know then. She had met Luca Morandi the previous winter, through the Bellini family circle,

and had been drawn into his orbit in the way that I understand now was his particular skill—the orbit was not obvious as an orbit, it felt like choice, it felt like the ordinary progression of a connection between interesting adults. By the spring she was pregnant and by the summer she understood that he was not what she had believed him to be. I was already back in New Haven by the time Francesca was born. I learned of the child only when Marie-Hélène wrote to me in 1995, after she had already signed the agreement and given the child to Marco Bellini and gone to Lyon.

I should have done something then. I want you to understand that I knew even then, even without knowing what I know now, that Morandi was dangerous and that the arrangement was coerced and that Marie-Hélène had been given no real choice. I should have gone to Venice. I should have found a way to help her and to make the truth about Francesca known. I did not do these things. I had just met your mother. She was ill already, though we didn't know yet how ill, and I had you to think about and a career that I was still building and the comfortable excuse of the man who finds the cost of action too high and tells himself it is wisdom and not cowardice.

I have thought about this for twenty-five years.

When Francesca died—I saw it in an Italian news feed, 2020, a brief item—I understood immediately. I had followed Morandi's career from a distance, not obsessively but as you follow something you know to be dangerous, and I knew about Giulia. I knew the pattern. And I knew that the man who had coerced a woman

into silence about a child he had fathered had also married that child and arranged her death to protect his estate. I knew it and I still could not prove it, and by the time I began to try to compile what I had—the document Marie-Hélène had sent me in 2019, the letter she had asked her intermediary to carry to me, the photographs she gave me years ago of herself during that time—Morandi's people had identified me as a risk.

The phone calls you heard were him. Not directly—through the intermediary I mentioned, a lawyer in Paris who I believe has been carrying Morandi's communications for years. The message was the same each time: let it go. Laurent. It is thirty years ago. It cannot be undone. Let it go and no one is harmed. I did not let it go. But I also did not act. This is what I mean when I say I was afraid. Not of him, exactly—I stopped being afraid of dying at some point in my fifties, which I think is a mercy that comes to most people if they have the patience. I was afraid of what would happen to you if I moved first and he moved second.

This is the thing I could not bear to leave unfinished, but also the thing I could not bear to finish. You are reading this, which means the choice was made for me.

In the bottom drawer of the desk at Briar Hollow, behind the false back panel—you will need to push it firmly, it sticks—there is a folder I could not bring with me when I knew they were watching the house in the last weeks. I don't know if you will be able to retrieve it. But if the house is gone, it doesn't matter, because the folder contains the photographs Marie-Hélène gave me and the 1995 document that I obtained a copy of through my own

resources, and you will have found both from other directions if you've gotten this far.

What the folder also contains is a letter from Marco Bellini, written in 2018, two years before his death. He had kept records. He was a decent man, Marco, and he loved Francesca as a daughter, and in 2018 he understood that he was dying and that Francesca had married Morandi and that something about this was wrong, and he wrote everything he knew into a letter and sent it to me because he did not know who else to trust. In the letter he states clearly that he knew Francesca was Morandi's biological daughter, that this had been the condition of the arrangement in 1995—Marco raising the child as his own while knowing who her father was—and that Morandi had been aware of Francesca's identity throughout their relationship. Marco was not a strong man. He did not go to the police. He wrote the letter.

This letter is evidence of what he knew, and of premeditation, and it is the thing I was most afraid for Morandi to know existed.

Go and get it, Emilia, if you can. Or don't, if it's gone—you are smarter than I was and you will have found other ways. But be careful. Be careful in a way I was not capable of teaching you to be, because I spent your childhood teaching you to be open and honest and to trust what you heard, and those are good qualities and I do not regret them but they are not always safe. Use Val, if he is with you. I hope he is with you. I met him briefly, in the Alps—I think you know I saw what was between you even then, and I think you know that my warning was about

something other than him specifically—and he struck me as someone who stays.

I love you. I have loved you every day of your life including the days I was too frightened to be the father you needed. I'm sorry I ran out of time. You won't.

H.

She sat with the pages for a long time. Outside the Lyon hotel the city did what cities do at eleven p.m. on a Wednesday in December—continued—and she held her father's handwriting and thought about all of it: the twenty-five years of knowing and not acting, the fear that she understood and did not entirely forgive and recognized in herself as a thing she had been working against since October. The apology. The particular specificity of I met him briefly, in the Alps—the mountain in August, her father three steps ahead on the trail, his back already turned by the time she climbed to the flat rock, and the way he had said afterward don't pursue that in the voice she had not been able to name. He had seen Val and understood what she was moving toward and had been afraid that Val, like everything else in the world of that summer, could be used against her.

She thought about the blue sticky note.

She took it from the inside pocket of her jacket, where it had been since October, still folded, still not looked at. She had taken it from the windowsill of Briar Hollow on the day she left because she could not throw it away, and she had carried it for two months without opening it in the way one carries certain

things—talismans, not information, objects of sentiment rather than use. She unfolded it.

Her father's handwriting, in his black fine-point pen, seven characters: 47-23-08.

A combination.

She called Val's room.

"The false back panel in the bottom drawer," she said, when he answered. "If the house is gone—"

"Is the house gone?"

"The bank took it. November." She looked at the sticky note. "There's a combination. For something in the house. But the house is—"

"Is there any possibility that the folder is still there? That the foreclosure process left it untouched?"

She thought about this. Foreclosure in Connecticut was a legal process that transferred title from the owner to the lender. The bank took possession. The bank then typically arranged an estate sale or auction of remaining contents before listing the property. The movers had taken her things. Her father's furniture and books had been—she didn't know. She had signed papers and not asked.

"Someone would know what happened to the contents," she said.

"Morrison," Val said. "The lawyer who handled the estate."

She called Morrison at seven a.m. Connecticut time and got his voicemail and left a message that was as brief as she could make it—the desk, the bottom drawer, a folder she needed—and he

called back in forty minutes with the information that the house contents had been auctioned by the estate on behalf of the bank, the auction having been held in late November, the proceeds applied to the outstanding mortgage balance. The desk—a large antique partner's desk, he believed—had been purchased by a dealer in Hartford.

She looked at the sticky note's combination.

Val appeared in her doorway. She had not heard him come across the corridor.

"I'll call the dealer," he said.

The dealer in Hartford, reached at eight a.m. Connecticut time by Val's phone from a Lyon hotel, had the desk. He had not yet refinished it. He had not noticed any false panel in the bottom drawer because he had not looked for one because desks generally did not have false panels in their bottom drawers and no one had told him to look. He was willing to look now, with sufficient motivation, and Val's explanation of what was at stake was apparently sufficient because forty minutes later an image arrived on Val's phone of a manila folder, slightly dusty, retrieved from behind a false back panel in the bottom drawer of a partner's desk in a dealer's workshop in Hartford, Connecticut, the combination 47-23-08 having worked exactly as specified.

The dealer scanned the folder's contents at a copy shop around the corner and sent them as a PDF.

Val's Italian was adequate to Marco Bellini's letter. He read it twice, sitting on the edge of Emilia's bed, and handed her the phone without speaking.

It said everything her father had said it would say. It said it clearly, in the hand of a dying man with nothing left to protect, dated October 2018, addressed to Laurent Moreau as the only person Marco believed was both honest enough and frightened enough to handle it responsibly. Luca Morandi had known Francesca was his daughter. He had known from the first meeting, Marco wrote, because Luca had recognized Marie-Hélène's name in the Bellini family circle and had gone looking deliberately. Had found Francesca and pursued her deliberately. Had married her knowing. Marco had tried to warn Francesca and she had not believed him—why would she, a woman in love, being told by her aging stepfather that the man she was marrying was her biological father, based on a thirty-year-old private agreement and an old man's memory—and Marco had watched the wedding with the particular helplessness of knowing the truth and being unable to make it land.

Celine arrived at the hotel at two in the afternoon with a small roller bag and the controlled composure of a woman who has been maintaining a performance for ten days and has reached the precise limit of what the performance can sustain. She sat down in the chair by the window, placed her bag beside her feet, and looked at Emilia and Val with the expression of someone coming in from a long way out in cold water: grateful for the solid ground and not yet entirely certain her legs work on it.

"I'm out," she said. "Officially visiting a brand partner in Lyon. As of tonight Luca believes I'm returning to Milan on

Saturday. By Saturday I intend to be somewhere he can't reach by assumption."

"Did he suspect?"

"He suspects everything and nothing specifically. That's his condition—he maintains a general suspicion the way other people maintain an insurance policy. Specific suspicion about me would require him to believe his plan has failed, and he's not ready to believe that yet." She opened her bag and produced a phone—new, a different make from her usual one, a burner. "This is for coordination. Don't contact me on my regular phone after tonight."

Emilia handed her Laurent's letter. Celine read it at the window in the winter light, unhurriedly, all the way through. When she finished she folded it carefully and handed it back.

"He knew about me," she said. "About Pierre. About what Pierre's estate would mean."

"He knew someone was watching it. He didn't know it would come through you specifically."

"He should have warned me," she said. Not with anger. With the rueful accounting of a woman who has had this conversation before, in various forms, about various men who knew things they declined to share. "But then I would have needed to believe him. Which—" She paused. "Which I might not have." She looked at her hands. "The sapphire ring is in the Grand Canal. I dropped it off the palazzo's water steps at five this morning. I had a specific and very satisfying feeling of finality."

Emilia looked at her aunt and felt, not for the first time but more completely than before, genuine love for her—not the complicated love of obligation and proximity but something cleaner, the thing you feel for a person when you have seen them at their worst and their best in close succession and prefer the whole to any edited version.

"We have everything," Emilia said. "The recording, the document photographs, Celine's portfolio photographs, Marco Bellini's letter, the Questura lieutenant who knows the case, Marie-Hélène who will speak. We have enough for a journalist—more than enough."

"We need a journalist who understands the Italian legal system and has sufficient standing to make the story impossible to suppress," Val said.

Celine said: "I know someone. A correspondent at La Repubblica—Giulia Ferretti. She covered the Giulia Morandi death for them, three years ago, before the investigation closed. She's been looking for a way back into it since." She took out the burner phone. "I've been looking for the right moment to contact her for three weeks."

"Contact her now," Emilia said.

The plan was not complicated. The complicated part was that it had to work before Saturday's wedding, which was in two days, and which would take place at Villa Udolpho in the Val d'Aosta, a location that was remote enough to make intervention difficult after the fact.

Giulia Ferretti was reached by Celine at three-fifteen and responded with the speed of someone who has been waiting for a phone call for three years. She was in Rome. She could be in Turin by midnight if there was a car waiting. She had editorial clearance for the story if the documentation was substantive. Celine described the documentation. There was a silence on the line that had the quality of a journalist doing arithmetic.

"I'll be in Turin by midnight," Ferretti said.

Emilia sent the evidence package to Ferretti's encrypted email: the photographs, the recording, the translated documents, the Marco Bellini letter, a summary she had written in the hotel in forty minutes that laid out the timeline from 1994 to the present in the plain declarative prose of someone who has been thinking about nothing else for two months. She sent a copy simultaneously to Lieutenant Ferri at the Questura di Venezia, with a note: you said we needed something that speaks to cause rather than consequence. This is it.

They left Lyon at four. Val drove north along the A43 toward the Mont Blanc tunnel and the Italian border, the Alps appearing ahead of them through the windscreen as the day's last light caught the upper ridges and turned them briefly, impossibly orange before the dark came in. Celine was in the passenger seat with the burner phone. Emilia was in the back with her father's letter and the journal open on her knee to the crossed-out entry, looking at the column of dense obliterated ink, and she understood now—having read what she had read—that the name beneath it was not only Morandi's. It was also her own appraisal

of herself, which her father had crossed out on her behalf, insisting that the crossing out was not the truth of her. She closed the journal.

The Mont Blanc tunnel was four kilometers of mountain, the longest road tunnel in the world, and they passed through it in the white light of the tunnel's fluorescent strips while the Alps pressed down on both sides from above, and came out on the Italian side into the Val d'Aosta, which was dark by then and cold with the particular cold of high Alpine valleys in December, the kind of cold that comes from the stone itself and not merely the air.

"How far?" Celine said.

"Gressoney is forty kilometers," Val said. "The village at the valley head. The villa is above it." He had been reading the route on his phone since Turin. "There is a road to the property—a private road, three kilometers of switchbacks. It ends at the villa gate."

"Which will be staffed," Emilia said.

"Almost certainly. He has security people—the men who were in the forest in the teleplay photographs from the Instagram posts. Men who know the territory."

"We're not going in tonight," Emilia said. "We're going to park below the valley head and wait for Ferretti. She arrives in Turin in—" She checked the time. "Four hours. She'll come directly. We need the story filed before we go near the villa, so that if anything happens to us it's already in the world."

Celine said: "And Sofia?"

They had found Sofia in Celine's account of the palazzo's staff—a young woman, perhaps twenty-two, who had worked as Celine's personal attendant during her time at the palazzo, who had been kind to her in the quiet specific way of someone who is not permitted to be kind officially but finds ways. Celine had not spoken to Sofia directly about any of it, but Sofia had slipped her a note on the fourth day: I know what he is. Be careful. And Celine had understood that there were people inside Morandi's world who knew what he was and could not say it and were waiting for someone to make it sayable.

