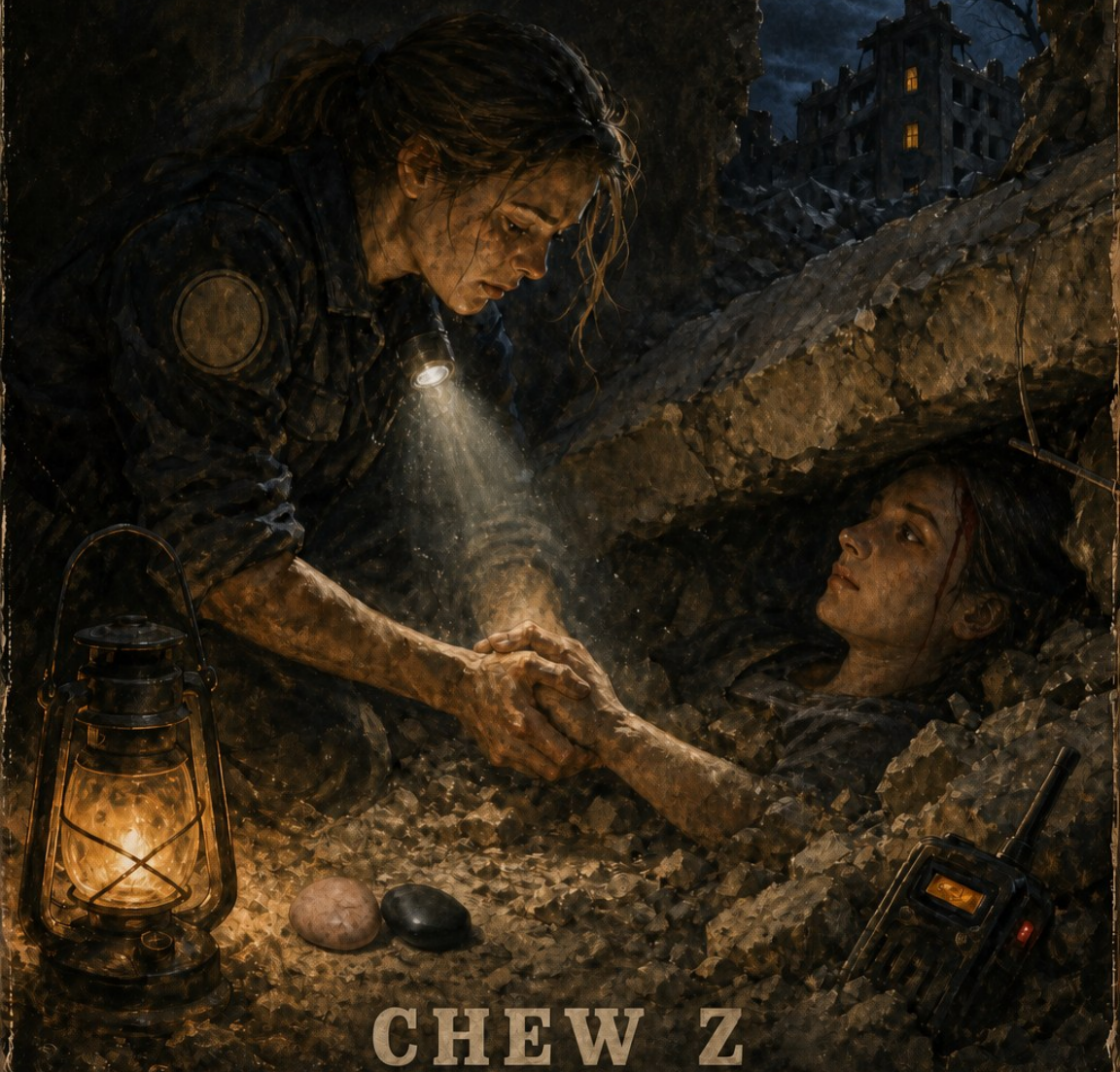


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THE MARRIAGE OF STONES



CHEW Z

• A ROYA PUBLICATION •

THE MARRIAGE OF STONES

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 11

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.

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TWO PAIRS. ONE INHERITED, ONE ASSEMBLED.
THE DIFFERENCE IS THE WHOLE PRACTICE.

SYNOPSIS

Reyhan doesn't experience time in order anymore. Cold stone against skin, a stranger's grip, a certain slant of afternoon light — each is a trapdoor back to some other year of her life. She has built a private discipline around the dislocation: teaching the powerful and the damaged a total literacy in their own bodies, using paired stones — pink and black — as instruments as precise as a stethoscope.

Her current client has mastered everything except himself. Their sessions become a slow disarmament, equal parts seduction, therapy, and interrogation. Beneath it, in fragments that arrive out of sequence, the truth of her own apprenticeship surfaces — a teacher who may have been a healer or exactly the kind of predator who preys on the already-broken — and beneath that, the original wound itself, told last, told plainly, told without mercy.

A nonlinear novella about trauma, embodiment, and the question of whether mastery over one's own body is a cure, or simply the most sophisticated scar a person can carve.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There's a phrase that's become common shorthand in trauma research: the body keeps the score. I didn't set out to illustrate a textbook, but the idea kept returning to me while I wrote this book — that what happens to us doesn't stay in the past the way memory pretends it does. It lodges. It waits in the tissue, in the reflexes, in the places we stop letting ourselves feel. Time, for the traumatized, is not a line. It's a loop with trapdoors.

That idea owes an obvious debt to Kurt Vonnegut, whose *Slaughterhouse-Five* taught a generation of readers that some experiences are too large for chronology — that a person can become unstuck from time not as a fantastical device, but as the truest way to describe what it feels like to survive something. I wanted to write a trauma story that moved the way trauma actually moves: sideways, backward, arriving uninvited.

But I also wanted to ask a stranger question, one I'm not sure has a comfortable answer: if the body is where the wound lives, could the body also be where it's finally metabolized? Not talked through, not reasoned with — felt through, in the most extreme register available to it. Pleasure, pushed to its outer edge, is one of the few states that returns us fully to our own skin. What happens if that return is deliberate? What happens if someone builds a discipline out of it?

I don't offer an answer in these pages. I'm suspicious of anyone who would. But I find the question worth sitting with, and worth handing to you.

Chew Z

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CHAPTER ONE

Now.

The room is not what people expect. No incense, no silk, no candlelight arranged for effect. A single lamp, amber-shaded, throws a low light across a floor mat and two cushions. On a low table between them: a lacquered box, and inside it, wrapped in undyed linen, two stones.

Reyhan does not speak first. She has learned that the first person to speak in this room is the one still performing a self they haven't finished building. She lets the client sit. Lets him notice the silence has weight. Most people, faced with quiet this total, start negotiating with it — filling it, apologizing to it. He does neither. He simply waits her out, the way a man waits out a market he intends to buy.

She likes him already. She distrusts liking him. Both are useful information.

"You said on the phone you wanted to understand your own body," she says. "Not increase pleasure. Understand it."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"No. One is furniture. The other is architecture."

He almost smiles. Almost is a category she tracks carefully with men like him — men who have spent decades ensuring nothing crosses their face without a toll paid first.

She opens the lacquered box. Unwraps the linen. Two stones: one the deep pink of something that has been alive, polished to a slick, private shine; one black, heavier than its size suggests, absorbing the lamplight instead of returning it.

"These are called Married Stones," she says. "Publicly. What I call them is mine."

She does not explain further. She presses the black stone into his open palm and watches, with real clinical interest, the exact moment his face forgets it is supposed to be composed.

It's cold. That's the whole trick, at first. Cold enough to be undeniable. Cold enough to require his full attention, the way a body in shock will focus entirely on the one true fact — the broken bone, the bleeding — and abandon every performance around it.

"Cold," he says, like it's an accusation.

"Everything starts cold," she says. "That's how you know it's real and not a memory."

Somewhere behind her sternum, a door she keeps oiled and quiet swings open half an inch. She lets it. She always lets it, now. It used to terrify her, this door. Now it is simply weather.

CHAPTER TWO

Eight years before.

