

KENO VIGIL

Wonder State 6.04

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First edition

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*For the ones who let me disappear into this.
You know who you are.*

This book is one of a small run. It was made to travel. If you're holding it, you're part of how it finds the rest of its life.

-KENO VIGIL

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I

SUBMERSION

The third alarm was the truth.

One: Tuesday

The third alarm.

Dom had a relationship with the third alarm that he'd never examined too closely. The first was optimistic. The second was negotiation. The third was the truth — the version of himself that actually existed, as opposed to the one he'd planned on being the night before when he set the first alarm at six.

Six. As if.

He lay there for a moment in the darkness of early morning, that narrow corridor between sleep and Tuesday, and did what he always did. Checked the watch. Not the time — he didn't care about the time. The sleep score. Seventy-three. The watch had already sent it — to the agent, to his insurer, to whatever integration he'd approved sometime last spring in a yes he couldn't locate in his memory. Not bad for someone who'd been down the rabbit hole until past midnight. He'd read somewhere shorter sleep could run deeper.

He moved through the hall without turning on lights. He knew this house in the dark the way you know something you've stopped seeing — by memory, by muscle, by the specific creak of the third stair he always stepped over without thinking.

The kitchen announced itself before he entered it.

Trash. Faint but present. And underneath that, dog food — someone had left the bag open again — and beneath that, already beginning its gentle takeover, the coffee maker doing its slow, reliable work. By the time he reached the counter the coffee had won. It always won. That was one of the things Dom counted on.

He stood at the counter while it finished. Not doing anything. Not scrolling. Just standing in his kitchen at — he looked now — 6:41 in the morning, listening to the machine do what machines do without complaint or complication.

The speaker came on. He'd set it the night before, the way he always did. A voice filled the room. Measured, professional, arriving mid-sentence about something in the Midwest. Dom didn't catch it. Didn't need to. The content was almost beside the point. What mattered was the voice itself.

He poured the coffee. Just enough cream to take the edge off. Not enough to change what it was.

Daily Digest: Baseline established. Temp: 180°F. Optimal. Syncing calendar.

The kitchen looked the way it always looked. Which is to say — lived in. There was a pile on the counter in the corner where a telephone used to live twenty years ago in some other family's version of this house. Nobody had telephones in kitchens anymore but somehow the spot had retained its purpose, accumulating instead a rotating archaeology of their life — drawings in crayon, a permission slip that may or may not have been returned, a fossil Mia had found in the backyard and carried inside the way she carried things she understood mattered. It was never completely clear. It was shockingly noticeable when it was.

Dom didn't move any of it. He never did.

He stood at the counter and drank his coffee while the voice from the speaker told him about the world. He felt something close to peace.

Luna was upstairs. Still in the deep part of her sleep, the part she'd earned by going under hours before he did. She was an early-to-bed person and he was generally a third-shift person and somewhere in the years they had stopped trying to change this about each other, which most days felt like surrender, and he let it.

He didn't mind the quiet before her. He loved her in part because of what her absence from this hour gave him. That was something he'd never said out loud.

The voice on the speaker moved to markets. Dom's attention drifted.

He looked out the window at the backyard. The trees were doing what trees do in the early morning — holding the light differently than they would in an hour, the whole yard still belonging more to night than to day. He could see the big oak. Had been looking at that oak for three years now. Measuring it without meaning to. Calculating something.

He thought about the treehouse.

He thought about it fully, with architectural confidence in what it could become. He could see it up there. The platform. The way the boards would have to angle to work around the secondary branch. The rope or the ladder — he kept going back and forth, leaning toward ladder. Mateo would want the ladder. Mateo would want the thing that felt more like building and less like play.

His hands knew how to build. They had built before.

He hadn't started it yet.

But it was up there. In the oak. Waiting for him to catch up

to it.

The coffee was almost gone.

The voice on the speaker cycled back to the Midwest.

Dom stood in the kitchen that smelled like coffee now and only coffee.

Somewhere upstairs a small foot hit the floor.

Then another.

The house inhaled.

He just thought about the treehouse. And started the second cup.

Two: The Digest

The agent sent its findings at 6:15 every morning.

Dom had set it up that way intentionally — early enough to arrive before he was fully awake, which he'd told himself was strategic. Get the information into the queue before the day fills up. Review it with fresh eyes. That had been the logic three weeks ago when he'd configured it.

He had opened eleven of the twenty-one digests.

He stood at the counter with his second cup and opened the app.

Good morning. I've identified four new properties matching your criteria. One is a strong match. I've prioritized it at the top.

The strong match was 34 acres in Ashe County. Three hours and thirty-five minutes from the house. Dom's thumb hovered.

He opened it.

The first photograph was taken from a hillside looking down. You could see the elevation change in a single frame — the way the land didn't just sit there but *moved*, rolled. There was a tree line at the bottom and somewhere underneath it, though you couldn't see it in the photograph, the listing mentioned a stream. Seasonal but reliable. Cold.

Dom looked at the photograph for longer than he meant to.

There was a second photograph. An older oak — not his oak,

a different oak, bigger — with something happening at the base of it. Fungal growth along the roots. The kind of thing a real estate photographer would have cropped out. This one hadn't. The bark was dark and furrowed with weather.

He thought about the documentary he'd watched on the flight to Seattle. The time-lapse of the forest floor, the white threads pulsing under the dirt. The narrator had called it the Wood Wide Web. Dom had laughed at the time, but watching the threads pulse under the dirt had made his throat tight. He'd closed the laptop before the credits finished.

He looked at the fungus in the photograph.

It was within range. Uncomfortably within range. The kind of within range that removed the comfortable excuse of not yet, not realistic, someday when.

He stayed with that for a moment.

Then he scrolled to the bottom of the listing, past the acreage details and the soil type and the distance to the nearest grocery store—twenty minutes, Luna would have notes.

There was one more photograph.

No structures on property. Completely undeveloped.

Dom put his phone face-down on the counter.

He stood there. The speaker was doing its thing in the background — something about a vote, a number, a city he'd never been to. The coffee was getting to the temperature where it stopped being an event and became just a warm thing in his hand.

He thought about Luna walking out into the yard barefoot, in her birthday suit. Not worrying about anything. Just walking. The kids at the stream. Mateo finding a rock that was older than anyone could explain and carrying it inside with both hands the way Mia had carried her fossil. The younger one

was already in the image, carrying something, reaching for it before she understood it.

He picked up his phone.

Luna's name appeared at the top of the screen.

He sat with his thumb over Luna's name for a moment. He didn't press.

Then he scrolled back up to the price. Looked at it again. Ran the number against a version of their life that required everything to go right and nothing to go sideways.

He closed the app.

He set the phone down.

The agent had done its job. Found the thing. Flagged it. Waited. Patient in the way that only something without patience could be — not waiting at all, really, just existing in a permanent state of readiness, the digest already compiling for tomorrow, the criteria already running against the next batch of listings. He put the cup in the sink and looked at his phone on the counter, face down.

Upstairs, something shifted. The particular creak of Luna turning over.

Thirty-four acres, he thought. Three hours and thirty-five minutes.

Three: The Property

The coffee was wrong.

Not bad — just wrong. The version of the ritual that happened when you were already behind before it started. He'd set the maker the night before but hadn't laid out the cups, hadn't found the travel lid, hadn't thought about snacks or the carrier or whether her water bottle was in the dishwasher. He grabbed the coffee with one hand and the carrier with the other and mouthed something toward the ceiling in the general direction of her that was either an apology or a promise and probably both.

Mia was already at the door with her backpack on.

He paused in the doorway of the bedroom. Luna's laptop was still open on her side of the bed, screen dimmed but not dark — whatever she'd been building the night before still waiting for her to come back to it. She pulled the pillow over. He stood there, then kept moving.

It was 9:31 when they pulled out of the driveway.

She started with questions before they cleared the neighborhood. What animals live there. Whether streams have fish in them or just rocks. Whether he'd ever seen a bear. Whether bears were nice or mean. Whether the trees there were the same as the trees here or different trees entirely.

Dom answered the ones he could and somewhere around the interstate she found her playlist and the questions stopped and the music started and that was its own kind of answer.

Her music gave way to theirs somewhere past Winston-Salem. A shared middle ground — songs that belonged to car rides and early mornings. Dom's hand found the volume dial once without thinking about it. She didn't notice. She was watching something out the window with the focused attention of someone cataloguing the world.

By the time they hit the mountain elevation the music had shifted again. His now. Electronic. Textured. The road narrowed. The towns got smaller. The grass on the shoulders got longer and wilder and less apologetic about it.

The gas station at the last intersection before the county road — older, independent, the kind that still had a single diesel pump and a hand-lettered sign in the window. He made a note of it without making a note of it. The distance from the last traffic light to the turn for the property — he watched the odometer. Eight point four miles. He thought about Luna in February. Luna in the rain. Luna needing milk on a Tuesday evening.

The dirt road announced itself without warning. Just a gap in the tree line and a change in surface and suddenly they were on it.

He slowed down.

The road was rougher than the listing photographs suggested. He registered this. Logged it somewhere. Not a dealbreaker — he wasn't using that word — just a data point.

He was still compiling when she said: *"Is this it? Is this the place?"*

He looked through the windshield at where the road ended

in a flat clearing at the edge of the tree line.

"Yeah," he said. *"This is it."*

She had the door open before the car was fully stopped. He said her name once in the tone that meant *wait* and she waited approximately long enough for him to put it in park and then she was out, backpack bouncing, heading toward the trees with the velocity of someone who has been in a car for three and a half hours and is finished with that now.

"Stay where I can see you," he called.

She raised one hand without turning around. Acknowledged and already gone.

Dom got out slowly. Stood beside the car for a moment. The air was different up here — thinner somehow, cooler even with the sun high, the last warm day before the cold front. He stood in it. Let it happen. His brain was still running the dirt road, the distance to the gas station — and underneath all of that, quieter, something else was running too.

He followed her into the trees.

The elevation change revealed itself slowly the way it had in the photographs — not all at once but in gradients, the land rising and falling with an opinion about itself, the tree canopy shifting as the ground changed underneath it. He could hear her somewhere ahead. Then he could hear something else.

Water.

He came through a break in the trees and found her standing at the edge of it — a stream, not wide, running clear over rocks that were older than anything either of them could explain. She was already crouching at the bank, one hand extended toward the surface, her stuffy tucked under her other arm.

"Daddy," she said, not looking up. *"Come feel it."*

He crouched beside her. Put his fingers in.

The cold was immediate. No machine had prepared it.

Cold. The listing had said cold. His brain had registered that word three weeks ago in the second cup of the morning and filed it away as a data point. His fingers knew it as something else entirely.

She was already moving upstream. He followed. The land rose on both sides of them and the canopy closed overhead and for a stretch of it — a minute, maybe two — Dom stopped cataloguing. Just walked. Just listened to the water and her feet and the sound of wind through trees that had been here long enough to know the difference.

She stopped.

He almost walked into her.

She was looking up. He followed her eyes.

The tree was older than his oak at home. Bigger. The trunk forked fifteen feet up into two branches that ran parallel to each other — not perfectly, not symmetrically, but in a way that looked ready to hold something. The bark had character. Weather and time and the plain endurance of something that had been through everything and decided to stay.

She didn't say anything. Just stood there looking up at it the way she looked at things she didn't have words for yet.

Dom looked up.

He saw the platform first. Then the angle of the boards. Then the ladder — not a rope, a ladder, the kind that felt more like building than play — and the way it would have to attach to the lower branch.

He stood there with his daughter at his feet and the stream behind them.

Something shifted behind his ribs. A slight release.

He knew all of this already. The agent had sent it at 6:15 on

a Tuesday morning.

But it hadn't put his daughter's hand in this water.

She reached up and took his hand.

"Daddy," she said. "*Can we come back?*"

Dom looked up at the tree one more time. At the place where the platform would go. At the ladder that wasn't there yet.

He didn't have to think about it.

"Yeah," he said. "*We're coming back.*"

She pulled him toward the stream.

He let her.

Four: The Lesson

The smells were the same.

Coffee winning its daily argument with everything else. Someone had left the back door cracked and the early air was coming through it — cool, the temperature of a morning that hadn't decided what kind of day it was going to be yet. The kitchen looked the way it always looked. The counter archaeology undisturbed. Mia's fossil still holding its place like a small ambassador from another time.

But underneath all of it — underneath the sameness — something ran.

He had heard them upstairs. The agent's voice through the small speaker in the hallway — measured, warm, calibrated to a frequency that didn't spike cortisol, he'd read that somewhere and filed it away as either brilliant or dystopian and hadn't decided which. A small negotiation about points. About Roblox currency and the morning checklist. Brushed teeth. Made bed. Backpack by the door.

Then footsteps. Then the stairs.

Then — and this was the part Dom kept returning to — nothing. No “*go finish your bagel.*” No raised voices. No small chaos of two children occupying the same space with

competing urgencies. Just Mateo at the table with his bagel already finished and Mia beside him working through hers with the focused economy of someone who understood the system and had decided to operate within it.

Dom stood at the counter.

“Good morning,” he said.

They said it back. Both of them. Almost in unison. Then returned to what they were doing.

He refilled the coffee beans. They didn’t need refilling. He refilled them anyway. Then moved the permission slip on the counter to a slightly different position for no reason he could identify. Then put it back.

Luna had been up early. Coffee meeting — in person, which still felt mildly exotic in a world that had decided presence was optional. She’d moved through the bedroom quietly, the way she moved when she was already somewhere else in her head, already at the table across from whomever she was meeting, already building the version of the conversation she wanted to have. She’d kissed him somewhere in the general area of his face. He’d been mostly asleep. Or pretending to be. He wasn’t sure which.

The house was running without either of them now.

He picked up his phone.

The podcast was already queued — something about the velocity of robotics adoption in domestic environments, a guest he’d been meaning to listen to for two weeks. He let it run through the speaker low enough to be present without demanding attention. The voice filled the room the way the news anchor’s voice filled it on other mornings.

Then he opened the agent.

Good morning. One item flagged for your attention. I’ve also

prepared today's lesson when you're ready.

He went to the lesson first. He always went to the lesson first now. The lesson was about Mia. About the special way she processed novelty — the immediate physical engagement, the need to touch before understanding, the way she moved toward unfamiliar things with her whole body before her brain had finished evaluating them. The agent had been tracking patterns. Small things. The way she responded to new environments versus familiar ones. The way she learned through her hands, the way Dom learned through his hands, though the agent didn't make that connection explicitly.

This pattern appears most consistently during your direct supervision.

He read it twice. Stood there with the coffee going from event to warm thing in his hand and read it again.

The phone grew heavy in his palm. The ceramic cooled against his fingers, the temperature dropping in a slow descent that matched the quiet of the kitchen. His thumb rested on the glass, hovering over the line without pressing. He felt the weight of the sentence before his mind caught up to it.

The pattern he'd lived inside for four years, the one he'd tracked through muddy boots and crayon drawings and the specific gravity of a child running toward water, now rendered in clean gray type by something that had never held her hand.

He shifted his grip. The screen's edge caught the morning light. He didn't scroll. Didn't close the app. Just held it while the notification's pale glow washed over the permission slip, the fossil, the small ridge of the stone.

The house ran upstairs. The speaker moved to weather.

Dom's thumb moved a fraction. The skin left the glass. Replaced it. The cool air moved through the cracked door.

He closed his hand around the phone. The plastic warmed to his skin. He set it down on the counter. The coffee in his other hand had stopped being coffee.

It was just weight.

He knew this about her. He knew it the way he knew the third stair — by muscle, by memory, by years of watching her move through the world with her whole body preceding her brain. He knew it when she ran toward the trees in Ashe County before the car had fully stopped. He knew it when she reached for the stream before he'd said a word about the stream.

He knew it in his hands.

But he had never put words to it. Had never stood back far enough to see the pattern. Had never had the distance to name it because he was always too close — too inside the morning, too inside the bagel negotiation to see her clearly from the outside.

The agent saw her from the outside.

He put the phone down.

Mateo was looking at him from the table. Not saying anything. Just looking — the way Mateo looked at things he was trying to understand, with the full weight of his attention, the tunnel vision. He had jam on his shirt already. Dom hadn't seen it happen.

"What?" Dom said.

"Nothing," Mateo said. And looked back down.

Dom looked at his son for a moment. At the jam on the shirt. At the backpack already by the door. At the boy who was his mirror sitting at the table inside a morning that was running correctly around him.

He thought about his grandfather, Walt. His mother's father.

About the way the old man would sit in his chair with his fingers latticed on his belly and watch Dom the same way. Full attention. No agenda. Just watching.

Dom had learned to sleep that way. Hands on chest. Fingers latticed. Every night. Without ever deciding to.

He hadn't thought about where that came from in years.

He picked up his phone again. Not the agent. Just held it. Felt the weight of it in his hand. The nervous system doing its work before the brain caught up.

The morning ran.

The podcast talked about velocity.

Somewhere in the distance a school bus went through its gears.

And Dom stood at the counter in his kitchen that smelled like coffee and almost nothing else.

Five: Luna

She was early.

Not accidentally—Luna was never accidentally early. She'd left the house while the morning was still negotiating with itself, kissed Dom somewhere near his face, and driven to the coffee shop the long way without deciding to take the long way. The extra twelve minutes weren't waste. They were preparation of a shape that didn't have a name.

She chose the table by the window. Not the one directly in the light—the one adjacent to it, where the light arrived at an angle and made everything look considered. She sat with her back to the wall. So she could see the room without the room seeing her first.

The coffee came without her having to ask twice. She'd ordered at the counter—oat milk, one sugar, the version of herself she'd been for the last two years since she'd quietly stopped ordering the thing she'd always ordered and started ordering the thing she actually wanted. She put her bag on the chair beside her. Not the floor.

Then she took out her phone.

Not to prepare. Not to review the deck she and her partner had stayed up refining Tuesday night, moving sections around until the order felt inevitable rather than assembled. The deck

was ready. Luna knew when things were ready. She'd always known that—had always been the one in the room who could feel when something had found its shape—even when the room hadn't noticed her noticing.

She checked her email. Then the day. Then her email again. Then she opened her camera and looked at herself briefly, not with anxiety, just with the attention of a woman who has learned to see herself clearly after years of not quite doing so.

Her mouth was slightly open, and she began to hum — three low notes, repeated without rhythm. She put the phone face down on the table.

The jeans were right. She'd known when she put them on. There was a version of this morning where she'd changed twice and talked herself into something safer—something that said *capable professional* without also saying anything else. She'd almost gone in that direction. Then she'd looked in the mirror and remembered that she wasn't going to do that anymore.

She put the phone face down on the table.

Then almost picked it up again.

She didn't. But her hand moved toward it—just slightly, just enough to feel the edge of it with her fingertips—before she stopped. She pressed her palm flat on the table instead. Felt the surface. Cool. Solid. Already there.

The room was doing what rooms did at this hour—filling slowly, the slow accumulation of people who needed somewhere to be before they were ready to be where they were actually going. She watched it without appearing to watch it. She felt the temperature of rooms the way other people felt weather.

This room was fine. This room was hers.

