

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 10

THE GOSPEL OF BROKEN SKIN

A Novella in Seventeen Thresholds



CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE GOSPEL OF BROKEN SKIN

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 10

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-09-4

Roya Publications

Publication No. 10

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

This novel depicts extreme, transgressive, and graphic content, including self-endangerment, violence, and depictions of a fictional subculture organized around pain and risk. It is intended as literary fiction for adult readers and does not endorse, instruct, or recommend any of the acts it depicts.



NINE MEMBERS. NO NAME, NO SIGN, NO SCRIPTURE.
THE ENTIRE LITERATURE OF THE PRACTICE.

SYNOPSIS

Wren, an ER technician who has spent a decade stitching a numbed city back together, meets Ezra Coyne the night he arrives smiling from a wreck he should not have survived. What follows is her slow initiation into a nameless group who have built an entire discipline around sensation as the last unfakeable proof of being alive — a philosophy of presence, and a threshold, that keeps demanding to be crossed further.

Guided by Ezra's total, ruinous honesty and Marlow's older, harder-won wisdom, Wren finds in pain a clarity the rest of her comfortable, medicated world has stopped offering her anywhere else. But a discipline built on crossing thresholds cannot stay the same size forever, and someone in the room is about to find out what waits on the far side of the last one.

The Gospel of Broken Skin is a noir descent into a fictional subculture of pain, risk, and radical presence — and a story about the rarer, harder discipline hiding underneath all of it: knowing when to stop.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a thought most people never let all the way into the light — the suspicion that comfort, taken as an unquestioned goal, has quietly flattened something in us that used to know how to feel its own aliveness. Most people are right not to say it. It's an ugly thought, and it curdles fast in the wrong hands. But not saying it doesn't make it stop being there.

Some thoughts aren't dangerous because they're false. They're dangerous because they're partly true, and truth doesn't come with a warning label about who's ready to hear it. I suspect almost everyone is carrying at least one thought like that — something they have never said whole, out loud, to another person, not out of shame at having thought it, but because they don't trust what saying it plainly would do to the people around them, or to themselves. Fiction is the only honest place I've found to put a thought like that down. Not because it launders the thought into something safer, but because it gives the thought a body that isn't mine — a Wren, an Ezra, a Marlow — and lets a reader sit with it at a small, survivable distance: close enough to recognize it, far enough to set it back down when they're finished.

This is not an endorsement of anything in these pages. It's an argument, carried out in fiction, that the ugliest thought a person carries is sometimes the one most worth finishing out loud — in a form built to hold it. A page, not a person.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. FLATLINE, GREEN LIGHT	8
II. THE TAXONOMY OF FACES	9
III. THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLINCH	10
IV. MARLOW'S HOUSE	12
V. THE PRACTICE, UNNAMED	12
VI. THE HOLE IN THE TREE	14
VII. PRUE AND THE FISHHOOK CHOIR	14
VIII. DEATH JOCKEYS	16
IX. CROSSING	17
X. WHAT MEG SAW	18
XI. THE ECONOMY OF SENSATION	19
XII. MARLOW'S LINE	20
XIII. COLE'S CURRENCY	21
XIV. UNDERTOW	23
XV. WHAT THE REPORT DIDN'T SAY	24
XVI. THE GOSPEL OF BROKEN SKIN	25
XVII. WALKING OUT	26
EPILOGUE	27

I. FLATLINE, GREEN LIGHT

The kid came in on a backboard with his jaw wired shut by nothing but luck, and he was smiling.

Wren had seen a thousand faces come through those doors doing the thing faces do when the body understands what the mind hasn't caught up to yet — the slack-jawed shock, the animal blink, the crying that isn't sadness so much as a nervous system trying to empty itself before it shuts down. She had a taxonomy for it. A decade on nights in the trauma bay gives you a taxonomy for everything.

She did not have a slot in that taxonomy for what the kid in Bay 4 was doing with his face.

He'd hit a concrete divider on the interstate doing what the responding officer guessed was ninety, no skid marks, which meant no attempt to stop, which the officer said like it was strange and Wren didn't say anything at all. The windshield had gone into a spiderweb the shape of his skull without ever opening it. His left forearm had folded backward at the wrist in a way forearms aren't built to fold, a greenstick fracture she could see shift under the skin like something deciding whether to come out. Three ribs stood up wrong beneath his shirt, visible in outline the way tent poles show through canvas when the tent's been struck. A punctured lung that would keep him overnight and nothing more. He should have been dead. He knew he should have been dead. It was written all over him, not as fear. As satisfaction.