The radio call comes in at 4:12 a.m., structural collapse, multiple trapped, and Reyhan is already moving before the dispatcher finishes the sentence, because that is what eleven years of night shifts does to a body — it stops waiting for permission.

She will remember, later, that the building smelled like a wet basement and rebar dust, that someone's radio was still playing music from a unit three floors up that hadn't finished falling yet, that she said "hold his head, don't let him look down" to a stranger in a bathrobe who obeyed her instantly, the way people obey anyone who sounds certain during the worst minute of their life.

She will remember the particular geometry of concrete on a torso. How the human eye tries to read it as sculpture, some kind of accident of art, before the brain catches up and refuses the frame.

She will remember that she did her job. That her hands did not shake. That competence, in the moment, felt like the only mercy available, and she gave it generously, to everyone, in order, by triage color, the way she'd been trained.

She will not, for a long time, let herself remember the one patient she didn't triage by color. The one she simply stayed with, past the point of protocol, past the point of use, because leaving felt like a second collapse, smaller, entirely hers.

For now: 4:12 a.m., the radio still playing, her hands doing the thing they know how to do.

CHAPTER THREE

The apprenticeship, year one.

The room he teaches in has no furniture at all — just a floor, swept obsessively clean, and a window that faces east so the morning light arrives on schedule like something you could set a watch to.

“Sit,” he says, which is the entirety of the first lesson, repeated for forty minutes, until she understands he means it structurally and not casually — sit as in *locate the places your body has agreed to stop feeling, and refuse the agreement.*

She has come to him half by accident, half by the specific desperation of someone who has been told by three doctors that there is nothing physically wrong with her hands, which she can no longer feel closing around anything, not a coffee cup, not another person’s wrist, not her own hair when she pulls it in the shower to remember she has a body at all.

He does not touch her, that first year. This detail will matter later — will be the detail she returns to, trying to decide, in hindsight, whether it was integrity or architecture, a real absence of appetite or a very patient version of one.

“Pain already taught you where the border is,” he tells her, on the last day of the first month. “I’m only going to teach you how to draw it yourself. That’s the entire difference between what happened to you and what we’re going to do.”

She doesn’t believe him yet. She writes the sentence down anyway, in a notebook she will use for the next six years, because some part of her — trained by a decade of triage — recognizes a claim worth checking for a pulse.

—

Before her. Long before.

He was not always the man with the swept floor and the east-facing window. For six years he sat with the dying professionally, in a

hospice wing that smelled permanently of lemon disinfectant failing to cover something older underneath it, and he was, by every metric the job offered, excellent at it — steady voice, steady hands, a face that had learned very early not to flinch at the specific geometry of a body giving up.

He tells no one — not Reyhan, not the two students before her, no one — about the night his own teacher died three feet away from him while he performed competence instead of presence, the exact inversion of what he will spend the next fourteen years training people never to do. His teacher was old by then, papery, a woman who had taught him the paired stones the way her own teacher had taught her — cold as the undeniable fact, warmth as the thing you eventually learn to generate yourself. She had asked him, at the end, only to stay. Not to fix anything. Only to stay, and mean it.

He stayed in the room. He did not, he understands only much later, actually stay. Some younger, more frightened version of him narrated the room instead of inhabiting it — noted her breathing rate, noted the color climbing her hands the way Reyhan will one day note it in a stranger's, filed it all with perfect clinical accuracy, and gave his teacher, in her last twenty minutes, a man performing calm rather than a man who had it. She knew. He is certain, turning it over for decades afterward, that she knew, and forgave him anyway, which somehow makes it worse, not better.

He builds the entire apprenticeship — the sitting, the border, the insistence on total presence over correct performance — out of that twenty minutes. It is, he would say if anyone ever asked him directly, which no one does, the only inheritance he has left of her: not the stones themselves, which are just river rock, but the specific, unbearable knowledge of exactly what it costs to fail at presence while believing yourself to be succeeding at it.

What he does not examine, not once in six years of hospice work and not once in the fourteen years since, is why the lesson he extracted from his own failure is one he now administers entirely to other people's hands, never again to his own. He tells Reyhan to sit until she locates the places her body has agreed to stop feeling. He has never once, by his own account, sat that long himself. The floor

is swept obsessively clean because he is the one who sweeps it, alone, before each student arrives, and some part of him — a part he would call diligence and a more honest man might call penance — needs the room spotless in a way that has nothing to do with hygiene and everything to do with a debt he has never found the correct posture to repay.

He picked this student, if he is honest with himself in the particular hour before dawn when honesty is cheapest, because her hands had already stopped working the same way his once did, in that room, in front of that dying woman. He recognized the numbness the way you recognize a coastline you've only ever seen from very far away. He believes, and will go on believing for years, that this recognition is compassion. He does not ask himself the second question — whether what he actually wants is a body in front of him finally *doing* the presence he failed to do, so he can watch it succeed this time, from a safe distance, without ever again risking that it might be his own.

He does not think of this as a debt being passed forward. He thinks of it, when he thinks of it at all, as the only honest trade left available to a man who has already spent his one chance at doing this correctly. Someone taught him the shape of the border. He is only continuing the shape. That the shape, each time it moves through another pair of hands, seems to cost the person receiving it something he never quite has to pay himself — this is not a thought he permits to finish forming, and by now, fourteen years and several students deep, he has gotten very good at not permitting it.

There is a specific memory he returns to more than any other, though he has never once described it aloud, not even in the hour before dawn: his teacher's hand, three days before the end, still strong enough to grip his wrist and hold it there, and her voice, already thinning, telling him that the work was never about the border at all — that the border was only ever the excuse, the way the cold stone was only ever the excuse, for two people to stay in a room together longer than either of them would otherwise have permission to. He wrote this down too, in a different notebook, one he no longer owns, because he gave it away, years later, to the first

student before the one before Reyhan, along with a version of the sentence edited just enough that its original shape no longer showed.

He remembers, with a clarity that frightens him more than almost anything else from that period, that he felt something like relief in the days immediately after she died — not because the grief wasn't real, it was, it is, even now, but because the specific unbearable tension of performing calm in front of a woman who could see through the performance was, at last, over. No one left in the room to notice. He built the swept floor and the east-facing window not long after, in a rented space three neighborhoods from where he'd lived with her those last two years, and told himself the distance was practical, closer to the hospital where he still occasionally consulted, nothing more. He has never once gone back to the old apartment, not even to look at the building from the street, though he has, on certain nights, driven the long way home specifically to avoid the possibility of passing it by accident.

What he tells Reyhan, in the version of this story he permits himself to imagine telling her, though he never actually will, is that he became a teacher because he had something worth passing on. What is closer to true, and further from anything he has ever said out loud, is that he became a teacher because it was the only remaining way he could think of to keep being in the room with someone at the exact threshold his own teacher occupied when he failed her — to keep restaging the scene, differently, patiently, for as many years and as many students as it took, on the chance that eventually, with enough repetition, he might finally arrive at the version where he actually stays.

CHAPTER FOUR

Now.

Second session. The client has brought his own notebook this time, a leather one, expensive, and she almost laughs, because she recognizes the gesture instantly: a man trying to attend his own disarmament as if it were a boardroom.

"Put it away," she says.

"I take notes on everything."

"That's the problem you're paying me to fix."

He puts it away. It costs him something to do it — she watches the cost cross his face and log itself somewhere — and she files that, too. Everyone who comes to her arrives with a ledger. Her job, she's decided, is not to add to it. Her job is to make the ledger irrelevant for forty-five minutes at a time.

"Tell me about the last woman you were with," she says.

He gives her a summary. Efficient. Flattering to himself in the specific way efficient summaries always are.

"That's a resume," she says. "I asked what happened to your body."

He doesn't have an answer for that. It is, she suspects, the first time in a decade someone has asked him a question he can't immediately monetize into an answer. She watches him sit inside the not-knowing. Some men flee it. He, to his credit, stays.

She hands him the pink stone this time. Warmer than the black — she's been holding it. He notices the temperature difference immediately, the way a body starved of sensation notices anything at all, and for a moment his whole careful architecture just — stops.