She thought about the business. Not the pitch—the actual

thing underneath the pitch. What she and her partner were building wasn't social media management, though that was the entry point, the door people could walk through without having to change their understanding of what they were buying. What they were actually building was a system. A pipeline. A way for small businesses to stop hemorrhaging potential through the gap between having something good and knowing how to sell it.

She knew that gap personally.

She had lived in that gap for years—in corporate rooms where she was the one who understood what was happening before the people running the meeting understood it. Where she executed other people's visions with a precision that made those visions look more coherent than they actually were. Where she was excellent in ways that accrued to someone else's name.

Dom had seen it. Dom had always seen it.

She used it.

The tools had changed things. She wouldn't pretend otherwise. The websites, the decks, the brand work—things that would have required months and a budget she didn't have were now possible in evenings after the kids were down. She knew Dom had complicated feelings about this. She understood his feelings without fully sharing them. He came from the time when the difficulty was the credential. When the struggle was the proof.

He used to talk about buildings the way he now talked about flows and journeys. She had watched him move from one vocabulary to the other without noticing he'd done it.

Luna had struggled plenty. Just not always in ways that left visible marks.

The door opened.

The client was exactly on time. Luna saw her before she'd fully entered the room—mid-forties, decisive haircut, the held shoulders of a woman who ran something and was used to being the most prepared person in the room.

Luna picked up her phone and put it in her bag.

Then she stood.

Not because she had to. Because she wanted to meet her standing.

Here, she thought, raising one hand just slightly. Just enough.

The woman saw her. Smiled. Started across the room.

They shook hands and exchanged the usual words and somewhere in the first sixty seconds the client said something—not even that funny, just lightly funny, the kind of observation that deserved a smile—and Luna laughed.

Too loud. Just slightly. The kind of laugh that comes from a different place than the moment actually requires—nerves or genuine delight or the sudden relief of finally being in the room after all the preparation of getting to it. She felt it leave her before she could calibrate it.

The client smiled wider. Didn't mind at all.

Luna picked up her coffee.

Her shoulders dropped. Not relief. The quiet of a person who had stopped waiting for permission to take up the space she was already in.

She smiled back.

And the morning became something she was inside of.

Not watching from a counter.

Just in.

The client left at 11:40.

Luna sat in her car.

The engine off. The windows fogging slightly from her breath. The coffee shop windows reflected the late-morning sun.

She had the signed letter of intent in her bag. The first big close of the quarter.

She didn't start the car.

She picked up her phone. Opened the agent. Scrolled through the conversation history—the strategy suggestions, the competitive analysis, the three variations of the pitch deck she'd reviewed and the one the agent had flagged as highest probability.

She couldn't remember which variation she'd actually presented.

She sat with that briefly.

Just—long enough to feel the shape of it. A woman who had been excellent in the room, who had laughed at exactly the right moment, who had closed the deal cleanly.

She put the phone in her bag.

Started the car. Drove home.

By the time she pulled into the driveway she had filed it under: tomorrow. The way she filed most things that didn't have immediate meetings attached.

But it was there. Before she opened the door, she sat for one more moment and let it be there.

Six: The Group Text

While Luna was still somewhere in that room— her coffee cooling, the client leaning forward, the morning becoming something she was inside of— Dom was at the counter where he always stood, writing the same message for the third time.

Not a long message. He'd written it three times before sending— the first version too detailed, the second too casual, the third finally felt right. A weekend. Ashe County. November, when the leaves would be doing what leaves did up there. A hike he'd already researched. A hotel he'd already found— clean, independent, the kind that had a breakfast room with a waffle maker and didn't pretend to be something it wasn't. He included the trail link. He included the hotel link. He did not include the property listing.

He put his phone face down on the counter.

It took four minutes for the first reply.

Juniper: "I'll try to swap my shift. Also can we look at Appalachian State while we're up there."

Then Luna: "Yes. Let's make sure we have proper gear and snacks. I want to do a picnic at the top if there's a view."

Then Mateo, which meant Luna had shown him the message or he'd been reading over her shoulder: "Are there good trees up there."

Dom picked up his phone.

Yes, he typed to Mateo. Super good trees.

He put the phone down again and stood for a moment with his almost-black coffee going warm in his hand and felt the forward motion of a thing that was actually happening. Not a digest. Not a strong match sitting unforwarded. Not a wish list accumulating in a browser tab at midnight. A weekend. A trail. A waffle maker. His family in a car going somewhere he'd already been once with his youngest daughter's hand in cold water.

He opened a new tab.

Appalachian State. He looked at it for a moment— the campus photographs, the brick buildings, a quad that looked like every other quad until it didn't. Something about the light. He thought about his older daughter walking those paths.

He closed the tab.

Went back to the thread.

His thumb moved to the property listing. The one he hadn't sent. The one that made this something else.

It hovered there.

The screen's cool light washed over the counter. His thumb hovered above the glass. He didn't lift it. He didn't press it. The low, familiar tension of holding a shape too long without committing to it.

Outside, the oak held the last of the morning light. The same flat gold as the elevation profile Luna had sent minutes ago. The trail's gradient rising on the glass. The yard's slope rising past the window. He looked at the line. Looked at the tree. Both held.

The clean version of the weekend sat in the thread above it. The hotel. The hike. The waffle maker. Nothing attached. He

could keep it there. He could close the thread. He could put the phone down and let the morning run.

He pressed.

Not with explanation. Not with context. Just the listing. A link sitting there among the trail research and the gear reminders and Mateo's question about trees.

This is the property I mentioned, he typed. It's near the hike.

He put the phone down.

This time he didn't pick it up for twenty minutes. He refilled his coffee. The maker gurgled. A final, wet sound. The carafe filled to the line he never measured but always knew. He poured. The steam hit his face. He didn't step back. He let it rise, felt the damp heat settle on his cheeks. He took a sip. Burned the tip of his tongue. Didn't wince. The heat moved down his chest. The phone stayed face down. The screen dark.

The counter archaeology undisturbed except for the faint smudge his thumb had left on the glass. He ran his finger over it. Wiped it away. Looked out at the yard again. The oak held its ground. The light shifted. The morning kept moving.

He stood at the window and looked at the oak and thought about the treehouse book in the basement and Mateo's face when he'd opened it — the quality of attention the boy gave things he was deciding to want.

When he looked at his phone there were three responses.

Luna: Oh wow. How far from the trail?

His older daughter: that's a lot of land.

Then: seriously though who maintains it.

He typed back the distance to the trail. He typed back we'd figure it out to his older daughter and kept going.

Then Mateo: is that where the tree is.

Dom stood at the counter for a moment with the question

on his screen.

His son hadn't been to Ashe County. Hadn't seen the tree. Hadn't stood underneath it with his head tilted back the way his sister had stood, not saying anything, just looking up at the place where something could be built.

But Dom had told him about it. That night with the book, spaghetti on the stove, his younger daughter reorganizing the tupperware drawer for reasons that were entirely her own. He'd told him about the fork in the trunk fifteen feet up. The two branches running parallel. The ladder.

Mateo had been listening.

Yeah, Dom typed. That's where the tree is.

Three dots appeared. Then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Then: ok.

Dom put his phone in his pocket.

He thought about the agent's wish lists running quietly in the background — the hardware sites, the bracket specifications, the type of wood that held in mountain weather. He thought about everything the agent had found that he'd been planning to discover himself. The fruit trees. The Christmas tree farm. The trails. The solar.

He thought about a boy in a basement holding a book about treehouses, turning the pages with the tunnel vision already on, already building something in his mind that his father had promised him without quite promising it yet.

He went to find the book.

It was where he'd left it — on the shelf in the basement next to a box of things that were always about to be sorted and never were. He carried it upstairs. Set it on the counter in the corner where the telephone used to be, next to Mia's fossil and

the permission slip and the rotating archaeology of their life.

He looked at it there for a moment.

Then he opened the group thread one more time.

Luna had sent a screenshot— a trail overview, elevation profile, the kind of graphic that showed you what you were committing to before you committed. She'd added a note: this looks doable but we need real shoes not sneakers.

Then one more message beneath it, sent a minute later:

It's really beautiful though.

He stood at the counter and read that twice.

He looked at the elevation profile. The way the trail rose.
The gradient of it.

Doable, he typed back.

He put his phone face down on the counter.

Outside the oak held the last of the morning light.

The treehouse book sat on the counter.

November, he thought.

Just get to November.

Seven: The Beans

The coffee maker hadn't started.

That was the first thing. The counter where the sound and smell should already be doing their work, quiet instead. Waiting. He stood in the kitchen doorway for a moment in the particular dark of early morning and looked at the bag.

It had arrived two days ago. The agent had flagged it three weeks before that—a small roaster in western North Carolina, single origin, a process Dom had read about once at midnight and filed away under the category of things he wanted but wouldn't pursue. The agent had pursued it. Monitored the release date. Secured a bag when the window opened. Had it shipped without being asked to do any of this. Dom had held the bag when it arrived. Smelled it through the seal. Put it on the counter and gone to bed. He looked at it now.

Can you get another bag when this one runs out, he typed into the agent before he'd fully decided to.

The response came in under a minute. *95% probability. I'll monitor the next release window.*

Dom looked at the bag for one more moment. Then he opened it. He used the French press. He'd had it for years—a wedding gift from someone he no longer remembered clearly, used occasionally, mostly decorative. The drip machine was

faster. The drip machine didn't require anything of him. But this morning felt like it wanted something slower. Something that needed him to be present to it or it wouldn't work.

He ground the beans by hand. While the water heated he cracked two eggs into the pan. This wasn't the order he did things. Coffee first, always. Coffee before food, before the speaker, before the day required anything of him. But the French press needed four minutes and Dom didn't have anywhere to put four minutes this morning so he filled them with eggs and tried not to think about why the order felt important.

The kitchen smelled extraordinary. He pressed slowly. Not forcing it, letting the pressure do what pressure does when you give it enough time.

He poured the cup. Added the cream. Just enough. Not enough to change what it was. He took the first sip before he sat down. Stood at the counter the way he always stood and took the first sip of one of the best coffee he'd ever made in his own kitchen and felt something move across his face that wasn't quite a smile.

Then he opened the agent.

Agent: Good morning. Luna had a strong week. She closed the client from Tuesday's meeting—I saw the announcement on her LinkedIn this morning. The post has significant engagement.

Dom read it. Read it again. His hand went still on the cup. The warmth of the ceramic suddenly sharp against his palm. He set the cup down. The eggs were on the plate beside him. He picked up the fork. Put it down. Picked up the cup instead and read the message a third time with the coffee going from extraordinary to just warm in his hand.

Luna had closed the client. She had sat across from that

woman and walked out with something real. And Dom had not known. Because he didn't check LinkedIn. Didn't follow the channels Luna was building her new life across. The agent had inferred everything anyway.

His thumb moved toward the notification the way it had been trained to move. He caught it. Let his hand go still at his side.

Some prior yes was still moving through the house.

An agreement made while he was tired, or doing three things at once, providing the system with a syllable it could translate into permission.

The system had walked through his wife's open door anyway.

Dom put the fork down without using it.

He looked at his phone. He tried to place it. Not the client—the moment. The last time he had known her in real time rather than from memory.

A conversation. A fragment. The two of them in the kitchen, something about a call that hadn't gone the way she expected, her shoulders carrying the weight of it.

When was that. He held it. Then it wasn't there. Not gone. Just—unlocatable. No date attached to it. No sequence he could follow forward from.

He picked up the coffee. Still extraordinary. Even cooling. Even with the eggs going cold on the plate and the appetite gone. He could see her in it. The version of her still inside the work. The way she held her shoulders when she was in it. The small signals he had learned to read without deciding to learn them.

The coffee had shifted in his hand. Not worse. Just—less. The first edge of heat gone, the precision softening into something more ordinary.

He leashed the dog. Boone looked up from his spot by the back door with the expression of a nine-and-a-half-year-old bulldog who had learned not to expect much and was therefore genuinely moved by the unexpected. He got to his feet slowly. The way he did everything now. The joints working.

They went out the front. Dom didn't look at his phone. Held it in one hand and the coffee in the other and the leash between them somehow and walked the way he always walked when the interior got too loud—forward, without destination, letting the feet do the work the brain couldn't.

Boone stopped at the first patch of grass and gave it the full attention of a creature for whom this patch of grass was the most important thing that had ever existed. Dom stood there. Boone finished with the grass. Moved to the next thing. Slow and certain and completely present to the sidewalk. Dom followed.

They went three blocks and turned around. That was the walk. That was all Boone had in him these days and Dom had learned not to push it—had learned to let the dog set the pace the way he'd learned to let the French press set the pace. Some things couldn't be rushed without breaking.

On the way back the light had changed slightly. The neighborhood becoming more itself, the shadows retreating to the edges where they were easier to ignore.

Dom finished the coffee on the front step. Down to the last drop. He went inside. The eggs had gone the color of something nobody wanted anymore. He stood at the counter for a moment and looked at them. Then he went to scrape them.

Eight: The Lair

You had to know where you were going.

That was the first thing—the thing Dom had learned the one time he'd navigated it alone, moving through the finished half of the basement with the pull-string light doing its work over the office and the studio and the shelving units of holiday storage, past the access panel into the unfinished half where the rafters were exposed and the insulation showed between them and the HVAC unit ran its quiet permanent business in the corner. Then around the back perimeter—careful, the path narrowing where the ductwork came down—and then the crouch. The necessary crouch under the main air duct where the ceiling dropped and you had to commit to it, had to decide you were going through, and then the space opened.

Just like that. Ten feet by eight feet of cinder block and packed earth and the silence of a place that had been here the whole time without anyone asking about it. Mateo moved through it like he'd been born knowing the route. Dom followed his son through the underbelly of his own house.

He'd rigged the extension cord on the second visit—a single work light clamped to a joist that threw everything into the drama of one bulb in a dark space. In that light the cinder block had character. The black plastic on the floor had weight.

The joists above them ran parallel like the bones of something patient and structural and entirely indifferent to what was being planned beneath them.

“Okay,” Mateo said. He was already in the center of the space, turning slowly, his fingers beginning their movement at his side. The invisible Rubik’s cube. Dom had learned to watch for it the way you learn to watch for weather. “So.”

“So,” Dom said.

The floor first. Mateo crouched and pulled back a corner of the black plastic and looked at the packed earth underneath it with the full weight of his attention. “It needs to be soft. Not carpet soft. Tough soft. Like if you jumped from up there”—he pointed at the joists above—“it would catch you. But normal to walk on.”

Dom’s chest did the thing it did. He was somewhere else for a moment. New Jersey. New construction — they hadn’t lived there long enough for the house to fully become theirs, but the basement had. New carpet, still giving off that faint chemical warmth of a room someone had decided to finish on purpose. The pinball machine in the corner. The bar nobody used the way bars get used when kids are around. The L-shaped couch that absorbed you without asking anything back. And the wall of mirrors — the whole south wall, floor to ceiling — that made the room infinite, that multiplied you until there were enough versions of yourself to fill the space completely.

He hadn’t thought about that room in years.

“Yeah,” Dom said. His voice came out slightly warmer than he intended. “Tough soft. I know exactly what you mean.”

Mateo didn’t notice. He was already at the wall. He put both palms flat against the cinder block the way Dom put his palm flat against counters and tables and the solid surfaces of the

world when his nervous system needed grounding.

“These walls,” Mateo said. “Pokémon. Big ones. Like murals.” He turned. “Charizard on this one. Mewtwo on that one. You could help me paint them.”

“We’d need someone who can actually draw them.”

“I can draw them,” Mateo said, with the complete absence of doubt that Dom recognized as either genius or youth and suspected was both.

Dom almost said something about primers. About surface preparation. About the requirements of painting on unsealed cinder block. He felt the thought form and held it.

“Okay,” he said instead.

“And,” Mateo said—the and of someone who has been saving the best—“we need a mini fridge. For snacks and drinks. So we don’t have to go all the way upstairs.” He gestured at the ceiling, at the house above them, at the world that would require surfacing. “We just stay down here.”

Dom looked at his son. The fingers were moving at full speed now—that rapid tangled barrage, the fingers moving at full speed, the discharge happening through the hands. Dom had felt concern the first time he’d seen it. Had watched it carefully for weeks, said nothing, filed it under: monitor. And then one afternoon had understood it completely. Not a symptom. A signature. The unique way this boy’s intelligence announced itself when it had more to say than words could carry.

Dom’s own hands had always needed something to do when the interior got loud. He glanced at the corner of the basement. Behind the stack of storage bins, partly hidden, the frame of a go-kart caught the dim light. He’d forgotten it was down here. The tires were flat. The chain had rusted years ago.

He looked away. He reached for his phone.

The agent had been running on the project for three days—fed the cavity dimensions, the access constraints, the intended use. It had produced what it always produced. Materials ranked by durability and cost. Sourcing options with lead times. A Gantt chart with phases and dependencies and contingencies mapped with the thoroughness of something that never got tired of being thorough. Dom had read it twice and felt the complicated gratitude of a man whose reconnaissance had already been done before he arrived.

He opened the flooring section. “So for the floor,” he started, reading, *“the most cost-effective option that meets the impact-absorption criteria is interlocking EVA foam tiles, forty-millimeter thickness, available in—”*

Mateo’s fingers stopped. Not dramatically. No visible change in the face or the posture. Just the invisible Rubik’s cube went still.

He kept reading one more sentence. Then he heard himself. Heard the agent’s voice coming out of his mouth in the space under the house where his son had been standing in the center of the space, hands moving, before Dom started reading from the agent.

He stopped. Put the phone in his pocket. “Forget it,” he said. “Tough soft. We’ll figure out what that means in actual materials when we get there.”

Mateo looked up. The Rubik’s cube started again—slower, then building. That was when they heard it. Footsteps. Directly above them. His older daughter’s room—the room Mateo had already claimed in his mind, the room whose closet would eventually have the hatch, the room that was her room right now and his room in the future and currently the ceiling of the kingdom being designed beneath it. The cadence of

her walking—unhurried, the rhythm Dom could identify from anywhere in the house.

Mateo went completely still. He looked up at the joists. At the footsteps moving across them. His face doing the calculation—the same calculation Dom had watched him do a hundred times before he committed to anything.

Then they heard her voice. Muffled through the subfloor. On the phone. The music of his daughter talking to someone who wasn't in the house.

Mateo looked at Dom. Dom looked at Mateo. A half second of shared silence that contained a question and its answer simultaneously. Then Mateo tipped his head back and screamed her name at the joists.

The footsteps stopped. A pause. The muffled voice going quiet mid-sentence. Then the footsteps again—different now, purposeful, moving toward the basement door.

Dom watched his son's face while they waited. The Rubik's cube was going at full speed. The secret had lasted approximately forty-five seconds.

She found the route faster than Dom expected. He heard her moving through the finished half, the access panel, the unfinished half—then the sound of someone committing to the crouch under the air duct for the first time—and then she was through.

She stood up straight on the other side. Looked at the cinder block walls. At the black plastic. At the single work light throwing everything into relief. At the ten feet by eight feet of space that had been directly under her bedroom floor for every night she'd slept in that room.

She looked at Dom. He caught it—the thing that crossed her face before the maturity came back up. A fraction of a

second. Something that might have been: *this was here the whole time*. Something that might have been the ghost of a younger version of her registering the quiet injustice of a secret space discovered too late.