"You have a family we should call," she said, cutting his shirt open.

"No," he said. Not sad. Just factual. Like a man declining a coupon.

His pulse under her fingers was doing something she'd only ever seen in the very devout or the very high — that slow, huge, deliberate beat, like a bell rung and allowed to finish ringing. She'd expected tachycardia, adrenaline, the aftermath panic. Instead his heart rate was coming *down*, settling, the way it does in people meditating, not people who've just tried to merge with a concrete pylon at ninety miles an hour.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, because someone had to ask something true.

He looked at her for the first time since they'd wheeled him in. His eyes were wet, not from pain.

"It's the only thing that's happened to me all year," he said.

She should have let it go. She'd tell herself that later, in the versions of this story she rehearsed for people who would never hear it. She should have logged the vitals, called it a possible psych hold, moved on to the next gurney, the next Tuesday, the next forty years of nights spent putting a numb city back together one stitched laceration at a time.

Instead she wrote his name down. Not on the chart. On the inside of her wrist, in pen, like a thing she wasn't proud of and would do anyway.

Ezra Coyne.

II. THE TAXONOMY OF FACES

Nine days is nothing. Nine days is also, if you spend them the way Wren spent these, an entire second life lived quietly on top of the first one.

Her sister called twice that week about the house — their mother's house, unsold eleven months now, a leak in the sunroom neither of them had the money or the will to look at — and both times Wren let it ring itself out and texted *sorry, crazy shift* afterward, which was true in the way a lie can be assembled entirely out of true parts. She wasn't lying about the shifts. She was lying about what was crazy in them.

She went to work. She came home. She reheated things in their own containers and ate standing at the counter, watching a rerun with the sound off because the sound, lately, felt like one more thing being said at her rather than to her. She was, by any measure a friend or a doctor would have used, functioning. Dana at the nurses' station asked if she was sleeping and Wren said fine, and Dana, who had asked the same question of a hundred burned-out

techs and knew the answer didn't matter as much as the asking, let it go.

What she didn't tell Dana, or her sister, or the mirror, was the specific texture of the thing she kept circling back to at three in the morning, which wasn't the crash, and wasn't even really the boy. It was the four seconds before he answered her. *It's the only thing that's happened to me all year.* She turned it over the way you turn over a stone that might have something living under it, curious and already flinching.

She was thirty-one years old. She had a competent life built out of shifts and container food and a sister she loved from a careful distance, and somewhere in the last few years, without any single afternoon she could point to as the one where it happened, the whole thing had gone quiet the way a radio station goes quiet when you drive far enough from the tower — not a dramatic silence, just static thinning slowly into nothing, so gradual you don't notice you've stopped being able to make out the words.

On the ninth day she looked up beverage distributors on the east side, three of them, and drove to the second one on her afternoon off, telling herself the whole way there that she was simply confirming a discharge address for her own peace of mind, a lie so thin she could see her own intentions straight through it, the way you can see the shape of a hand through a single sheet of wet paper. Nine days is nothing. Nine days is also, it turns out, a length of time that means you looked.

III. THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLINCH

He was working — of all things — a normal job, loading pallets at a beverage distributor on the east side, moving like a man with a punctured lung has no business moving, fast and unhesitating, like the accident was a door he'd already walked all the way through.

"You're the nurse," he said, before she said anything.

"Tech."

"You wrote something on your arm. I saw you do it."

She hadn't known he was conscious for that. It embarrassed her more than anything had in years.

He didn't ask why she'd come. He picked up a box cutter from the loading dock table, turned his forearm over — old scar tissue there, a roadmap of small deliberate lines gone silver with age, some raised into keloid ridges thick as string, others sunk into pale trenches where the skin had healed too fast to fill itself back in, nothing recent, nothing sloppy — and instead of cutting himself, which she flinched in advance for, he set the naked blade flat against the meat of his palm and simply *pressed*, watching her face the whole time, not his own hand.

The skin dimpled white around the edge of the blade before it gave. A thin line of blood welled up dark, then brightened as it hit the air, beading along the cut like something deciding whether to stay a bead or become a stream. He didn't blink. His breathing didn't change. She watched the color come back into the blanched skin at the wound's edge, the small, animal stupidity of a body continuing to try to heal itself even while being told, very calmly, that it didn't matter.

"That's not the thing," he said. "People think it's the pain. It's not the pain. It's that for exactly as long as it lasts, there is nothing else happening in my head. No rent. No dead mother. No radio going in a loop I can't turn off. Just this, right now, and the fact of being *in* it."