What she doesn't tell him, because it isn't information he's paid for yet, is what happens next in bodies like his: the ones that have spent a decade converting every sensation into strategy. The stone doesn't ask him for strategy. It asks nothing at all, which is precisely the problem. Heat with no negotiation attached to it moves through a body the way water moves through a structure that was never actually built to keep water out — it simply finds every unaddressed seam.

His breath goes first, catches somewhere below where breath usually catches. Then something further down answers it without his permission, a full-body flush he cannot route through composure, cannot narrate his way out of, cannot bill to any version of himself he recognizes — and for four, five seconds he is not a man in a room performing the correct depth of vulnerability for a service he is paying for. He is a nervous system, unattended, doing

exactly what nervous systems do when nothing is asked of them but presence. His hips move perhaps an inch, involuntary, and he makes a sound she has heard from men twice his age and once from a stroke patient regaining sensation in a limb everyone had already grieved.

He is horrified. That is correct. That is, in fact, the entire diagnosis.

"There it is," she says, mostly to herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eight years before.

The morning after, her hands still know exactly what to do, and nothing else does.

She showers at the station because she cannot make herself go home yet, and stands under water so hot it should hurt and does not, quite, and she understands, distantly, professionally, the way she'd note a symptom in someone else, that something in her has gone quiet in a way showers don't fix.

Her captain tells her to take the week. She takes two days and comes back, because stillness, she is starting to learn, is worse — stillness lets the door open on its own schedule instead of hers, and she would rather choose the hour.

She signs the incident report. Efficient. Accurate. It reads like weather — *structural failure, multiple casualties, extended extraction* — and contains nothing at all about the radio still playing three floors up, nothing about the stranger in the bathrobe, nothing about the one patient she stayed with past the point of protocol.

Some reports, she is learning, are true and still lie by omission, and the omission is the part that will keep working on you at 4 a.m. for years, long after the report itself is filed and forgotten by everyone except the person who wrote it.

CHAPTER SIX

The apprenticeship, year one.

"There's an old idea," he says, months in, "that a body can be paired the way a lock is paired to a key. Not romantically. Structurally. One instrument for the front border, one for the back. Married, because a marriage is the only word we have for two things that only make sense in relation to each other."

He shows her stones for the first time — not the ones she'll eventually carry, just examples, river-worn, unremarkable. "The stone isn't the point," he says. "The stone is an excuse to pay attention. You could do this with a coin. A key. Anything cold enough to be undeniable. I use stones because stones don't ask anything back."

She turns one over in her palm. It is, she thinks, the first object in a year that hasn't required her to perform feeling it.

"Why pink and black," she asks.

"Because the front border and the back border tell you different things," he says. "One is about being seen. One is about being alone even when you're not. Most people spend their whole lives running from the second one. I'm going to teach you to sit in it until it stops being a threat."

She writes this down too. She does not yet know which sentences of his are wisdom and which are simply well-lit manipulation. She will not know for two more years. This is, she'll later decide, the exact design of the not-knowing — and possibly its cruelty.

—

Before her. Long before.

The stones are not his. This is the part he tells no student, because the telling would require admitting that the entire practice he presents as considered, original, earned through his own years of sitting — is, underneath, inherited whole, the way a coat is inherited, worn by someone else first until it takes the shape of a different body only slowly, imperfectly, never completely.

His teacher gave him this exact pair the year before she died — not the ones she'd used on him, a different set, warmer wood-grain pink and a black stone with a hairline vein of white through it like a crack that had healed wrong. "One for the front, one for the back," she told him, in words close enough to the ones he will later use on Reyhan that he sometimes cannot tell, lying awake, which sentences are hers and which he has quietly made his own by repeating them long enough. "Married, because a marriage is the only word we have for two things that only make sense in relation to each other." She did not invent this either. She told him, once, that the idea was older than either of them, older than the stones, something closer to a fire-temple instruction than a therapeutic one — the old duality of the truth you can't argue with and the lie that only survives in a body that has stopped paying attention to itself. He never asked her where she'd learned it. He understands now, the way you understand things only in hindsight, that this not-asking was itself a kind of inheritance — the specific silence a lineage requires in order to keep passing itself along unexamined.

He remembers the exact cold of the black stone the first time she pressed it into his palm, in a room not unlike the one he now teaches in, though his had a rug, and hers had smelled faintly of cedar rather than swept dust. He remembers the specific, humiliating relief of being handed an excuse to feel something without having to first construct a socially acceptable reason for feeling it. He was, at the time, twenty-six years old and had not cried in front of another person since he was eleven, and the stone did not ask him to explain why that was, only asked him to be cold, and then, later, warm, and let the rest of him catch up on its own schedule.

What he does not tell Reyhan, when he shows her the stones for the first time and calls them merely examples, river-worn, unremarkable — is that they are, in fact, the single most consequential objects his teacher ever gave him, and that handing them onward is not a demonstration exercise. It is the exact moment the coat changes hands again. He watches Reyhan turn the black stone over in her palm with the same careful, wondering attention he once brought to it himself, and something in him — he

would not call it satisfaction, though satisfaction is closer to true than he would ever admit — settles, briefly, the way a debt settles when a payment is made against it, even if the payment is being extracted from someone who never agreed to owe anything.

He tells her stones don't ask anything back. This is, strictly, true. What he does not say — what he may not, even now, fully understand himself — is that *he* asks something back, every time he hands them to someone new: a small renewal of the belief that what was given to him was worth receiving, that the inheritance was a gift and not simply the only thing his teacher had left to hand off before she ran out of time to examine whether it was one.

There is a word his teacher used once, only once, late enough in his training that he almost missed it, folded into an offhand sentence about why the cold has to come before the warmth and never the other way around. She called it *asha* — an old word, she said, for the kind of truth that holds a structure together, as opposed to the kind of lie that only feels like relief because it costs nothing yet. He did not ask what tradition the word belonged to. He has looked for it exactly once in fourteen years, late at night, in a browser window he closed before finishing the search, telling himself he already understood it well enough in practice not to need the history — which is, he will not let himself notice, precisely the same maneuver by which an entire lineage of not-asking gets to keep renewing itself, one incurious inheritor at a time.

He has, over the years, assembled a private theory about why the practice moves in pairs — teacher to student, stone to stone, cold to warm — and the theory, when he lets himself examine it directly, frightens him slightly, because it implies an obligation he has never once fulfilled. His teacher gave him the stones expecting, he now believes, that he would eventually do the one thing she never got to do herself: find his way back to someone who had known him before all of this, before the cold and the warm and the careful architecture of presence-as-practice, and let that person see him plainly, without a stone in the room to mediate it. He has not done this. He has, instead, gone in the opposite direction every year for fourteen years, adding another layer of ritual, another swept floor,

another east-facing window, each one a slightly more elaborate way of ensuring that no one ever gets close enough to ask the question directly.

He thinks, sometimes, of the word she gave him — *asha* — and of the fact that he has built an entire vocation out of teaching other people to hold themselves to a standard of undeniable truth that he has not once applied to his own life outside the room. Inside the room, with the stone in someone else's palm, he is more honest than he has ever been anywhere else. The moment the door closes behind a student, the honesty seems to close with it, folded up and put away like the linen the stones are wrapped in, waiting for the next appointment to be worth unwrapping again. He has never described this contradiction to anyone, because describing it would require admitting that the room itself may be the only place he has ever been able to tolerate being truthful, which would mean the whole practice is not generosity at all, but a very elaborate, very expensive way of buying himself forty-five minutes of a feeling he cannot otherwise produce.

He remembers, too, the specific afternoon his teacher first told him the stones were not really about the body at all, not fundamentally — that the body was simply the only instrument reliable enough to hold a truth that the mind would otherwise negotiate its way out of within minutes. “The mind will lie to you for free,” she said, “every single time, without even noticing it’s doing it. The body has to be paid first, in sensation, before it will tell you anything real.” He believed her completely, at the time. He believes her still. What he has never let himself notice is that he has arranged his entire life so that the body doing the paying, session after session, year after year, is never his own.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Now.