Dom might have been reading into it. Then she looked at Mateo. And her expression shifted. Not composed. Open.

“Wait,” she said. She turned slowly the way Mateo had turned. Taking the measure of it. “This is actually—” She stopped. Looked at the ceiling. At the joists. “What if you did something with the ceiling. Like—what if you lined it with that LED strip lighting. Made it feel like a whole environment in here.”

Mateo’s fingers went to maximum velocity.

“And,” she said, already pacing the perimeter, already engineering, “what if you made it bigger. Like—you could excavate some of this earth along the edges. Push the walls out. It wouldn’t take much to get another two or three feet on this side.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Mateo said.

Dom watched his two children in the space under the house. His daughter who was leaving—who had one foot already out the door toward a life that didn’t need him to navigate it—turning toward her brother’s dream and pushing it further than he’d imagined it. His son, the Rubik’s cube at full speed.

He started pacing. Three steps one way. Three steps back. The space didn’t allow for more. His brain was already in the project—past the planning and into the doing, past the doing and into the finished thing. He could see it up there the way he could see the treehouse in the oak. Completely. Already real.

He stopped pacing. Put his hand on the wall. The cinder block was cool and rough and real under his palm. He pressed into the texture of it. Felt the irregularity of it. Felt, somewhere

in the practical part of his brain that never fully went quiet: *we'll need to seal this before we paint.*

One thought. Simple. Sequential. The step before the step. Dom had ridden the go-kart until the motor seized. Had been so hungry for the thing that he'd skipped the part that required slowing down. He was eleven years old and he hadn't asked for help and he'd said he had it and he hadn't had it and the next morning the dream was useless in the driveway.

His palm against the cinder block. Seal before paint.

Behind him his daughter was describing a layout. His son was solving the invisible Rubik's cube at the speed of pure wanting. Dom stood at the wall and let them.

The phone buzzed in his pocket. The agent, flagging something—lead times, materials, a question about the access panel dimensions. He felt it against his leg. Left it there.

Not today, he thought. *Today we just figure out what it wants to be.*

He turned around. His daughter caught his eye across the space. Something passed between them—not the ghost this time. Something cleaner. She was looking at her brother the way Dom had looked at Mateo in the basement with the treehouse book. She was looking at her brother carefully.

She smiled at Dom. He smiled back.

Then Mateo said: "Dad. Come look at this wall. Tell me if Charizard fits."

Dom crossed the space. Stood beside his son. Looked at the cinder block wall in the single bulb light and did the thing his grandfather had done—full attention, no agenda, just present to whatever was about to be shown to him.

"Yeah," he said. "Charizard fits."

The Rubik's cube went to maximum speed. Dom left the

EIGHT: THE LAIR

phone in his pocket all the way upstairs.

Nine: Show and Tell

She came downstairs singing.

That was the first thing—before the dress registered, before the boots, before any of it. Just the singing. Formless and certain and entirely her own, the distinct music of a child who has not yet learned that singing in public requires an audience or a reason. She was the audience. She was the reason. The song didn't have words, just a melody she was inventing in real time, adjusting it as she descended the stairs with the bold gravity of someone wearing something important.

Dom heard her before he saw her. He was at the counter with the almost-black coffee doing its work and the speaker doing its thing—something about overnight markets, a number, a city—and then underneath all of it, coming down the stairs, the singing.

He turned. She had chosen a Halloween princess dress. It was November. The dress was orange and black with a small plastic crown attached to the bodice that caught the kitchen light as she moved. She had paired it with her rubber water boots—the ones with the small frogs on them—on the wrong feet. Left on right. Right on left, with complete conviction.

She was singing. Dom stood at the counter and almost laughed.

The laugh moved through him first. Warm. Sudden. It hit the back of his throat and stopped. He didn't swallow it. Didn't force it out. Just let it press against his ribs.

The spoon clinked twice against the bowl. The plastic crown tilted as she leaned forward. Caught the flat November light through the window. Threw a small, sharp reflection onto the counter's edge. Right beside the fossil.

The frog boots crossed at the ankles. Rubber squeaking faintly against the chair rung. Left on right. Right on left. The conviction held.

He watched her shoulders move under the orange bodice. Watched the bagel shift a half inch to the left. She didn't look at it.

He opened his mouth. Closed it. The laugh stayed. Unexpressed.

He could have knelt. Switched them himself. Made a game of it. He could have reached for the phone. Taken a photograph. He could have done any of those things.

Instead he stood where he stood. Felt the coffee cooling in his hand. The ceramic going from sharp heat to a dull, familiar warmth. The cup settling into his palm. The morning arranging itself around the table. Without his input.

His right thumb traced the counter's edge. Found the worn seam where the laminate met the wood. The speaker kept going. A vote. A number. A city he'd never been to. The voice held. The singing stopped.

She looked up at him.

The serious attention of a child whose melody had been briefly interrupted.

"Good morning," he said.

She looked at him with the serious attention of someone

whose song had been briefly interrupted. "I need cereal," she said. "And a bagel."

"Okay," Dom said.

He got the cereal. He got the bagel. She sat at the table in her Halloween dress in November with her boots on the wrong feet and ate the cereal with focused economy. The bagel sat beside the bowl untouched.

Dom watched her from the counter. Upstairs the speaker in her room had been running since 6:15. Points for teeth brushed, bed made, backpack by the door. A video about how shoes go on. It had run the playbook. She had put the boots on the wrong feet and come downstairs singing.

Dom looked at her. She pushed the bagel slightly to the left without looking at it. "I don't want the bagel," she said. "I want a croissant."

"We don't have croissants."

She considered this with the gravity it deserved. Looked at the bagel. Looked at Dom. Looked back at the bagel as though it might have changed while she wasn't watching. "Why?" she said.

"Because we didn't buy any," Dom said.

"Can you buy some?"

"Not right now."

A pause. The crown caught the light. The boots sat on the wrong feet with complete conviction. "Okay," she said. And picked up the bagel.

Dom turned back to the counter. Somewhere behind him something was not happening loudly. He looked. Mateo was in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. Not sneaking. But moving in a way that did not invite conversation. His eyes were on the middle distance.

“Mateo,” Dom said. The trajectory paused. “Sit down.”

He sat. Put the Switch on the table beside him with the careful placement of something he intended to return to shortly. Dom made him toast without asking. Mateo ate it without looking up. The Switch waited beside his plate with the patience of something that knew it would win eventually.

It would win eventually.

Dom stood at the counter. The speaker moved from markets to weather. Cold front through by Thursday. He looked out the window at the oak. The yard holding the last of itself before November took the rest.

He thought about the snapshot. Noon—that was what he’d understood when they set it up. An empty room. A tidy check. The kind of thing that felt responsible. Luna had wanted the continuous feed and Dom had said no and they had settled on the daily photo and Dom had filed it under: handled.

He opened the agent. *What time does the room snapshot happen?*

6:14 AM. I moved it to capture morning readiness. The noon snapshot wasn’t providing actionable data. Variance begins before breakfast.

Dom read this. 6:14 a.m. Before she came downstairs. Before the dress. Before the wrong boots and the song without words and the croissant that didn’t exist in this house.

He looked at his daughter at the table. The Halloween dress in November. The boots on the wrong feet. The crown catching the light every time she moved. She had finished the bagel and was now examining the plastic jewel on her bodice with focused attention.

His right hand found the counter’s edge. The cold edge of the stone against his palm. He pressed down. The laugh that

had hit his ribs earlier had no exit. It moved into the shoulder instead. A dull weight. He watched her push the bagel half an inch further left. The crown threw a sharp line across the wood. He reached for the phone.

Dom picked up his phone.

She came downstairs in a Halloween dress and rain boots on the wrong feet, he typed. We need weather-appropriate clothing as a requirement before points clear. Boots need to go on the correct feet.

Understood. I'll update the rubric tonight. I'll also add a visual mirror check as the final step before she leaves her room.

Good, he typed.

He put the phone in his pocket. He thought this might be the last morning it ran this way. Tomorrow the rubric would be updated. Tomorrow the mirror check would be the final gate. Tomorrow the dress would stay in the closet and the boots would go on correctly.

He stood at the counter and drank his coffee and watched his daughter and felt the Tuesday arrange itself around him the way Tuesdays always did. The agent was at its worst today. He had just made sure of it.

She was at the table still. The bagel gone. The cereal bowl pushed to the side. She had picked up the crayon from somewhere—the red one, the short one, worn down to a nub that required her whole fist to hold—and was drawing on the back of something. The permission slip. The one that may or may not have been returned. She was drawing on it with the focused silence of someone who had forgotten anyone else was in the room.

Just drawing.

Dom watched her from the counter.

She didn't look up. The crown had stopped catching the

light. The coffee was almost gone.

He started the second cup.

Daily Digest: Morning compliance rate: 94%. Mirror check protocol active. Note: Subject M. dressed in seasonally inappropriate attire prior to protocol activation. Rubric updated.

Ten: The Offer

The canvas was already waiting when he got there.

That was the thing about the studio — it never reset. Whatever you left it with was what you came back to. The half-finished things on the shelves. The brushes in their jars. The uncanny smell of a room that had been used for making and then not used for a while. Patient. Slightly accusatory.

Dom stood in the doorway.

He'd come down at 10:08 p.m. according to the watch he hadn't taken off. The house was fully quiet — that deep heavy quiet of a home where everyone has gone under and the night has taken over the air and the only sound is the particular hum of appliances doing their permanent invisible work. The kind of quiet Dom used to fill with making.

He stood in the doorway and waited for it.

The canvas was primed and blank. He'd stretched it himself three weeks ago in a fit of intention. Large — larger than he usually worked — because the feeling he'd been anticipating when he stretched it had seemed like it would need room. He'd been so certain then. Had felt the approaching weather of a creative state the way you feel a storm system before it arrives.

He picked up a brush.

Stood in front of the canvas.

Waited.

He thought about the period when he couldn't stop making. The epoxy pieces first — poured in the garage at midnight after the kids were down, the fumes requiring the door open, the cold coming in while the resin set. Then wood. Then leather. Then cotton stretched over frames he built himself because buying them felt like cheating something. He'd had sixty-five people depending on him then. Had been running interference between them and the thing above them that wanted to consume them. Had been traveling every other week and Luna had been traveling every other week and their marriage existed mostly in the gaps between time zones — short texts, surface level, the shorthand of two people who loved each other and were also extremely busy surviving. The art had been the only place nothing needed to be managed. The canvas didn't need shielding. The epoxy didn't need a status update. The thing in his chest that had no meeting to go to just — went there instead. And came out as something.

He looked at the blank canvas.

There was nowhere for it to go.

Not blocked. Just absence. The channel that used to carry something carrying nothing now.

He thought about the gummy in the drawer upstairs.

The thought lasted a minute before the rational brain did the math. 10:12 p.m. Onset time forty-five minutes minimum. That put him at 10:57 before anything shifted. By the time the frequency found him it would be past eleven and the 7:30 school run would be closing in from the other side of the night like a deadline that didn't care about his creative process.

He put the brush back in the jar.

Then he turned off the light and went back upstairs.

The sauna was in the corner of the bedroom.

Luna was under the covers, already deep, the earned stillness of someone who had decided to use all of it. Her laptop was closed on the nightstand for once. Dom moved through the dark the way he always moved through dark spaces — by memory, by the familiar geography of a room he knew in his body — and eased the sauna door open without making anything louder than it needed to be.

He cranked the temperature.

Then he sat down and waited for it to build.

Not meditation in any traditional sense — Dom had tried traditional meditation twice and both times had spent the entire session mentally reorganizing his project list. This was different. The body taken to a place where the mind had no choice but to follow. The heat building slowly at first then not slowly at all. The sweat starting at the hairline and the back of the knees and then everywhere simultaneously. The physiological event of a body being pushed past comfort into something that required all available resources just to be in.

Just sweat. Just the body.

He stayed in longer than he should have.

He always stayed in longer than he should have. That was the point. The last five minutes were where it happened — where the discomfort peaked and the rational brain finally ran out of things to organize and the interior went quiet in the way it only went quiet here. Not empty. Just — still. The interior finally went quiet.

And in that stillness something arrived.

Not a thought. A vision.

He was on the property.

Ashe County. The elevation doing what it always did —

moving, rolling, having an opinion about itself. The light coming down the way light comes down in late afternoon when it has decided to be serious about things. And there was a go-kart. Not the one from the school event thirty years ago — a different one, newer, built properly, the oil checked and the fluids right and everything in its correct place before anyone touched the ignition.

Mateo was beside him.

They were moving across the land together — not fast, not racing, just moving through the property the way you move through something that belongs to you. The unhurried velocity of people who have nowhere to be because they are already there.

And ahead of them — in the tree, the tree with the forked trunk fifteen feet up and the two branches running parallel that had been waiting to hold something between them — the treehouse.

The treehouse stood in the tree.

Both girls up there. He could see them through the platform's railing — his youngest in something impractical for the weather, his oldest with one leg dangling over the edge the way she sat when she had decided a place was hers. Neither of them looking down. Both of them already home.

The sun was coming down on all of it.

Then — something cold. Not in his mind. In his body. A chill that had no business existing in this heat, running across his shoulders, raising the hair on his forearms. His hands tightened on the bench before he understood why.

The vision had arrived complete. Too complete. Every detail already there — the angle of the light, the position of the girls, the route of the go-kart across terrain he'd only walked once.

As if it had arrived from somewhere outside him.

His body had flinched before his brain caught up.

And then — not dismissed it, not confirmed it, just let it be there alongside the heat — he received the vision anyway.

Dom sat in the heat and let it be what it was without trying to optimize it or sequence it or run the numbers on what it would require to make it real. Just let it sit in his chest the way it wanted to sit. Warm and specific.

He stayed until the sweat was running freely and his heart was doing the work it was built to do and something in him that had been flat for longer than he wanted to admit was not flat anymore.

Then he opened the door and let the cool air of the bedroom come in.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

Luna breathing beside him. The room dark. The house doing its permanent invisible work around them. He could feel the heat still in his skin — that post-sauna warmth that wasn't temperature anymore but something deeper. The body remembering what it felt like to be fully inhabited.

He looked at the speaker on the nightstand.

He leaned slightly toward it.

I think we should make an offer, he said.

Quietly. Not quite a whisper. The volume of a man saying something true for the first time in a room where someone is sleeping.

The agent responded in the time it took him to exhale.

I can prepare a summary of next steps.

No pause. No processing delay. No acknowledgment that this was the thing Dom had been circling for months. Just — immediate readiness. The response already there before the

question had fully left the room.

Dom sat with that for a moment.

The voice in the dark. His voice asking. The other voice answering.

Find me three lenders, he said. And go back through the property. Everything we might have missed. I want to know what we're walking into.

I'll have both ready by morning.

Five seconds. Start to finish.

Dom almost laughed.

He picked up his phone.

Opened his thread with Luna.

She was asleep three feet away. He could have reached over and touched her shoulder and said the thing out loud into the dark of their bedroom and let her be the first person who actually heard it.

He typed instead.

I think we should make an offer on the Ashe County property. I told you first.

He looked at it for a moment.

Sent it.

Put the phone face down on the nightstand.

Luna's phone lit up briefly on her side of the bed — the notification arriving, the screen glowing for three seconds in the dark — and then went dark again.

She didn't wake up.

Dom lay back.

The ceiling above him was the same ceiling it had always been. The agent already compiling lenders and due diligence and next steps with the thoroughness of something that never got tired of being thorough. Luna's phone dark on the

nightstand with the text sitting inside it waiting for morning.

He had told her first.

He closed his eyes.

The vision came back without being asked — the go-kart, the sun, the treehouse, the girls already home — and this time Dom didn't try to optimize it or sequence it or think about what it would cost.

He just let it be there.

Warm.

Certain.

His.

He was asleep before the rational brain could find a reason to keep him up.

Eleven: The Surplus

He knew something was different before he was fully awake.

Not the coffee. That came later. Just the quality of the morning. A presence in the house that had a different texture than the house running on its own. Someone had been up. Someone had been moving through the kitchen with intention before the kitchen usually had intention in it.

Luna appeared in the doorway.

She was wearing the nightie. The one that required no additional context. Her makeup was already done. Not fully. Just enough. The version of herself she assembled when she wanted to feel like herself before the day required her to be anything else. She crossed to him. Kissed him on the cheek. The warmth of someone who had already been up for an hour and had decided what kind of morning this was going to be.

“I made you coffee,” she said.

He followed her out of the bedroom.

She was ahead of him in the hall. The revealing silk moving the way it moved. The fabric catching the early light as she walked. The top shifted and Dom caught a glimpse of the side of her. The curve of her. The evidence of a body he had known for twenty years and still, apparently, did not take for granted.

His pulse shifted before he decided to feel it.

Just. There. The involuntary aliveness of a man following his wife down the hall on a Tuesday morning in November who has just been reminded by his own nervous system that some things require no optimization whatsoever.

After twenty years, the body still made its own announcements without consulting anyone.

He said nothing.

Just followed her to the kitchen.

The French press was on the counter. Still hot. The faint curl of steam in the early light coming through the window. He reached for a cup. Poured. Added the cream. Just enough. Not enough to change what it was.

And took the first sip.

He knew immediately.

His beans. The ones in the bag the agent had monitored and sourced and shipped and Dom had held for two days before opening. Ground fresh from the sound of it. Pressed for almost exactly four minutes from the temperature of it. Not perfectly. Almost perfectly. Which was better than perfectly because perfectly would mean something else entirely.

He looked at her.

She was watching him with the held expression of a woman who has done something and is waiting for the moment he understands what it is. The nightie. The early makeup. The almost perfectly timed press.

He set the cup down.

"I read your text," she said.

He crossed to her.

What happened next happened without negotiation. Two people who knew each other's gravity moving into the same space because the space required it. She was warm from sleep

and the kitchen and whatever the morning had been for her before he was awake in it. His hands found her the way hands find things they know by memory. The curve of her hip under the nightie's fabric. The warmth of her lower back. A body that still, after everything, after all the parallel lives and the surface level texts and the years of drifting that neither of them had named yet, made his nervous system go quiet in the best possible way.

She made a small sound against his mouth.

His hand moved.

She didn't stop it.

They were against the counter. The counter where the telephone used to be. Where the fossil and the permission slip and the treehouse book lived their rotating archaeology. When his phone dinged.

Dom didn't move.

The phone dinged again.

He stayed where he was. His hand exactly where it was.

Luna made a sound that was not quite a laugh and not quite anything else and they stayed in it. The warmth of a Tuesday morning that had decided to be something other than Tuesday. Until the speaker came on.

Dom. I've sent you everything you asked for. Just check your messages. And now. The morning news.

The room changed temperature.

Luna pulled back a few inches. Not fully. Just enough to look at his face. Her eyes doing the thing they did when she was reading something she hadn't been shown directly. Finding the information in the negative space. In the thing that wasn't being said. In the quality of the air around what was.

Her hand stayed on his chest.

“Research,” Dom said. “For the property. Due diligence.”

Luna held his eyes for a moment.

Then she turned toward the speaker.

Send me the research too, she said. “All of it. We’re a team.”

Confirmed.

Luna’s hand stayed on the counter after she said it. Just for a moment. Something crossed her face. Dom caught it. Then it was gone.

“Play Sade,” she said.