"Sofia may be at the villa for the wedding," Emilia said. "We can't account for everyone inside."

"I know," Celine said. "I just—" She looked out at the dark valley. "I don't want anyone else to be in harm's way because of my bad judgment."

"It's not your bad judgment," Emilia said. "It's his."

They drove the last kilometers into the valley in silence, the road rising and the pines closing in on both sides and the stars becoming extraordinary above them in the way that high Alpine valleys in winter produce stars—dense, cold, absolute—and they found a parking area outside a ski lodge closed for the season and stopped there and cut the engine and waited.

Outside, the Val d'Aosta was entirely quiet. Above them, somewhere in the dark above the treeline, Villa Udolpho sat at the end of its three kilometers of private switchback road, where a man was preparing to marry a woman he might intend to kill. The wedding was in thirty-eight hours.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Villa Udolpho

Ferretti arrived at eleven forty-seven in a rented Fiat that she had driven at a speed suggestive of someone who had grown up in Rome traffic and found Alpine switchbacks a comparative relief. She was fifty-three, compact, with close-cropped grey hair and the specific wakefulness of a journalist who has trained herself to be useful at any hour by accepting that hours are a construct of the comfortable. She shook hands in the order they were offered—Emilia, Val, Celine—with a directness that dispensed with warmth not because she lacked it but because she was here for something else.

She had read the evidence package on her phone during the drive from Turin. She read the key documents again on Emilia's laptop in the ski lodge parking lot, under the dome light of the Fiat, while the four of them sat with their breath misting and the Alpine silence outside the windows was total and cold and complete. When she finished she sat for a moment with her hands folded on the laptop's lid.

"The Marco Bellini letter," she said, "combined with the paternity document and the insurance records and the recording—this is a story. This is not a story I can stop from running." A beat. "I want to be clear about what that means. Once this is filed, Morandi will know within hours—he has people who monitor media mentions. He will also know that the evidence exists in multiple locations and that suppressing it is no longer possible.

That may make him less dangerous, because there is no longer anything to gain from silencing anyone. Or it may make him more dangerous, because people who have nothing to gain can still act from anger or desperation."

"We think he's planning to kill Celine at the villa," Emilia said. "The wedding is in thirty-six hours. He has the same pattern established twice. The same financial instruments in place."

"You think," Ferretti said. Not a dismissal—the journalist's precision about what is known and what is inferred.

"We think," Emilia confirmed. "We can't prove he intends it. But the pattern suggests this is when."

Ferretti looked at Celine. "You came out of the palazzo voluntarily."

"I told him I was visiting a brand partner in Lyon. He expects me back Saturday."

"If the story runs tonight, he'll know you're not coming back Saturday."

"I know."

"And you're prepared to be a named source."

"Yes."

Ferretti nodded once. She took out her own phone and called a number and spoke briefly in Italian to an editor she addressed by first name, and the conversation lasted four minutes and at its end she said *va bene* and ended the call.

"Filing in two hours," she said. "Online publication at six a.m. Print edition tomorrow. I need your formal statement,

Celine, recorded, before I file." She produced a recorder. "And yours, Emilia. For attribution."

They recorded their statements in the Fiat's back seat while Val sat outside with his collar up against the cold and the stars overhead were so numerous and so still that the sky seemed to be made of something more than light and dark, and when they were done and the statements were attached to the filing and Ferretti had sent the package to the editorial desk in Rome with the specific satisfaction of a person completing an action they have been building toward for three years, she looked at Emilia.

"What happens now?" she said.

"We go up," Emilia said.

"To the villa."

"Celine needs her documents. Her passport. Her things. And there is a young woman on Morandi's staff who knows what he is and is inside that building."

Ferretti looked at her for a moment. "I'll stay at this position. If I don't hear from you in four hours I'll call the Carabinieri di Aosta with the full evidence package."

"Three hours," Emilia said.

"Three hours," Ferretti agreed.

They drove the switchback road in darkness with the headlights off for the last kilometer, Val navigating by the satellite image he had studied for two hours that afternoon while they waited—the hairpin bends memorized, the distances noted, the point where the main road to the gate diverged from a maintenance track that accessed the villa's lower outbuildings from the west

side, invisible from the gatehouse. The rental car was a small diesel and its engine in low gear on the steep slope was a sound that seemed enormous in the Alpine stillness, and Emilia watched the trees on either side and the sky above the trees and held the door handle and did not speak.

The maintenance track ended at a gate of the utilitarian type, chain-link on steel posts, padlocked. Val examined it with the penlight for perhaps ten seconds, produced the locksmith's tension wrench from his jacket pocket, and had it open in forty-five seconds. Emilia made a mental note that his improvement over her own ninety seconds in the Palazzo courtyard was something she would think about at a less pressured time.

They left the car on the track and went on foot.

The forest on the villa's west side was pine, dense and dark, the needled floor muffling their steps. The December cold here had an additional quality beyond the valley's cold, the cold of high altitude in a mountain forest where the wind comes intermittently through the canopy with the sound of something breathing in its sleep. Celine walked between Emilia and Val, sure-footed, her roller bag left in the car and the burner phone in her coat pocket, and Emilia thought again about the woman she had constructed from the ring lights and the Instagram posts and the woman who was walking through an Alpine forest at two in the morning to retrieve her passport from a murderer's house.

The villa appeared through the trees.

She had been expecting it and was not prepared for it. The original building was nineteenth century, as Morandi had said at

the dinner in Milan, and it had the heavy confident scale of that era's mountain architecture—stone, massive, built to say that someone with sufficient resources could impose domesticity on terrain that had previously declined to be domesticated. It was not a castle; it was too recently constructed and too deliberately comfortable for that designation. But it had the bones of something that had decided to be permanent, three stories of dark stone with the upper windows lit in the main wing and the lower outbuildings extending on either side in a crescent that gave it something of a fortress's geometry. The roofline was complex, dormers and a central tower and the pitched steep angles necessary for the Alpine snow, and against the night sky and the high peaks behind it, the whole structure had the quality of a thing that had grown out of the mountain and retained some of the mountain's indifference to human timescales.

There was a light in a downstairs window at the far east end of the building—the service wing, Val said, checking the satellite image—and no other movement visible from the treeline. One guard, somewhere, possibly at the gate. Possibly making rounds.

"Sofia," Celine said quietly.

She had described Sofia as a young woman who had come to work at the palazzo six months ago, recommended by a friend of Morandi's staff manager, quiet and efficient and possessed of the particular quality of someone who sees more than they indicate they see. The light in the service wing window was the one she had described as Sofia's room, on the east side of the house away

from Morandi's main rooms. She had messaged Sofia on the burner phone from Lyon: I'm coming. Don't be afraid when I arrive.

Sofia had replied: I know a way in. The kitchen door, east side. I'll leave it unlocked.

The kitchen door was unlocked.

The kitchen was stone-floored, commercial in scale, dark except for the standby lights on the appliances and the thin line of light under the door that led to the service corridor. The smell was of winter cooking—the particular deep smell of a kitchen that has been making stocks and braises for days in preparation for an event—and of stone and cold, the cold that lives permanently in the lower floors of buildings this age in this terrain regardless of what the upper floors are heated to.

Sofia was waiting by the corridor door. She was twenty-two or twenty-three, dark-haired, wearing kitchen whites, and her face when she saw Celine had in it the complicated relief of someone who has been responsible for a secret that was too large for them and has now been relieved of it. She and Celine held each other briefly, the embrace of people who had understood each other without being able to speak it directly, and then Sofia stepped back and looked at Emilia and Val with the assessment of someone who has been managing a difficult situation alone and is evaluating whether the reinforcements are adequate.

"He's asleep," she said, in careful English, accent thick. "In the main wing, second floor. He has two men—Ricci at the gate, Fabbri in the building. Fabbri does rounds every forty

minutes. Last round was—" She checked her phone. "Twelve minutes ago."

"Celine's room?" Emilia said.

"First floor, east corridor. The room at the end. Her things are there. Her documents in the bedside drawer." She looked at Celine. "The wedding—it is tomorrow evening. Six o'clock, in the chapel." A pause. "I was to attend. As witness."

"You're not attending," Celine said.

"No," Sofia agreed. There was, Emilia thought, a relief in that single syllable that contained several months of private knowledge and private fear.

They went through the service corridor single file, Sofia leading, Val last. The corridor connected the kitchen to the main building through a baize-covered door that had the old domestic architecture of a house designed so that the working parts of it were not visible from the living parts, a design philosophy that Emilia had always found more revealing about its era than most explicit statements. Through the door: the main ground floor, a flagged hallway with a carpet runner, oil paintings on the walls that she caught in the edge of the penlight's beam as they passed—mountain landscapes, late nineteenth century, competent and serious—and the bottom of a stone staircase.

Silence above. The sound of old stone contracting in the cold. Somewhere distant, the deep tonk of a clock in a room she couldn't identify, measuring the hour in Alpine darkness.

The east corridor on the first floor. At the end: a door, closed, no light under it. Sofia tried the handle. Unlocked. She pushed it open and stepped aside.

Celine's room was the kind of room that a thoughtful host provides for a guest he intends to keep: large, well-furnished, the window views spectacular in daylight, a dressing table with flowers on it, a wardrobe, a good bed. The kind of room that makes a person feel attended to rather than contained. Emilia stood in the doorway while Celine went directly to the bedside drawer and removed her passport and a small leather wallet containing cards and documents, and then to the wardrobe where she spent ninety seconds in focused silence extracting only what she would need, folding it with the speed of a woman who has learned to pack fast from years of travel for work.

"The documents in his study," Emilia said, quietly.

"I have photographs of everything important."

"Is there anything else—"

"There is one thing." Celine straightened from the wardrobe. "In his study, on the desk, there is a folder. Red, Manila. He had it out last week and I saw my name on the tab. I couldn't take it then—he was in the room. But if we're here and his study is—"

"Where is the study?"

"Second floor. West corridor. The room above the portego." She looked at Emilia. "It's where he sleeps."

Emilia looked at Val. Val said nothing.

"Stay here with Sofia," Emilia said. "Both of you. I'll go."

"Emilia—"

"Val, stay with them."

The staircase to the second floor was narrower than the main one, a secondary stair at the west end of the building that appeared on the satellite image as a lighter line alongside the main structure. She found it by logic—the building's plan was clear enough in her head now to navigate without a guide—and climbed it in darkness, one hand on the wall, the penlight off.

The second floor was warmer. The heating in the main wing was better than below, the stone walls less absolute in their cold, and she could feel it as she reached the landing, the slight density of air in a space that has been inhabited recently. To the left: a line of closed doors. To the right: at the end of the corridor, a door with a thin bar of light beneath it.

She stood at the top of the staircase for a moment and listened. Nothing. The distant clock again. The house's own breath.

She went to the study door. Tried the handle. Unlocked—consistent, she thought; he was a man who trusted his perimeter rather than his interior locks. The door opened inward without sound. She went in.

The study was large and organized with the particular neatness of a man whose external presentation was always controlled and whose private spaces reflected it. A desk of the modern glass-and-steel type that looked wrong in a nineteenth-century Alpine villa and had been placed there anyway, because

Morandi was not nostalgic. A wall of bookshelves, well-maintained. A filing cabinet, locked. The desk's surface clear except for a lamp, a laptop closed, and a red Manila folder with a tab on which she could read, in the lamp's low standby glow, the name: Cheron.

She took the folder.

She turned to leave.

Luca Morandi was standing in the doorway to the adjoining bedroom, in a dressing gown, with the specific stillness of a man who has been awake for some time and has been deciding how to manage what he was going to find.

"Emilia," he said. "How consistent you are."

She held the folder. She did not speak.

"I heard the car on the maintenance track," he said. "The engine sound is distinct. I've been waiting—" He glanced at his watch. "Twenty-two minutes." He looked at the folder in her hands with the expression of a man doing a calculation. "That folder contains a prenuptial agreement," he said. "A very thorough one. If Celine is aware of its terms—"

"Celine is not here," Emilia said. This was not precisely true and he probably knew it, but it was the response most likely to buy time.

"Where is she?"

"Lyon."

His assessment ran. She watched it the way she had watched it in the Palazzo portego across the candlelit room: the rapid

internal accounting, the simultaneous management of multiple variables.

"You came alone," he said.

"I came for the folder."

"To what end? The evidence you took from Venice was legally compromised. Whatever is in that folder is similarly tainted by unauthorized entry. You have broken into my home twice in two weeks, Emilia, and each time you have produced materials that no Italian court will admit." He moved slightly, not toward her, a positional adjustment that placed him more fully in the doorway. "I admire your persistence. I have been saying that since Milan. But persistence in the absence of legal utility is simply—a hobby."

"La Repubblica filed the story at one fifty-three this morning," Emilia said. "It publishes at six a.m. The Marco Bellini letter. The paternity document. The insurance records. The recording from Venice. Giulia Ferretti's byline." She watched his face. "She's been building toward this story for three years."

What happened in his face then was not what she expected. She had expected fear, or anger, or the specific recalibration of a man whose plan has encountered an obstacle. What she saw instead was something more fundamental and more chilling: the expression of a man for whom the game had changed, who was processing the change with the swift animal intelligence of someone who has survived previous changes and is already identifying the new parameters.