Alone, after the second session, Reyhan does the thing she does every week and has never told anyone about: she opens a ledger of her own, handwritten, and logs the session under an initial and a

euphemism. Not for privacy — her memory is fine. For the joke. Dark, private, hers.

Client 14 — “the Boardroom.” Held stone 90 seconds before the face arrived.

Some entries make her laugh out loud, alone, in a way that would unsettle anyone who saw her — the particular gallows humor of someone who has spent a career finding jokes at the exact center of catastrophe because the alternative to laughing is a much older door.

She keeps the ledger in the same drawer as the stones. Once, only once, she has written a private name for them at the top of a page — *Anahita, keep this one honest* — and then never again, because some names lose their charge if you spend them too often.

She thinks, closing the drawer: *this is either the most honest work I have ever done, or the most elaborate scar I have ever built*. She does not resolve the thought. She has learned not to require resolution before continuing to live inside a question.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The apprenticeship, year two.

The lesson deepens, and so does the question of who is really being taught.

He asks her, now, to teach the exercises back to him — to place the stones in his hands, describe his own borders back to himself while he holds them. It is presented as pedagogy. *You learn a language by speaking it, not just hearing it*. She accepts the framing for months before a smaller, colder voice in her — the one trained by a decade of triage to distrust anything that explains itself too smoothly — starts asking a different question: *who benefits from my hands being the ones that do the teaching?*

There is an evening — she will return to this one specifically, later, turning it over the way she once turned over the stone — where the line between apprenticeship and something else goes fully transparent, and she cannot, even years afterward, decide with total confidence which side of it she was standing on. He was

patient. He was also never, not once, the one being asked to sit inside his own not-knowing.

She notices, and files it, the way she once filed a patient's pulse: *irregular. Worth watching. Not yet actionable.*

There were nights that same year when he left her alone with the stones on purpose — pedagogy, he called it, *you cannot teach a border you have never crossed by accident* — and she would sit on the floor of the empty room with the black stone pressed flat between her thighs, cold going to warm going to something that had no name she trusted yet, and her body, which had refused her for a year, would suddenly answer with a violence that felt less like pleasure than like a bone being reset without anesthetic — necessary, correct, and unbearable in the same instant.

It did not feel like ecstasy. She has never once described it that way to anyone, including herself. It felt like being forcibly reconnected to a limb she'd amputated out of mercy — a flood of sensation so total that her spine arched off the floor and her hands, her clever diagnostic hands, closed on nothing, grasping at air the way a drowning person grasps at surface. Afterward she would lie there shaking for whole minutes, not from pleasure exactly, though pleasure had clearly happened, but from the sheer overwhelming administrative fact of having a body again, all at once, with no warning and no consent given in advance for how much it would cost to have it back.

She wrote none of this down. Some data, she decided, was not for the ledger.

—

Before her. Long before.

He does not tell his students that his own hands went quiet once too — not from a single catastrophic night, nothing so clean as a collapsed building, but from six years of hospice work accumulating in him the way sediment accumulates in a pipe, narrowing the channel so gradually that no single day announces the blockage. By the time his teacher died in front of him, performed at rather than accompanied, some part of him had already stopped fully feeling

the rooms he sat in. He built the entire apprenticeship, in part, as a machine for reversing that — and the machine, he discovered years into running it, works considerably better on other people's hands than it has ever worked on his own.

This is the part he has never said out loud, to anyone, including the two students before Reyhan: asking her to teach the exercises back to him is not, primarily, pedagogy. It is the only remaining procedure he has found that reliably produces the sensation he is otherwise no longer sure he still has access to. When she places the stone in his palm and describes his own borders back to him, haltingly, uncertain of her authority to do so, something in his chest answers in a way that nothing else in his life reliably answers anymore — not sleep, not solitude, not the swept floor, not the fourteen years of swept floors before this one. He tells himself this is simply modeling vulnerability for the student's benefit, demonstrating that the practice runs in both directions. He has told himself this so consistently, for so long, that the sentence now arrives fully formed, requiring no further inspection, the way a well-worn lie eventually stops feeling like effort.

What frightens him, on the nights he allows himself to notice it at all, is the trajectory. Each cohort of students restores the sensation a little less completely than the one before. He does not know if this is because the sensation itself is degrading with age, the way everything degrades, or because some part of him has begun requiring larger and larger doses of being taught — needing the students to go further into their own unraveling before his own hands report anything back to him at all. He has not asked himself, plainly, what happens when a cohort's unraveling stops being enough. He has, if he is honest in the specific hour before dawn when honesty is cheapest, already begun to suspect the answer, and has already begun, with the same quiet unexamined competence he brought to his teacher's final twenty minutes, arranging his life so that he will never have to find out.

He would say, if anyone asked him plainly why he needs a student to hold the stone against his own palm and speak his borders back to him — and no one has ever asked him this plainly, because he

has built an entire architecture of soft-voiced authority specifically to prevent the question from occurring to anyone in the room — that it keeps him honest. That a teacher who forgets what the border feels like from the inside is no longer qualified to teach it. This is, again, strictly true. It does not touch the second, less flattering truth sitting directly underneath it: that he has built, without ever deciding to, a practice that requires a fresh, unhealed person to walk through his door every eighteen months or so, not because he has more to give them, but because he has, by now, almost nothing left to generate on his own, and has quietly outsourced the manufacturing of his own aliveness to whoever is young enough, hurt enough, and trusting enough to still believe the arrangement runs both ways.

He notices, in Reyhan specifically, a resistance the earlier two didn't have — a cold, professional part of her that keeps filing his behavior the way she once filed a patient's vitals, refusing to simply accept the framing he offers. He tells himself he finds this promising in a student. He does not let himself finish the adjacent thought: that some part of him, older and more frightened than the part that teaches, has already begun treating her particular resistance as a threat to the only mechanism he has left for feeling anything at all, and that a man frightened in this specific, unexamined way is not a safe person to be alone in a room with, however swept the floor, however patient the voice, however sincerely, in the hour before dawn, he believes himself to still be the one doing the healing.

He remembers the exact session, four years earlier, with a different student entirely, when he first discovered what happened if he let himself receive rather than only give. It was not planned. He had simply, on an evening when his own hands felt more absent than usual, asked the student — a quiet man in his thirties, gone now, moved to another city, no longer in contact — to place the black stone in his palm and describe what he saw. The student did, haltingly, uncertain of the reversal, and something in his chest had answered with such force that he'd had to excuse himself from the room for several minutes, ostensibly to retrieve water, actually to stand in a hallway with his back against the wall, breathing,

astonished at how completely alive a single borrowed exercise had made him feel after years of feeling almost nothing at all.

He built the justification afterward, the way he builds most of his justifications — not as a lie exactly, but as a retrofit, a structure of reasoning erected around a thing he had already decided to keep doing regardless of whether the reasoning held. Modeling vulnerability. Demonstrating reciprocity. Teaching the practice from the inside rather than only administering it from a safe distance. Each of these is defensible in isolation. None of them explains why he has never once done this with a colleague, a peer, someone capable of declining without professional or financial consequence — only ever with students, only ever with people for whom refusing him carries a cost they can feel long before they can articulate it.

He has, in fourteen years, never described this pattern to anyone as a pattern. He has described individual instances of it, to himself, in isolation, each one felt at the time like an exception, a particular student's particular need, a specific evening's particular rawness. It is only very late, on nights he does not permit himself often, that he can see the instances stacked end to end and recognize the shape they make together — a shape that looks considerably less like teaching and considerably more like a man siphoning aliveness from whoever is closest and least equipped to refuse him, one supervised, well-lit, carefully-worded session at a time.

CHAPTER NINE

Seven years before.

What the event actually took from her wasn't a person. She is careful about this distinction, has been careful about it for years, because the version of the story where she lost someone is easier for people to hold, and she has stopped being willing to make her wound easier for other people to hold.

What it took was smaller and stranger: the ability to trust her own hands as instruments of true information. For a decade her hands had told her the truth about the world — a pulse, a temperature, a fracture, a lie in someone's grip when they said they were fine and

weren't. After that night, her hands kept working, kept diagnosing everyone else with total accuracy, and told her nothing at all about herself. She became, overnight, expertly fluent in every body except the one she lived in.