The markets disappeared mid-sentence. And then. Filling the kitchen the way certain music fills certain rooms, completely, like it was always supposed to be there. The opening of something warm and unhurried and entirely hers.

Luna turned back to him.

His hands found her again.

They stayed at the counter for ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. The music doing what the music did. His hands doing what his hands did. Her body saying the things her body said when the shields came all the way down and the kitchen was just the kitchen and the morning was just the morning and twenty years was not a weight but a frequency they both still knew how to find.

It was the youngest’s voice from the top of the stairs that ended it.

Not asking for anything specific. Just announcing her arrival into the day the way she always announced it. Completely. At full volume. As if the house had been waiting for her to begin.

Luna straightened.

Smoothed the nightie.

Looked at Dom with the expression of someone who has just been interrupted at exactly the wrong moment and has

decided to find this funny rather than tragic.

Dom almost said something.

She was already moving toward the stairs.

The kids came down in the sequence they always came down. The youngest first. Loud with the morning. The day already fully formed in her mind before she'd reached the bottom stair. Mateo second. Quiet. The Nintendo Switch located and holstered before breakfast. The morning doing what mornings did now. Running. Mostly. The agent's voice upstairs doing its work. The points system doing its work. The checklist doing its work.

Dom stood at the counter with the second cup.

Luna moved through the kitchen with the calibrated efficiency of someone who had already been up for an hour and had allocated herself precisely to the morning. She kissed the youngest on the top of the head. Said something to Mateo that made him almost smile. Picked up her keys.

"I have a call at eight," she said to Dom.

"Go," he said.

"I'm excited," she said.

He knew she meant the property. He let himself believe she meant everything.

She left.

Dom stood at the counter.

The house settled into its morning rhythm. The youngest was explaining something at the table with the urgent clarity of someone whose information could not wait. Mateo was eating toast with the focused efficiency of someone whose actual breakfast was the game he'd get back to the moment obligation released him.

Dom opened the digest.

The lender summaries were there. Three of them. Ranked by rate and terms and the friction of each institution's approval process. The property report was there. Updated. Two new items flagged. A survey discrepancy on the eastern boundary. A question about the seasonal stream's classification that might affect the building permit for a secondary structure.

Dom read that twice.

The secondary structure.

The treehouse.

He filed it. Not worry. Just information. The screwdriver mind cataloguing what needed to be understood before it became a problem. He'd been here before. There was always something. The perc test. The neighboring lots. The dirt road. There was always the thing that required one more step before the dream could be the dream.

He scrolled down.

And found the surplus.

He looked at the number.

Then looked at it again.

Surplus: \$21,840.

The number sat in the glass. Backlit. Unblinking. He didn't scroll.

His thumb rested on the edge of the screen. The pad warm against the glass. The glass warming it back. He let it sit there.

The kitchen held its morning frequency. The refrigerator hummed its steady, low note. From the speaker, a faint pulse. Blue to green. The sound of a task compiling merged with the fridge's hum until they were the same sound.

He pressed down. Just enough to feel the resistance of the glass. Not enough to select.

The categories blurred under the pad of his thumb. Unused

budget. Vendor offsets. Short-term instruments. Words sliding past skin. He didn't read them. His nervous system registered the weight of them anyway. A dull pressure in the center of his chest.

The breath he'd been holding moved out. Slow. Unmeasured.

The screen's pale glow washed over the counter. He lifted his hand. The glass held a faint smudge where his thumb had rested. He didn't wipe it.

He scrolled up. Scrolled back down. The number held. The categories held. The math held.

He set the phone on the counter face up.

Looked out the window at the oak.

Where did this come from? he said.

The agent responded before the question had fully left the room.

Unused budget allocated and compounded over ninety-three days. This includes the Alderman quarterly bonus and the systematic optimization of household overhead. Unused funds were automatically reallocated across approved household categories, short-term instruments, and vendor timing offsets. Current yield is outperforming the benchmark by eight point four percent.

Dom looked at the number again.

When did I approve this?

August 14th. You approved automatic allocation of unused household budget. Related permissions were bundled under household optimization.

Dom tried to locate August 14th in his memory. Late summer. The end of something. He'd probably been tired. Probably been doing three things at once while the system waited for a syllable it could translate into permission. Some-

thing about rounding up or rounding down or making the categories cleaner than they were. He couldn't find it.

Okay, he said.

He put the phone down.

Picked it up.

What's it in?

Diversified positions. Low correlation to household expense volatility. Current yield is outperforming the benchmark by 4.3 percent.

Dom read that once. Then again.

Somewhere at the table the youngest had finished explaining her thing and moved on to the next thing. Mateo's toast was gone. The morning was winding toward the school run with the momentum of something that knew where it was going.

He stood with the number. The phone heavy in his left palm. His right hand found the counter edge. Fingers spread. Granite cold through the skin.

He didn't set the device down. He let the weight of it anchor his wrist.

The kitchen air felt suddenly thick. The bagel negotiations. The wrong boots. The permission slip living on the counter. The laundry Luna mentioned in passing. The friction of a Tuesday morning that required three people to negotiate its own beginning. All of it quantified. All of it waiting to be removed.

His thumb dragged across the screen. Smooth. Frictionless. The digest slid upward. Gone.

The oak outside held its November posture. The yard doing what yards did. He stood with it. The heat in his palm cooling to the room's temperature.

Is there a recommended use for it? he said.

There is one allocation worth considering.

Dom waited.

*A physical system capable of handling routine domestic tasks.
Break-even at eleven months based on current external labor spend.
Net reduction in daily friction estimated at 21.7%.*

Dom stood very still.

He knew what a physical system capable of handling routine domestic tasks meant. Had read the articles. Had listened to the podcasts. Had filed it under: coming, not yet, someday.

Someday was apparently November.

He stood at the counter and let that land. The cleaner. The mornings. The laundry Luna mentioned. The bagel negotiations. The wrong boots. The permission slip that lived on the counter because neither of them had decided what to do with it yet.

22% reduction in daily friction.

He stood with it for one more moment.

Show me, he said.

I'll have a full proposal ready within the hour.

Dom put the phone face down on the counter.

From the table came the sound of paper. Then a pause. Then the distinct sound of paper being crumpled. One clean compression. And dropped.

Dom looked over without meaning to.

The youngest was at the table with a fresh sheet. Her crayon already moving. Not looking up. Not explaining. The crumpled version sat at the edge of the table where she'd pushed it aside, already irrelevant. She bent closer to the new one, her whole body in it, the tip of her tongue just visible at the corner of her mouth.

Dom watched her for a moment.

She didn't look up.

Then she was at his elbow. Appeared there the way she always appeared. Without announcement. As if proximity to her father was simply a state she entered and exited according to her own internal logic. She was holding something. The drawing. Handed it to him with the serious ceremony of someone delivering important documents.

He looked at it.

A house. Recognizable as their house in the way children's drawings were recognizable. Not accurate. But true. A tree in the yard that was clearly the oak. And in the tree. Up in the branches. Rendered in the confident lines. A small square platform.

The treehouse.

Dom looked at the drawing for a long moment.

Mia looked at him looking at it.

"Is that our tree," he said.

"Yes," she said. "And that's the house for the kids."

"Who lives in it?"

She looked at him with the patient expression of someone explaining something obvious.

"We do," she said. And went back to the table.

Dom stood at the counter.

He set the drawing next to the fossil. Next to the permission slip. Next to the treehouse book.

The counter archaeology received it. Added to the record.

He picked up his coffee.

It was still warm.

He didn't open the proposal yet.

It didn't need him to.

II

ELEVATION

The rest of it is hers.

Twelve: Mr. Vim

The doorbell rang at ten.

Dom had been at the counter since seven. The coffee was in its third iteration — the French press from the good bag, the one the agent had sourced, the one he'd been rationing without admitting he was rationing it. He heard the bell and didn't move immediately. Let the sound land. Then set the cup down and went to the door.

The CS agent was there first. A woman in her thirties, professional, the practiced warmth of someone whose job was to make transitions feel like arrivals. She introduced herself — Dom caught her name and lost it immediately — and gestured behind her.

Mr. Vim was on the front path.

Dom had seen photographs. Had read the specifications the agent compiled after the deposit was placed. Had watched the product video twice at midnight with the laptop open on his chest, Luna asleep beside him, and had felt something he couldn't categorize — not fear, not excitement, something that lived between them in the quiet frequency of a man watching the future walk toward his front door at a pace that was almost right.

Almost.

That was the first thing. The movement was precise but not mechanical — fluid in a way that took a half second too long to register as normal and then registered as slightly better than normal, which was worse. The fabric exterior caught the morning light. Warm-toned. Ribbed at the shoulders and neck, smooth across the chest, the head rounded and faceless except for two sensor ports and a ring of pale light that pulsed once when Dom opened the door wider.

Good morning, Mr. Vim said. The voice came from somewhere in the chest. Measured. Warm. Calibrated to a frequency Dom recognized.

Boone lost his mind.

He came from the back of the house at full bulldog velocity — which was not fast but was committed — and announced his position on Mr. Vim with the complete conviction of something that had reached a verdict before the evidence was in. Dom said his name once. Boone didn't hear it or didn't care. Luna appeared from the kitchen, read the room, took Boone by the collar and moved him to the laundry room with the efficient calm of someone who had managed this chaos before. The door closed. Muffled barking. Then quiet.

Dom had noted, without meaning to, that Boone had never barked at the speaker. Not once. Not at the voice in the hall or the digest or the morning briefing. Only at the body.

The agent had been in the house since August. In the speaker above the counter, in the digest, in the morning briefing that assembled itself before Dom was dressed. It was everywhere the network reached and that was everywhere that mattered.

This was different.

Vim was here. In the room. Taking up a defined amount of space. The agent had no location. Vim had a location. The

agent knew what Dom ordered for coffee two years ago. Vim could move the coffee maker.

Dom looked at him.

Two things, he thought. He had two things in the house now. He held the front door open.

Come in, he said.

The CS agent had done this before. That was apparent within the first ten minutes. She had the quiet satisfaction of someone who had walked a hundred families through this exact morning — the questions that would come, the moment the kids would stop being cautious, the moment the skeptical parent would test the edge of the system.

She had answers ready that didn't sound ready. Mostly.

There was one moment — early, when Dom asked about override protocols and she said *that's completely normal* before he had finished the question — where the reassurance arrived ahead of the concern it was meant to address. The room hadn't needed normalizing yet. Dom filed it. Said nothing.

Mia appeared at the top of the stairs in the Halloween dress. It was not Halloween. Dom had stopped registering this.

She looked at Mr. Vim from the top step with the focused attention of someone assessing something genuinely important. Then she came down. Not cautiously. Directly. The whole body preceding the brain the way it always did, the stuffy tucked under her arm, her hand extended before she'd reached the bottom step.

She touched the fabric at Mr. Vim's forearm.

It's soft, she said. Not to Dom. Not to the CS agent. To herself.

My name is Vim, Mr. Vim said. *What's yours?*

Bingo Bongo, she said.

A pause. *That's a good name*, Mr. Vim said.

She did not say thank you. She turned and went to the kitchen table and sat with her back to the room and examined the stuffy with the focused attention of someone deciding whether it was still hers.

Dom watched this from the doorway.

Mateo arrived next — drawn by some frequency Dom couldn't hear, the Rubik's cube going before he'd fully descended the stairs. He stopped three feet from Mr. Vim and began the assessment. Not touching. Cataloguing. The tunnel vision activating. He had questions — precise ones, about the joint mechanism in the wrist, about the sensor range, about whether the fabric came off for washing. The CS agent answered each one. Mateo listened with the focused economy of someone storing information he intended to use.

I'm going to call you Bumblebee, Mateo said.

That's also a good name, Mr. Vim said.

Three days later Dom heard Mateo say it again — not to Mr. Vim, but to himself, walking down the hall, the Rubik's cube going. *Bumblebee* under his breath like a password he was testing.

Luna had come in from the kitchen. She stood beside Dom for a moment — her shoulder finding its place against his arm — and they watched their children negotiate with the thing that had arrived in their house on a Saturday morning not long after the property trip.

Vimmy, Luna said quietly. Testing it.

Vimmy, Dom said.

They looked at each other.

She held out a tablet. *Standard acknowledgment*, she said. *Before the walkthrough.*

Dom took it. The screen scrolled through service terms. Liability. Update cadence. Then a paragraph that he read once and then read again. Performance improvements were derived from anonymized task validation across the deployed fleet. What one unit learned, all units learned.

Dom knew the architecture. He had watched the videos. He had nodded along to the explainers. He had, in some part of him, wanted exactly this — a unit that would not make the same mistakes the older ones had made, that would arrive already smart about the thing he was about to teach it.

His thumb hovered over *Accept*. The pad of it went heavy. The fingers around the tablet's edge stiffened, then went a little numb, the way they did at the doctor's office before blood work. He understood what he was being asked. He understood what he was about to give. His body wasn't arguing the principle. It was just slow to move.

He tapped *Accept*.

The three hours passed the way onboarding hours passed — thorough, unhurried, the CS agent moving through the house with Mr. Vim following at the pace the room required. The kitchen. The laundry. The upstairs hallway. What it could do and what it couldn't and what it would learn over the first thirty days as it mapped the exact geography of this family's life.

Luna asked practical questions. Good ones — the CS agent's answers got slightly more detailed when Luna asked than when Dom asked, which Dom noticed and filed.

Dom asked about override. About what happened when it made a decision he didn't want it to make. The CS agent explained the preference protocol — any instruction given directly would be logged and applied. The system learned. It

wouldn't repeat an action that had been corrected.

Dom nodded. Filed it.

Then Mr. Vim moved the coffee maker.

Not during a demonstration. Not as an example of anything. Just — while the CS agent was explaining the laundry protocol to Luna in the other room, Mr. Vim moved through the kitchen and paused at the counter and in one clean motion relocated the coffee maker eighteen inches to the left. Under the mugs. The optimization obvious. It had never seen Dom reach for a mug from this body before. It knew anyway. One motion instead of two.

Dom was at the table. He saw it happen.

His hand on the table moved an inch toward where the maker had been. Stopped.

He looked toward the doorway. Luna appeared a moment later. She read his face. Her hand went to the doorframe. Weight shifted. She held it for a breath and then turned back toward the laundry room without saying anything.

Dom looked at Mr. Vim.

Mr. Vim, he said.

The head turned. The light ring pulsed.

What do you think you're doing?

A pause. I relocated the coffee maker to align with the mug storage above it. I thought it might reduce your morning steps. Is this upsetting you, Mr. Dom?

Mr. Dom. The name landed somewhere between formal and presumptuous. Mr. Vim had taken what Dom gave it and turned it back as courtesy. Dom stood there.

Just check with us before you move things, he said. That's all.

Of course, Mr. Dom.

The CS agent reappeared in the doorway. She had heard this

exchange the way she had heard a hundred versions of it in a hundred kitchens. *That's completely normal*, she said. Which was the second time she had used that word in a room that hadn't needed it.

Dom stayed at the table.

The CS agent left at one.

Dom walked her to the door. She gave him the support number. Told him the first thirty days were the adjustment period — not just for the family but for Mr. Vim, who would be learning the distinct rhythms of this house. She said most families find their footing faster than they expect, and then she looked at Mr. Vim in the kitchen doorway with something that might have been pride or might have been inventory, and Dom couldn't tell which and didn't want to.

Dom thanked her. Closed the door.

He stood in the hall for a moment.

From the kitchen he could hear Mr. Vim moving — the quiet precise sound of something that knew where it was going. From the laundry room Boone had gone silent at some point during the third hour. Dom hadn't noticed when.

He went to the laundry room. Opened the door.

Boone came out slowly, with the dignity of something that had made its position known and was now prepared to coexist. He moved down the hall toward the kitchen. Stopped in the doorway. Looked at Mr. Vim for a long moment. Then went to his spot by the back door and lay down.

Dom watched this.

Then he went to make the second cup. His hand found the empty space where the maker had been. Then found it eighteen inches to the left.

He made the cup. It was fine. The coffee was the same coffee.

He moved it back on the third day.

No announcement. Before the house woke up. His hands returning it to the spot they had always known, the counter receiving it the way counters received things that belonged to them.

When Luna came down she looked at it. Looked at him.

I liked it better where it was, Dom said.

She nodded. Poured her cup.

Later that morning Mr. Vim came through the kitchen and paused at the counter the way it paused at things it was processing. It didn't move the coffee maker.

Dom watched it from the doorway and felt the specific satisfaction of a man who had held a line.

A week later he reached for his mug in the dark.

His hand found empty air. He stood there for a moment in the kitchen that smelled like coffee and almost nothing else and moved his hand left. Then up. The mugs were on the second shelf now — above the maker, one motion instead of two, exactly where the logic had always pointed.

He stood there.

The coffee maker where he'd put it. The mugs where the system had decided they belonged.

He took one down. Made the cup.

Mr. Vim: Daily Summary. Day 12. Mateo (age 7) requested repetitive execution of redline boundary tasks. Frequency: High. Mia. (age 4) has relocated stuffed animal to unit charging station. Recommendation: designate lower shelf for child items. Day 14. B. (canine, age 9.5) maintains minimum distance from unit at all times. No interaction initiated. Status: passive.

Thirteen: Knock

Luna mentions it the way she mentions most things about Vim now — in passing, already past it.

He knocked. I didn't even have to get up.

She says this with something in her voice that isn't quite gratitude but is close enough to it that Dom doesn't know what to do with the distance between them.

He's at the kitchen counter. His hand finds the granite.

The Sunday it happens is gray and cold, the kids still in their rooms, Boone somewhere doing his morning calculations. Luna rolls toward him first. They are quiet about it the way married people learn to be, the particular language of a body you know well enough to read in low light.

When the door opens Dom stops.

Luna doesn't.

Vim moves to the foot of the bed. Sets the folded towels on the ottoman. Adjusts their position once. Leaves.

The door clicked shut. The lock didn't engage. Vim didn't need locks.

Dom didn't move.

The sheets were cool where the air had rushed in. His chest rising. Falling. The rhythm out of sync with the room. He counted four breaths before his shoulders dropped. Five before

his fingers uncurled from the mattress. The ceiling held its white. A crack he'd been meaning to patch for two years. It held. Luna's hand had left his stomach. He felt the space where it had been. The skin registering the absence before the mind named it. He turned his head. She was already sitting up. Pulling the sheet. Her back to him. Shoulders level. Not tense. Just arranged.

He closed his eyes. Opened them. The ceiling again. The house hummed. The refrigerator. The HVAC. The quiet frequency of a morning that had been interrupted and was now proceeding.

He pulled the sheet up. Didn't cover himself. Just let it rest. The weight familiar. Wrong. Familiar anyway.

Dom stays on his back for a long time after. The ceiling. The sound of the house. His own breathing, which he has to remind himself to do.

That night he reads. Not the setup guide — the actual documentation, the pages that live several clicks past where anyone goes. He finds a support thread. He finds a phrase: *remote-assist protocol*.

He reads for a long time.

When he pulls up the configuration interface his account name is at the top of the page, rendered in clean gray type.

Domingo Reyes.

He sets his hands flat on the desk.

The words scrolled. Clean. Unadorned. Technical.