He said: "Then the story runs."

"Yes."

"And everything in it is accurate."

"Everything in it is accurate."

"Then I imagine," he said, very quietly, "that I have very little left to lose."

He moved.

She was already moving before he reached her—not toward the door, which he was blocking, but sideways to the desk, putting it between them, which gave her two seconds and not more. She said nothing because there was no one in this room to say anything to. She had the folder in one hand and she threw it at him—not as a weapon, as a distraction—and in the half-second he took to catch it reflexively she went for the window.

The window was old casement type, the latch a simple turn, and she had it open and one leg over the sill before he reached the desk and in the same moment, from below and to the right—below her window, from the direction of the east corridor—she heard Val's voice, sharp and controlled: "Now. Move."

She dropped.

One story, approximately four meters, onto a covered walkway between the main building and the east outbuilding, the roof of which was at the right height to break her fall if she hit it correctly and at a slope angle that would otherwise send her off the edge. She hit it correctly, mostly—her right shoulder took the impact badly and she felt it rather than hurt from it, the hurt being something the adrenaline was currently managing on her

behalf—and she slid to the edge and caught herself on the gutter and dropped again to the ground, perhaps two meters more, and landed on stone flagging and was upright and moving before she had fully processed the sequence.

Val was at the east outbuilding door with Celine and Sofia, and their faces in the darkness had a quality she recognized as the specific focus of people who have committed to a direction and are not stopping. From above, from the open study window, Morandi's voice, calling in Italian—not panic, never panic, even now—and from somewhere at the front of the building the sound of a door and running steps.

Fabbri. The guard doing his rounds.

"The forest," Emilia said. "West side. The maintenance track. Go."

They went.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Mountain

The forest took them immediately. That was the word for it—not that they entered the forest but that the forest received them, the pines closing on both sides the moment they crossed from the flagged stone of the outbuilding path onto the needled ground beneath the trees, and the difference was absolute: from the open ground with its villa lights and its receding noise of Fabbri's boots on stone, to this, the forest's specific darkness and its specific silence, which was not the absence of sound but the presence of a different kind—wind moving high in the canopy, the occasional crack of a branch cooling in the cold, the soft percussion of their own feet finding the ground at speed.

Emilia went first. She had studied the satellite image for two hours in the parking lot while the others were recording their statements with Ferretti and she had the layout in her head not as a memorized sequence but as a felt spatial sense, the way you know the floor plan of a house you've lived in—not consciously recalled but retrieved by the body when the body needs it. The maintenance track was behind and to the right. The treeline ran westward along the villa's lower edge and then dropped, steeply, into the ravine Val had identified on the map as the first natural feature that would appear between them and the car. The ravine was perhaps six hundred meters through the forest. Six hundred meters of dark pine, downhill, on ground that was frozen in the upper layer and uncertain below it.

Val was behind her. Behind him, Celine. Behind Celine, Sofia, who ran with the steady purposeful gait of a young woman who had grown up in mountain country and knew how to move on uneven ground in the dark. Emilia could hear all three of them without looking: the rhythm of their breathing, the variations in footfall that mapped their respective gaits and states, the absence of words because words were a luxury the forest could not currently afford them.

The lights from the villa fell behind and were gone.

Thirty seconds. A minute. The ground dropping sharply under Emilia's feet, the pitch of the slope increasing, and she adjusted her stride without breaking pace—shorter steps, weight back, the technique her father had taught her on their hikes, the way he had taught her most physical things, by demonstrating and expecting her to replicate and saying very little else. She thought of him briefly and completely and let him go.

Behind her, from the direction of the villa, a sound that was not the wind. Voices. Then the sound she had been anticipating with the specific dread of having anticipated it: dogs.

"They have dogs," Val said, from behind her.

"I hear them."

"How far to the ravine?"

"Four hundred meters. Less." She recalibrated from the map in her head. "Three fifty."

The dogs' sound was directional and it was changing—moving, getting less fixed, which meant they were on a lead and moving

rather than at a fixed point and barking. On a lead meant guided. Guided meant someone had the scent and was following it. They had perhaps eight minutes at the dogs' current pace before the gap closed to a range where the outcome of the chase became a matter of terrain rather than speed.

Three fifty meters of downhill pine forest, in the dark, with eight minutes.

"Faster," Emilia said, and ran.

The ravine appeared as a sudden absence—the trees thinning and then stopping, the ground falling away at a slope steep enough to require a different kind of movement, hands as well as feet, grabbing at root systems and outcropped stone and the occasional pine sapling whose root ball she tested instinctively before trusting her weight to it. Val came over the edge beside her and they both descended the first ten meters side by side and looked back.

Celine was at the edge. Sofia was not.

"Where is she?" Celine said. She was breathing hard, her voice stripped of its performance quality by the simple necessity of getting enough air, and she looked genuinely frightened in the way of someone who has been managing fear successfully and has just run out of management capacity.

"She was behind you," Val said.

From above, through the trees, the dogs' sound had changed register: closer, no longer approaching but arrived, and in the same moment the flashlight beams became visible, sweeping through the pine trunks in the jerky, urgent way of people moving at

pace. Two beams. Fabbri, and possibly Ricci who had left the gate. Two men and dogs, perhaps fifty meters above the ravine's edge.

And then a sound that was not dogs and not footsteps.

"No," Celine said.

Emilia had heard gunshots only in films and had not expected them to be so flat and prosaic in open air, nothing like the cinematic weight of them, just a hard sharp report that the forest threw back in a brief rough echo and then absorbed. One shot. Then a second, further away.

"Sofia," Celine said. She moved toward the edge to go back up and Val caught her arm.

"Celine."

"She's—"

"If she's up there we cannot help her. Not now." His voice had the precision of someone managing the difference between what is true and what is unbearable, both of which were currently the same thing. "We can help her by getting down. By getting to Ferretti. By making sure everything we came here for matters."

Celine stood at the ravine's edge with Val's hand on her arm and her face in the dark was a thing Emilia could not look at directly, the specific quality of a person understanding something they cannot undo and cannot yet hold. Then she looked down into the ravine and said, quietly: "Show me where to put my hands."

They descended.

The ravine was perhaps forty meters top to bottom, the angle severe enough in its upper section to require the careful placement of hands and feet that Emilia had described to Celine and that Celine executed with the focused precision of someone converting grief into movement, which is one of the things humans are capable of that is simultaneously terrible and admirable. The lower section eased to a slope and then to a stream—narrow, perhaps two meters across, but deep in its channel, the water black and moving fast over rounded stones—and they dropped to its edge and stood for a moment, all three of them, breathing.

Above, the flashlight beams were at the ravine's edge. The dogs' sound was louder now and had the quality of animals straining against restraint.

"The water," Emilia said. "Across and then downstream. It breaks the scent trail."

She went in first. The cold was a category she had not previously experienced—not the cold of a swimming pool or an ocean beach but the cold of snowmelt in December, water that had been frozen a week ago and had not recovered its ambient temperature and was not interested in the temperature of the person entering it. It reached her knees and then her thighs and the cold traveled upward through her body with the directness of something that does not negotiate. She kept moving. Val behind her, hissing a sharp inhalation but continuing. Then Celine, who made no sound at all, which Emilia recognized as a form of courage more demanding than noise.

The far bank. They climbed it and turned downstream and walked in the shallows for two hundred meters, stumbling on the uneven bed, the water never deeper than the thigh but never warmer than the entry temperature, and then found a place where the bank was low and flat and came out onto mossy stone and continued on the forest floor.

Behind them, above the ravine, the dogs' sound changed. Milling, confused. The scent trail ending at the water.

Emilia did not stop. She counted to two hundred and then looked back and the flashlights were not visible through the trees, which might mean the ravine's angle was blocking them and might mean they had gone another way, and either way the correct response was to keep moving.

"Keep going," she said. "Downhill. Always choose the downhill direction."

They walked for an hour and a half.

Time in a dark forest has a different structure from ordinary time. It expands and compresses in patterns that have nothing to do with the clock and everything to do with the body's attention—the vigilance required to navigate by feel and by the faint difference between tree-dark and sky-dark at the edge of the canopy, the periodic tests of the ground underfoot, the management of cold in wet clothing. Emilia's legs had gone from painful to numb to a determined indifference; she trusted them to continue because they had no alternative and they appeared to agree with this reasoning. Val moved beside her, slightly ahead when the ground was uncertain, slightly behind when she needed to

lead. Celine was between them, steady in the way she had been since the ravine—not the steadiness of someone who is fine but the steadiness of someone who has decided that not being fine is a problem to address later.

They spoke very little. The occasional directional decision—left around an outcrop, right at the fork in a deer track—rendered aloud in the shortest possible terms. The rest was the forest and the cold and the sound of their breathing and, periodically, the sound of their own thoughts, which Emilia could not avoid but could decline to follow.

She thought about Sofia.

She thought about her deliberately and without flinching, because that was what Sofia deserved from the people she had helped: to be thought about with full attention rather than put aside as a thing too painful for the moment. Sofia who had left the kitchen door unlocked. Who had said I know what he is. Who had slipped Celine a note and lived for months inside the knowledge of what Morandi was, unable to act directly, waiting for something to make the action possible. Who had, tonight, made the action possible. Emilia did not know what had happened at the top of the ravine—whether the shots had found her, whether she was hurt, whether she was being detained or worse. She held the not-knowing as steadily as she could and kept moving downhill through the dark.

"She knew the risk," Val said, from beside her. He had been thinking the same thing; she could tell by the timing, the sentence arriving exactly when she needed it.

"That doesn't make it—"

"No. It doesn't make it easier. But it makes it different from something that happened to her. She made a choice."

"She was twenty-two."

"Yes."

They were quiet for a while.

"She knew before we arrived," Celine said, from Emilia's other side. Her voice was entirely steady. "She knew what it was going to cost to be inside that house with that knowledge and do nothing. She made the choice she could live with. She made it before we came." A pause. "We made it possible for her to act on it. That's different from being responsible for what happened to her. Luca is responsible for what happened to her. Not us."

This was, Emilia thought, both correct and insufficient, which was the nature of the things that were true about terrible situations.

"When did you get so clear-headed?" she said.

"I've been clear-headed for three weeks," Celine said. "I was waiting for somewhere it could be useful."

They lost the deer track at two-thirty and were genuinely lost for twenty-five minutes, which was the worst period of the walk—not because of the fear of being found, which receded as the distance from the villa increased, but because of the specific exhaustion and cold and disorientation of moving in a landscape with no fixed reference points, guided only by the ground's general inclination and the faint difference between the black of the treeline and the slightly less black of the sky above it.

Val stopped them at one point and stood still with his head tilted in the way she recognized as listening for something specific rather than general.

"Water," he said. "To the left. A stream—not the one we crossed. Larger. Running water runs downhill."

She could hear it, barely, once she stopped trying to hear everything else. The faint continuous murmur of water over stone, lower and more even than the stream they had waded, further away. She turned left.

The stream was perhaps fifty meters through dense understory—the worst walking of the night, the low branches catching at their faces and the ground unpredictable under the leaf litter—and when they reached it it was wider and faster than the earlier one, running with the purposeful energy of snowmelt that knows exactly where it is going, and beside it the ground had been cleared, presumably by spring floods, into a kind of natural path. They followed it downstream and the slope steepened and the stream's noise increased and then the trees thinned and there was a road.

Not the maintenance track. A real road, paved, with the faded yellow centre line of a minor mountain road and the reflectors at its edge catching the faint ambient light of the valley far below. They stood at the road's edge and Emilia looked both ways—left, climbing; right, descending—and looked at the others.

Celine's coat was torn at the shoulder, her hair down, her boots caked with the mud and pine needle composite of three hours

in the Alpine forest. Val had a cut across his left cheekbone from a branch. Emilia did not look at herself but understood from the way her right shoulder was reporting in, finally, that she had done more damage coming off the villa's walkway roof than the adrenaline had been allowing her to register.

"Right," Val said. "We go down."

They went down.

She tried Ferretti's number at three-twenty and got voicemail, and tried again at three-thirty and got an answer on the second ring, and Ferretti's voice had in it the specific quality of someone who has been awake and alert for hours waiting for a phone to ring.

"Where are you?"

"On a mountain road. Val d'Aosta, descending. I don't have a road number."

"Are you all right?"

"Mostly. There were shots. One of the villa's staff—Sofia, we need to know about Sofia."

A pause. "I called the Carabinieri at three-oh-five, when you didn't check in. They responded to the villa." Another pause, the kind that precedes information being chosen carefully. "They found a young woman at the forest's edge. Gunshot wound to the shoulder. Not fatal. She's at the hospital in Aosta."

Emilia closed her eyes. Beside her, she felt rather than saw Val's hand find her arm.

"Not fatal," she said.

"Not fatal. She's in surgery. The prognosis is—" Ferretti paused. "The prognosis is good."

"And Morandi?"

A longer pause. "Morandi is not at the villa. He left before the Carabinieri arrived. His car was gone. Fabbri and Ricci are being held."

Emilia turned this over. He was gone. He had assessed the situation—story filed, Carabinieri inbound, the evidence package distributed beyond suppression—and had left rather than be arrested on his own premises, which was the calculation of a man who still believed he could manage this outcome.