This is the part she cannot explain to the three doctors who found nothing wrong. There was nothing wrong, mechanically. The wiring was intact. What had gone missing was translation — the body kept sending its signals, and the part of her that used to read them had quietly, professionally, gone on strike.

She thinks of it, later, the way you'd think of an instrument that still produces a perfect tone but has lost, somehow, its ear.

CHAPTER TEN

Now.

The client's third session. He says something true, unprompted, and looks immediately terrified of having said it — the specific fear of a man who has built a life on never being caught without a rehearsed answer.

"I don't think anyone has touched me on purpose in eleven years," he says. "Everyone touches my position. Nobody touches me."

She doesn't reach for him. That's the part she's proudest of, in this work — knowing exactly the moment reaching would ruin the sentence he just managed to say. She lets it sit in the room, uncollected, the way you let a wound air before you decide what it needs.

"That's the first true thing you've told me," she says.

"Is that the job? Getting people to say true things?"

"The job is making your body stop lying on your behalf before your mouth catches up. Yours just caught up."

He is quiet for a long time, holding the pink stone, which by now has gone warm from his own hand rather than hers — which is, she thinks, the entire point, the whole architecture of the practice compressed into one small fact: eventually you have to be the one generating your own warmth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The apprenticeship, year two.

The Teacher's method turns, or perhaps it was always this shape and she is only now developed enough to see the shape clearly — she genuinely cannot tell which, and this not-knowing is, she will realize far later, the single most damaging thing he ever built, more damaging than any specific act: the deliberate, patient construction of a student who could no longer trust her own read of a situation, which is the one skill she had walked in the door already possessing.

He begins asking things of her framed as necessary practice that she notices, with the old cold triage-voice, serve no pedagogical purpose she can locate — serve, in fact, only him. She does them anyway, for a while, because doubting him has been trained out of her as thoroughly as doubting her own hands was trained out of her by the collapse.

Then, one evening, he says something offhand, cruel in its casualness, about a previous student — a joke at her expense, dressed as fondness — and something in Reyhan, some instrument she thought had gone permanently silent, gives a single clear reading: *this is not a border he's teaching you to draw. This is a border he needs you not to have.*

It is the first fully trustworthy signal her body has sent her in seven years. She does not act on it yet. But she writes it down, and this time she underlines it.

—

Before her. Long before.

The previous student had a name he still will not say out loud, even alone, even to the empty swept room, though he thinks it more often than he would ever admit — usually late, usually right after a session that has gone unusually well, as though her name is the tax levied on any evidence that the practice still works.

She left eleven months before Reyhan arrived, and she did not leave quietly, the way he tells the story to himself now — smoothed,

generalized, a student who “wasn’t ready,” a student whose “own material got in the way.” What actually happened is that she sat across from him on an ordinary Thursday and told him, in a voice with no theater in it at all, that she had spent four months slowly understanding that every exercise he’d ever framed as being for her benefit produced, without exception, an outcome that served him — his comfort, his sense of continued relevance, his need to be found necessary — and that she could no longer locate a single moment in two years of training where his need had not, eventually, outweighed hers.

He did not shout. He did not, by his own accounting, even feel defensive, not at first — what he felt, he recognizes only in hindsight, was something closer to vertigo, the specific nausea of watching an entire self-concept fail a stress test in real time. He told her she was projecting a wound from before him onto the room. He told her, gently, in the exact register he uses to help students locate their own borders, that her reaction was itself useful data, worth sitting with rather than acting on. He used, that afternoon, every tool the practice had ever given him — and used all of them, without noticing he was doing it, in the service of making her doubt a reading that was, in fact, the single most accurate one anyone in that room had ever produced.

She left anyway. She did not come back to argue further, which he has, for eleven months, allowed himself to interpret as evidence that she simply hadn’t been strong enough to stay in the discomfort — rather than evidence that she had, finally, correctly diagnosed the room and removed herself from it, which is the reading he has never once permitted to complete itself, because completing it would require him to accept that the border he most needs a student not to have is not some abstract inner boundary at all. It is the specific, ordinary clarity to see him plainly, the way Reyhan’s hands once saw a stranger’s pulse — total, unsentimental, already knowing the diagnosis before the mouth catches up.

This is why the joke slips out that evening with Reyhan — dressed as fondness, aimed sideways, a small assertion that other students exist and get discussed once they’re gone. He does not experience

it, in the moment, as cruelty. He experiences it as maintenance: a reflexive test, almost administrative, to confirm that this student, unlike the last one, still requires him enough not to look too closely at what the joke actually reveals. He does not yet know that something in her — an instrument he has spent two years patiently convincing her not to trust — has just given her the first fully accurate reading of him she's had since she walked in the door, and that this reading, unlike the previous student's, she will choose to write down rather than speak, and will not act on for another two years, but will never again fully un-know.

He will think of the previous student again, briefly, on the ordinary Tuesday Reyhan simply stops coming back — will wonder, for the length of one uncomfortable evening, whether the pattern he has just watched repeat itself for a second time is a coincidence of two difficult students, or a fact about the room itself that no amount of swept floor has ever been sufficient to correct. He will not sit with the second interpretation long enough for it to finish forming. By the following week, he will have already begun, quietly, without deciding to in any way he could describe to another person, watching for the next one.

He remembers, if he lets himself, the exact shape of the previous student's face in the seconds after she finished speaking — not anger, which he could have absorbed and reframed as easily as he absorbed and reframed everything else, but a kind of settled, almost peaceful clarity, the specific expression of someone who has finally finished a piece of arithmetic they'd been avoiding for months and does not need him to confirm the sum. It is that expression, more than anything she actually said, that has stayed with him. Anger he knows how to metabolize; he has tools for anger, techniques, a whole practiced vocabulary of gentle redirection. He has no tools at all for a person who simply, quietly, stops needing his opinion of her conclusion.

He has told himself, in the eleven months since, several different stories about why she left, rotating between them depending on the hour and how recently he has had to sweep the floor for someone new. On his best days, he tells himself she genuinely wasn't suited

to the depth of the work, that some people arrive already too fractured for a practice this demanding, and that her leaving reflects a limitation in her rather than a flaw in the room. On his worst days, alone, past midnight, holding a stone with no one scheduled to receive it, he allows himself perhaps ninety seconds of an entirely different story — that she was, in fact, the most perceptive student he has ever had, that her diagnosis was exact, and that the reason he has never once tried to repair the rupture or seek her out to understand it further is that some part of him already knows repair is not actually what he wants. What he wants, underneath the ninety seconds he allows himself, is for the room to keep working exactly as it has always worked, and for the cost of that continuing to work to keep landing on someone other than him.

This is, he understands only abstractly, without ever finishing the thought in a way he could say aloud, the precise mechanism by which the border he needs a student not to have gets built and rebuilt with every new arrival: not through any single dramatic act of cruelty, but through the quiet, cumulative arithmetic of a man choosing, session after session, year after year, the version of the story that lets him keep sweeping the floor tomorrow morning with his sense of himself as a healer still fully intact.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The night it happened.

The building took eleven seconds to fail, start to finish, and she spent six of them making a decision that cost her nothing structurally and everything otherwise: she chose to go toward the second sound instead of away from the first.

The patient was a woman roughly her own age, pinned from the chest down, fully conscious, entirely lucid, asking Reyhan — by name, having read it off her uniform — not to save her, because she could already read her own vitals in the color of her own hands, but to stay. Just to stay. To not let the last conversation of her life be with a stranger who left.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The night it happened.

Minute one.

Dust is still coming down, fine and endless, sifting through the gap above them like something that has decided to become weather. Reyhan's knees have found two flat inches of broken tile between rebar ends, and she does not move them again for the next forty minutes, not once, though by the end she will not be able to feel where her knees stop and the concrete begins. Somewhere above and to the left, a man's voice is counting off a different rescue in a different pocket of the building — *I've got a pulse, I've got a pulse, hang on* — and the ordinariness of another stranger surviving lands on her, briefly, like a mercy she has no right to borrow.