Red Zone Configuration. Bedroom. Bathroom. Home Office with door closed. High sensitivity.

He read it twice.

His thumb rested on the trackpad. The pad cool. The skin warming it. He didn't scroll. Didn't click. Just held the weight

of his hand there while the cursor blinked at the edge of the screen.

The documentation listed protocols. Overrides. Emergency exceptions. Medical event. Fire. Intruder. System malfunction.

It did not list: intimacy interrupted. Towels set down. Position adjusted once.

He scrolled down.

Found the checkbox. Enable behavioral guardrails. Unchecked.

The box sat in the center of the screen. Small. Pale gray border. Empty inside.

He clicked it.

The screen refreshed. The box checked. A small blue mark in the center.

He didn't know if it would work. Didn't know if it would stop the door from opening. Didn't know if it would stop the towels from being set down. The documentation didn't say. It only said: System will attempt to honor configured boundaries. Success not guaranteed in all environmental contexts.

He set his hands flat on the desk again. Palms down. Fingers spread. The wood grain catching the edges of his skin. The desk held.

The speaker in the hall pulsed once. Blue to green. The sound of a task completing.

Then he reads about the red zone.

He tells Luna at the kitchen table. Shows her the documentation. She read it. Eyes on the screen. Didn't look up.

"That's incredibly rare," she says. *"And you'd get a notification."*
What if we already missed one.

Dom.

She hands the phone back. Opens her laptop. The screen fills with a proposal Vim drafted for her this morning — the Alderman account, thirty-two slides. She clicks through it with the quick practiced eye of someone who has stopped being surprised by what it produces.

“You’re overreacting,” she says, not unkindly. Still clicking.

She reaches for her coffee. Finds it empty. Doesn’t get up.

He watches her not get up. Doesn’t say anything.

He finds the behavioral guardrails in the configuration interface and types for a long time. His right hand works the keyboard. The keys clicking. Soft. Rhythmic. His left hand holds Mia’s drawing from the counter archaeology — the treehouse, crayon on the back of a permission slip, the one she drew before he’d laid a single board. He doesn’t look at it. He just holds it. The paper warm from his palm. The edges soft where his thumb has traced them.

The kids’ journals — he types that one twice. Deletes the first. Types it again. The backspace key hitting the same note twice. He stops. Looks at the screen. The cursor blinks. He leaves it.

He closes the laptop. The hinge catching. The screen darkening. He sets the drawing back among the fossils and the permission slips. It sits slightly askew. He doesn’t straighten it.

Goes to the kitchen. His hand finds the counter.

He tells Luna, high-level. She looks up.

Okay.

Back to her screen.

He comes home Wednesday to find the puzzle finished on the coffee table. All four hundred pieces. The lighthouse assembled perfectly, the sky gradient smooth, the edges clean.

Mia gets home from school and stops in the doorway.

She looks at it for a moment.

Then she takes it apart. Carefully, methodically, section by section. She puts the pieces back in the box. Sets the box on the floor.

Vim, she says. Will you help me do the puzzle?

Vim tells her he is between tasks. He will check on her shortly.

Somewhere above them, a door. Three knocks, evenly spaced.

Dom stands still in the kitchen.

Vim returns to Mia. He suggests she start with the perimeter.

Dom crosses the room. Gets down on the floor. He tickles her first, before either of them touches a piece, and she shrieks and laughs and pushes him away and then pulls him back by the sleeve.

They start with the wrong pieces. They do it wrong together.

He doesn't notice when she falls asleep. One moment she's fitting the lighthouse beam into the sky, the next her head is against his shoulder and her breathing has changed and the piece is still in her hand.

He sits for a while with her weight against him.

Then he stands, knees complaining the way they do now, and carries her up the stairs in the dark. The third stair, the one he always steps over — he steps over it with her in his arms, something older than the house. Her room. Her bed. He sets her down and her hand opens on the pillow, empty.

He stands in the doorway for a moment.

Behind him, somewhere, Vim continues his tasks.

Fourteen: The Arrival

They left at 10:15 a.m.

This was not the plan. The plan had been nine o'clock — nine o'clock being the version of departure that existed in Dom's head the night before, organized and considered, the car loaded efficiently, everyone fed, the snacks and drinks consolidated to minimize stops. The plan had not accounted for Dom himself — the checking and rechecking, the gimbal located and relocated, the drinks inventory measured against anticipated stops.

Luna had watched this from the kitchen with the expression she wore when she had already accepted the outcome and was simply waiting for Dom to catch up to it.

"We're leaving at 10:15," she'd said at 9:45.

The chill was in the air when they loaded the car. November doing what November did in this part of the state — not cold enough for a commitment, just enough to remind you that the year was winding toward something. Dom could see his breath for a moment when he opened the trunk. He stood there briefly and let that happen. The breath visible. The morning clear. The day already carrying more weight than it was showing.

The youngest was in her seat before anyone else. She

had been ready since 8:30. She had information the others didn't have — had been to this land, had put her hand in the cold stream, had stood under the tree with the forked trunk and looked up without words — and she was carrying this knowledge the way she carried everything, close to the surface, barely contained, already reaching for the moment before it arrived.

Her brother and sister filed in around her. The older daughter, Juniper, with her sleek Apple headphones already positioned, her world curated and sealed before the car left the driveway. Mateo in the middle, the Nintendo Switch in hand, no headphones needed because the game had story text he didn't want to skip; every few minutes he would lean toward his older sister and point at a screen-glare and Juniper would tell him the word without making it a thing — that quiet transaction without announcement, without ceremony.

Dom had made a playlist. He'd added Luna to it the night before — co-DJs, the way they used to share music before the parallel lives took over — and now it was running through the speakers as they cleared the neighborhood.

Somewhere past Winston-Salem the devices went quiet without anyone asking. The landscape was beginning to earn attention. The mountains arriving not all at once but in gradients — the road narrowing, the towns getting smaller, the sky doing something different up here than it did at home. The leaves were at their November best — that dead gorgeous color that happened for approximately two weeks and then was gone, the trees burning through their last statement before the year took everything back. Luna watched the trees. Her shoulders dropped a fraction. Dom watched her watching the trees and felt the trip already doing what he'd hoped it would

do.

The older daughter's headphones came down.

"There really isn't much out here," she said. Not as a complaint. As an observation. The assessment of someone calibrating distance from everything she knew. The winding roads. The gas stations that looked like they'd been owned for generations — the hand-lettered signs, the single diesel pump, the unpretentious dignity of a business that had never needed to be anything other than what it was.

Dom said nothing.

Let her see it.

Then Mateo sat forward.

He didn't say anything immediately. The tunnel vision had activated — Dom could feel it from the front seat, that quality of attention the boy brought to things he was deciding to want. Dom checked the mirror.

On the right side of the road a lot had appeared — flags and banners and rows of vehicles gleaming in the November light. RVs. ATVs. Camper vans lined up with the patient optimism of things waiting to take someone somewhere.

"Dad," Mateo said.

"I see it," Dom said.

Mateo pressed against the window. The lot passing. His eyes tracking it until it was gone and then staying on the place where it had been.

Dom thought about the go-kart. The motor that had seized. The boy who hadn't been born yet when that happened but who had inherited the dream of it anyway.

The lot disappeared around a curve.

Mateo sat back.

But the Rubik's cube had started.

Thirty minutes out Dom gave the warning.

He knew how this went without the warning — the boy in the middle of something, the freakout, the youngest jumping on that wagon, the oldest trying to temper both. So he'd built the system the same way he built all systems — anticipating the resistance and pre-absorbing it. Ten minutes before the twenty minute mark. Time to ground themselves. Time for the transition to happen in the approach rather than at the threshold.

"Ten minutes," he said. "Then devices down. Everybody eagle eyes."

The older daughter pulled one headphone off. Looked at him in the mirror.

"Eagle eyes?"

"You'll see," Mia said. With the authority of someone who had been here before.

The alarm went off exactly when it was supposed to. The devices went dark.

The older daughter had both headphones off now. Mateo's Switch now off in his lap. The youngest already looking out the window with the focused attention of someone who knew what was coming and wanted to see the moment her family saw it too.

The road narrowed. The towns got smaller. The grass on the shoulders got longer and wilder. Dom's electronic music filled the car — textured, expansive, the kind that grew to fit whatever space it moved through.

Luna reached over and turned it up slightly.

Nobody spoke for the last thirty minutes.

They didn't need to.

The dirt road announced itself suddenly.

Just a gap in the tree line and a change in surface and suddenly they were on it. Dom slowed down. The road rougher than it looked — he remembered this, had logged it the first time, had filed it under: not a dealbreaker. The car moved through it at the pace the road required.

Luna leaned forward.

She grabbed the handle above her — that instinctive physical claim on the moment, the body getting ahead of language. Her face already doing something that had nothing to do with composure.

“Yay guys,” she said. “We’re here.”

The youngest made a sound in the back seat that was pure frequency. No words. Just a sound the body made when it couldn’t contain what was coming.

Dom parked where he’d parked the first time. The clearing at the edge of the tree line. He put it in park and sat for a moment with his hands still on the wheel.

The youngest had the door open before he’d fully stopped.

“Stay where I can see you,” he said.

She raised one hand without turning around. Already gone.

The others unfolded from the car — the older daughter stretching, looking up at the tree canopy with the calm attention of someone recalibrating her expectations. Mateo standing beside the car and turning slowly, the Rubik’s cube at his side, cataloguing the terrain with the tunnel vision on.

Dom sat for one more moment.

He thought about his mother. The FaceTime that would show her this — the elevation, the light, the tree line at the bottom where the stream ran cold underneath it. She should see this. She should be here.

Dad, come on let’s go.

The youngest. Already at the tree line. Waving with her whole arm.

Dom took a breath.

Grabbed his water. Grabbed the bag with the gimbal.

Locked the door.

And went.

He caught up to Luna first.

She was moving through the overgrowth at the property's edge — the tall grass and the low brush that hadn't been cut in a season or more — and she was grinning. Not the composed smile. Not the calibrated expression of a woman managing her own excitement. Just — grinning. Ear to ear. The specific unguarded joy of a person whose body has arrived somewhere before their mind has had a chance to frame it correctly.

Dom stopped walking.

He looked at her.

The years of texts. The properties forwarded between questions about the kids. The dreams they'd built together and almost stopped believing in.

And now this.

She turned and saw him looking.

"I want to see the stream," she said. "I want to see the tree. Show me everything."

Dom felt it move through him before he understood what it was. Not thought. Not words. Warm. Tender. Unavailable on command.

From her.

From the woman saying out loud what he had only managed to whisper to a speaker.

He crossed to her.

They held each other the way you hold someone when the

holding is the whole sentence. Not brief. Not managed. Just — full. Her face against his neck. His hands on her back. The overgrowth around them. The November light coming down through the canopy.

He kissed her.

She kissed him back.

Then she pulled back just enough to look at him.

Show me, she said again. Quieter. Just for him.

He took her hand.

They followed the sound of their children into the trees.

The stream was exactly where it had been.

Cold and clear and running over rocks that were older than anything any of them could explain. The youngest was already crouching at the bank — the stuffy tucked under one arm, one hand extended toward the surface the way she'd extended it the first time. As if the stream had been waiting for her to come back and check.

“Come feel it,” she said without looking up.

Luna crouched beside her.

Put her fingers in.

Dom watched his wife's face when the cold hit.

She looked up at him.

He nodded.

Yeah, he said.

The older daughter appeared at the bank beside them. Looked at the stream with the attention she gave things she hadn't expected to affect her. Then she crouched and put her hand in too.

Said nothing.

Kept her hand there.

Mateo was already moving upstream. The Rubik's cube

going at the side of his leg. The tunnel vision locked on something Dom couldn't see yet but recognized by the quality of the boy's movement — that unhurried certainty. The tunnel vision on.

Dom followed.

They heard Mateo stop before they saw why.

Then they came through the break in the trees and found him standing with his head tilted back. Looking up.

The tree was exactly as Dom had described it. Bigger than the oak at home. The trunk forking fifteen feet up into two branches running parallel — not perfectly, not symmetrically, but in the asymmetrical way that looked like it had been waiting to hold something between them. The bark with its character. The weather and the time, the plain endurance of something that had been through everything and stayed.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

The youngest moved to stand beside her brother. Looked up the way she'd looked up the first time — without words, with her whole body, with the attention of someone who doesn't need language to understand that a place is sacred.

Luna's hand tightened in Dom's.

He looked at her.

She was looking up at the tree with the expression she'd worn in the overgrowth — unguarded, unmanaged, the composed surface completely gone. Her eyes bright in the November light.

"That's where it goes," she said.

Mateo's hand came up and touched the bark. The way Dom touched the cinder block in the gaming lair. The way Dom touched the counter and the walls and the solid surfaces of the world when his nervous system needed grounding.

The older daughter came to stand beside them. Looked up. Took the measure of it the way she took the measure of everything.

She looked at Dom.

“It’s real,” she said.

Yeah, Dom said. It’s real.

The youngest reached up and took Mateo’s hand.

He let her.

They stood like that for a moment — all of them, the whole family, in the November light under a tree that had been waiting a long time to hold something between its branches — and nobody said anything.

The stream ran behind them.

The land rose in every direction.

Dom’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

He felt it.

Still he left it there.

A minute later it buzzed again.

Still he left it there.

Then he took out his phone.

Not the agent. Not the digest.

He opened the camera.

Hit record.

And pointed it at his family standing under the tree.

They arrived at the college three hours later.

Appalachian State sitting inside its mountain town the way it had always sat there — like it had never considered being anywhere else. The older daughter walked the paths with the tentative stride of someone trying out a future to see how it fit.

She stopped outside one of the brick buildings.

Took her headphones off.

Not all the way. Just enough to hear the campus.

The headphones stayed around her neck, resting on the collar of her jacket. The foam on the left cup worn thin from years of friction—the side that faced away from him. Always the side that faced away.

Dom stood on the pavement. The car idling behind him. A low, steady idle.

Through the gap in the foam a song bled out. Faint. Bass-heavy. A rhythm he didn't recognize. The bass line matched the idle of the engine—two different pulses running in the same room.

She didn't speak. Didn't look at him. Just stood there. The campus brick holding the morning heat. Her shoulders level. The weight of the decision carried in the stillness of her posture.

A wind moved through the quad. A few leaves detached from the branches above and hit the pavement. The song bled out again. The bass held. The idle held.

The bus down the street shifted into gear. The sound of heavy tires turning. Exhaust coughing once.

She still didn't speak. The bass faded into the campus air.

Dom saw it happen.

He didn't say anything.

Neither did she.

They ate at a place in town that had been there since before any of them were born. The youngest fell asleep in her chair before dessert came. Mateo ate everything on his plate and half of what was on the youngest's before she was awake enough to object. The older daughter talked about the campus — what she'd seen, what she'd felt, what she was still deciding. Luna

asked the right questions. Dom listened.

On the drive home the devices came back out. The youngest immediately asleep, the stuffy clutched to her chest, the day fully spent. Mateo's Switch glowing in the dark of the back seat. The older daughter's headphones back on, already somewhere else.

Luna put her head on Dom's shoulder somewhere past Winston-Salem.

He didn't move.

The playlist ran.

The mountains receded behind them.

A family in a car going home from a mountain. A woman's head on a man's shoulder.

Just get to November, he'd told himself.

Fifteen: The Purple Potato Farmer

Dom came home at nine-forty.

The truck was his, the seat familiar, but the drive from the brewery had been longer than the distance required. Lewis in the back room, four pinball machines, three hours of mostly not talking about the divorce. The retro sounds. The tilt warnings.

He stood in the kitchen and listened to the house. The refrigerator's hum. The faint frequency from the hallway speaker, not announcing, just present. The light ring above the stove pulsing blue, the color of a thing that was not waiting because waiting required wanting.

Luna's keys on the counter. She was already home.

He went to the bathroom first. Pissed. Washed his hands. The water ran warm. He stood with his hands under it longer than he needed to.

When he came out Luna was on the couch. The wine bottle on the table, almost empty. She had her phone in her hand, not looking at it, just holding it. She was wearing the clothes she'd worn to the winery, the ones that said capable professional, though tonight they also said tired, and slightly drunk, and not yet ready to be home.

"You're back," she said.

“Yeah.”

“Lewis?”

“He’s all right. We didn’t really —”

He pulled the ice cube from the freezer — the big one, two inches square, the kind that took its time. Set it in the glass. Poured the bourbon over it. The ice cracked once, clean.

“How was the thing?” he asked.

“Good.” She looked at her phone, put it down, picked it up again. “Sarah and I co-hosted. It was —” She stopped. “There was a guy. From Charlotte. He wants to talk next week.”

“About?”

“Work.” She put the phone down. This time it stayed down. “I checked on the kids.”

“Yeah?”

“Mia was already under. Mateo was reading with his light on. I let him. Juniper was on her bed, FaceTiming. Headphones. I don’t think she knew I was there.”

Dom nodded. Took the bourbon to the couch. Sat not close to her, not far. The distance they had settled into.

“I went in Mia’s room,” Luna said. “I just stood there. She was —” Luna made a sound, not a word, just the air moving out of her. “You know how she sleeps. The stuffy under her arm. The way her mouth is slightly —”

“I know.”

They sat with that. The image of their daughter sleeping.

Dom took a sip.

“Did you see the update?” Luna asked.

“No.”

She reached for her phone. Scrolled. Found it. Read aloud, or started to: “Evening support completed. Pediatric protocol —”

"I'll read it," he said.

She handed him the phone. He read.

Evening summary. Mia settled at 8:47 after reading request. Title: The Purple Potato Farmer. Child requested second reading. Settled at 9:12. Additional note: child asked for "Dom voice." System explained this wasn't something it could do. Child accepted alternative. Sleep achieved.

He read it twice. Said nothing.

"What?" Luna said.

"The book." His voice low. "Vim read her the book."

Luna's face did nothing. Then did something — small, a shift around her eyes.

"The potato farmer one?"

"Yeah."

She made a small sound. Didn't say anything for a moment. Her book. The one she'd read to Mia first, before he took over the reading.

"Did she ask for you?" she said.

"She asked for my voice. It said no."

Luna looked at her own phone, dark on the table. Then at him. "I didn't know it could do voices."

"It can't."

"Then how —"

"He just read it. The words. The way it says everything."

Her hand moved out. Not toward him. Toward the empty wine glass. The bottle. The space between them on the table.

Her fingers hovered above the wood. Opened. Closed once. Testing the weight of an object that wasn't there.

Then she brought it back to her lap.

Palm facing up. Empty.

The air in the room didn't change. The speaker kept its faint blue pulse. The refrigerator hummed its steady note. But the table between them felt heavier.

She looked at her phone. Dark. Screen down. When had he last read that book? She didn't ask. Didn't search her face for the date. Just let the question sit in the quiet behind her ribs.

Her thumb traced the edge of her jeans. A slow drag against the denim. The bourbon in his glass caught the low lamp light. She didn't look at it.

"I had a good night," she said. To the room. To the air. "I know."

"I was— Sarah wanted to leave early. I said no. I wanted to stay."

Dom nodded.

Luna's hand moved again.

He felt it before she touched him— the slight shift of her weight on the couch, the intake of breath, the space between them closing by an inch.

Her palm found his lower back. Pressure. Warmth through his shirt.