"Where did he go?"

"Unknown. His phone has been off since two-forty. European arrest warrant is being prepared—the La Repubblica story has been read by a magistrate in Rome who has been looking for reason to open a formal investigation for three years. This is—" Ferretti stopped herself. "This is moving faster than I expected."

"He'll run," Val said, from beside Emilia. "He has assets in Lugano. The holding company. He has resources outside Italy."

"Then he runs," Emilia said. "And we let Interpol catch him, which they will, because the story is everywhere and he is exactly the kind of man who cannot become invisible because he has never learned how." She thought about him—the performance, the controlled presentation, the forty years of managing what other people saw. Visibility was his strength. Invisibility required capacities he had never developed because he had never needed them. "He'll be found."

"Yes," Ferretti said. "He will. Where are you going now?"

"Down," Emilia said. "We just need to get down."

The road descended for four kilometers before they saw the lights of the ski lodge parking lot where Ferretti's Fiat sat waiting, its headlights on, the car visible from the road's last bend as a warm yellow promise at the valley bottom. Emilia saw it and felt, in her legs and her shoulder and the cold that had been a condition of existence for the past three hours, the specific collapse of the body when it understands it is allowed to stop.

They walked the last half kilometer on the road's verge with the silence of people who have said the necessary things and are now simply enduring the remaining distance. The stars had begun to pale at the eastern ridgeline, almost imperceptibly, the particular pre-dawn lightening that begins not as light but as the withdrawal of something absolute. She could see the shapes of the peaks against it—not the peaks themselves, not yet, but their absence, the mountain-shaped holes in the sky where stars had been.

Ferretti came out of the car when they were fifty meters away. She looked them over in the parking lot's single lamp with the rapid professional assessment of a woman who has covered conflict zones and knows the difference between functional and injured at a glance.

"Shoulder," she said to Emilia.

"I fell off a roof."

"Of course you did." She opened the car's back door.

"There's a blanket. Get in. Both of you—" She looked at Celine.

"All three of you. I'll drive."

They got in. Celine sat between Emilia and Val in the back seat and Emilia felt her aunt's warmth beside her and thought about all the warmth that had been absent from the Milan apartment in November, all the carefully managed performance and the distance, and what it had cost both of them. Celine took Emilia's hand in hers and held it without speaking and Emilia held it back.

Ferretti drove. The Val d'Aosta went past the windows in the gathering dawn, the mountains appearing as the light came up, first as shapes and then as the specific magnificence of high Alpine winter—the snow on the upper ridges catching the first direct light while the valley below was still in blue-grey shadow, the peaks burning one by one as the sun found them, each summit briefly a thing of extraordinary fire before the light spread and distributed itself and the burning became simply morning.

Emilia watched this and thought about her father, who would have had something to say about it—about the philosophy of light, about the way illumination works on mountains differently from how it works on flat ground, about what it means when the high places are lit and the low places are still in shadow. She thought about what he had written: you are smarter than I was and you will have found other ways. She thought about the blue sticky note and the combination and the dealer in Hartford and the

folder that had been waiting in a locked drawer in a desk in Connecticut for three years, and about what it means to leave something behind for someone to find.

She thought about Briar Hollow, the stone wall in October light, the Virginia creeper, the pale rectangle on the hardwood floor where his reading chair had been. She thought about what it would mean to build a life from what remained after all of that, and whether remaining was enough to build from.

She thought it probably was.

The dawn continued to arrive over the Alps, patient and extraordinary, and the car descended into the valley, and Emilia Moreau held her aunt's hand and watched the mountains burn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After

They reached the hospital in Aosta at six forty-three, which was when the sun finally cleared the eastern ridgeline and put the town briefly and completely into gold. Emilia noticed this with the specific attentiveness of exhaustion, which renders certain sensory details precise and others entirely absent—the light on the hospital's pale stone facade, the steam from an exhaust vent somewhere above the entrance, the sound of the automatic doors opening when Ferretti pushed through them. She was less aware of her own feet on the floor. Val's hand was under her elbow and she was grateful for it without having thought to reach for it.

The emergency desk directed them to a waiting area, which they occupied in the way of people who have run out of movement and are grateful for the instruction to stop. A nurse brought coffee in small paper cups that were too hot to drink immediately and too necessary to set aside, and they held them and the warmth moved up through their palms in a way that was disproportionately significant.

The surgeon came out at seven-twenty. He was a compact man in his fifties with the unhurried manner of someone accustomed to delivering the complete range of possible information and who had learned that the manner of delivery mattered as much as the content. He said: the wound was a through-and-through to the left shoulder, the bullet having missed the subclavian artery by what

he described as a margin he was professionally satisfied with. The surgery had addressed the damage to the muscle and the joint capsule. The patient was in recovery. She was asking for water and for someone to call her mother.

Celine sat forward in her chair. "Her mother is in Turin," she said. "I have the number."

"We've called her," the surgeon said. "She is on her way."

Something in Celine's face then was beyond what Emilia could describe precisely, except to say that it was the expression of a woman who has been given back something she thought she had lost and does not yet trust the return. She pressed her hands together, both of them, and said nothing.

Emilia's shoulder was assessed by a different doctor forty minutes later. The fall from the walkway roof had produced a separation of the acromioclavicular joint—not the worst possible outcome, the doctor said, with the reassuring bedside manner of a person who is providing context by comparison with worse things. Rest, a sling for two weeks, physiotherapy after that. She was given anti-inflammatories and a sling and told not to lift anything heavier than a book for a month. She thought about her painting supplies and the canvas boards and the particular weight of the twelve-by-sixteen format she had been using in Marseille and decided that a book was an adequate threshold for the time being.

Val, who had a bruised rib from something in the forest that he had not mentioned, was similarly told to rest and to stop doing whatever he had been doing.

"Everything," he told the doctor. "I'll stop doing everything."

The doctor regarded him with the professional skepticism of someone who has heard this before and said: good.

The La Repubblica story had been live for three hours by the time they were discharged from the hospital's emergency department and standing in the morning light of Aosta's central piazza, the mountains rising on all four sides of the valley with the frank impassivity of mountains, indifferent to the news. Emilia read it on her phone with Val beside her and the particular quality of attention one brings to seeing something one has been building for months rendered into the public form of a bylined article.

Ferretti had written it cleanly and with precision: the pattern across three marriages, the insurance instruments, the paternity document and Marco Bellini's letter, the recording from Venice. She had sourced it fully—Emilia and Celine by name, with their consent; Marie-Hélène Aubert named as a source who had provided testimony and documentation; Lieutenant Ferri of the Questura di Venezia quoted on the previously closed investigation and its evidentiary limitations. The headline was in Italian: MONTONI: IL SISTEMA, and below it a standfirst that Emilia translated as The businessman's three marriages, three deaths, and thirty years of managed silence.

It had been shared forty thousand times in three hours.

"That number will be different in an hour," Ferretti said, from Emilia's left, reading the same screen over her shoulder.

"By this evening it will be different in a way that matters. The Corriere has already asked for a comment and three other outlets have picked it up. The television people will have it by noon."

Emilia lowered her phone and looked at the piazza. A man was opening a bar across the square, the sound of the chairs being set out on the stones carrying across the cold air with a clarity that seemed disproportionate, as though the world had turned up some internal volume in the night. A dog crossed the piazza on a considered trajectory. Pigeons considered the fountain. Aosta was beginning its day with the indifference of a place that had been at the foot of these mountains since the Romans put a road through, and Emilia had the feeling she associated with the end of something large: not relief, not satisfaction, but a kind of volume reduction, the specific quiet of a sound that has been playing at high frequency for months and has finally stopped.

"Thank you," she said to Ferretti.

Ferretti looked at her with the directness she had displayed throughout. "Don't thank me. I've been trying to write this story for three years. You gave me the last pieces." She tucked her phone into her coat. "I have three more pieces to file this week. The full paternity story. The Giulia Ferrara investigation. And the political connections—the people whose financial interests led to the investigations being closed. That one will take longer." A slight pause. "I'll need access to the Questura records. And possibly to Marie-Hélène Aubert, if she's willing."

"She'll be willing," Emilia said. "Call her. I'll let her know to expect it."

Ferretti nodded once and went to her car, already on the phone.

Celine had booked them into a hotel on the piazza the previous night—a practical choice made from Ferretti's Fiat by a woman who had been managing logistics in a crisis and understood that the crisis needed somewhere to land. The rooms were clean and quiet and had the Alpine hotel quality of buildings that understand their business is to be warm when everything outside is cold.

Emilia slept for four hours and woke to the sound of Val's guitar through the wall, which she registered as the most ordinary and the most necessary sound she could have woken to, and lay still for a moment listening to it before getting up.

Celine was in the hotel's breakfast room when Emilia came down, with a pot of coffee and the expression of a woman doing a careful audit of everything she owned. Not her physical possessions—those were largely still at the Palazzo Morandi or in the Milan apartment—but the other kind: the account of who she was and what she had been doing with it.

"How are you?" Emilia said.

"I'm making a list," Celine said. "Of decisions I made badly. I'm trying to be specific rather than general because I find that general self-criticism is a form of self-indulgence—it feels productive but it doesn't actually tell you anything useful." She looked at her phone, on which she appeared to have been writing. "The list is moderately long."

"You were the one who came out of the palazzo with the documents," Emilia said. "You were the one who walked back in when you didn't have to. You were the one on the forest trail at two in the morning."

"Yes." Celine put down the phone. "I know. I'm not being self-flagellating. I'm trying to understand the mechanism so I don't repeat it." She poured coffee into Emilia's cup without being asked—an action so domestic and unconscious that Emilia felt, in it, the full shape of the aunt she might have had, had they been given ten years rather than three months. "The mechanism," Celine continued, "is loneliness plus the specific vanity of believing oneself too intelligent to be manipulated. The two things together are very useful to a man like Luca. I was lonely in the particular way that a woman who has made her public life her whole life is lonely—full of people and empty of them simultaneously—and I believed, as I have always believed, that I was perceptive enough to see through performance. Both of those things were true. Neither of them protected me."

"He was very good," Emilia said.

"He was extraordinary," Celine agreed. "I'm not diminishing my own responsibility by saying that. He was extraordinary and I was susceptible and the combination produced something I should have seen earlier." She looked at her coffee. "I keep thinking about Francesca. Who she was without knowing who she was. Whether she was happy, in any of it, before she understood."

Emilia had been thinking about Francesca too. A young woman who had loved a man she didn't know was her father. A young woman

whose death had been arranged by the same man, through instruments prepared before he married her, as a financial calculation. She had been twenty-nine. She had called her friend and had a bag packed and had been so close to the door.

"I want to do something for her," Celine said. "I don't know what yet. But something that makes it clear that her life was a life and not only a—not only a piece in his arrangement. Something that uses her name and says: she existed."

"Talk to Marie-Hélène," Emilia said. "When this is settled. She would want to know you."

Celine considered this for a moment and then nodded, once, with the precision of a woman who has added something to a list she intends to complete.

The news alert arrived on Emilia's phone at eleven forty-two on the second morning in Aosta, while she was sitting in the hotel room with the sling on and her father's letter re-read for the third time since Lyon, not because she needed the information in it but because reading it was a form of conversation she could still have.

The alert was from La Repubblica. She read it twice and then called to Val through the connecting door.

He appeared in the doorway.

"He was arrested at Geneva Cointrin airport," she said. "At seven this morning. Attempting to board a flight to Dubai." She looked at the screen. "Interpol warrant. Italian and Swiss authorities cooperating. He'll be extradited."

Val stood in the doorway for a moment. Then he came in and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her and they read the rest of the article together. The arrest had been straightforward—an airport, two officers, no resistance, which was consistent with a man who understood that resistance at that stage would add to the inventory of his problems without changing the outcome. His lawyer was quoted as saying his client maintained his complete innocence and would cooperate fully with any legitimate investigation. The lawyer's choice of the word legitimate had the specific quality of a man preparing his battlefield.

"He'll fight it for years," Emilia said.

"Yes," Val agreed. "But he'll fight it from custody, or from conditional release with significant restrictions. And the story is public. The evidence is public. Whatever his lawyers do, people know."

She thought about Isabella Ricci, in the Caffè Florian with her hands flat on the table and the weight she had been carrying for three years. She thought about Marie-Hélène Aubert in the Croix-Rousse apartment with the envelope held for three years and the thirty years before that of living under a different name in a city that was not Venice. She thought about Sofia in the hospital with the bullet wound to her shoulder that had missed the subclavian artery by a margin.

She called Lieutenant Ferri.

Ferri answered on the second ring, which Emilia had come to understand as the Lieutenant's version of running to the phone. Her voice had the quality it always had—the composed attention,

the reserve that was not coldness but precision—and underneath it, today, something Emilia could only describe as satisfaction, which Ferri expressed with the same economy she applied to everything: "We have the file open."

"I know. I saw the arrest."

"The warrant covers both deaths—Francesca and Giulia—plus the financial instruments and the attempt at the villa regarding Signora Cheron. The evidence package you and your colleagues assembled was—" A pause in which she appeared to be selecting a word. "Comprehensive."

"It took several people," Emilia said. "And my father, who did what he could."