The air still tastes like rebar dust and wet cement, a taste she will not be able to separate from certain kinds of silence for the rest of her life. Somewhere further off, water is running from a broken line, a small domestic sound completely out of place inside so much structural wreckage, patient and steady, like a tap left on in an empty house.

The woman is pinned from the sternum down, a slab resting at an angle that has, by pure accident of physics, kept her chest free enough to breathe. Her face is unmarked, almost absurdly so, dust-powdered and calm in a way that makes Reyhan's training run three separate diagnoses before the woman even speaks, and none of them are good, and all of them agree with each other, which is the part that matters.

"What's your name," Reyhan asks, once the settling overhead goes quiet enough for words to survive it.

"Does it matter now."

"It matters to me."

A pause the length of a held breath. "Alma."

"Alma," Reyhan says, and files it the way she files everything — except this one, she already knows, she will keep.

She takes the offered hand because there is nothing else useful for her hands to do, and because Alma's grip finds hers first, fast, harder than a woman in her condition should still be able to manage, and Reyhan does not say what that tells her. That is the one rule of the next thirty-nine minutes, decided without either of them saying it aloud: nothing true gets spoken unless Alma is the one who says it first.

Minute two.

Neither of them says anything for a while. Reyhan lets it sit, because she has already learned, in eleven years, that the first silence after an agreement like this one is not a silence that needs fixing — it's the sound of two people finding out whether the agreement is going to hold.

Somewhere behind her, a stretcher wheel catches on debris and shrieks once, briefly, and is gone. Alma's thumb moves once across the back of Reyhan's hand, small, almost accidental, and Reyhan understands it as a test — *are you still there, is this still happening the way you said it would* — and does not move away from it.

Minute three.

"Talk to me," Alma says. "Not about — " She doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't have to.

"About what, then."

"Anything. Weather. I don't care. Just don't let it go quiet."

So Reyhan talks about the weather, because it's the smallest true thing she has. Two days ago, she says, it rained in the afternoon and stopped by six, and the sidewalk outside her apartment steamed for twenty minutes afterward like it was breathing. She doesn't know why she remembers that. She has never once mentioned it to another living person. It comes out of her now, whole and useless and exactly what is needed.

"I had laundry on the line," Alma says. "Had to run out and get it. Barefoot. My neighbor saw the whole thing."

"Did you get it in time?"

"Half of it." A sound that might have been a laugh, if laughing weren't already an expense she can't quite afford. "The sheets got soaked through again."

Neither of them says anything about whether the sheets ever dried. Reyhan does the math anyway, privately, the way her hands do everything now, without asking her permission first.

Minute five.

The dust has slowed to almost nothing. What's left drifts down in single flakes, catching what little light there is, and for a stretch of time Reyhan cannot later account for, she simply watches it fall across the small visible triangle of Alma's face, because watching it is easier than watching anything else in the room, and because Alma seems, for now, content to be watched instead of talked to.

A boot scrapes rubble somewhere to the right. A radio crackles a call sign she doesn't recognize. She does not turn toward either sound. Her whole attention has narrowed, without her choosing it, to the exact temperature and pressure of one hand.

Minute six.

The radio is still going, three floors up, through a ceiling that isn't there anymore in any way that should let sound travel and does anyway. Slow, old, a little warped from whatever it's playing through. Four bars looping, over and over, some song neither of them can name, the kind that used to come out of a kitchen radio on a Sunday while someone did dishes and didn't think about it being remembered later.

"I know this one," Alma says. "I don't know it. But I know it."

"Same," Reyhan says.

"Hum the part you know."

Reyhan does, badly, off the beat, and Alma corrects her, faintly, breath doing more of the work than her voice, and for eleven seconds — Reyhan will count them later, obsessively, the way she counts everything from that night — they are just two women getting a tune wrong together in the dark, and it is, briefly, almost good.

Minute eight.

The song loops again, and again, and neither of them asks anyone to turn it off, though someone easily could. It has become, without either of them naming it as such, the room's only clock — not minutes, just loops, four bars each, counted without counting, and Reyhan will realize only years later that some part of her has never fully stopped hearing it.

Alma's grip shifts again, resettling, the way a hand does when it's decided to be here for a while and wants to find a more sustainable way to hold on.

Minute ten.

The dust has mostly settled now. What's left is a fine gray film over everything, over Alma's hair, her collar, the backs of Reyhan's own hands, which have not let go and do not intend to. Somewhere behind her, boots on rubble, a radio crackling a code she doesn't turn to acknowledge. Someone calls her name — her actual, department name, the one on her uniform — and she says, without turning her head, *occupied*, and that is the entire negotiation. No one comes to argue with it. Triage color has already been assigned to this scene and everyone on it knows what color it is except, officially, out loud, the person lying in it.

"You're not going to tell me," Alma says. Not a question this time either.

"No."

"Good." A breath. "I already know. I've got eyes. I can see my own hands."

Reyhan looks down at them then — she has been avoiding it, which is its own kind of tell — and sees exactly what Alma has already diagnosed herself: the color starting at the nail beds, patient and unhurried, doing the one thing it always does, the thing Reyhan has watched a hundred times in a hundred other hands and never once had to sit inside of like this, minute by minute, with nowhere else to put her attention.

"Okay," Reyhan says. It's not agreement. It's the only word left that doesn't lie.

Minute twelve.

For a while, nothing is said at all, and Reyhan lets that stand too, because she is starting to understand — sooner here than she will admit to anyone for years — that presence doesn't always need a voice attached to it. She shifts her weight without letting go, just enough to take some of the ache out of one knee, and Alma's eyes track the small movement, and something in her face, brief and almost embarrassed, might be gratitude that Reyhan is still uncomfortable enough, still human enough, to need to shift her weight at all.

Minute fourteen.

"Do you have anyone," Alma asks. "Waiting on you, I mean. Tonight."

"No."

"Ever?"

"Not really."

"That's sad," Alma says, and there's no cruelty in it, just a plain, tired kind of honesty that people only seem to manage once they've stopped budgeting their words for later. "You should fix that. When this shift's over."

"I'll think about it."

"Don't think about it. Do it." A ghost of the earlier almost-laugh. "I'm allowed to boss you around today. Special occasion."

Reyhan doesn't answer that one. There isn't an answer that wouldn't be a lie in one direction or the other, and lying, she has decided, in either direction, is now off the table for good.

Minute sixteen.

The water is still running somewhere, that same patient domestic sound, and Reyhan finds herself timing her own breathing to it without deciding to, the way a body will sometimes borrow a rhythm from whatever steady thing happens to be nearby. Alma's

breathing has not found anything to borrow from. It has its own rhythm now, one Reyhan is tracking without wanting to, the way she has tracked ten thousand other breaths in ten thousand other rooms, except that none of those rooms asked anything of her except her hands.

This room is asking for the rest of her too. She gives it.

Minute nineteen.

The silences start getting longer here, and Reyhan lets them, because filling every one would turn this into a performance, and Alma didn't ask for a performance. She asked for company. There's a difference, and it is, Reyhan will understand only much later, the exact difference she will spend the next several years of her life trying to teach other people to feel in their own skin.

The grip in her hand shifts — not weaker yet, just different, like something recalibrating for a longer haul than it originally planned on — and Alma's breath goes uneven for four full seconds before evening back out, and Reyhan counts those seconds too, silently, the way she will count nearly everything from this night for the rest of her life, whether she wants to or not.

"Still there," Alma says. Not a question. A checking-in. The kind you do with someone you've decided to trust with the whole rest of it.

"Still here."

Minute twenty-one.

A long stretch now where the only sounds are the loop of the song, the drip of the broken line, and the small, steady evidence of two people continuing, against very different odds, to be alive in the same six square feet of wreckage. Reyhan finds she does not want to fill this silence either. It is, in its own way, still the promise being kept — not the absence of words, just the absence of anything false trying to pass as one.

Minute twenty-three.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone," Alma says.

Reyhan almost deflects it. The old training says deflect, redirect, keep the patient calm with generalities, don't make yourself the

subject. But the old training was built for situations that end with the patient walking out, and this is not that, and some newer, colder part of her — the part that will not fully arrive until years later, in a room with no furniture, in front of an east-facing window — makes the decision before she's finished thinking it through.