"That's what drugs are for," Wren said, and hated how thin it sounded coming out of her.

"Drugs check out of the room. This checks *in*." He set the box cutter down, folded a rag over his palm without urgency. "You've been standing there for three minutes deciding if I'm a lunatic. I'm not going to help you decide. Come to Marlow's on Thursday if you actually want to know, instead of just wanting to have wanted to know."

IV. MARLOW'S HOUSE

Marlow's house didn't look like anything. That was the first lesson, though no one said it as a lesson. No candles, no black paint, no symbols burned into the door. A woman in her sixties in a cardigan, tea going cold on a side table, hospice-nurse hands — the specific gentleness of someone who has closed a great many eyes.

"Twenty-two years I sat with the dying," she told Wren, not as an opener, just as a fact laid down like a foundation stone. "You want to know what I learned? Not one of them was afraid of pain at the end. They were afraid of *disappearing while still alive*. Of the months before, when the morphine had already taken the feeling out of everything, and they were just — present. Attending their own hallway. That's what this culture does to everyone now, dying or not. Numbs the hallway. Calls it mercy."

"And this is the opposite of that."

"This is a *refusal* of that." Marlow's voice didn't rise; it never rose, Wren would learn, that was its own kind of discipline. "We don't worship pain. We're not masochists in the tidy little clinical sense, safe-word sense. We use pain because it is, empirically, the only signal the nervous system has never learned to fake or numb past. You can lie to yourself about being happy. You can medicate away grief until it's a rumor. You cannot lie to yourself about a burn. It is the last true thing available to a species that has automated the rest of feeling out of existence."

Wren looked at the room — nine, ten people, unremarkable, a schoolteacher, a man who fixed HVAC systems, no one you'd cross the street to avoid.

"What do you call yourselves?"

"Nothing," Marlow said. "Names are for things that need selling."

V. THE PRACTICE, UNNAMED

She was allowed to watch before she was ever asked to do anything, and that itself was a kind of seduction — the patience of

it, the total absence of pressure, which felt more dangerous than pressure would have.

What she watched, over three Thursdays, resisted the shape she'd built for it in advance. It wasn't chaos. It was liturgical in its own inverted way — turns taken, a rough order, an unspoken rule that no one initiated anything for another person that they had not already done to themselves first. Ezra held his hand to a stove burner for four seconds, counted aloud, and the room counted with him, not cheering, just witnessing, the way a congregation says amen. Wren watched the skin at the heel of his palm go from pink to white to a shining, taut red, watched a blister rise almost immediately, translucent and already filling, like something being born under the skin rather than damaged on it. The smell reached her half a second after the sound did — a thin, sweetish, meat-and-hair smell her body recognized from a hundred burn-unit transfers before her mind caught up to placing it. Ezra didn't move his hand until the count ended on four, and even then he lifted it slowly, almost gently, the way you'd lift something you didn't want to wake.

A woman named Prue took a fishhook to the pad of her own thumb, slow, controlled, working the barbed point in at an angle and drawing it through in one continuous motion so the barb tore a second, smaller channel coming back out, a thin ragged flap of skin lifting where it exited. Blood came up fast and generous, welling over the pad of her thumb and running down into her palm in a single thread. Her face, through all of it, doing something Wren could only describe afterward as *arriving*.

And there was a car. Always, eventually, there was a car — not every week, but the current ran under everything, the highway logic Ezra called *outrunning the numbness*, two vehicles on the frontage road past the rail yard at two in the morning, closing speed calculated the way other people calculate a golf swing, a controlled clip of bumper on bumper hard enough to total both cars and leave both drivers laughing, wild, alive, checked at the hospital under names that weren't theirs.

No one made Wren do anything. That was the trap disguised as its opposite. Refusal, here, cost nothing, which made refusal feel, for the first time in Wren's adult life, entirely her own choice — and an entirely free choice, offered without cost, is the hardest kind to keep saying no to.

VI. THE HOLE IN THE TREE

Ezra told her his story on a night neither of them had asked for one. Fourteen years old, a kid down a rural stretch of Missouri with too much time and a hole in a fallen tree that a black snake had made its home. Every summer, for a season, boys in that county turned it into a rite of stupid courage — reach in, get bitten, don't cry — and Ezra had done it not for the other boys but for the four seconds after, the venom's slow bright climb up his forearm, fever-bright and total, a feeling with *architecture* to it, a feeling that arrived and built and had a shape, unlike anything else his life had offered him before or since.