"Yes," Ferri said. "I read the Bellini letter. Your father was a careful man."

"He was a frightened man. They're not always the same."

"No," Ferri agreed. "But the fear didn't stop him from preserving everything. That counts."

Emilia held the phone and looked out the hotel window at the mountains, which were clear and hard-edged in the December light and had the quality they had most mornings of being permanent in a way that nothing in the valley below them was. She thought about what her father had written: you won't run out of time. She had not. But it had been close enough to feel the wind of it.

"Thank you," she said to Ferri. "For what you said in the interrogation room. About needing something that spoke to cause rather than consequence."

"I was telling you what I couldn't do," Ferri said. "You found it yourself."

"Not by myself."

"No," Ferri said. "Not by yourself."

They were allowed to see Sofia on the afternoon of the third day. She was in a room on the second floor of the ospedale with a view of the mountains that Emilia suspected had been arranged by a nurse with an instinct for what patients needed, and she was propped up in the bed with her left arm in an elaborate sling and her hair down and her mother sitting in the chair beside her—a small woman from Turin who stood when they came in and shook hands with the contained courtesy of someone who had been told who they were and had formed a specific opinion about the situation.

Sofia looked at Celine first. She had, Emilia noted, the expression of someone who has been through something significant and has not yet decided how to carry it—not trauma, not bravado, but the careful provisional quality of someone establishing what they feel before committing to it.

"You got out," Sofia said.

"We got out," Celine said. She sat down in the second chair—Sofia's mother had indicated it—and looked at the young woman with a directness that was entirely free of the performance quality she had brought to almost every other relationship Emilia had seen her navigate. "Because of you."

"Because of you," Sofia said. "You came. I would have waited another year if you hadn't come."

"You had been waiting a year already."

"Eight months." Sofia shifted slightly, cautiously, the way people move when they are managing pain with dignity. "I took the job because the money was good. I understood what he was within three weeks. And I—" She stopped. "I knew about the other women. Not the specifics. But the shape of it. The way he spoke about them when he thought the staff weren't listening." She looked at her hands. "I stayed because I thought maybe I could—I don't know. Do something. I didn't know what. I couldn't go to the police. He had people in the police, or people thought he did, and I was a twenty-two-year-old kitchen worker. Who would—" She stopped.

"You did something," Val said, from the doorway where he had stationed himself with the tact of a man who understands when a room needs fewer people in it. "You opened the kitchen door. You kept the layout of the building and told us where to go. And you bought us enough time at the forest's edge to get across the ravine."

"I ran at Fabbri," Sofia said. "With a kitchen knife." A slight pause. "He shot me for it. I didn't think he would."

"Most people wouldn't," Emilia said.

"No," Sofia agreed. "Most people in most situations don't. I made an incorrect assessment of the probability." She said this with the specific rueful precision of someone who is going to spend time thinking about whether the assessment was actually incorrect and has not yet finished the thinking. "The surgeon

says I'll have full use of the shoulder. In four months. Maybe five."

"Good," Celine said. She reached out and took Sofia's hand, the uninjured one, with the directness she had been showing all morning—the particular directness of a woman who has stopped performing warmth and is simply being warm. "I am going to make sure you're looked after. Financially, medically, everything. And I am going to make sure that what you did tonight is part of the record. Ferretti knows your name. When this is over—when the trial is over—people will know what you did."

Sofia looked at their joined hands. Then she looked at Emilia. "Your father," she said. "I found something in Luca's study, two weeks ago. I don't know if it matters now."

"Tell me."

"A medical report. In English. From America. A private pathology firm—I photographed it before I replaced it." She reached for the phone on her bedside table with her good hand. "The name on the report is Laurent Moreau. It is a toxicology panel. And it shows—" She found the photograph and turned the phone to Emilia.

Emilia looked at the photograph for a long time.

The report was two pages. It showed the standard panel of compounds and their levels and beside several entries the notation: above reference range. The compounds were not medications. They were not alcohol. They were a class of substances whose mechanism of action was cardiac and whose

administration in careful doses over time produced effects that were diagnostically consistent with myocardial infarction.

Her father had not died of a heart attack.

He had been poisoned.

She sat with this in the bright hospital room in Aosta while Sofia's mother poured water into a glass and the mountains stood in the window and time did the thing it does when a very large piece of information arrives, which is to slow perceptibly and then resume.

"The report was in his study," Emilia said.

"In the red folder. The one labeled Cheron. The one you took." Sofia looked at her steadily. "You didn't see it?"

"I photographed the folder's contents without reading them. I haven't looked through them since—since the forest."

She took out her phone. She found the photographs of the red folder. She went through them one by one until she found the medical report, and she read it sitting in the hospital chair, with Val's hand on her shoulder, and Celine sitting very still across the room.

"Ferri," Val said quietly. "Call Ferri."

"Yes," Emilia said. She was very steady. She had been steady, she understood, since October, and the steadiness was not the absence of feeling but its management, the habit of a woman who had learned from a man who held his own distress carefully so that someone else could be all right. She had inherited this, along with his eyes and his library and his capacity for the long attention that things required.

"Yes," she said again. "I'll call Ferri. And then I'll call Marie-Hélène. And then—" She looked at the mountains in the window, the permanent things, the ones that had been there before this and would be there after. "Then I need to eat something. I haven't eaten properly in days."

Sofia's mother, who had been listening with the quiet competence of a woman who raised her daughter to open kitchen doors and was accordingly undisturbed by the level of events she was hearing about, stood up and said that the hospital cafeteria did a reasonable minestrone, and that it was lunchtime, and that they should all come.

They all came.

The days in Aosta produced a texture of their own, distinct from the months before and from whatever would come next—a kind of interregnum, a time between the emergency and the ordinary that had its own quality of attention and its own small particular events that Emilia would remember long after the larger ones had receded into summary.

Val finished the recording. He played it for her on the second afternoon, on his laptop in the hotel room, the Marseille songs in sequence: seven tracks, each one developed from sketches and fragments over the months since August, each one arriving now at the form it had been looking for. The Alpine fragment was the fifth track. She listened to the full version—the minor-key searching quality of the mountain version extended now into something that moved through several key areas and found, finally, an arrival she had not heard in the original, a

resolution that was not resolution in the sense of problem solved but resolution in the sense of a thing having come to terms with its own nature. The ending he had told her he found. She listened to it and understood why.

"What are you going to do with it?" she said, when it finished.

"Release it. The label I work with in Montreal has been asking for something for eight months. This is the something." He looked at the screen where the waveform sat, the visual rendering of the sound. "The fifth track I want to call 'Moreau.' If that's—"

"Yes," she said, before he could ask.

He turned to look at her. "You didn't let me finish."

"You were going to ask if that was all right."

"Yes."

"It is," she said. "It's more than all right."

She called Morrison, the lawyer in Hartford, and asked about the trust. Morrison consulted documents and then explained, in the careful measured tones of a man who delivered complex information for a living, that under Connecticut law the trust's trustee designation could be reviewed and modified upon a finding that the designated trustee had a material conflict of interest or had acted against the beneficiary's interests. He mentioned, in the same tone, that Celine Cheron had submitted a formal request to the court, five days earlier, asking that the trusteeship be immediately and permanently dissolved and the trust transferred to Emilia's direct control. He mentioned that

the court had issued a preliminary ruling and that the full transfer would be finalized within thirty days.

Emilia was quiet for a moment after he finished.

"Who filed the request?" she said. "Morrison—did Celine file it herself, or through you?"

"Through me," he said. "She called me from Lyon, three weeks ago. Before she went back to Venice."

Before she went back to the palazzo. While she was preparing to do what she was about to do. She had been, in the space between the lawyer meeting and the return to Morandi's orbit, dissolving the one tool he had used to control Emilia's situation. She had filed the paperwork and then gone back to be a source inside the house and photographed his documents and told Emilia to meet her in Lyon, and she had done all of this in a sequence that she had apparently not thought worth mentioning.

Emilia found Celine in the hotel breakfast room at seven the next morning and sat down across from her.

"The trust," Emilia said.

Celine poured coffee into Emilia's cup. "Yes."

"You filed from Lyon. Before you went back."

"It was the first thing I could do," Celine said. "That was actually useful. Not the dramatic parts—the dramatic parts came later and were mostly improvised. But the filing was something I could do right then, in a café in Lyon, that would matter. So I did it." She looked at Emilia. "It should have been done in October. I should have gone to Morrison immediately after the funeral and told him I refused the trusteeship. I didn't, because

I was—" She stopped. "I was doing what I have always done when I am frightened, which is to move toward the thing that seems to offer structure and control and call it making the best of a situation."

"In this case the structure and control was Morandi."

"In this case, yes." She set down her coffee cup. "I'm sorry, Emilia. For October and November and the things I said about Val and the ways I made your situation worse instead of better. I know that an apology—"

"It's accepted," Emilia said. She said it simply, without drama, because that was what it was: simple, and without drama, and true. "You came out of that palazzo in the dark at four in the morning with a roller bag and an operational plan. That counts for more than the apology."

Celine looked at her with something that was not quite the eight hundred and fifty thousand followers' Celine and not quite the morning-after-the-forest Celine but a version that had not previously been on offer—more present, less managed, the whole of her rather than the curated portion. "You're like your father," she said. "He was always direct. Directly kind, directly angry, directly whatever he was. He never performed anything."

"He was afraid," Emilia said. "For thirty years he was afraid."

"Yes. And he was still kind inside the fear." Celine smiled, a small, real smile. "That's harder than not being afraid."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Trial

Justice, Emilia discovered over the months that followed, moved at a speed determined by the volume of documentation it had to process and the number of jurisdictions whose cooperation it required, and at no point did its speed coincide with the speed at which the people waiting for it experienced time. The extradition from Switzerland took six weeks, each of which was a week in the ordinary sense of seven days and in no other sense ordinary. The formal charges were filed in February, in Venice, where the investigating magistrate had been given what Ferri described as a comprehensive mandate and what Ferretti described to her readers as an overdue accounting. The trial date was set for June. June was five months away.

In January, Emilia gave her deposition in a conference room at the Questura di Venezia, on a grey Tuesday morning with the Grand Canal outside the window doing its winter thing—the light flat, the water the color of old pewter, a single vaporetto making its reliable crossing in the middle distance. The deposition took four hours and covered the sequence from her father's death in October through the arrest in Aosta. She answered the magistrate's questions in English, a translator rendering them from Italian, and her answers were recorded and transcribed and became part of the formal record of what had happened.

She had expected this to feel like something significant. What it felt like was: careful. The care required to be accurate—to say what she had seen rather than what she had concluded, to distinguish between the document and its implication, to give the date and the location and the specific words rather than the meaning she had made of them—this care was itself a kind of tribute to the process, an understanding that the law's formal requirement of precision was not pedantry but the thing that separated evidence from story, and that both mattered but only one of them could send a man to prison.

Val gave his deposition the following day. He had been in Venice the whole week, staying in a small hotel near the Rialto that he had found by the simple method of looking for somewhere inexpensive near where he needed to be—a habit of practicality that Emilia had come to regard as one of his most characteristic qualities, the way he solved problems by addressing them directly rather than by constructing elaborate approaches to them. He came out of the deposition at three in the afternoon and they walked the calli in the January cold and ate fritto misto at a bar near the fish market where the menu was a chalkboard and the chairs were mismatched and the food was exactly what was required.

"How was it?" Emilia asked.

"Thorough," he said. "They were very interested in the recordings. The voice-activated pendant. The chain of custody from the recording to the backup copies to the files I sent to you." He ate a piece of calamari. "They were also interested in the locksmith tools."

"What did you tell them?"

"That they were purchased from a hardware shop near the Rialto whose proprietor I declined to name on the grounds that he had been extraordinarily helpful to us in ways that had ultimately served the interests of justice and I saw no reason to complicate his life." Val picked up his wine. "The magistrate found this answer, I think, moderately irritating but legally adequate."

Emilia looked at him across the small table—the January light through the bar's low window finding his face with the particular quality it had in Venice, that quality she had first noticed from the water taxi approaching the Palazzo Morandi, the second illumination from below—and felt, in an uncomplicated and entire way, glad. Not merely glad that he was here or glad of the outcome but glad in the larger sense of finding the world, temporarily and surprisingly and against all evidence of the previous three months, acceptable.

"The album," she said. "Ferretti asked me whether the fifth track title was—whether it was something I had authorized."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it was the most accurate thing in the title sequence. That my father was the reason any of it happened." She looked at the canal through the bar's single window. "She's going to write something about him. For the follow-up pieces. His connection to Marie-Hélène, the role he played. She wants to—she wants to make clear that his decision to preserve the evidence

rather than destroy it was itself a form of action. That it mattered."

"Does it feel like enough?" Val asked. He asked it without judgment, only as a genuine inquiry, which was one of the things she trusted in him.

She thought about it. "It feels like what there is," she said. "Which isn't always the same as enough. But sometimes it's all you get and you take it."

Celine posted the first different thing in February. Emilia saw it on her phone in the Montreal apartment she and Val had taken for the spring—a two-room place in the Plateau-Mont-Royal, four flights up, with windows that admitted significant quantities of a cold that was entirely unlike the Mediterranean or Alpine cold she had spent the winter in, being more blunt and less scenic—and sat with her coffee and read it twice.