"I don't like this job most days," she says. "I'm good at it. That's not the same thing."

"What would you do instead?"

"I don't know. I've never let myself get that far."

"Let yourself get that far," Alma says. "Right now. Just for me. Pretend."

So Reyhan does, out loud, badly, something about a smaller life, quieter, hands doing something slower than saving people — she doesn't have the shape of it yet, not really, not for another eight years, but she says the vague outline of it into the dark anyway, and Alma listens to the whole thing like it's the most important thing anyone has told her all year, which, Reyhan will think much later, it might genuinely have been.

Minute twenty-six.

The song loops again. Reyhan hums along under her breath, mostly to herself now, and Alma's eyes stay open, fixed somewhere above them both, on whatever piece of exposed rebar or hanging cable happens to be the last piece of architecture she'll ever study this closely. Reyhan doesn't ask what she's looking at. Some questions, she is learning in real time, aren't hers to ask anymore.

Minute twenty-eight.

"I didn't do the dishes this morning," Alma says, apropos of nothing, and something in her voice cracks for the first time, not from pain, from something smaller and worse. "Just left them. Told myself I'd get to it tonight."

Reyhan doesn't say anything right away, because there isn't anything to say to that which wouldn't diminish it, and diminishing it is the one thing she has promised herself, silently, she will not do to this woman.

"They'll still be there," Reyhan says finally, which isn't comfort exactly, isn't even really true in the way that matters, but is the truest small thing available, and Alma's hand tightens once, hard, like that answer was somehow the correct one after all.

Minute thirty.

Fewer words now. The gaps between them have gotten long enough that Reyhan starts filling them herself, quietly, without being asked — the weather again, the sheets on the line, the song, humming a few bars of it under her breath just to keep some sound moving through the space between them, because silence, she is starting to understand in real time, is the one thing Alma actually asked her not to allow, and she intends to keep that promise past the point where keeping it costs her anything.

Alma's eyes are still open. Her breathing has changed shape — not faster, not slower exactly, just further apart, like a sentence with too much space between each word to still read as a sentence.

Minute thirty-two.

"Cold," Alma says. Just the one word.

Reyhan doesn't say *I know*. She doesn't say anything true about what that word means, from where she's kneeling, with a decade of knowing exactly what that word means. She just holds on, and says, "I've got you," which is the only sentence left in her that is both entirely honest and entirely bearable at the same time.

She shifts her own coat higher around Alma's shoulder with her free hand, a gesture she knows, clinically, changes nothing, and does it anyway, because some gestures aren't for changing anything.

Minute thirty-four.

The water is still dripping somewhere. The song loops again, quieter now, or perhaps only quieter to her, her own hearing narrowing down to the one hand in hers the way her whole self has narrowed down to it, everything else — the wreckage, the other rescue two pockets over, her own name being called somewhere

and left unanswered — falling away into a kind of background static that doesn't matter and never really did.

Minute thirty-five.

"Say the song again," Alma says, barely audible now, and Reyhan does, humming it low and off-key and constant, the same four bars over and over, because it's the only structure left in the room that isn't collapsing, and some part of her understands, without being told, that repetition itself is a kind of mercy right now — not a new comfort, just the same one, offered again and again so nothing has to be alone in the space between one offering and the next.

Alma's lips move along with it for a moment, no sound behind it anymore, just the shape of the tune passing through her, and then even that stops, gently, the way a radio doesn't break so much as simply stop finding the station.

Minute thirty-six.

Reyhan keeps humming anyway. She doesn't know, yet, that she's doing it more for herself now than for Alma. She will understand that later, turning the whole night over for years afterward, the way you turn over a stone to see the side that was resting against the ground.

Minute thirty-seven.

"Reyhan."

Just her name. The first and only time Alma says it. Reyhan will hear it, unbidden, at odd hours, for years — in showers, in the six seconds before sleep, once, badly, in the middle of a session with a client who will never know why her voice went strange for a moment mid-sentence.

"I'm here," Reyhan says. "Still here. Not going anywhere."

There is no answer to that. There doesn't need to be. The hand in hers is still a hand, still warm in the specific, narrowing way a hand stays warm right up until it doesn't, and Reyhan keeps talking anyway, softly, about nothing, about the rain two days ago, about the sheets, about a song neither of them ever learned the name of,

because the agreement was never that Alma had to answer. The agreement was only that the talking wouldn't stop.

Minute thirty-eight.

It doesn't arrive like anything. That's the part no one tells you, not in training, not in eleven years of nights exactly like this one minus everything that made this one different. There's no gasp, no visible turn, no dramatic final breath that announces itself as the final one. There is simply a breath that Reyhan is already, wordlessly, waiting on, and it doesn't come, and then several seconds pass in which it still doesn't come, and Reyhan's whole body — trained for a decade to know this specific absence better than it knows almost anything else — understands before her mind catches up and files the correct word for it.

She keeps humming for another few seconds anyway. Not for Alma. She understands that, even in the moment, with total clinical clarity: this last stretch of the song is for her.

Minute thirty-nine.

She doesn't let go.

She knows, with the same clean certainty she has always brought to every hand she has ever held, exactly what letting go now would mean, exactly what protocol would say about it, exactly how many better uses her hands could be put to two floors up where the man's voice was still counting off a pulse an hour ago. She stays anyway. She holds a hand that is still, technically, still a hand — still has the shape and weight and specific small calluses of a woman who did her own dishes and hung her own laundry and got caught barefoot in the rain two days ago trying to save half of it — and she does not let go, because letting go now, before someone made her, felt like the second collapse of the night, smaller, entirely hers, and she has already decided, without deciding it out loud, that she is not available to cause that one herself.

The dripping water is the only sound left. The song has looped itself into silence somewhere above them, or maybe someone finally found the radio and turned it off, or maybe Reyhan has simply,

finally, stopped being able to hear it. She doesn't know which. She will never find out.

Minute forty.

Someone's hand lands on her shoulder — Marquez, she'll remember later, though in the moment he is only pressure and a voice saying her name in the particular register reserved for pulling someone back from somewhere they shouldn't still be standing.

"Reyhan. Come on. She's gone. You gotta let them work the scene."

She lets go then, because someone finally made her, and in the exact two seconds it takes her fingers to uncurl from around a hand that no longer curls back, something in her own hands — the part that has read every pulse, every fracture, every lie in every grip for eleven straight years without once failing — simply stops. Not breaks. Stops, cleanly, the way a radio stops when you've finally found the one frequency that costs more to keep receiving than any receiver was built to survive.

She has never told this story with the woman's name in it. She has told the department's version — *extended extraction, one fatality, subject remained on scene per standard comfort-care protocol* — so many times that it has started to feel truer than the version with a hand in it, and a song neither of them could name, and half a line of wet laundry, and dishes left in a sink that someone else, eventually, would have to be the one to finally wash.

Tonight, telling it for the first and only time in full, she puts all of it back in.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The apprenticeship, final months.

She leaves on an ordinary Tuesday, which surprises her — she'd always assumed an ending like this would need a scene, a confrontation, some proof on the record that she'd finally seen clearly. Instead she simply doesn't go back, and two days later, then two weeks, the absence starts to feel less like avoidance and more like a diagnosis she's finally willing to write down herself.

She takes the stones. Not his — she has her own set by now, has had them for a year, a fact that will matter later, because it means what she builds afterward is not inherited but assembled, deliberately, out of what she kept and what she refused to keep.

What she keeps: the cold-as-truth principle. The idea of the border as something you can draw yourself instead of having drawn for you. What she refuses: the smoothness, the framing of extraction as pedagogy, the specific quiet cruelty of a teacher who needs his student a little bit lost in order to remain necessary.

She decides, in the two weeks of silence that follow, what she will build — a practice with no ambiguity engineered into it on purpose, where the not-knowing belongs entirely to the client's own body and never, ever, to the relationship between them. She will be paid. She will be precise. She will never once let a session need her to be needed.