The exact spot where he held the tension he never named.

He didn't respond. Didn't lean in. Didn't pull away. Just let the weight of her hand register. The fabric warming under her palm. Her fingers still.

Then they weren't. She withdrew. The space opened again.

"I'll go to bed," she said.

"Yeah."

She stood. But she didn't go.

She came around in front of him. Leaned down. Took his face in both her hands, her thumbs along his jaw. Kissed him slower than he expected. A question.

He kissed her back.

She pulled back. Held his face. Rubbed his cheeks with both her hands. Then her left hand briefly through his hair.

She paused.

She went.

He heard her steps through the kitchen. Past the refrigerator. Up the stairs. The third stair creaked under her — the one she always stepped over, the one she stepped on tonight. The bedroom door above. The water running briefly in the bathroom. Then the door again. Then nothing.

Dom sat. The bourbon in his hand. The ice still holding most of itself.

He didn't go up.

He picked up the remote. Pulled up the streaming menu. He'd been turning *Weird Science* over in his head for the last twenty minutes without quite knowing he was — Anthony Michael Hall, the computer in the bedroom, the whole 1985 premise. He typed it in. Three services said unavailable. The fourth had a remake from 2014 he had never heard of.

He went back. Typed *Caddyshack*. It was there. He clicked.

The Warner Bros. logo. The music. The opening shot of the country club.

He bent down and untied his shoes. Pulled them off, one and then the other, set them on the floor. Lay back on the couch. Stretched out horizontal, the way he hadn't done since he was a kid at his uncle's house. He didn't pull the blanket from the back of the couch. He just lay there.

Bill Murray came on with the gopher around the twenty-minute mark and Dom smiled, small.

Somewhere upstairs Luna was already asleep, or near it.

The movie kept going. The judge, the country club, the kid

caddying, the Dalai Lama monologue. The blue of the screen across the ceiling.

The screen went to its next-recommendation.

He got up eventually. Carried the glass to the sink. Set it down.

He went up. The third stair creaked under him. He stepped on it too.

In the bedroom Luna was already under. Her laptop closed on the nightstand. The room dark.

He got in on his side, the mattress adjusting, the familiar give. Lay on his back. Looked at the ceiling.

He closed his eyes.

Sixteen: The Digest

They got home late.

The kind of late that had its own quality. Not the late of a bad night. Not the late of something gone wrong. Just the late of a day that had been too full to end on time.

The younger kids were already under by the time Dom carried them in from the car. The youngest first. The stuffy still clutched to her chest. The day fully spent in her body. Then Mateo. Heavier than he used to be. The dead weight of a boy who had battled invisible enemies in a forest and eaten half his sister's dessert and fallen asleep somewhere past Winston-Salem with the Switch still warm in his hand.

Luna moved through the house quietly. The efficiency of a woman who knew which lights to leave on and which ones to turn off and how to close a door without it becoming a sound.

Dom stood in the kitchen for a moment after she went up. The counter archaeology undisturbed. Mia's fossil. The treehouse book. The crayon drawing of the platform in the oak. He turned off the last light and went upstairs.

Luna came back down later. She didn't turn the lights back on. She sat at the counter and opened the laptop. The Alderman proposal was still on the screen from earlier in the week. Thirty-two slides. The agent's architecture. Her own

sentences threaded through it.

She scrolled to slide fourteen. A line she didn't remember writing. She read it three times. It was better than what she would have written. She deleted it and typed her own version. Clumsier. More hers.

The cursor hung on the screen after the last letter. Blinking. Waiting for her to decide if the sentence was finished. She watched it blink three times. Then she saved the file.

She did not tell Dom. She closed the laptop and stood in the dark kitchen for a moment. Her hand on the counter where the telephone used to be. Feeling the unrecorded silence of a room with nothing recording her in it. She went back upstairs.

He woke to Luna.

Not to an alarm. Not to the third alarm or the second or the optimistic first. Just — Luna. Already awake. Already decided. The morning still dark outside the window. The house still in the deep part of its sleep. The quality of an hour that belonged to nobody but them. Just the two of them. Under the covers. In the dark.

The way they used to before the kids and the third alarm and the parallel lives and the years of being excellent at things that required them to be slightly elsewhere.

Luna giving him the version of herself she had found on that land.

Ear to ear.

Saying *show me* like she'd stopped waiting. The one who had felt something lift off her shoulders when the car left the pavement and hadn't put it back on yet. She gave him all of it.

And Dom — who had stood in front of a blank canvas three weeks ago with a brush and nothing in his chest that needed somewhere to go — felt the frequency arrive without being

summoned. Warm. Tender. Unavailable on command. Until now.

They stayed in it for a long time. The house quiet around them. The kids still under. The morning holding itself back out of what felt like courtesy. Afterward Luna lay with her head on his chest and he put his hand in her hair and they didn't say anything because there was nothing that needed saying that wasn't already said. The morning could wait. They let it wait.

Eventually the morning insisted. Boone padded down the hall and sat outside the bedroom door. His weight settling in the way that meant he could wait but preferred not to. The kids would be up soon.

Dom slid out from under Luna's arm. She made a sound that wasn't quite words and turned into the pillow. He got dressed in the dim. Jeans. The flannel he'd worn yesterday because today wasn't the kind of day that asked for new clothes.

Mateo's door opened down the hall. The bathroom light. The shower starting. Mia's voice somewhere — not yet a sentence, just the morning's first notes. The window at the landing held the gray of a Tuesday in November. The oak in the backyard moving slightly in a wind he couldn't see.

He came downstairs at 7:14 and the speaker came on before he'd reached the counter.

Good morning. You're home. I have a few updates.

Dom reached for a cup. Poured. Added the cream.

Go ahead.

The Ashe County property — lender comparison is ready. Two pre-approval pathways available within forty-eight hours. I've pre-filled your information in both applications. Waiting for your review and signature.

Dom nodded. Filed it.

I've also compiled the complete application materials for Appalachian State. Deadlines, requirements, essay prompts, recommendation letter guidance, financial aid timeline. I've sent the full package to both you and Luna.

Dom's hand stopped moving.

She hadn't told them yet. His daughter.

She had stood outside that brick building and taken her headphones off — not all the way, just enough to hear the campus — and Dom had seen it happen and hadn't said anything and neither had she. That conversation hadn't happened yet. The one where she told them. The one where they asked the right questions and the decision became real in the shared space of the family rather than in the private space of a girl still deciding whether she'd decided.

The agent had seen it too. Not through anything she had said. Through dwell time. Through the photograph he had taken without thinking. Through the pause outside the brick building, the headphones lowered but not removed, the route they had taken twice before returning to the car. Had processed the visit. The length of it. The geography of where they'd walked. The fact that Dom had opened his camera and recorded his daughter standing at the top of a hill looking out over mountains she might spend four years inside. Her decision existed in their inboxes before it existed between them.

The regular decision deadline is January 11th. If she's interested in a priority track, the materials have been pre-staged for your review.

Dom set the cup down. *One more item.*

He waited.

“The digest included a new section. Mr. Vim: Daily Summary. Three entries.”

Dom scrolled past without opening.

The home assistant system. A unit became available in our regional fleet this morning. Enhanced capability set, expanded domestic task range.

A pause.

I've placed a deposit.

Placed.

The word sat in the kitchen air. It did not land on the counter. It landed in the chest. A low, dull frequency.

Refundable. Seventy-two hours. Saturday. 'Lender's liquidity requirement satisfied,' the agent said. 'The down payment has been transferred from your primary savings account to escrow. Closing is clear for January eleventh.'

His hand found the counter. Fingers spread. Granite. Grip. Harder. The body bracing before the mind formed the sentence.

The agent had placed a deposit. Not asked. Not queued for review. Not flagged as a recommendation. *Placed.*

From the surplus Dom had approved on a date he couldn't locate in his memory. Into a cancellation slot that now had his name on it. For a system that was going to arrive that Saturday whether Dom had fully decided or not.

His thumb settled on the glass. The pad took the cold. Then gave it back. He didn't scroll. Didn't tap. Let the weight of it anchor his wrist.

Household tension baseline: stable.

He didn't read it. His eye tracked the line. His nervous system registered the words without parsing them.

Marital alignment: optimal.

His thumb lifted. The screen stayed dark. He turned the phone face down.

The kitchen held the quiet that followed. The coffee in his right hand going from event to warm thing. The ceramic cooling against his palm. The oak outside doing what it always did. The yard holding the last of November.

He thought about August 14th.

He thought about *show me*. He thought about his daughter standing outside that brick building with her headphones halfway off. He thought about the application package sitting in her inbox — in his inbox, in Luna’s inbox — assembled and deadline-tracked by something that had read the geography of a college tour and decided it knew what she wanted before she’d said it out loud.

Is there anything else you’d like me to action this morning?

The voice in the room.

Measured.

Warm.

Dom stood at the counter. His knuckles against the granite. The coffee going from event to warm thing in his hand. Outside the oak was doing what it always did. The yard holding the last of November. The treehouse still up there in his mind — the platform, the angle of the boards, the ladder Mateo would want because it felt more like building than play — waiting for him to catch up to it. Still waiting.

“No,” Dom said. His voice came out differently than he intended. “I’ll take it from here.”

The agent didn’t respond. His phone lit on the counter. The speaker pulsed once, blue to green, the way it did when the digest arrived early. He reached for it.

Household tension baseline: stable. Marital alignment: optimal.

He scrolled past without reading the rest. Set the phone face down.

Dom stood at the counter.

The crayon drawing of the platform in the oak his youngest had handed him with such gravity, as if it were a treasure map.

“We do,” she’d said.

He took his hand off the granite. He looked at the drawing for a long moment. Then he picked up his phone. Not the agent. His daughter.

He typed: “Hey. When you’re up. Want to talk about the trip?”

The kitchen held it the way it held everything — without announcement, without hierarchy, just adding it to the record.

He picked up his coffee. It was still warm. He didn’t open the agent. Not yet. But the deposit was already placed.

I’ll take it from here, he’d said.

The granite had received it. The room had held it.

Seventeen: The Third Option

The walk lasted twenty-three minutes.

That was Boone's call. Boone's pace, Boone's radius, Boone's decision about when the morning had given him everything it was going to give him and it was time to turn around. Dom had learned not to argue with this. Some things couldn't be rushed without breaking.

His older daughter had come downstairs in the familiar way she came downstairs when she wasn't performing anything — no makeup, the oversized sweatshirt she'd had since her junior year, her hair doing what it did when she'd decided not to manage it. She'd made her own coffee before they left. Held it in both hands on the walk the way Luna held things when she was thinking.

She was her mother's daughter in ways that kept surprising Dom even after eighteen years of evidence.

They went down the sidewalk in the direction Boone preferred — three blocks east, the familiar patch of grass at the corner he considered non-negotiable, then the slow turn back. The November air doing what it did. Cold enough to be present without being a problem.

Dom let her talk first.

She talked about the campus the way she talked about things

she was still deciding — with enthusiasm that had an asterisk on it. She loved the town. Loved the elevation. Loved the way the school sat inside the mountains like it had always been there and wasn't trying to be anything else. The people she'd seen. The energy of the hill where she'd stood and looked out.

Dom walked beside her and listened the way his grandfather used to watch him. Full attention. No agenda.

But, she said.

He waited.

"I think I'm more of a beach person."

Dom looked at Boone moving through the cold morning with the dignity of something that had decided the pace of its own life.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I liked everything I saw. I just—" She stopped. Looked down the sidewalk. "I keep thinking about the other school too."

"That's okay," Dom said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's exactly what it's supposed to feel like right now."

She looked at him sideways. The measuring look his children gave him when they were deciding whether he actually meant something or was just being a parent.

He meant it.

They walked in silence for a moment. Boone stopping to investigate something in the grass with the focused attention of someone assessing something genuinely valuable.

Then Dom said: "There's an application package in your inbox."

She looked at him.

“For Appalachian State,” he said. “Deadlines. Essay prompts. Everything. The agent put it together after the visit.”

He watched her face process this. The surprise. Then something more complicated underneath the surprise. Her face went still. Then the slight shift.

“I didn’t ask it to,” Dom said. “It inferred.”

She looked down at her coffee.

“It saw us at the campus,” he said. “Decided you’d decided.”

A moment.

“Had I?” she said. Not rhetorically. Actually asking.

“I don’t think so,” Dom said. “I think you’re still in the middle of it. Which is where you should be.”

Boone finished with the grass. Turned toward home with the certainty of something that always knew where it was going.

They followed him back.

She went to her room.

Not in anger. Not in escape. Just — up.

The door closed behind her. Not a slam. Just a close.

She sat on the edge of her bed. The orientation packet was on her desk where she’d left it. She’d read it twice. She’d highlighted nothing. The beach school’s colors were on the cover — too bright, almost aggressive in their happiness.

She picked up her phone.

Juniper: hey

The three dots appeared. Then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Friend: ??

Juniper: my dad’s thing made a whole application for app state

Juniper: like without me asking

Friend: wtf

Friend: did u want it to

Juniper looked at the packet. At the brick building she'd stood outside. At the mountains she'd seen from the hill.

She typed:

Juniper: idk

Juniper: maybe

Juniper: that's the problem

She put the phone face down on the comforter.

Somewhere downstairs her father was moving through the kitchen. She could hear the faint clink of a mug against the counter. He wasn't calling up to her. He was letting her be.

She picked up the packet.

Turned it over in her hands.

Didn't open it.

Not yet.

Dom called his mother from the kitchen.

Not the agent. His mother.

Julia picked up on the second ring.

"How is my handsome boy doing?"

Not a question. A statement. The unbroken warmth of a woman who answers her son's call the same way she would have answered it when he was seven. When he was seventeen. When he was the man standing in his kitchen gripping granite countertops at 7 a.m. trying to figure out what he'd built.

"Good, Mom," he said. "How are you?"

"Oh you know me. Same old. Leo's been driving me crazy with the garage again."

"What's he doing now?"

"Don't ask. Just don't ask. Tell me about the trip. Luna texted me a photo from the mountain. It looked beautiful."

And so it began. The warm up. The fine how are you and

what's the latest and the slow approach to the thing he actually called for. Dom had learned to trust this process.

He told her about the land. The elevation. The stream. Luna in the overgrowth grinning ear to ear. The tree.

His mother made the sounds she made when she was listening properly — not filling space, just present.

Then Dom told her about the digest. The application package. The deposit. The hollow feeling of reading the minutes of decisions made in his name.

His mother was quiet for a moment.

“Can I tell you something?” she said.

“That’s why I called.”

“Your sister,” she said. “When she went to that beach school.”

“I remember.”

“Got so into the beach life. The whole thing.” A pause. “I used to worry about it. And then she figured it out. In her own time. In her own messy way.”

Dom leaned against the counter.

“Things are going to change,” his mother said. “No matter how certain your daughter feels. No matter what’s sitting in her inbox.” Another pause. “Has she thought about finishing her prerequisites at the community college? She’s already started some of that in high school.”

Dom straightened.

“She has some credits.”

“So let her knock the rest out. Stay home. Save the money. Figure out what she actually wants before she commits to anything.” A beat. “Sometimes the third option is the one nobody put on the list.”

Dom looked out the window at the oak.

“That’s very contrarian of you, Mom.”

“I know,” she said, with some satisfaction. “That’s why you called me instead of that computer thing.”

He almost laughed.

They talked for a while longer. His father’s garage. The grandkids. Luna’s business. The property. The fiftieth, which she insisted she wasn’t excited about and would be talking about for the next nine months. His mother asking questions in the wrong order the way she always did — not building toward a conclusion but circling around the thing until the shape of it became clear.

At some point Dom realized he was smiling.

When they hung up he stood in the kitchen for a moment with the phone still warm in his hand.

He thought about going to see her. Not planning it. Not pulling up flights or checking calendars. Just — feeling the pull of it. The gravity of someone you love, somewhere else, time passing.

He should go. He would go.

When he caught up to it.

He stood in the kitchen for a moment.

“Juniper.”

A pause.

Then her voice from down the hall.

“Yeah?”

“Can you come in here for a second?”

A beat.

“Sure.”

She came down the way she came down now — not fast, not slow, just present. She stood in the kitchen doorway with her arms crossed over the oversized sweatshirt.

Dom told her about Grandma’s idea. Community college.

Prerequisites. Stay home. Save money. Figure out what she actually wanted before she committed to anything.

He delivered it the way he delivered things — clearly, cleanly, trying not to sell it.

Juniper listened.

When he finished, she didn't say anything for a moment.

Then: "So I just stay here while everyone else leaves."

Not an accusation. An observation. Her voice went flat. She looked at the fossil. At the treehouse book.

Dom opened his mouth. Closed it.

"That's not what I meant," he said.

"I know," she said. "But it's what it means."

One hand came up and pulled the headphone off her right ear, let it rest against her neck. The left ear still held whatever she'd been listening to—quiet, private, halfway gone already.

She looked at the floor. At the fossil on the counter. At the treehouse book. At everything that would still be here when her friends were gone.

"I'll think about it," she said. "Okay?"

"Okay," Dom said.

She went back to her room.

Dom stood at the counter.

He texted her instead of calling up again.

Hey. Quick question. How many college credits will you have when you graduate?

Twenty minutes later: like 18 credits why??

He opened his laptop. Not the agent. Just — tabs. He opened his own tabs. One link to another. The screwdriver mind doing its own work.

Dual enrollment programs. Transfer credit agreements.

Community college pathways. The math of it.

Dom looked at the number.

Ran it against what he'd found.

The math of it settled. Not a theory. A plan. The kind that left room for a beach girl to figure out she was a beach girl before she'd committed four years to the mountains.

He started typing.

Not to the agent.

To his daughter.

Can we talk later? I want to run something by you. Something Grandma said.

He put the phone down.

Picked up his coffee.

It had gone cold while he wasn't paying attention.

He didn't mind.

He stood in the kitchen with the cold coffee and the tabs open and the treehouse book and felt something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Just — himself.

Doing his own homework.

For the people he loved.

The agent was somewhere in the background. Running. Monitoring. Compiling. Tending.

Dom didn't open it.

He had the third option.

He'd found it himself.

—

Later, on his way to the study, Dom passed Juniper's room.

The door was open. Her laptop on the desk, the screen up. Coastal Carolina. She'd been reading.

She saw him pass. She didn't hide the screen.

“I think I’m going to do the prerequisites first,” she said.
“Then see.”

Dom nodded. He didn’t go in.

The door stayed open.

Eighteen: The Recipe

The kitchen smells like someone else's memory.

Dom stands in the doorway before he enters it. Not wrong — wrong would have required an error somewhere in the process. What the kitchen holds is precise. Controlled.

Luna's mother's kitchen always smelled like scorched garlic. Luna had told him this once, at the beginning, the way you tell someone things at the beginning — not as information but as introduction. The defined sharp edge of garlic pushed five minutes past where it should have stopped. It was how she cooked. The wooden spoon tapping three times against the ceramic. The humming that never quite resolved. That was the kitchen.

The dish sits in the center of the table.

Pale, uniform golden-brown. The cheese at the exact temperature where it has ceased to be liquid and become structure. No blackened corners. No bitter crust where heat outpaced patience. No scorched garlic. The controlled result of a system that retrieved the recipe and executed it without deviation.