"Everyone talks about the pain like it's the point," he said. "The pain's the doorway. What's on the other side of the doorway is the only room in the house where I've ever felt like the lights were fully on."

His father had been a rageful, absent kind of drunk; his mother had left when he was nine and never once been discussed again in that house. He didn't dress this up as trauma looking for a name. He was, Wren came to understand, one of the only genuinely honest men she had ever met, and the honesty was inseparable from the horror of him — he simply would not perform grief he didn't have or shame he'd already burned out of himself years ago.

"I'm not asking you to feel sorry for me," he said, reading her face correctly. "I got past sorry a long time before you were writing my name on your arm."

VII. PRUE AND THE FISHHOOK CHOIR

Prue found her outside after that one, on the porch steps, two mugs of the same tea Marlow never let get properly cold. She was fifty-something, wiry, with the specific patience of someone who

has spent a career being underestimated by rooms full of men twice her volume.

"He tells that story like it's the whole file," Prue said. "It isn't. It's just the chapter with the best light. Ask him sometime about the years after, before he found this place. He won't tell you. Ask me instead, if you want the part he skips."

Wren asked.

Prue had lived eleven years with a nerve condition no specialist ever fully named, the kind that turns ordinary weather into an event inside the body — and eleven years of opioids prescribed with the best intentions, dose stacked on dose, until she woke up one October morning and realized the medication had done exactly what it promised and nothing more: it had taken the pain away, and, with a thoroughness nobody warned her about, everything sitting next to the pain in the same nerve pathways. Her husband's hand on her shoulder. The smell of rain before it starts. She'd gone looking, when she finally tapered off, for anything that could prove the wiring still worked, and found this house instead of a support group, because the support group wanted her to talk about her pain and this house let her simply *have* some, on her own terms, and feel the whole electric fact of it arrive.

"The fishhook isn't about hurting myself," she said, turning her thumb over so the old scar caught the porch light — a thin white seam with a small hard pucker at each end, entry and exit, precise as a surgeon's line, nothing like a wound made by accident. "It's about proving the line's still connected. Some people need less proof than others. I needed a lot. I need less now."

She talked about the frontage road too, the nights the group called Choir Runs, though never in front of Marlow, who thought the nickname cheapened it. Two cars, headlights doused a half mile out, closing at a speed the whole group had argued over for years — not fast enough to guarantee anything, never that, the rule was older than the fear of dying, the rule was *fast enough that the decision to keep going has to be renewed every single second*. Prue had ridden in sixteen of them. She still remembered every one by

the taste in her mouth afterward, not fear, something closer to the first bite of food after a long fast.

"You'll ride one eventually, if you stay," Prue said, not as a threat, just as weather. "Everyone does, once. Some people it's the whole religion right there, and they never need anything else again. Some people it just tells them what door they actually wanted." She studied Wren for a moment, kind and unhurried. "I don't know which one you'll be. Neither do you yet. That's sort of the point of asking."

VIII. DEATH JOCKEYS

The inner room existed a half-level below the one Marlow ran, and Wren was not invited there so much as she noticed, one night, that certain people left through a door that others didn't follow.

Ezra took her, eventually, because by then he'd stopped being able to keep two selves cleanly divided in front of her, and some correct, ruinous part of him wanted her to see all of it or none of it.

Inside: five people, no more, no ritual language, none of Marlow's careful theology. Just a flat agreement, spoken once between two of them while Wren stood in the doorway not yet let further in — *your hand, my knife, however far you say stop* — and then a stillness in the room that had nothing to do with peace. This was not Marlow's discipline of presence. This was something with the morality sanded entirely off it, a closed circuit of consenting adults who had long since stopped asking each other *why* and had started only asking *how much further*.

"This is the part Marlow won't come down and watch," Ezra said quietly, the only apology he ever offered her, and it wasn't really an apology. "She thinks there's a line. I used to think there was a line. There's a threshold, not a line. A line, you can see coming. A threshold, you only know you crossed it by what's different on the other side."

Wren did not participate that night. She watched a man named Cole strip to the waist and kneel on a folded towel already gone stiff and dark at its center from other nights, watched the room

settle into the particular quiet of people who have done this enough times to know exactly how long it takes. She watched his knuckles go white where his hands gripped his own thighs, watched the muscle along his ribs jump and resettle, jump and resettle, in a rhythm that had nothing to do with breathing. She heard the sound before she let herself understand what was making it — a wet, deliberate, unhurried sound, repeating — and watched a thin, dark line start high on his shoulder and run the length of his spine, catching the lamplight, branching and rejoining the way a river finds the low ground in a field. She would not, later, allow herself to describe in complete sentences what was actually being done to him. What unmade her wasn't the act itself so much as its patience — the total absence of hurry in it, performed the way a craftsman performs a task he has done a hundred times and long since stopped needing to think about.