It was not a brand partnership. It was not a curated photograph of a morning routine or a thoughtful reflection on the season's transitional fashion. It was a piece of writing, eight hundred words, addressed to her eight hundred and fifty thousand followers, and it said: I was in a relationship with a man who was using me. I knew something was wrong and I chose not to see it clearly. This is what I want to tell you about that.

The piece was honest in the way that public writing can sometimes be honest when the writer has decided to stop managing their image and start managing the truth instead, which is a different project and considerably harder. It described the loneliness she had identified in the hotel breakfast room in

Aosta—the particular emptiness of a life constituted entirely of public-facing content and private absence of connection—and what that loneliness had made her susceptible to. It did not name Morandi specifically, for legal reasons Ferretti had advised while the trial was pending, but it did not need to. The context was the story that had been running since December. Everyone reading it knew who she meant.

The comments were, in approximately equal measure, compassionate and hostile and the specific third category that social media produces: people who had been waiting for permission to describe their own comparable experiences and were now describing them at considerable length in the replies. The post reached two million people in forty-eight hours.

Emilia called Celine.

"I read it," Emilia said.

"I know. I could see." On the other end, the sound of Milan in February—the trams, the specific urban texture of a city that had gone back to being hers rather than Morandi's. She had gone back to Milan after Aosta because it was where her work was and where her life was, and because leaving would have been a version of the same flight that he had taken at Geneva airport, which was a flight she declined to make. She had let her apartment with the ring lights and the white walls and the positioned furniture be itself again, and she had taken the ring lights down. She had installed a lamp and two shelves of books, chosen with the assistance of Emilia, who had sent her a list. "I've been thinking about this for six weeks," Celine said. "About what to

do with the platform now that I've been paying attention to what it actually is."

"What is it?"

"It's eight hundred and fifty thousand people who don't know me and think they do," Celine said. "Which is—which could be changed. Partially. With effort." A pause. "I want to use it for something that's actually useful. Not performatively useful—not the kind of advocacy that's really self-promotion at one remove. Something that matters to the people it claims to matter to."

"What are you thinking?"

"I've been talking to an organization that works with women leaving coercive relationships. Not a charity campaign—something more structural. A proper partnership where I'm actually useful rather than merely visible." She paused. "It turns out that having experienced something and having eight hundred and fifty thousand people paying attention is an unusual combination. I'm trying to use it carefully."

"That's good," Emilia said. And meant it, without qualification, for the first time about something Celine was doing.

"It's a beginning," Celine said. "I'm trying not to overstate what it is. But it's a beginning."

Marie-Hélène Aubert gave her statement to the magistrate in March, in Lyon, at the Palais de Justice, in a deposition that lasted two days and covered the years from 1993 to the present with the systematic completeness of someone who had been

organizing this testimony in their mind for a long time and was grateful, finally, for a room in which to deliver it.

Emilia was not present—the deposition was a formal legal proceeding closed to non-parties—but she had spoken with Marie-Hélène the previous week, in the Croix-Rousse apartment, and she had known from that conversation that Marie-Hélène was ready. Had been ready for years. The readiness had not diminished in the intervening time; if anything, the thirty years of waiting had concentrated it into something very precise and very steady, the readiness of someone for whom the thing they have been waiting for has finally arrived and who will not waste the arrival on nerves.

They had talked for three hours, in the apartment with the northern view of the rooftops and the fig tree bare in the courtyard below. Emilia had told her everything—not the investigation narrative, which Marie-Hélène had followed through Ferretti's articles, but the personal story: the journal, the photographs in the locked drawer, the notation M-H, Venice, mai 1994, the blue sticky note and the combination and the Hartford dealer and the folder waiting in the false panel. The letter. For E.

Marie-Hélène had listened with the quality of attention that, Emilia understood, was a characteristic she had inherited from her father rather than from Laurent Moreau, because Marie-Hélène had never met her father and could not have transmitted it directly—and then she had been quiet for a long time.

"He kept everything," she said finally.

"He kept everything," Emilia confirmed.

"I thought he had decided to let it go. After 2019—when I stopped hearing from him through the intermediary, I thought he had made his peace with it. With the silence." She looked at the fig tree's empty branches. "I was wrong."

"He was frightened," Emilia said. "But he preserved everything he knew, in a form that could be found."

"For you."

"Specifically for me." She paused. "And by extension for Francesca. For what she deserved to be known as, if it could ever be established." A pause. "Can it be established? In a legal sense? Her parentage—whether the trial—"

"The paternity document is part of the evidence record," Marie-Hélène said. "My testimony names it. What the court does with it in relation to Francesca's identity—" She stopped. "I don't know. Legally, Francesca Bellini Morandi died as the wife of the man who killed her, with her actual parentage unknown to official record. Whether the trial corrects that in a formal sense, or whether it simply becomes known—" She stopped again. "I have been thinking about what I want for her. What I actually want."

"What do you want?"

"For her name to be true," Marie-Hélène said. "For it to be on record somewhere that she was not Francesca Bellini. That she was Francesca Aubert. That her mother is alive and knew her as a baby and has been thinking about her for thirty years." She pressed her hands together. "I know the law may not accomplish

this. I know it may not be in the court's power or inclination. But it is what I want."

Emilia looked at her—the white hair, the eyes that were also her own eyes, the specific quality of a woman who has been waiting a very long time and has not been made smaller by the waiting—and said: "I'll ask Ferretti. There may be something she can write that makes this part of the public record even if the court doesn't address it specifically."

Marie-Hélène looked at her with an expression that was not gratitude—gratitude was too simple—but was something older and more specific: the look of a person seeing a thing they had believed they would never see.

"You look like your father," she said. "The way he was at twenty-five. Before the years he had." A pause. "He would have been very proud."

Emilia sat with this in the Croix-Rousse apartment for a moment, and did not trust herself to speak, and did not need to.

Sofia's shoulder healed, as the surgeon had predicted, in approximately five months, which was four months and three weeks of physiotherapy that Sofia approached with the focused determination she apparently brought to everything, including opening kitchen doors for people who needed them opened. She had gone back to Turin after the hospital, to her mother's apartment, and she and Celine had been in regular contact—phone calls, occasional visits, a relationship that had no prior category to fit in and was therefore simply what it was, which was two women

who had been in the same bad situation and had helped each other out of it and were now trying to figure out what to do next.

Sofia had enrolled in a nursing program at the Università degli Studi di Torino in the spring. She had announced this to Celine, and then to Emilia by extension, with the directness of someone who has decided what they want and declined to make a negotiation out of it. She wanted to be useful in a way that was structural rather than situational—not dependent on a particular set of circumstances aligning, but built into a profession that would make her useful to whoever needed her, regularly and reliably. She was twenty-two. She had time.

In April, Ferretti published the piece on Francesca. It ran in the magazine section of La Repubblica, four thousand words under the headline she had discussed with Emilia and Marie-Hélène: Francesca Aubert: chi era veramente. Who She Really Was. It was not a legal determination—the courts had not addressed Francesca's parentage formally, though the paternity document was part of the trial record—but it was a public statement, sourced, attributed, read by hundreds of thousands of people, that said: this woman's name was Francesca Aubert. Her mother is Marie-Hélène Aubert. She was born in Venice in January 1995 and she deserved to know who she was and she was not permitted to know it and she died at twenty-nine at the hands of the man who knew and chose otherwise.

Marie-Hélène called Emilia the morning the piece published. She did not say very much. She said thank you, and she said she had bought three copies of the print edition and sent one to the

church in Lyon where she had lit a candle for Francesca on the anniversary of her death every year since it happened, and that the priest there had said he would add the correct name to his records. Emilia said that was good, and meant it, and held the phone after the call ended for a long time.

In May, Val's album was released. It was released digitally on a Thursday, and the following Monday it was reviewed in a music publication whose readership was not enormous but whose opinion was respected in the specific circles where musicians' opinions were formed, and the review said that the fifth track, "Moreau," was the record's center of gravity, a piece that had the quality of something that had taken a long time to find its form and had arrived at exactly the form it needed. It said other things too, about the production and the arc of the seven tracks and the particular character of Val's guitar, but Emilia read the sentence about the fifth track and set the review down on the kitchen table in the Montreal apartment and went to the window and stood there for a while.

She had been painting through all of it—through January in Venice and February and March in Montreal and April in Lyon and the visit to Marie-Hélène and the spring in the Plateau-Mont-Royal, which produced a specific quality of light as the city came back from winter that she had not expected to be as paintable as it turned out to be. She had finished fourteen paintings since October. She had sold three of them, through a gallery on the Saint-Laurent that a friend of Val's had introduced her to, and the proceeds were modest and were hers and

were the first money she had made from her own work, which was a different thing from the trust money in a way she could not fully explain but felt completely.

The trial began on a Tuesday in June, in Venice, in the Corte d'Appello building near the Rialto, which was a sixteenth-century structure that had been administering Venetian justice in various forms since before most of the countries involved in the proceedings had existed in their current political configurations. Emilia arrived on the Monday evening with Val, and they took a vaporetto from the station to the Rialto stop and walked from there, and Venice in June was what Venice in June was—the tourists at critical density, the Grand Canal a continuous procession of water traffic, the evening light on the facades so excessive in its beauty that it seemed like showing off. She found it, walking the calli she now knew, more beautiful than she had in December and more complicated, the city's loveliness no longer separable from what she knew had happened in its canals and in the palazzi that lined them.

She had decided to attend. It had been a decision she made and unmade three times before arriving at it finally in May, when she understood that not attending would be a form of management—managing herself away from the difficulty of the room—and that management was the habit she was trying to break. She attended not because the trial required her presence, which it did not, but because she had started something in October and she intended to be present when it came to its formal conclusion, and because the women whose names were in the indictment—Francesca, Giulia,

her father—deserved someone in the room who had known what they had lost.

The trial lasted eleven days.

Morandi's defense was conducted by a team of lawyers from Milan who were, by all accounts, excellent. Their strategy was the one his lawyer had previewed outside the Questura in December: legitimate investigation, insufficient evidence, the illegality of the recordings and the documents obtained through unauthorized entry, the alternative explanations for each piece of evidence taken in isolation. It was a skillful defense and in a different arrangement of circumstances might have been adequate.

It was not adequate here because the evidence was not taken in isolation. It was taken in its totality—the pattern, the mechanism, the thirty years of documented management—and the magistrate, who had been waiting three years for exactly this file to be complete enough to proceed, had a comprehensive grasp of the totality that no piece-by-piece challenge could fully disassemble. The Marco Bellini letter was admissible as the dying declaration of a witness. The paternity document was admissible as an authenticated original from the Palazzo Morandi files, its provenance challenged but ultimately upheld. The insurance records were public filings. The toxicology report for Laurent Moreau, authenticated through the pathology firm that had conducted the analysis and the Connecticut medical examiner's office that had provided the original tissue samples under an

international legal assistance request, established premeditated murder.

Marie-Hélène Aubert testified on the fourth day. Emilia watched her walk to the witness stand—upright, white-haired, sixty-six, in a dark suit that had the quality of something worn for an occasion that has been prepared for over a very long time—and give her testimony in a clear voice that did not waver and did not perform. She said what she had seen and what she had signed and what she had been told and what she had understood and what she had done with all of it. She said it in Italian, which she had learned in Venice thirty years ago and had maintained with the private stubbornness of someone who refused to let the language be taken along with everything else.

She did not look at Morandi during her testimony. She looked at the magistrate, and at the court reporter, and occasionally at her hands, and once, briefly, at the room, which was where Emilia was sitting.

Their eyes met for a moment. Marie-Hélène nodded once, the smallest acknowledgment, and looked back at the magistrate.

Isabella Ricci testified on the sixth day, and her testimony about the call from Francesca on the night she died—the exact time, the exact words, the plan that was in place and the silence that followed eight minutes later—was, Emilia thought, the center of gravity of the entire proceeding in the way that some things are the center of gravity not because they are the largest piece of evidence but because they are the most human: a phone call, a

woman who was frightened and had a bag packed and was eight minutes from getting out, and then nothing.

Lieutenant Ferri testified on the eighth day about the original investigation and its closure and the resources that had been available to reopen it. Her testimony was measured and precise and contained, embedded in its precision, a controlled and entirely professional fury about the three years between the first investigation's closure and the file being opened again that Emilia found more affecting than if she had been openly angry.

Celine testified on the ninth day. She was, Emilia thought, magnificent. Not magnificent in the way she had been at the engagement party—not the performance—but magnificent in the simpler and more difficult sense of a person who has agreed to tell the truth in full in a room full of people while a man who had intended to kill her sat fifteen meters away, and who does this with composure not because they are not frightened but because the composure is a form of insistence. An insistence that what he had done would be named, and the naming would be done by someone he had tried to silence, and the silencing had not worked.

The verdict was delivered on the eleventh day, at four in the afternoon, with the lagoon outside the building going from afternoon blue to the first suggestions of evening rose, the light doing its Venetian thing with the particular theatrical timing that Emilia had come to believe was not coincidence but the city itself making a statement.

Guilty. On all counts. Three murders: Francesca, Giulia, Laurent. Financial fraud. Coercion. The conspiracy charges relating to the insurance instruments. Life imprisonment under the Italian system, which meant a minimum of twenty-six years before parole eligibility and, given his age and the severity of the charges, a likely functional sentence of the remainder of his life.