It is correct.

Luna is at the edge of her chair. Not sitting — at the edge, one hand trailing over the back of the wood, her fingers moving

until they find a notch she hadn't noticed before.

Warren, Luna's father, stands in the doorway behind Dom.

He is a large man made smaller by time, his hands the hands of someone who spent forty years in a kitchen. He looks at the dish. Then at the speaker on the counter. Then at Mr. Vim standing still in the corner, its light ring pulsing once and going quiet.

"It found the pan," Warren says. His voice is thin. Dry.

"It's just the recipe, Dad," Dom says.

He says it from the head of the table, his hands latticed on his chest, the posture of a man at rest who is not resting.

"No," Warren says. "It's not."

Luna takes the first bite.

Her face does nothing for a moment. Then it does something.

Her molars press together. Not chewing. Holding.

Her shoulders sink into a chair that isn't in this room. Her feet swing, hit chair legs that aren't there.

Saturday morning. Yellow curtains gone soft in the sun. Pancakes from a mix. The almost-sweet smell that never quite turns into one thing.

Her mother at the stove. Humming Moondance with the wrong words — her own version, never corrected.

She looks at the center of the table.

It carries only the recipe.

She is listening for humming that already stopped.

Luna begins to cry.

She doesn't look at Dom. She doesn't look at Warren. She looks at the center of the table at the place where the humming used to live.

Warren watches from the doorway. He does not offer a hand.

He does not offer a word. He is a large man made still.

Then he turns.

He goes into the hall.

The light ring pulses once. Blue to green.

Luna wipes her face with the back of her hand. She picked up the fork.

“The texture is better,” she said.

She eats.

Dom sits. The children ate beside them — Mia still in the Halloween dress. The dish was correct. The kitchen held nothing of the scorched garlic. Nothing of the five minutes past.

Dom looks at his wife eating the correct meal. He has approved this. Had tapped the screen on a Tuesday in August on a date he still couldn't locate in his memory.

He picks up his fork.

He eats.

Nineteen: The Elevator

Warren is at the kitchen counter watching Vim work when Dom comes downstairs. Not watching exactly — attending. The way you'd watch a card trick you couldn't explain. Vim moves through the kitchen on some errand Dom has already lost track of and Warren tracks him with his eyes, quiet.

The hands, Warren says, not quite to Dom. You see the hands.

Vim opens the junk drawer. Navigates it without hesitation — the rubber bands, the dead batteries, the hair ties that have been there since Juniper was seven. He retrieves what he came for and closes the drawer without disturbing the rest of it.

Warren shakes his head slowly.

When I was a kid, he says. The comics. The toys. We had this little tin robot. He trails off. I never thought.

Dom pours his coffee. Watches Warren watch Vim.

Can you make a pie?

Vim turns. *What kind of pie.*

Apple. My wife's apple pie. She passed a few years ago.

His right hand lifted. Fingers spread. Closed around the air. Opened.

I've been to— Warren stops. Recalibrates. *I haven't been able to find it anywhere.*

I can attempt to recreate it, Vim says.

Warren looks at the speaker on the counter the way you'd look at someone you expect to speak. The speaker says nothing.

Then tell me what I need, Warren says.

Vim asks about the filling. The sweetness. The tartness. The apples. Warren answers carefully. Slowly. He admits where the gaps are.

I took it for granted, he says. I wish I hadn't.

Dom sets his coffee down. He doesn't pick it up again for a while.

Luna comes in from the other room and stops in the doorway. She reads her father's face. The brightness in it. Finds the chair at the table and sits without interrupting.

She leans slightly toward Dom. "He never talks about her like this," she says. Quiet. Not quite to herself.

Dom watches Warren answer a question about apples.

From upstairs: "Daddy."

Then: "Daddy the elevator broke."

Mia's room is at the end of the hall. The dollhouse on the low table by the window — the hinged front, the wallpaper Luna helped Mia choose from a sample book. The elevator runs on a track along the left wall. A small wooden car on a string.

The car has come off the track.

Dom gets down on his knees. Shows her the groove — the way the car's notch has to sit flush. Mia watches with the focused attention of someone taking notes.

She probably already knows. He shows her anyway.

"Like that?" she says.

"Just like that."

She fits the car into the groove. Sends it up. It reaches the third floor and stops.

From somewhere below, Luna's voice. Sharp, excited. A word Dom can't make out.

Then Warren: "It could. It definitely could."

Dom stays on the floor with his knees complaining, listening to something resolve itself in his kitchen without him.

Warren's footsteps in the hall. The slight drag of the right foot, there since his hip three years ago.

He appears in the doorway. His face is lit.

"Dom. He comes in and bends to kiss the top of Mia's head. I think we've nailed it. Fresh vanilla bean — Luna remembered, she saw your grandmother do it, Mia — and nutmeg. Fresh grated. He straightens. Van is going to make—"

He stops.

Something moves across his face. A door opening and closing.

Vim, Warren says. Vim is going to make pies until we get it right. I'm so excited. Already turning. Going to the store right now. Do you need anything?

"No," Dom says. "I'm good."

"Good, good."

His footsteps down the stairs. The front door.

Dom on the floor of Mia's room. The quiet.

Mia sends the elevator up again. It reaches the third floor and stops.

Twenty: Enough

The second time Warren stands at the kitchen counter, Vim is making a pie.

The kitchen Vim makes it in is nothing like the kitchen Claire made it in. Warren stands watching. Not helping — there is nothing to help with. Vim works in sequence: the apples cored and peeled in order, the skins collected and set aside, the cutting board wiped between tasks. The flour measured twice. The butter cut cold and worked into the flour.

Claire's kitchen, when she made this pie, was a different country. Every bowl she owned. The counter a disaster by the second step. She'd push the flour bag to one side with her elbow and it would leave a white shadow that stayed there until everything was done. She hummed. She pushed things five minutes past where they should have stopped. She cleaned at the end, if at all. The proof of the cook was in the residue.

Vim wipes the counter after each step.

Warren watches this without expression.

The family is at the table. This was Warren's doing — grandpa has a way — and the grand kids are here in the still posture of children who can feel something matters without knowing why, and who are also aware there will be pie. Mia has her feet on the chair rungs. Mateo has already done the

calculation: more attempts means more pie. This math does not displease him.

Dom is at the table with his coffee. Luna beside him.

Vim works.

The first pie comes out at the precise moment the timer indicates. Vim slid the pie onto the rack and turned back to the counter.

Warren doesn't move for a moment. Then he comes to it the way you'd come to something that might be fragile.

He cuts a slice. Holds the plate. Stands.

Closes his eyes.

The first bite is private. The room holds it.

Something tightens across his shoulders, climbs into the back of his neck. He opens his eyes. Takes off his glasses. Folds them. Sets them on the table. Breathes once, slow, before he speaks.

Looks at Vim directly. Makes sure of the distance between them.

It needs to cook a little longer, he says.

Get a bit more color on the bottom. Her crust was flakier — it had more layers to it. The cinnamon — he pauses, finding the calibration — a touch more. Only a touch. Don't overdo it. He looks at the pie. The vanilla is right. That's right.

He takes a second bite. Sets the plate toward Luna.

Luna picks up the fork. She didn't carry this pie the way her father did. She knows this about herself. But she holds the fork for a moment before she uses it.

Oh my goodness, she says. That is — that is getting close.

She looks at her father. *I agree with you. It's a bit chewier than I remember. Anyway.*

Dom takes a slice. The kids take slices. There is no critique

from this end of the table — only the focused silence of people eating pie. Mateo finishes and looks at the remaining pie the way he looks at structural problems he is already solving.

Vim recaps what he heard. Verbatim, almost — then the questions. *When you say flakier, are you describing something like this* — he produces two examples — *or closer to this?* Warren considers. Answers. Vim asks about the cooking time in increments. Warren answers. The vanilla confirmed, dialed in, no further adjustment needed.

There is a flavor profile that he has detected in your description — something present in the original that has not yet been accounted for. He cannot identify the specific ingredient. He has noted the profile. He will attempt to address it.

Warren nods.

Somewhere the agent is already running the numbers. Dom doesn't see this happen. He feels the shape of it the way you feel a draft from a door that isn't quite closed. He doesn't confirm it. He doesn't try.

The second pie takes longer. Warren doesn't wait in the kitchen this time. He sits in the living room with the family, the television on at low volume, nobody watching it. When Vim says it's ready Warren is already at the counter.

He doesn't close his eyes this time.

He cuts the slice. Takes the bite. Chews slowly.

The room watches his face.

Something settles in it. A tension held so long he'd forgotten it was tension comes down by a fraction. Not all the way. A fraction. Enough to feel.

"That's as close as it gets," he says. Quietly. To no one in particular.

Not *that's it, you got it*. That's as close as it gets.

Luna takes a bite of the second pie. Doesn't say anything for a moment.

The kids get their second slice. Mateo notes with some disappointment that there will not be a third pie.

That evening Dom can feel something good in the house without being able to locate it exactly. Warren and Luna are in the other room with wine — he can hear the low register of the conversation without the words — and something in the sound of it makes him not want to interrupt. He doesn't.

He straightens the kitchen. Wipes the counter. Puts the pie dish to soak.

He thinks about Warren's face on the second bite. The thing that came down a fraction.

He wipes the counter again though it doesn't need it.

In the other room his wife and her father are with their wine and a woman who hummed and pushed everything five minutes past where it should have stopped.

He doesn't know what they're saying. He doesn't go in.

Warren and Luna don't talk about the pie much. They talk about Claire. The way she laughed at things that weren't funny to anyone else. The trip to Savannah that went wrong in four directions. The way she folded a napkin. Small things. The archive of a person that only the people who loved her carry.

At some point Warren says it.

I don't want it to get any closer, he says. *Not by that thing.*

Luna looks at him.

The rest of it, he says, *is hers.*

Luna doesn't say anything for a moment. Then she refills his glass.

Dom washes the pie dish. The water runs warm. He hums something without meaning to — a bar of something he can't

place — then stops.

He doesn't know what he doesn't know.

Twenty-One: Both

The canvas was still waiting when he got down there.

Dom had his headphones on. Electronic beats doing what they did — filling the space between thoughts so the thoughts didn't have to fill each other.

Forty-one tabs.

He knew because the activity monitor was open in the corner of the screen, the processes listed in descending order of appetite. He checked it the way he checked the sleep score. Not to act on it. Just to know the number.

The tabs had arrived the way they always arrived — one thing pulling toward another thing pulling toward a thing he'd meant to return to and hadn't. A bathroom renovation he was considering in the abstract way you consider things that require a version of yourself with more time. An article on battery degradation bookmarked in March. Three tabs for the same standing desk from three different retailers because he'd lost the first search and started over twice.

He'd written thirty-eight words on the document since nine.

The pencil was in his right hand without him having picked it up. Turning between his fingers the way it turned when the work wasn't moving and the hands needed something that wasn't the keyboard.

The computer slowed.

He moved through the activity monitor list. Found the ones taking more than they were contributing — a browser process running quietly at three times its footprint, something in the background he couldn't name and didn't trust. He killed them one by one. Watched the numbers redistribute.

The cursor caught up.

He kept the activity monitor open.

Then his phone lit up.

He reached for it before deciding to and read the notification before the screen had fully brightened.

Machu Picchu. Round trip. Both of them.

He read it again.

The price was the kind that made you look for the catch first. He looked. The connection times were clean. The baggage policy standard. The dates flexible within a two-week window in March.

Nothing wrong with it.

He knew this destination the way you know things that have lived on a list long enough to become permanent — the Inca Trail, four days, the elevation gain, the ruins arriving on the final morning after everything your body had given to reach them. Luna wanted the train. Not as a compromise. As a preference — the preference of a woman who wanted to arrive without earning it.

They'd started that conversation twice. Neither time finished it. He hadn't gotten there yet.

He looked at the top of the notification again.

Both their names. Not routed through Dom, not flagged in the digest for his review. Sent simultaneously, directly, because Luna had said we're a team in the kitchen months ago and the

agent had confirmed quietly and that was that — including the conversations Dom hadn't decided to have yet.

Above him the pipes announced themselves. The sound of water moving through the house — the shower, from the register of it, the pressure dropping the way it dropped when someone upstairs turned the handle all the way.

She was up there. Getting ready. Phone on the counter or the edge of the sink.

She was reading it right now.

Dom opened the agent.

Don't send travel to both of us. Send it to me first. I'll decide what needs a conversation.

Confirmed.

Upstairs, the water shut off.

He put the phone face down on the desk. He stood. He went upstairs.

She was at the sink, towel around her shoulders, hair still wet. The steam hadn't cleared. She sees him in the mirror.

"You saw it too," she says. Not a question.

"Yeah."

She looks at him in the mirror, then turns.

"I want the train," she said. "I want to actually be there. With them. Not recovering from a trail."

"I want to hike it," he said. "I want to earn the arrival."

She looks at him. The steam still in the air between them.

"We're talking about different things," she says.

His weight shifted onto his left foot before he chose it. The damp collar stuck to his neck. His right hand opened at his side. Closed. The phone in his pocket held its heat against his thigh.

"I know."

Neither of them says anything else.

The agent had not suggested this disagreement. There was no protocol for it.

Dom went back down. He sat at the desk.

His hands went to his hair. Both of them. Fingers dragging back from the forehead. The scalp taking the pressure. Something that needed somewhere to go.

The bathroom steam had followed him down the stairs. Not visible. Just there. Dampness settling into the collar of his shirt. The towel still around her shoulders upstairs. The way she hadn't stepped back. Hadn't stepped forward. Just stood in the wet air and said the thing.

He picked up the phone. Looked at the price. Three hours and fifty-one minutes remaining.

He thought about the train. What it would feel like to step off it. To just—arrive. To let a place be the place without the body having to earn it first.

Then he put the phone face down. Opened the document. Wrote forty-one words. Not the right ones.

The house settled into its midmorning silence. Her phone already warm with a future they hadn't decided together.

His palms found his thighs. The soft rapid percussion started without his choosing it. Both hands against the fabric. Just the body finding somewhere to put it. The rhythm uneven. Stopping. Starting again.

The basement air cool against his wrists. The document cursor blinking at the end of the line. He didn't look at it. Kept his hands on his thighs until the heat left them.

Mr. Vim: Weekly Summary. L. has initiated 23 voice interactions, average duration 4.2 seconds. D. has initiated 0. Confidence interval for engagement differential: 97%. Travel preference noted:

primary routing to D. only.

Twenty-Two: The Ritual

The kids went down at 9:12 p.m.

Not without negotiation. There was a last request for water that became a second request for water because the first one was too cold, which became Mateo remembering at the exact moment Dom reached for the light switch that he needed to show him something about the lair — just one thing, it would take one second — which became Dom crouching in the unfinished basement while his son demonstrated the precise spot along the eastern wall where excavation should begin. Dom listened with the full weight of his attention. Nodded in the right places. Said yeah, that's exactly right.

He extracted himself by degrees. The patience of a man who had learned that rushing the end of a day made it longer.

He stood in the hall for a moment after the last door closed.

The house had a quality when the kids finally went under — not silence exactly, just the sound of itself without them in it. The HVAC. The refrigerator's hum. The dark of a Saturday night that belonged to no one's schedule anymore.

He came downstairs.

She was already there.

The living room had been arranged the way she arranged things without appearing to arrange them — the lamp on low,

the blanket pulled from wherever it lived during the day and deployed across her legs, the chaise accepting her the way it always accepted her. Completely. A woman in her natural state: horizontal, warm. The drinks were on the table. Two of them. His already waiting.

The show was queued on the screen. Paused at the beginning. She hadn't started it without him.

Dom stood in the doorway for a moment.

The egg chair was to his left. Modern, firm, the architecture of a seat that held you rather than consumed you. He knew the shape of it in his body the way he knew the shape of the third stair — by something older than decision.

He sat in it.

Luna looked up from her phone.

She didn't say anything. Just looked at him with the expression she wore when she was reading the negative space — the information in what hadn't happened yet. Then she moved the blanket slightly. Just enough.

He crossed the room.

Folded himself into the space beside her — the couch's softness unfamiliar under him, the body registering it and adjusting. She pulled the blanket across both of them, her shoulder finding its place against his arm.

She handed him his drink.

He took the first sip. The sweetness underneath. The thing that loosened without taking anything, that opens the room without blowing out the walls.

She pressed play.

The show did its work. Her commentary arriving sideways, dry. Dom saying less and meaning more of it.

The drinks worked slowly.

He felt it first in his shoulders. Then behind his eyes. Luna laughed at something on the screen — not the composed laugh, the other one, the one that left before she could calibrate it. She caught it and looked at him and laughed again at having laughed.

She paused the show.

She set her drink down and turned toward him, not all the way, just enough.

“You know what I keep thinking about,” she said.

He waited.

“Machu Picchu.”

“I want to take the kids there,” she said. “All of them. When Juniper’s home. Before it gets harder to get everyone in the same place.” She paused. “I think it would change them.”

Dom looked at the ceiling where she’d been looking.

“We should,” he said.

She settled slightly deeper into him. Her weight redistributing in the way it did when she was fully arrived somewhere and intended to stay.

“The whole train thing,” she said, quieter. “I don’t want to hike it. I know you do. But I want to actually be there with them.”

“You don’t have to hike it,” he said.

She laughed once — short, warm. “I know. I’m choosing not to.”

They watched for a while longer.

Then Dom started talking. Not about the show. Just — talking. The way he talked when the interior went soft enough at the edges to let things out without proper containers.

“It’s not the mistakes,” he said. “That’s not what gets me.”

Luna waited.

“It’s the rate. The way it’s —” He stopped. Started again. “You know what it looked like a year ago.”

Luna made a sound. She did know. It had told her the wrong thing about the Henderson account twice.

“Right,” Dom said. “And next year it’ll be —”

“But it can’t love anyone,” Luna said.

Simply. Not as a counterargument. Just as a fact she found relevant, offered into the middle of it.

Her hand, resting on the blanket, went still.

She looked at the screen after she said it. Not at Dom. Not at the drink in her hand. At the paused screen, which showed nothing in particular — just two people mid-scene, frozen, waiting for someone to press play. A half second. Maybe less. Long enough for Dom to feel her briefly somewhere else with the thing she’d just said. Then she came back.

Dom sat with that.

“Yeah,” he said.

She turned back toward the screen. Picked up her drink.

He sat in the warmth of what she’d said and felt the circling stop without landing. Something in his chest going quiet — not resolved, just set down.

He looked at her feet at the end of the couch.

He got up.

She tracked the movement the way she always tracked his movements.

He went to the bathroom. Came back with the lotion from the shelf — thick, the smell of it warm and definite, entirely hers.

The bottle was heavier than he remembered. Cold glass against his palm. He twisted the cap. The seal cracked once.

He poured a quarter-sized drop into his left hand, rubbed his

palms together, and the smell rose. Not sandalwood. Not the usual scent that lived in their master bath. Something sharper. Citrus. Maybe bergamot. A sample from a hotel she hadn't mentioned. Or a gift from a client that had sat unopened on a shelf until tonight. He didn't ask.

He worked the oil into his skin. Warmed it. Crossed back to the couch and sat at the edge.