What unmade her more than any of it was that when it was over, Cole was crying, and laughing, at the exact same time, his whole back trembling under a sheen of sweat and something darker, with an expression she recognized instantly and with dread, because she had seen it once before, on a stretcher, in Bay 4, on a boy who should have been dead.

IX. CROSSING

She went back. Of course she went back; the story would be a lie if she hadn't, and Wren had promised herself, somewhere in the drive home that first night, that she would not lie about this to herself even if she lied about everything else.

What she chose, when she chose something, was small by the room's standards and enormous by hers: her own palm, a sewing needle sterilized in a lighter's flame until the metal went matte and faintly blue, threaded, and pulled slow through the webbing between thumb and forefinger while six people breathed with her, not for her, the way Marlow had taught the room to do it — witnessing, not managing. She felt the point meet resistance, then give, the specific double pressure of skin parting on one side and not yet parting on the other, and then the long, strange drag of the

eye of the needle following behind it, wider than the point, stretching the channel already opened. A single bead of blood rose at the entry and sat there trembling before it decided to run.

She had expected agony and gotten information instead. A white detonation that resolved, within four or five seconds, into the strangest sensation she had ever logged in a body she'd spent the better part of a decade repairing in other people: total, cloudless clarity. No rent. No argument with her sister looping in her head since March. No low static of every unpaid thing a life quietly accrues. Just her hand, the thread, the room, now.

"There it is," Marlow said, from the doorway — she had come up after all, this once, though whether for Wren or in spite of the inner room's existence, Wren never asked. "That's the whole religion. Everything after this is just people arguing about how much of it they need."

Wren looked at her hand and understood, with the particular horror of understanding something true, that she wanted more of it already.

X. WHAT MEG SAW

Her sister came without calling first, which was so unlike Meg that Wren knew before she opened the door it wasn't going to be a good visit.

Meg stood in the doorway with the specific stillness of someone rehearsing an opening line and abandoning it. Her eyes went to Wren's hand before her face did — the small, healed-over dot in the webbing of her thumb, nothing dramatic, nothing a stranger would clock, but Meg had grown up in the same house Wren had, had learned the same attention to small changes in a person's hands that a childhood spent watching a mother's moods can teach two sisters equally well.

"What is that."

"A mistake with a box cutter. Work."

"You've never once been careless at work in your life." Meg came in without being asked, which she'd always had the right to do and

had never once exercised before this year. “You don’t answer your phone anymore. You canceled Sunday twice. You look —” she stopped, recalibrating, choosing a smaller word than the one she’d started with — “tired. You look tired in a way that isn’t about sleep.”

“I’m fine, Meg.”

“Say something true instead of that.” Meg’s voice cracked on it, which surprised them both. “Mom used to say *I’m fine* the exact same way, right before every single thing that wasn’t fine. I watched you learn her voice for that sentence when you were nine years old. I know what it sounds like when you’re lying with it.”

Wren didn’t have an answer that was both true and safe to give, which was, she understood even as the silence stretched, its own kind of answer. She thought of Marlow’s cold tea, the porch steps, Prue’s scarred thumb catching the light, the particular clarity of a needle pulled slow through skin — none of it translatable into a sentence that would survive contact with her sister’s kitchen-table logic, the ordinary daylight logic of people who had never needed a doorway to feel like they were standing inside their own lives.

“I found something that makes me feel like myself again,” she said finally, which was the truest sentence she had, and the least reassuring one she could have chosen.

Meg looked at her for a long moment, the particular look of someone doing arithmetic they don’t want to finish. “That’s what scares me,” she said. “You don’t say that about something safe.”

She left without the fight either of them had braced for, which was somehow worse than a fight would have been. Wren stood in the doorway a long time after the car pulled away, holding her own hand up to the light the way Prue had held hers, checking, the way you check a stove you’re almost sure you turned off.

XI. THE ECONOMY OF SENSATION

Marlow named it plainly, months later, over the same cold tea: the economy of the Practice was not stable, and she had watched it fail

the same way in three other people over twenty years, long before Ezra.