She had been expecting the verdict and she found, when it came, that she still needed to sit with it for a moment. Val's hand was in hers. Celine was two seats along, very still. Marie-Hélène Aubert was in the row in front, and when the verdict was read she lowered her head briefly, a gesture that Emilia understood as neither grief nor triumph but the specific response of someone who has been waiting for a thing to be true for thirty years and has now been told officially that it is.

Outside afterward, on the stone steps leading down to the canal-side, the June evening arriving in the warm, salt-scented way of a Venetian summer evening, Emilia stood with Val and looked at the water.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

She took a moment with the question, because it deserved the moment. "Like it's the right answer to the wrong question," she said. "The right answer is: he's convicted, the sentences are just, the record is correct. The wrong question is whether any of that gives back what was taken." She looked at the canal. "My father is still dead. Francesca is still dead. Giulia is still dead. The verdict doesn't change those facts. It just puts them

in the right category—not accidents, not natural, not the bad luck of women near water. What they were."

"What were they?"

"Murders. Things someone chose to do." She watched the water. "That matters. It's not enough. But it matters."

Val looked at the canal with her and said nothing for a while, which was the right response, and she was grateful for his understanding of when the right response was nothing.

Celine came out of the building and stood on the steps below them. She had the expression she had shown in the Aosta breakfast room—the careful audit—and she looked at the canal and then back at Emilia.

"Where do we go now?" she said. Not existentially. Practically. The evening was warm and the city was around them and they had been sitting in a courtroom for eleven days and the need for something immediate and ordinary was, Emilia thought, one of the more reasonable human needs she had ever encountered.

"I know a place near the Ca' Rezzonico," Emilia said. "Small bar. The owner calls everyone cara. They make a very good Aperol spritz and the bovoletti are always fresh."

"Bovoletti?"

"Small snails. Venetian. Val loves them."

Val, who was standing just above them on the steps, said: "I have never had a small Venetian snail in my life."

"Then it's time," Emilia said. "Come on. Both of you."

She led them through the calli—through the turns she knew now and the turns she didn't, the city's internal logic asserting

itself as it always did, the route finding itself through use—and behind her she could hear Celine and Val talking about something, the specific warmth of two people who have been through something large together finding their ordinary register with each other, and the evening settled over Venice with the patience of evenings that have been doing this for a thousand years, the light going amber and then rose and then the first blue of dusk, the canals reflecting it all back in the way of surfaces that have learned to hold light without being changed by it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What Continues

The house was not Briar Hollow. She had been careful about this from the beginning—careful not to want it to be Briar Hollow, careful not to select for the qualities of Briar Hollow the way a person selects a new relationship for its resemblance to the previous one, careful about the entire emotional architecture of what she was building and what she intended it to mean. She had told herself this with some precision in the spring, when the trust was fully hers and the question of what to do with a sum of money she had never previously controlled became not theoretical but practical. She had told herself: whatever you find, it should be its own thing. Don't rebuild what was taken. Build what comes next.

The house she found was in the Haute-Savoie, in a village seven kilometers from Chamonix, at the end of a road that was paved for the first two-thirds and became unpaved for the remainder in a way that was either charming or impractical depending on the season and the condition of one's suspension. It was stone, which was not a coincidence, because stone was what the Haute-Savoie built with and had built with since people arrived in this valley and understood that the available material was the right material for the available conditions. The house was three rooms on two levels with a cellar that she immediately converted to a studio, the light from the single high window being at the specific flat northern angle that painters require

and the stone floor being impervious to whatever she chose to spill on it. She had moved in in August. She had been painting in it since August. It was now October, a year since her father had died, and she was at her easel in the cellar studio with the high window's morning light on a canvas that was going well.

The painting was of the mountain. Not the mountain in summer as she had first seen it from the trail with her father and later from the flat rock with Val, but the mountain in October, which was a different proposition: the upper snowfields established since September, the treeline going gold and red below them, the sky at the mountain's western face the specific dark blue that preceded the afternoon cloud-building. She had been painting this view in various conditions for two months now and was beginning to understand what she was doing with it, which was not to document the mountain—the mountain was indifferent to documentation—but to work out what it meant to have a view you returned to. What it meant to stay.

She worked for two hours in the morning's best light. Val was upstairs making coffee; she could hear the particular rhythm of his movement in the kitchen above the studio ceiling, the sound of his day starting with the same unhurried logic that his music had, each element arriving in its own time and for its own reason. He had been here since August too, most of the time, with periodic returns to Montreal for the work that could not be done remotely—sessions, a run of concerts in Quebec in September that had gone well, meetings with the label about the second record. He came back each time with the specific quality of someone who

has been somewhere else and is glad to be in the place they came from, and she found this quality in him—the returning—one of the things she trusted most about the decision she had made, which was the decision to be where he was and have him be where she was, as far as the work of each of them permitted.

She set down her brush at ten, as she usually did, when the light shifted and the canvas began to tell her it had had enough for the morning. She cleaned the brushes with the methodical attention she had given them since she was sixteen and her father had pointed out that carelessness with brushes was carelessness with the future and she had been annoyed by this but internalized it. She set them in their jar. She stepped back from the canvas and looked at it with the slightly defocused gaze that she had learned produced a truer assessment than the close and deliberate one, and found that the painting was doing what she wanted it to do.

She went upstairs.

The kitchen in October had the quality she had been working toward since August: used. Not messy—she had her father's habit of particular tidiness, the disposition of someone who grew up in a house where chaos was constituted entirely of books and where everything else was in its place, and Val matched it with the practicality of someone who had lived in hotels and small apartments for a decade and had arrived at minimalism through necessity rather than aesthetics—but used in the sense of inhabited, a room that had been living in rather than preserved. There were his notebooks on the end of the table, three of them,

each open to a different section and each containing what appeared to the uninformed eye to be random notation but was actually the layered record of a mind working through music simultaneously on several planes. There was her book on the windowsill, the one she was reading through breakfast, currently Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, which she had found in the village's secondhand shop in September and which she was reading slowly and with the attention it required. There was the coffee, made and waiting, because he knew when she came up.

"How is it?" he asked, from the table where he was already working.

"The mountain," she said, meaning the painting. "It's getting somewhere."

"You said that yesterday."

"Yesterday it was getting closer to somewhere. Today it's arrived at the edge of somewhere. It's different."

He made the sound that meant he was listening while also working, which she had come to distinguish from the sound that meant he was only working, and she poured coffee and sat down with the Weil and they occupied the kitchen together in the particular way of two people who have learned to be in the same room without requiring the room to be about their togetherness, which was, she had concluded, the specific quality she had been looking for without having had a name for it.

Outside, the village was doing its October morning in the unhurried fashion of a place whose calendar was organized around the skiing season and which regarded October as a transitional

interval between the summer's walking tourists and the winter's skiing ones—quiet, locals-only, the kind of morning where the baker's van came through at eight and the sound of the church bell at nine was the primary event. She had been surprised by how much she liked this. She had grown up in a house at the end of a gravel drive and spent four years in a university city and the subsequent year in various European apartments, and she had not expected that what she was looking for was something this quiet, something this far from the ordinary coordinates of a twenty-five-year-old's life. She had expected to find the quiet restless. She had found it instead what the Weil described as the appropriate weight of things: each thing as heavy as it actually was and no heavier.

She had turned twenty-five in September.

The trust had transferred to her direct control three days before her birthday, as Morrison had promised it would. The sum was what it was—not a fortune, after the estate's debts and the legal costs of the trusteeship dissolution, but enough to have bought the Haute-Savoie house outright and to maintain it for several years while the painting developed from a practice into an income, which was the trajectory she was on. The three sales from the Montreal gallery had been followed by four more since then, through a gallery in Lyon that Ferretti had connected her to, and the prices had increased in the modest and incremental way that prices increased when work found an audience. She was not, by any conventional metric, established. She was, by her own metric, working, and the work was good, and the trajectory was

real. This was what she had been moving toward since October of the previous year and the fact that she had arrived at it while also surviving everything else that October had contained seemed, at moments, like more luck than she had any reasonable claim to.

She did not think of it as luck. She thought of it as the specific and cumulative result of a great many decisions made by a great many people over thirty years, several of whom were dead, and whose decisions had produced a version of the world in which she was alive and painting in the Haute-Savoie and her father's journal was on the desk upstairs and his letter was in her bedside drawer. She thought of it as inheritance, in the largest sense of the word: what is passed down, what is preserved, what outlasts the person who made it.

The journal was on the desk in the upper room she used as a study. She had been deciding for months what to do with it—whether to give it to the court, which had seen photographs of the relevant pages and did not require the original; whether to give it to Ferretti for the archive she was assembling; whether to give it to Marie-Hélène, who had a claim on it that was harder to articulate but no less real. She had not done any of these things because she had not yet finished with it herself, and she had decided, having thought about it from several directions, that she was entitled to finish with it before it passed into anyone else's hands.

She re-read it sometimes, not from beginning to end—the early entries, the reflective ones about philosophy and teaching and Emilia herself at fourteen and fifteen, were their own form

of presence and required a specific kind of readiness—but in fragments, the sections she had not yet fully understood, the compressed late entries that she could read more fully now that she had the context they had lacked in October. Each re-reading gave her something different. Not new information—the information was fixed—but new relationships between the information, new understandings of what her father had been thinking and when and why, the archaeology of a person's interiority rendered available by the passage of time and the accumulation of everything that had happened since.

The letter was in the bedside drawer. She had read it perhaps twenty times since Lyon. She read it now in the way she had come to read it, which was the way you read something that is both document and presence, both the thing itself and the person who made it, and which consequently requires a different kind of attention from ordinary reading—slower, with more pauses, the gaps between the sentences as important as the sentences.

There was one line she returned to most often, not because it was the most important but because it was the one that continued to produce new meaning with successive encounters: I spent your childhood teaching you to be open and honest and to trust what you heard, and those are good qualities and I do not regret them but they are not always safe. She had thought about this line in October when she first read it, sitting in the Lyon hotel room, and she had thought about it in Venice and in Montreal and in the Haute-Savoie, and each time she thought about it she arrived at a slightly different understanding of what he

had been trying to say and what he had been unable to say because the thing he was trying to say was not fully speakable in a letter.

She thought he had been trying to say: I am sorry that the world required you to be careful in ways I failed to teach you, and I am also glad that you are the kind of person who hears things correctly, and those two facts exist in tension and I have not resolved the tension and I cannot resolve it, and the best I can do is to tell you both. The love is in the telling both, she thought. The love is in the refusal to simplify.

The blue sticky note was in the inside pocket of the jacket she had been wearing in October and November and December and had continued to wear through the winter and into the spring because it was a good jacket and because it had the note in it, which was not a reason to wear a jacket and was also a reason. She had eventually moved the note, in May, to the small dish on her dresser where she kept the objects of her daily carry-phone, keys, a piece of Alpine scree—and it sat there now with the others, just another small flat object in an ordinary dish. 47-23-08. She knew the combination by heart. She no longer needed the paper to know it. But she kept the paper.

She kept the paper because it was his handwriting, in his black fine-point pen, on a blue Post-it note that had once been on a windowsill at Briar Hollow among the three colored varieties whose coding meant nothing, and because having it in the dish was a form of continuity she could manage without it managing her,

which was the distinction she had arrived at after months of working out how to carry the fact of him.

Celine had, by October of the following year, three hundred and twelve thousand fewer followers than she had had in November of the previous year, and she was the happiest Emilia had ever seen her.

The decrease was deliberate and had been achieved partly by accident: she had changed what she posted and how she posted it, and a portion of her previous audience had found the new content less aesthetically consistent with what they had subscribed for and had unsubscribed accordingly, which was their right and which Celine had accepted not only without resistance but with something approaching relief. The audience she retained—five hundred and forty thousand people, which was still, Emilia pointed out, a number that exceeded the population of Lyon—was an audience that had chosen to stay through a change, and the change had been significant enough that staying was itself a choice. She posted about the coercive control organization she was partnered with. She posted about the legislative reform campaign for stronger protections for victims of financial abuse within relationships, which was a campaign she had become publicly involved with in the spring and which had, in part because of her involvement, received coverage in publications that had not previously covered it. She posted about books, occasionally, and about Milan, and about food, and about the specific texture of her life in the way that she had always posted, except that the

life was now the actual one rather than the curated one and the texture was consequently rougher and more interesting.

She had visited the Haute-Savoie in September, for four days, and Emilia had shown her the mountain and the studio and the high-window light on the canvases and Celine had sat in the kitchen drinking Val's coffee and looking at the mountain through the window and had said: I understand now. What your father was building at Briar Hollow. I didn't understand it before because I couldn't understand why you would choose this over everything else. But I understand it now.

Emilia had asked her what had changed.

"I spent a year," Celine said, "doing something that actually mattered to the people it claimed to matter to. And it turns out that matters more than being seen doing it. I didn't know that. I was forty-two years old and I didn't know the difference."

"You know it now," Emilia said.

"I know it now." Celine had looked at the mountain. "Is it always this beautiful?"

"In October especially."

"In October especially," Celine had repeated, with a quality in her voice that Emilia recognized as a person committing a thing to memory.