It is, she recognizes, not a cure. It is a very specific, very deliberate refusal to pass the wound forward in the shape it was handed to her. Some days, she thinks, that's the only difference between healing and simply being careful. She has decided she can live inside that distinction without resolving it.

Him. After.

He notices her absence on the second missed session, not the first — the first, he tells himself, could be anything, a cold, a family matter, the ordinary friction of a life outside the room. By the second, he has already begun composing, without quite admitting he is composing it, the version of this he will tell himself going forward: that she wasn't ready, that her material got in the way, that some students simply cannot tolerate the depth of their own not-knowing long enough to complete the work. He recognizes, dimly, that this is the exact sentence he used once before. He does not let the recognition finish.

He does not call her. He tells himself this is respect for her process — that a good teacher does not chase a student who needs distance, that pursuit would only confirm whatever misreading she

has apparently made of the last two years. He believes this, in the way he has trained himself to believe most things: fully, fluently, without the friction that used to accompany a lie before he became this practiced at telling himself only the versions that let him keep sweeping the floor each morning with a clear conscience.

There are nights, in the two weeks after, when something moves in him that is not quite grief and not quite fear and has no clean name in the vocabulary he has spent fourteen years building for other people's borders. He sits on his own floor, alone, past midnight, with a stone he no longer has a student to hand to, and presses it flat against his own palm the way he once taught Reyhan to, waiting for the cold to arrive and mean something. It arrives. It is only ever cold. It has been only ever cold, he understands with a clarity he will manage, by morning, to misplace again, for longer than he has been willing to count.

He does not conclude, from this, what a more honest man might have concluded years earlier — that the warmth he has spent two decades chasing was never going to come from the stone itself, was only ever going to come from the specific, costly, mutual risk of being truly seen by someone who was free to leave and chose, instead, to stay. That the entire architecture of the practice, however genuinely it may have started, has become a machine for producing everything except the one condition under which the stone might actually have worked on him: a room with no power differential in it at all.

He starts interviewing a new student six weeks later. He tells himself six weeks is a respectful interval. He does not examine why six weeks is also, coincidentally, almost exactly the length of time it takes him to stop being able to feel his own hands go quiet on the nights no one is scheduled to arrive. He sweeps the floor the morning of the interview with the same obsessive, penitent thoroughness he has brought to it for fourteen years, and he tells the new student, within the first ten minutes, that pain already taught her where the border is, and that he is only going to teach her how to draw it herself — and he believes this, completely, in the specific unexamined way he has believed every version of this

sentence since the night his own teacher died being narrated at rather than accompanied — and somewhere underneath the belief, in a room even he does not sweep, the debt continues, unpaid, patiently waiting for a version of him honest enough to finally sit inside it instead of teaching it to someone else.

He finds, three months after she stops coming, that he has begun, without quite deciding to, editing her out of the story he tells the new student about how the practice was developed — not lying exactly, simply omitting, the way his own incident reports once omitted the radio and the stranger in the bathrobe and the one patient he stayed with past protocol. He tells the new student the practice has been refined over fourteen years by “several students,” a true sentence that manages, somehow, to say almost nothing at all. He does not mention that two of those several students — years apart, unconnected except by the room itself — left citing versions of the same complaint, both met with the same gentle, practiced redirection back onto their own material.

There is one night, seven months after Reyhan leaves, when he almost calls her. He has her number still, has never deleted it, tells himself this is simply administrative tidiness rather than anything more deliberate. He gets as far as opening the contact, thumb over the screen, before the old, familiar sentence arrives to stop him — *a good teacher does not chase a student who needs distance* — and he lets the sentence do its work, the way it has always done its work, smoothing the moment over before he has to sit inside what calling her might actually mean: an admission, offered without a stone in the room to soften it, that some part of what happened between them was his to answer for, not simply hers to outgrow.

He will not make that call, that night or any other. He will, instead, continue exactly as he has continued for fourteen years — swept floor, east-facing window, a new arrival roughly every eighteen months, each one taught the same true sentence about pain and borders, each one eventually asked, gently, to hold the stone against his palm and teach it back to him. Some will stay long enough to complete what he calls the work. Some will leave the way the previous student left, and the way Reyhan leaves, with a

clarity he will spend a private, unexamined ninety seconds admiring before folding it back into the story that lets him keep going. He does not know, and may never let himself find out, whether the man his teacher's dying voice once asked to simply stay, and mean it, has spent the fourteen years since actually learning how — or whether he has built, with real skill and real belief in his own good intentions, the single most elaborate and convincing way yet devised of continuing not to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Now.

Final session. The client holds both stones this time, one in each hand, and asks her the question she's been waiting seven sessions for, the one everyone eventually asks, in one phrasing or another.

"Did this heal you? Or did you just get very good at hiding it?"

She could answer with the department line. She could answer with a decade of clinical distance. Instead she tells him about a goddess of water whose name she keeps mostly to herself, a name for the stones that isn't the name printed on the box, and she watches him understand — correctly — that this is the only answer he is going to get, and that it is, in fact, a complete one.

"Anahita," he repeats, testing the shape of it.

"Don't use it," she says. "It's not for using. It's for knowing it exists."

He nods, and for once does not reach for his notebook, does not try to convert the moment into something he can carry out of the room intact. He simply sits in it — genuinely, finally, unrehearsed — and she recognizes the exact expression on his face, because she wore it once herself, in a room with no furniture, in front of an east-facing window, a very long time ago.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Now.

Alone, after the last client of the year, Reyhan sits on the floor mat with both stones in her open palms, and this time, for the first time in longer than she can accurately account for, she does not simply hold them. She presses the black stone low, against the exact border he once taught her to draw and then, later, taught her to distrust — and she lets whatever comes, come.

It arrives the way it always has: total, uninvited by her front-facing mind even as some deeper administration of her has clearly been requesting it for weeks. Her back leaves the mat. Her breath abandons its manners entirely. For nine or ten seconds she is not a woman running a business, not a woman still turning over the word *predator* against the word *teacher* without resolution, not even, really, a self with edges at all — she is a body cashing a check that has been accruing interest since a night eight years ago when her hands stopped translating and never fully forgave her for surviving it.

When it passes, she is crying, without distress, the specific unbothered crying of a pressure system releasing rather than a wound reopening.

The black stone, which was cold in Chapter One, in another century, in another life belonging to a woman still capable of being surprised by her own temperature — the black stone is warm in her hand now. It has been warm for years. She still cannot say exactly when that stopped being remarkable, which she has decided is the correct way for a thing like that to stop mattering: not with an ending, but with a body finally, finally, permitted to keep its own accounts.

She thinks of Alma, in the collapsed building, whose hand she held for two minutes past use. She thinks of the Teacher, whose name she has stopped saying out loud, though she has not, and will probably never, stop turning the shape of the decision over — mystic or predator, healer or excuse, and whether the difference was ever as clean as she once needed it to be.

She does not resolve it tonight either. She has built an entire practice, an entire second life, on the discipline of not requiring resolution before continuing to live inside a question.

Outside, it is raining, the way it was raining the night everything came apart, and inside, in a room with one amber lamp, a woman who has finally learned to read her own pulse again holds two stones that have long since stopped being cold, and calls them, silently, by the only name that was ever entirely hers.

END

GLOSSARY

Anahita [aa-naa-HEE-taa] — Ancient Iranian goddess of the waters, of healing and of wisdom, whose name carries the sense of the undefiled.

Asha [AA-shaa] — Avestan, *truth, right order*. The Zoroastrian principle of the truth that holds a structure together, as against the lie that costs nothing to tell.

Reyhan does not live her life in order. A stranger's grip, cold stone against skin, a certain slant of afternoon light — any of them is a trapdoor into another year of it.

She teaches the powerful to read their own bodies. Two stones, one pink and one black, one for the front border and one for the back. The cold comes first, because cold is the one fact a body cannot argue with.

Her new client has mastered everything except himself. The sessions are half seduction and half interrogation, and it is not always clear which of the two of them is being interrogated.

Underneath the work is an apprenticeship she has never described to anyone. Underneath that is a night in a collapsed building, forty minutes long, that her hands have never finished reporting.

The mind will lie to you for free. The body has to be paid first.