"The nervous system habituates," she said. "That's the tragedy baked into the whole idea. What clears your head at a five, in a year clears it at a fifteen, and everyone in that inner room knows it, and not one of them will say it out loud because saying it out loud means admitting the door doesn't stay the same size. It gets bigger. It has to."

Ezra had started sleeping less. Wren noticed it the way you notice weather — gradually, then as a fact you'd somehow missed arriving. He'd started proposing thresholds that made even Cole go quiet. The car on the frontage road, once a controlled ritual with rules older than any of them, was closing at speeds now that no longer left room for both drivers walking away smiling.

"Why doesn't anyone stop him?" Wren asked.

"Because the whole premise of the Practice is that no one stops anyone," Marlow said. "That's the entire moral architecture, such as it is. Total consent, total ownership, no one's keeper. It's the only part of it I ever fully believed in, and it's the part that's going to kill him."

"Then why do you still sit with them?"

Marlow was quiet long enough that Wren understood the question had cost her something.

"Because I already found what I was looking for," she said finally, "a long time before any of this got as large as it's gotten. I know the size the door needs to be. Ezra doesn't, yet. I'm not sure he's capable of learning it in time."

XII. MARLOW'S LINE

It came out slowly, in fragments, the way the truest things about a person always do: Marlow had a rule, one, unbroken in twenty years, that she would never explain and would not permit anyone to test.

No child. No animal. No one who hasn't chosen this with a whole, sober mind, twice, on two separate days.

Ezra called it sentimental once, in front of the group, testing her the way he tested everything, looking for the threshold under the rule the way he looked for the threshold under everything else.

"It's not sentiment," Marlow said, and for the only time Wren ever witnessed, her voice actually rose. "It's the one wall left standing between what we do and what we'd become without it. You take that wall down looking for a bigger room, you won't find a bigger room. You'll find out there was never a house at all. Just weather."

She wouldn't elaborate further, not that night, not ever completely — but Wren pieced together, over months, that Marlow's husband, decades before hospice work, before any of this, had died of a degenerative disease that took his ability to feel his own body months before it took his life, and that Marlow had sat with him through both deaths, the small one and the large one, and had built her entire theology afterward on the conviction that presence — full, unmedicated presence — was sacred precisely *because* someone she loved had been denied it. The Practice, for Marlow, had never been about pain. It had been about refusing, on principle, to let anyone she loved disappear early. The horror of what it had become in Ezra's hands was, Wren realized, the horror of a true thing taken past the only boundary that had ever made it survivable.

XIII. COLE'S CURRENCY

It almost happened to Cole first, and for years afterward Wren would wonder whether the whole shape of what came later had been visible right there, if any of them had known how to read it.

He came to Marlow's on a Tuesday, which was already wrong — Tuesdays weren't a night the house kept — half a bottle of something into a decision he'd clearly finished making somewhere else. He wanted the inner room. He wanted it that night, no waiting, no second sober day, and when Prue reached for the phone to call the others, he said the thing that stopped her hand: that he didn't need consent from anyone else's calendar, that his body was

his own currency and he could spend it however far he chose, whenever he chose, and no rule built by a woman who'd never gone past a fishhook herself had any claim on what he did with it.

Marlow came downstairs in her robe and looked at him the way Wren imagined she'd once looked at families in hospital corridors, delivering news no one wanted delivered.

"Sit down, Cole."

"I don't answer to —"

"Sit *down*." Not loud. Marlow's voice never went loud. It went somewhere colder than loud, a register Wren hadn't heard from her before and wouldn't hear again until the week Ezra died. "You want to talk about currency. Fine. Here's the actual accounting. You are drunk. Drunk is not sober. Sober, twice, on two separate days, is the entire rule, and it is the only rule this house has, and I have watched exactly what happens to men who thought their own certainty on a Tuesday night was worth more than somebody else's careful arithmetic. It is not a suggestion. It is the wall. You are asking me to help you take a wrecking ball to the one wall standing between what we do here and simple, ordinary harm."

Cole didn't leave. He sat, eventually, shaking in a way that had nothing to do with the bottle, and Marlow sat across from him for three hours while the rest of the house slept, not talking him out of wanting it — she never once, Wren learned later, tried to talk anyone out of wanting anything — but simply outwaiting the particular Tuesday-night currency he'd arrived with, until what was left, by two in the morning, was a tired machinist with calloused hands and a grief he hadn't named yet, sober enough to go home.

He came back the following Thursday, properly this time, and asked for something small, and got it, and nobody in that room ever mentioned the Tuesday again in front of him. But Wren mentioned it, once, to Marlow, weeks later.