Sofia had passed her first year of nursing examinations in June, with marks that her tutor described as commendable, which was university-speak for excellent, which was Sofia-speak for the inevitable result of having studied with the focused intensity of

someone who had decided to be useful and was not interested in any lower standard than useful. Her shoulder was fully recovered; she had finished physiotherapy in May and started a hiking program in June that she documented for exactly no one's social media because she was not interested in documentation. She hiked because the mountains were there and she liked the mountains. Emilia found this straightforwardly admirable.

She and Sofia had developed a correspondence that Emilia would not have predicted in Aosta and that had nonetheless arrived, the way some correspondences arrive, through the accumulation of small exchanges that individually were just checking in and collectively were the construction of a friendship. Sofia wrote with the same directness she brought to everything, the directness of someone who had worked in Luca Morandi's household for eight months and had consequently lost whatever residual patience she might have had for anything other than the thing directly stated. She was interested in Emilia's painting—had asked to see photographs of the work and had offered, when Emilia sent them, opinions that were unqualified and accurate in the way of someone with no art history training and good eyes. She had asked once, in a message in October, almost a year after the villa: Do you think it was worth it? What we did. Emilia had sat with the question for two days before answering, because it deserved the two days, and had written: I think worth it and not worth it aren't the right categories for something that was necessary. It needed to be done. The cost of doing it was what it was. I am glad we did it and I am sorry

about your shoulder and I think those two things can both be completely true. Sofia had replied: Yes. That's right. And then, after a brief pause: The shoulder is fine.

Marie-Hélène had come to the Haute-Savoie in September, two weeks before Celine, and had stayed for three days, and this visit Emilia had found the most difficult and the most necessary of the year. They had walked the lower trails on the first day, and on the second Val had cooked dinner and they had talked—really talked, the conversation that had been held in reserve through all the formal proceedings and the deposition and the trial, the conversation between two women who were connected to the same man in different ways and who were finding out what they were to each other now that the urgency of the investigation was over.

What they were to each other was still being determined. It was not a simple thing and Emilia did not think it would become a simple thing, because the connections between them were too multiple and too loaded with history for simplicity. Marie-Hélène was a woman who had known her father when he was young and who had kept his photographs in an envelope for thirty years and who had given her daughter to another family because she was afraid and who had been right to be afraid and who had also been wrong to let Francesca go without finding a way to tell her. Emilia held all of this without resolving it, because unresolved was what it was, and unresolved was not the same as unworkable. They had a relationship. It was real. It required care. She was giving it care.

Marie-Hélène had brought something on the September visit: a photograph, printed on plain paper, taken from her archive of the Venetian years. It showed two people on a Venetian canal-side in summer: a young woman and a young man, both dark-haired, both squinting into the sun, both apparently in the middle of a conversation. The woman was Marie-Hélène at twenty-five or twenty-six. The man was Laurent Moreau at roughly the same age, before the professorial stoop, before the silver in the temples, before Emilia—before everything. He was laughing in the photograph at something the woman had just said, his face fully open in the way that she had seen it occasionally in life and had always found slightly startling because it was so different from his everyday expression, which was kind and present but also privately occupied.

"He was happy here," Marie-Hélène said, looking at the photograph. "In that summer. He was very young and he was happy and he didn't know yet how complicated everything was going to become."

Emilia looked at the photograph for a long time. Her father at twenty-five on a Venetian canal-side, laughing. She would have been born three years after this picture was taken. The happiness in the photograph was from before her and therefore, in some sense, independent of her—a happiness that existed in its own right and not in relation to anything she had given him, which was both humbling and, she found, consoling. He had been happy before the complications, and he had been happy at Briar Hollow in the evenings under the plane tree, and he had been happy on

the trails in the Alps with her, and the complications and the fear had not been the whole of him. That was what the photograph said. She had read the journal for months and had felt sometimes that she was reading the man the complications had made rather than the man who had existed before and after and alongside them, and the photograph gave her something back.

She asked Marie-Hélène if she could keep a copy.

"I brought it for you," Marie-Hélène said.

In September, two weeks before Celine arrived, the gallery in Lyon had called to ask about the availability of the mountain series. Emilia had eleven paintings in the series at that point and had expected to have fourteen or fifteen by December and had told the gallery this, and the gallery had proposed an exhibition in January: twelve to fifteen paintings, the Haute-Savoie mountain in its four-month arc from August to November, under the title she had come to think of as right for them. The gallery owner had asked what the title was.

She had told him. He had been quiet for a moment and then had said, in the manner of a French gallery owner confronted with something that required adjustment: it's unusual.

"I know," Emilia said.

"It will require explanation in the wall text."

"I'll write the wall text."

Another pause. "It's a good title," he said, in a different tone, the tone of someone who has adjusted and arrived at agreement. "It has weight."

The title was: For E.

She had not planned this. It had arrived the way the right titles for things arrive, not by decision but by recognition—the understanding that the name had been waiting and she had only needed to find it. The paintings were for her, in the sense that she had made them for her own developing understanding of what she was doing and what she was looking at. But they were also for E. in the sense of the envelope, the thing preserved and passed forward, the inheritance that was not money but attention: the specific quality of looking at something until you understand what it is. Her father had given her this, as a practice if not always as an explicit lesson, and she was giving it back in the only form she had, which was the paintings.

Val had heard her explain this to the gallery owner and had said afterward, in the kitchen over the remnants of dinner: your father would have found this excessive.

"He would have found it sentimental," Emilia agreed. "He would have argued for something more spare."

"And then he would have spent twenty minutes defending it to himself and arrived at the conclusion that it was exactly right."

She looked at him. "You've been listening to me talk about him for a year."

"Yes."

"And you feel you know him."

"I feel I know the person you learned things from," Val said. "That's not the same as knowing him. But it's something."

She thought about this for a while. "He would have liked you," she said finally. "Despite himself. The warning on the

mountain—he would have liked you despite the warning. Because you stayed. He valued that. People who stay."

Val looked at the kitchen table. At the notebooks and the Weil and the coffee cups from the morning and the particular quality of a life distributed across a table. "I'm not going anywhere," he said.

"I know," she said. "That's what I mean."

October came in the Haute-Savoie with the particular decisiveness of an Alpine autumn: one week of gold and one week of red and then the leaves down and the upper snowfield extending its territory below the treeline and the quality of the light changing from the warm diffuse of summer to something sharper and lower and more specific, the sun arriving at angles that it had not inhabited since the previous spring. She found this year's October easier than the previous year's and harder than she had expected, because grief had this quality of coming in waves that did not diminish uniformly but changed in character—each October different from the last, shaped by what the intervening year had added to the understanding of who had been lost and why and what they had left behind.

On the thirteenth of October—the day after the anniversary of her father's death, which she spent quietly at the studio without painting, just sitting with the canvas and the light—she walked the trail above the village that she had been walking most mornings since August. It climbed steeply through pine forest for the first kilometer and then broke out above the treeline into the open ground where the mountain presented itself without

mediation, the full scale of it, the snowfields and the rock faces and the specific blue of the sky at high altitude in October. She had been on this trail at least forty times in the two months of living here. She had been on it in rain and in clear weather and in the early morning and the late afternoon, and she had understood by now that one of the things she was doing on the trail was the same thing she was doing in the studio: paying attention to something that did not change in order to understand how she herself was changing.

She stopped at the flat place she had found in August, a broad outcrop of rock that gave the same quality of prospect as the flat rock she had climbed to from the trail below in the previous August—the view across the valley, the peaks on the far side, the sense of height achieved. She sat down on the stone and looked at the mountain and thought about a year.

The year had contained: her father's death and what it had meant and what it had led to; Milan and Venice and Marseille and Lyon and Aosta; two countries' legal systems and an Italian magistrate and a Venetian journalist and a Swiss arrest; the people she had found—Val, Sofia, Marie-Hélène, Ferri, Celine remade—and the people whose absence she was now carrying, Francesca above all, whose face she had looked at for months and whom she had never known and would never know and who had been given a name by Ferretti's article and by Marie-Hélène's testimony and by the paternity document in the court record and by Emilia herself, whenever she thought about her, using the name that was the true one. Francesca Aubert. Hello.

She thought about her father on the trail in the previous August, three steps ahead, saying don't pursue that. She thought about him on this trail in his twenties, before she was born, because he had been on Alpine trails like this—had known the Haute-Savoie from his fellowship years, had walked above the treeline with Marie-Hélène and without her, had been the young man in the photograph laughing on the canal-side. She thought about the journal and the letter and the locked drawer and the notebook in the bottom of his bag that he carried everywhere: pages of philosophical argument, marginalia, the sticky notes whose color coding meant nothing. She thought about the lamp he always left on, the claim that he would be back shortly, the claim the lamp had been refuting since Emilia was twelve.

She thought: he was afraid for twenty-five years, and he was also the man who read to her in the evenings under the plane tree and taught her the names of the flowers on the mountain and corrected her French with the patience of a man who genuinely believed that precision in language was a form of care for the person you were speaking to. He was both of these things. He was the fear and the love and the failure to act and the careful preservation of everything that would allow someone else to act, and he was the yellow sticky note used when he ran out of blue, and he was gone.

She sat on the outcrop for a while with this.

Then she started back down the trail toward the village and the studio and the painting that was waiting.

In the afternoon she painted for three more hours. The mountain was resolving in the way that paintings resolved when they were almost done: the remaining work was the work of precision, the removal of the approximate, the making exact of the things that had been hovited toward their correct form without yet arriving. She was working on the upper-right section of the canvas, where the snowfield met the rock face in a relationship of light and shadow that she had been studying for two months and had finally understood: the snow not white but a complex of blue and grey and the specific warm ochre that appeared in the afternoon when the low sun hit it at the right angle, and the rock not grey but the same complex, darker, with the warm colour absorbed rather than reflected.

She painted. The light moved. At four the low sun found the high-window angle and the studio went briefly extraordinary—the light from outside the window and the light in the painting on the canvas and the light in the room all in the same register for perhaps three minutes, the mountain in the painting continuous with the mountain outside the window in a way that made her stop and put down the brush and simply look.

She thought: this is what painting is for.

Not for the exhibition and not for the sale and not for the review in the music publication that used the right word—weight—and not for any of the external recognitions that she had been glad to receive and would continue to be glad to receive. For this. The three minutes when the light in the room and the light in the painting and the light outside were the same light, and

she was the thing in the middle of them, and the mountain was the mountain.

She heard Val come down the stairs to the studio door. He stopped in the doorway without coming in—he had understood by now, as she had understood his silences, that this room in its working hours was a room you asked about rather than entered—and she could see him at the edge of her vision, standing there with his coffee cup looking at the canvas and the light.

"The snowfield," he said, after a moment.

"Yes," she said. "I finally got the snowfield."

She did not need to explain what that meant. He knew what it meant because he had been here while she had been working toward it, and because he knew the difference between approaching somewhere and arriving, and because arriving, when it happened, was audible even to someone standing in a doorway with a coffee cup.

They stayed like that for a while, with the light doing what it did and the mountain outside doing what it did and the painting on the canvas being, for those three minutes, exactly what it was supposed to be. Then the sun moved and the room's ordinary light returned and she picked up the brush again.

Outside, October was finishing what it had started. The last of the high-altitude color—the gold of the larches above the treeline, the red of the undergrowth—was giving way to the November palette, the stripped-back grey and brown of mountain forest in November, the colors of structure rather than surface. The snow on the upper mountain was consolidating, building toward

the permanent cover of winter. The village below was beginning to prepare: the ski-hire shop on the main street was receiving deliveries, the hotel near the lift station had hung its open sign, the baker's van now came at seven-thirty instead of eight.

She painted the last hour in the studio until the light was fully gone and the canvas was as close to done as a canvas could be on a given day, and she cleaned the brushes, and she went upstairs to the kitchen where Val was making dinner and the notebooks were on the table and the Weil was on the windowsill and outside the kitchen window the mountain was going dark against the last of the October sky.

There was a lamp on in the far corner of the room. She had not turned it on—she never turned it on in the evenings, because the kitchen light was adequate and because there was something about the lamp in the corner that she found unnecessary and also something she was not yet ready to turn off. It was her father's, the reading lamp from the study at Briar Hollow that had been on his desk and that she had asked Morrison to retrieve from the estate sale in November and that had been with her since Milan: the lamp that had always been left on because he claimed he would be back shortly.

She looked at it from the kitchen doorway.

He was not back shortly. He had been gone for a year, and for twenty-five years before that in the ways that mattered, frightened and loving and keeping everything that needed to be kept, and he was not coming back. The lamp did not change this. She turned it on every evening, in the Haute-Savoie kitchen, not

because she expected him to return but because it was the lamp and it had always been on in the evenings and there was no reason to stop now. Continuity was not only for the living. Continuity was also for the dead: the maintenance of the small rituals by which the living carry the dead forward, not because this restored anything but because the carrying was real and the dead were real in the carrying and the lamp being on was one of the ways she knew, each evening, that she had not forgotten and was not going to.

She went into the kitchen and sat down at the table with Val and they ate dinner and the lamp was on in the corner and outside the October dark came fully in over the Haute-Savoie and the mountain was invisible in it, present as the felt absence of the stars above it, and she was home.