"What would you have done if he hadn't sat down?"

"Called it," Marlow said. "Out loud, in front of everyone, forever. There's no version of this house that survives a rule with an exception built into it. The wall only works if it has no door in it at

all — not for grief, not for a bad Tuesday, not for anyone I love.” She looked at Wren for a long moment. “Ezra doesn’t know that story. I’d like to keep it that way. He has enough excuses already for the things he wants to believe don’t have walls.”

XIV. UNDERTOW

What happened to Ezra is the part Wren would never tell completely, to anyone, for the rest of her life — not out of loyalty, and not out of shame exactly, but because some experiences resist being handed to people who weren’t in the room, the words arriving pre-broken, incapable of carrying the weight without snapping.

He proposed a threshold the inner room had never gone near: unassisted, alone, no one there to say stop, the frontage road at a closing speed that left no arithmetic for survival, and he did not tell any of them until after.

Cole found the wreckage first — the car folded almost in half around the frontage road’s one concrete stanchion, the windshield gone entirely, safety glass scattered in a bright, glittering fan across thirty feet of wet asphalt. There would be, later, an autopsy that used phrases like *massive blunt force* and *non-survivable*, the flat, procedural language autopsies reach for when describing things that have no flat, procedural language of their own; a police report; a grieving mother reappearing out of years of silence to claim a body she hadn’t seen since a boy reached into a hole in a tree looking for the one true thing in his life. None of it, when it came, would carry any of the truth Wren actually knew: that in the last version of himself she’d spoken to, three nights before, Ezra had told her — not sadly, simply, the way he told her everything — that the room had stopped being able to reach him at any size, that the doorway kept getting larger and the other side kept getting quieter, and that he suspected, calmly, that he was looking not for the feeling anymore but for whatever came directly after it stopped being available at all.

“That’s not the Practice,” Marlow said, when Wren told her, and her voice had gone somewhere Wren had never heard it go. “That’s

what happens when someone mistakes the doorway for the destination. He wasn't chasing presence at the end. He was chasing its opposite and calling it by the old name because the old name was the only vocabulary he had left."

XV. WHAT THE REPORT DIDN'T SAY

The detective who took Wren's statement was young, kind in the specific overworked way of someone who has delivered this exact conversation too many times to still find new words for it, and entirely, hopelessly unequipped to hear the truth even if she'd offered it to him whole.

He asked if Ezra had seemed depressed. She said no, because it was true, and because the word depressed came pre-loaded with an entire official grammar — sadness, hopelessness, a diagnosis with a leaflet attached — that had nothing to do with the calm, curious, terrible clarity she'd actually watched him arrive at over the final months of his life. He asked about drugs. She said no, truthfully again, and watched him write something down that she understood, even upside down, was going to be some version of the word *reckless*, a word built to close a file rather than open one.

She signed the statement. She did not mention Marlow's house, or the frontage road's real name among the people who used it, or the fact that a woman two towns over had been outwaiting men's worst nights at her kitchen table for two decades with nothing but cold tea and a single unbroken rule. She told herself this was protecting the others. She understood, driving home, that it was also the first time in her adult life she had built something the exact size and shape of a lie and handed it to an official with a badge, and that it had come out of her mouth easier than almost anything true ever had.

Her sister called that night, for the first time since the porch conversation neither of them had finished. Wren let it ring twice before answering, and when Meg asked, carefully, whether she was okay, Wren gave her the same discharge-address lie she'd once told herself on the drive to a beverage distributor — a version of the truth thin enough to see her own intentions through — and

understood, hanging up, that the numbness she'd spent a year trying to outrun in one direction had simply found a new door to walk back in through, wearing a badge, wearing a grieving sister's careful voice, wearing the specific, comfortable, well-meaning grammar of a world that had never once made room for the thing she'd actually seen.

She went to Marlow's the following Thursday, for the first time since the funeral that wasn't a funeral, because there was, by then, exactly one place left where she would not have to lie about any of it.

XVI. THE GOSPEL OF BROKEN SKIN

They held something for him that the group had no name for and had never held before — not a funeral, Marlow was clear about that, funerals were for people who believed the dead needed comforting rather than witnessing. Nine people in Marlow's house, the same unremarkable furniture, the cold tea, and one at a time, without direction, each of them did a small, honest version of the Practice. Prue reopened the old scar on her thumb with a fresh hook, careful and unhurried, and let it bleed onto a folded paper towel without wiping it away. The HVAC man burned a coin-sized patch into his forearm and held the arm out afterward, silent, so the whole room could watch the mark rise white and tight before it started to weep at the edges. Someone Wren didn't know well pressed a sewing pin through the loose skin above her collarbone, in and out, three small punctures beading up in a neat, deliberate row, like stitches basted and not yet pulled tight. None of it for thrill, not that night, but as testimony, the room's only true language for grief, a gospel written the one place none of them had ever learned to lie: the skin.

Wren went last. She held the sewing needle Marlow handed her, and understood, with a clarity that had nothing to do with pain at all, that she had a choice in front of her that the whole book of her life so far had been quietly building toward: she could go further, tonight, than she ever had — the room would let her, no one would

stop her, that had always been the entire architecture — or she could do the smallest possible true thing and put the needle down.

She thought of Ezra's face in Bay 4, radiant, having just crossed a threshold he'd mistaken, at the very end, for a doorway. She thought of Marlow's one unbroken rule, built out of a husband's numbed and stolen dying, and of a machinist named Cole sobering up at a kitchen table because a wall had held. She thought, for the first time in months, of her sister, of the argument that had gone quiet in her head weeks ago without her noticing it had ever actually mattered less than the feeling of a needle through skin — and she understood, with the same total clarity the Practice had always promised and, this once, actually delivered, that the rarest threshold in that entire theology, the one none of them had ever named because none of them had ever needed to cross it, was simply: *enough*.

She set the needle down, unused, in the center of the room, in front of everyone.

No one stopped her. No one had ever stopped anyone. That had always been the whole religion, and for the first time she understood it was also the whole way out.

XVII. WALKING OUT

She didn't tell Marlow goodbye. Marlow would have understood it better than anyone alive, and that was exactly why Wren didn't need to say it out loud.

She went back to nights in the trauma bay. The work was the same — the taxonomy of faces, the automated numbness of a city that had built comfort into every wall of itself and called it mercy — but something in her had recalibrated at a frequency she couldn't explain to Dana at the nurses' station, or her sister, or anyone who hadn't stood in that room and put a threaded needle down of their own free will.

She called Meg the next morning, before her sister could call her, and said something true instead of *I'm fine* — not the whole truth, there wasn't a version of the whole truth Meg's kitchen-table logic

could hold without breaking, but something honestly load-bearing: that she'd been somewhere dark for a while, that she was walking back out of it under her own power, that she wanted Sunday dinners again if the offer still stood. It did. Meg cried on the phone in a way she would have been embarrassed by in person, and Wren let her, and understood that this too was a kind of presence, unglamorous and entirely real, the ordinary daylight kind she'd once mistaken for numbness simply because it had never once demanded a needle to prove itself.

She still felt everything. That was the part the Practice had actually been right about, underneath everything Ezra had gotten wrong: the world had not gotten any less numb. She had simply stopped needing a doorway to prove, to herself, that she was standing fully inside her own life. The proof, it turned out, had never required a threshold at all. It had only ever required attention, freely paid, to whatever was already, unglamorously, happening.

Marlow was right about one more thing, the last time Wren saw her, months later, from across a grocery store aisle, neither of them crossing to speak: some people find the size the door needs to be. Ezra never got the chance to. Marlow had found it decades before any of this began. Wren had found it, finally, in the one moment she chose to stop.

EPILOGUE

The house is still there. Different address, same cardigan, same cold tea. Marlow is older now, and someone else has started sitting where Ezra used to sit, proposing thresholds of his own, and the room is letting him, because the room always lets everyone, that has never once changed and never will.

This isn't a moral. It's just a fact, the way the frontage road is a fact, the way a hole in a tree with something living inside it is a fact.

Some doors get found. Some get crossed. Very, very few, ever, get closed on purpose, from the inside, by someone who already got what she came for.

Wren has spent ten years on nights in a trauma bay, putting a numbed city back together one stitched laceration at a time. She has a taxonomy for every face that comes through the doors.

The boy in Bay 4 does not fit it. He hits a concrete divider at ninety with no skid marks, and his pulse is coming down like a bell allowed to finish ringing. He is smiling.

He takes her to a house that looks like nothing at all. No candles, no symbols on the door. A woman in a cardigan, tea going cold, and a room of ordinary people who have built a discipline around the one signal a nervous system has never learned to fake.

The discipline works. That is the problem with it. What clears a head at a five clears it at a fifteen a year later, and nobody in that room says out loud that the door does not stay the same size.

*Some doors get found. Some get crossed.
Very few get closed on purpose, from the inside.*