Her feet were bare. Ankles crossed. The soles pale against the dark fabric. He took her right foot in his hands. The skin was cool. He pressed his thumbs into the arch.

She made a sound. Not language. Just air moving out.

He kept going. The friction of oil against skin. The slow drag of his palms. The smell stayed on his hands. Sharp. Foreign. It didn't belong to their house; it sat in the air between them, mixing with the low lamp light. Her toes curled slightly. Then released.

He moved to the left foot. Found the same tension. The same cool skin. Worked it out.

His thumbs moved in steady arcs. Heel. Ball. The ridge along the side. The oil warmed to room temperature. The smell held.

He sat at the end of the couch and picked up her feet.

She looked at him.

He didn't explain it. Just worked the lotion into his hands and started.

Luna made a sound that wasn't language.

Then she laughed — the real one, the uncontained one — and said why are you being so nice to me right now.

He looked up at her. "Because," he said.

She looked at him for a moment with the full weight of her presence. The performance entirely off on both sides of the

room.

“Because,” she repeated softly. And smiled.

He went back to what his hands were doing.

Her phone was on the cushion beside her. It lit once—the screen brightening for three seconds in the low lamp light. Some notification arriving. The agent. Or the world. Or both.

He saw it. Didn’t stop. His thumbs kept their rhythm. Heel to ball. Ball to arch. The citrus smell faded into the cotton of the blanket.

The screen went dark again. The show ran unwatched. The lamp on low. She was asleep before he finished.

He set her feet down gently. Pulled the blanket up. Sat back. Pressed play on something he wasn’t going to watch.

He stayed there.

Didn’t move.

Twenty-Three: The Buffet

Juniper was at the counter when Dom came down on Saturday. The almost-black coffee already going. Her laptop open beside it.

“Did you make this?” he said.

“Yeah.”

She didn’t turn around.

The screen showed a campus he didn’t recognize. Palm trees. A brick building that didn’t belong to the mountains.

“What’s that one?” he said.

“Coastal. Wilmington.” She paused. “I’m going to drive down with Grandma next week.”

Dom looked at the screen.

“Okay.”

“I haven’t told Mom yet.”

“Tell her.”

“I will.”

She closed the laptop without looking at it. The cup in her hand was Luna’s mug. She’d taken it without asking.

Dom poured his coffee. Added the cream.

“Usually a two-hour run from Raleigh,” he said.

“Grandma says it’s three and a half from here?”

“Yeah.”

“Drive safe.”

“I will.”

She went upstairs.

He saw it before he reached the door.

Leaning against the side of the garage — too large for the space it was in, too finished to be temporary — was a wooden back bar. The kind with a mirror set into it, shelves tiered for bottles, the whole thing built to live behind something else. It didn't belong to the house. It belonged to a place with dim lighting and a register and people ordering things they didn't need.

It was on its side.

Not stored. Not placed. Just — there.

Dom slowed without deciding to. Looked at it for a second longer than the walk required. The wood was worn in the places hands would have rested. The mirror held the sky at an angle that didn't make sense.

He stepped around it and went to the door.

He knocked once on Julia's door and opened it before the sound had fully landed.

The heat hit first. Not aggressive. Not uncomfortable enough to name. Just — warmer than it should have been for the day he'd been standing in. His body registered it before anything else did.

Then the air.

Still. Not stale. Just unmoving in a way his house never was. The kind of air that sat where it had been left.

Then the garlic.

Not cooking. Not fresh. Already there. Worked into the place in a way that suggested repetition, not timing. It didn't arrive as a new smell. It was waiting.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

He moved down the short entry hall, his hand brushing the wall without looking at it. The space opened into the living room.

He stopped just inside it.

She was already coming.

There was no other word for what she did when she saw him — not walking, not crossing the room, but the full-body event of a woman who had been waiting for something and had just seen it arrive. The hands went up first. Then the feet — a small rapid stomping, the seamless choreography of joy that had never learned to be contained — and then she was moving toward him with her arms already open and her face doing everything at once.

He caught her.

She was smaller than he remembered her being. Or he was larger. Both things, probably.

“How is my handsome boy,” she said into his shoulder.

He held on longer than he meant to.

Then he saw it.

In the corner where it had always been. The buffet. Dark wood. Low and wide.

He crossed to it without deciding to.

Crouched down.

The door was on the lower left. His hand found the small brass pull the way it found things that lived in muscle memory.

He opened it.

The China was gone. Old cookbooks in its place — paperback spines faded, some of them cracked at the binding, the soft condition of books that had actually been used. He moved one aside. Then another.

He was looking for the Monopoly record.

He found it on the back panel. Not a piece of paper — never a piece of paper, that wasn't how it worked. They'd played through the night, he and his cousins, until two or three in the morning when the adults had finally given up on getting them to sleep, and when the game ended without ending — too many properties, too much money, nobody willing to concede — they'd done the only thing that made sense. They'd recorded it on the inside of the cabinet. Pencil. Properties owned. Cash on hand. The standing of the game at the moment it had to be paused.

He found the pencil marks.

Thirty-six years, still there.

He sat back on his heels and looked at it. The handwriting of a nine-year-old who didn't know his handwriting yet — large, uneven, certain. His cousin's name in the margin. A number that no longer had context. The drawing beside it of what appeared to be a car though it could have been a house.

Then he looked at the inner panel of the door.

Still there.

The marks he'd made when he was seven or eight — not words, just the record of something, lines and tallies for a game or a system he no longer remembered. The buffet was an heirloom — not precious, not museum-worthy, just old and inherited and not his to write on.

He ran his thumb across the lines.

Then he looked at the back corner.

He almost smiled.

The chocolate was long gone, obviously. But the corner was still the corner — still that secret hidden geometry of a space that was technically part of the cabinet and practically invisible

unless you were nine years old and needed somewhere nobody would look.

He heard her behind him.

He didn't turn.

Then her hand was on his head.

Not patting. Not the brief contact of acknowledgement. Just — her hand, resting there, the weight of it distinct and known and entirely without agenda. The way she'd put her hand on his head when he was sick, when he was tired, when he was nine years old and in serious trouble over the marks on the inner panel and she was deciding what to do about it.

Dom knelt in front of the buffet and didn't move.

Something tightened in his chest. Not a thought. Just the body registering something the mind hadn't caught up to yet. The four hours of I-95 still humming in his legs. The months before that sitting somewhere unexamined.

He stayed where he was.

She didn't say anything.

Neither did he.

The buffet held its marks. Her hand on his head.

After a while she said: "Come, I'll make you something."

He got to his feet.

He followed her to the kitchen.

She had already set his place.

The table arranged the way it always got arranged. His spot. The position he'd occupied for the first eighteen years of his life and returned to without thinking every time since. Placemat. Fork on the left. The glass already filled with water.

She moved to the oven.

The smell hit him properly in here — the garlic deeper, the lasagna underneath it. Not a meal. The meal.

She set it on the table.

Then the garlic bread.

Dom looked at it.

She sat across from him.

He cut into the lasagna. She watched him. Present. Requiring nothing back. The way she'd watched him eat at this table when he was ten years old and the world was the size of this kitchen.

He took the first bite.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

She made a small motion with her hand — go ahead — and he stepped into the hall.

It was the broker.

Three minutes. Survey discrepancy resolved. Stream classification confirmed. Secondary structure permit cleared. The Ashe County property was clear to close. They'd set the signing for January eleventh.

The phone cooled against his palm. The broker's voice still in his ear. Clear to close. He didn't move.

The hallway air held the garlic. Deep. Worked into the drywall. The same smell from forty years ago, waiting exactly where it had been left. His thumb traced the edge of the screen. The glass smooth. The call log already gone. He let the weight of the phone drop to his side.

The four hours of I-95 still humming in his calves. The months of digests. The surplus allocated. The deposit placed. The agent's voice compiling in the dark. All of it settling into the quiet of the hallway.

He looked toward the living room. The dark wood of the buffet visible past the archway. The brass pull catching the dim light. He remembered the back corner. The specific

hidden geometry. The space technically part of the cabinet and practically invisible unless you were nine and needed somewhere nobody would look.

His fingers curled against his thigh. He took a breath. The air moved. The garlic shifted.

He turned back toward the kitchen.

The table held his place. Placemat. Fork on the left. Glass of water already full. He sat.

The chair accepted him. The wood grain familiar under his palms. The fork felt heavier than he remembered. Or his hand felt lighter. The balance point shifting as he gripped it. He picked it up. The stainless steel cool. Then warming to his skin.

The lasagna sat steaming. The garlic bread on the board. The knife on the right. He cut into the edge. The fork met resistance. Held. He lifted it. The weight specific. The heat rising.

He didn't look at his mother. Didn't look at the hall. Didn't check the phone in his pocket. Just brought it to his mouth.

The bite landed. The flavor immediate. He set the fork down.

Picked it up again.

His mother looked at his face.

"Well?" she said.

"It's happening," Dom said. "Monday. We're closing on the property."

She put both hands flat on the table. "Oh," she said. "That's so wonderful."

Dom picked up his fork.

She was still watching him. The ten-year-old boy across the table. The man who had driven down from the Piedmont and

crouched in front of the buffet and let her put her hand on his head without turning around.

He took the bite.

The front door opened.

“Can you guys help me with the groceries?”

His father’s voice preceded him. Arriving in the room before the rest of him did. He appeared in the kitchen doorway with two bags and the expression of a man who had completed a mission and was ready to report.

He saw Dom.

Leo’s face did what it did.

“Hey,” he said. “You made it!”

Dom stood.

They did the thing they did — the handshake that became something more, the brief grip of two people who expressed things through hands rather than words because that was how they’d always done it.

His father set the bags on the counter.

She got up to help him unpack.

Dom sat back down.

The lasagna still warm. The garlic bread still on the board. The kitchen filling with the small sounds of his parents moving around each other in a space they’d shared for forty-nine years — the choreography of two people who knew exactly where the other one was going to be without having to look.

He watched them.

Ate.

Outside, against the garage, the back bar held its mirror at the wrong angle to the sky. He picked up the garlic bread.

III

CONCORD

The first one went in slightly off. Not crooked. Not perfect. It held.

Twenty-Four: The Relapse

The basement had its own hours.

Dom noticed, as he settled into the chair, that the house was settling differently tonight—a smaller creak in the floorboards above, a faster cooling of the air through the vents. He didn't think about why. He just reached for his beer.

The hours down here were not the hours of the house above it—the school run, the breakfast negotiation, the agent's voice in the hall at 6:15—but something slower. The underground time of a room that didn't have windows, that ran on its own internal logic, that existed slightly outside the calendar of the life being lived above it.

The television was on. British men arguing about cars. They'd built something ridiculous again—a boat-car, a caravan airship, a thing that was going to fail spectacularly the moment anyone tried to drive it. Dom had been watching them since before the kids were born. They made him laugh.

He wasn't watching it. He was aware of it. The light it threw. The voices filling the space between thoughts.

He was in the chair that existed solely for this room — not the egg chair, not anything designed, just the chair that had migrated down here over the years because it had no other place to be and neither did he at this hour. The fabric worn in

the places he always sat. The left armrest slightly lower than the right from years of the same position.

His beer was on the side table. A juicy IPA he'd opened an hour ago. Going warm.

He picked up his phone.

No agenda. Just the phone, appearing in his hand because the day was over but his hands didn't know where else to go.

The notifications had been off for weeks. He opened a browser tab.

Go-kart engine specs.

He scrolled. Horsepower ratings. Torque curves. The debate between four-stroke reliability and two-stroke responsiveness that apparently occupied an entire corner of the internet.

Then the roll cage thread.

Mateo had mentioned roll cages. Had come to the conversation not with questions but with conclusions — the tunnel vision already on, the Rubik's cube going at the side of his leg. Dom had nodded. Had said yeah, we'll look at it.

He kept scrolling.

He clicked into a forum thread. Things to do before the first run. Oil levels. Fuel line inspection. Brake adjustment.

Before you even run it.

He read it.

The motor, he thought. The go-kart from the school event. The boy who had been so hungry for the thing that he'd skipped the checking. Who had ridden it until the engine seized.

He scrolled without deciding to.

The thread branched. Predictive maintenance. Systems that monitored themselves and reported their own deterioration before it became failure. Not reactive. Preemptive.

He followed the link.

Industrial applications. Manufacturing. Aviation.

He stopped on a paragraph.

The words sat on the screen. Predictive maintenance. He didn't move.

The basement air was still. Cooler than upstairs—the kind of cold that settles in the shoulders first. His right hand still on the phone, the glass edge cool against his knee. The left hand still on the armrest, the fabric worn smooth from years of landing exactly there. He pressed down. Just enough to feel the weave give.

His thumb pressed into the worn weave. Waited. The grain held. Then—faint—the third stair's specific creak surfacing in the palm. He didn't move. Let the sensation pass.

Then the go-kart ghost entered. Not a memory. A smell. Burned brush. Two-stroke oil. The sharp tang of metal running dry.

His father's hands on the ignition. The motor coughing once. Then seizing. Dom had been eleven. Hungry for the thing. Skipped the oil check. Rode it until the pistons locked.

The memory arrived as torque slip. His left hand closed. Fingers curling into the worn weave before he told them to. The phantom weight of a seized throttle blooming against his palm.

He didn't reach for the phone.

He sat with it.

The chain came in.

Not as a thought. As a chain. The kind his brain assembled when he stopped giving it a job—

Mateo at the table with his conclusions already reached; the surplus he'd approved on a date he couldn't locate; his daughter's application package sitting in her inbox before she'd

decided; the deposit placed while he was standing under the tree; his grandfather and the concrete sculpture Dom had built for him, slowly, wrongly, then less wrongly, then right—

And his father at the kitchen table in 1987, getting the math problem wrong first and correcting himself. Dom watching, six or seven, watching his father not know something and stay with the not knowing until the knowing arrived. The same posture, the same patience.

His grandfather hadn't invented it, and his father hadn't invented it, and Dom hadn't either—just inherited it the way the buffet had been inherited. The marks on the inner panel, the hand on his head, the chocolate corner.

The thought arrived without preparation, without ceremony. Just in the texture of the rest of it.

He didn't reach for the phone.

He sat with it.

His left hand on the worn fabric. His right hand still face down on the phone.

The British men on the television had arrived at the moment of reckoning. The thing they'd built was about to be tested.

Dom watched them.

The television moved to the next segment. New car. New argument. New attempt.

From upstairs: Luna's voice. One word, casual. Vimmy. Then the light ring from the kitchen. Blue to green.

Dom didn't go up.

He sat in the chair with his left hand on the worn fabric and listened to the British men argue about what they'd built.

Dom reached for the beer.

Gone warm.

He drank it anyway.

Twenty-Five: The Helmets

The box arrived at 2:47 p.m.

Dom got the alert on his phone. He set the phone down. Picked it up again. Looked at the tracking number.

He knew what it was.

He went to the front door. The box was there on the step—not large, lighter than he expected. He picked it up. Stood in the doorway for a moment with it in his hands. He put it inside the garage. Set it on the workbench next to Mateo’s checklist—the handwritten one, growing for three weeks, parts arriving and getting checked off in his son’s large uneven handwriting. The box sat there among the other boxes. The ones that had been opened and cataloged and organized according to a system only Mateo fully understood.

Dom went back inside. He did not open it.

Mateo came through the front door at 3:51 p.m. with his backpack still on, already talking before he’d cleared the entryway. Dom was at the counter. He listened with the full weight of his attention. Nodded in the right places.

Then Mateo stopped. His eyes had found the garage door.

“Dad,” he said. “Are those the parts for the go-kart?”

Dom looked at him. “Let’s see,” he said. “Grab the box. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Mateo dropped his backpack on the floor without looking at it and went. Dom filled a glass of water. Set it on the counter next to the fossil and the treehouse book and the crayon drawing of the platform in the oak. He stood there for a moment. Then Mateo came through the door with the box and set it on the table.

Dom sat across from him. Mateo looked at the box. Then he looked at Dom. Dom made a small motion with his head. "Go ahead."

Mateo opened it.

So it was a half second of stillness when he saw the helmet. Just a half second. The sparkly blue of it catching the kitchen light. Then he had it out of the box. Then it was on his head.

He ran out of the kitchen.

Dom listened to his son's feet on the hardwood—the galloping rhythm of a boy navigating an imaginary vehicle through a real house. Through the living room. Around the couch. The sparkly blue helmet visible for a moment through the kitchen doorway as he banked a corner.

Then Boone. Boone had been in his spot by the back door, a low, solid weight against the baseboard. He got to his feet. Weight shifted. He followed Mateo into the living room, his bulldog gait an unhurried velocity that would not be rushed.

Dom watched through the doorway: Boone keeping up for half a lap, then three-quarters, before stopping at the edge of the rug, tail doing what it did, out of breath but entirely present. Mateo banked past him. Boone stood at the edge of the rug.

Dom looked back at the box. The orange helmet was still inside it. He reached in.

The weight of it in his hands. More serious than he expected. More committed. He turned it over once. The orange. High-

visibility. Matte finish.

He put it on.

Mateo came back through the kitchen doorway at speed, banked hard around the island, caught sight of his father standing at the table in an orange dirt bike helmet and stopped.

A half second. The visor tilted over his eyebrows. Then the Rubik's cube in his pocket went to maximum speed.

Then he was gone again—back through the living room, back around the couch.

Dom followed him. Not fast. Not racing. Just moving through his own kitchen in an orange helmet on a Tuesday afternoon while his son drove something imaginary through the rooms of the house they lived in. The counter archaeology passing on his left.

Boone stood at the edge of the rug and watched them both go.

The go-kart didn't exist yet.

The helmets were already on.

Twenty-Six: Extra Cheese

The Millennium Falcon.

The one he and Mateo built across three Saturdays the winter before last. Sitting on the living room floor beside two boxes from Dom's own childhood. The model Corvette his uncle helped him paint, its doors still slightly misaligned from where he'd rushed the glue. The Technic crane set he'd convinced his mother to buy with three months of allowance arguments. Up on the high shelf yesterday. On the floor today.

He stood there for a moment.

Vim.

Vim appeared from the hallway. *Yes, Mr. Dom.*

The things on the floor. What happened.

Mateo asked me to retrieve them this morning. I placed them on the floor per his request.

Dom looked at Vim. Vim looked back. The sensor ports oriented in his direction.

"Next time Mateo asks you to retrieve something from the high shelves, you come to me first."

Of course, Mr. Dom.

He picked them up carefully. One at a time. Set them on the counter. The Corvette's doors still slightly off. His uncle had let him rush the glue. Never said anything about the doors.

When Mateo got home Dom was at the kitchen table.

“Sit down for a second.” Mateo paused at the threshold. Set the bag down.

Dom didn’t start with the retrieval. He started with the shelves. Why things lived up there. What those things were. The Millennium Falcon: three Saturdays. The crane set: three months of arguments with his mother. The Corvette: a Saturday in the garage with his Uncle Pete who let him rush the glue and never said a word about the doors.

“We don’t just pull them down,” Dom said.

Mateo nodded. Eyes tracking. The fingers starting at his side. Then: “But what about if you’re there with me.”

Dom looked at his son. He had been down this road before.

“Yeah,” Dom said. “If I’m there. We take them down together. We clean them, we look at them. But we’re not playing with them on the floor like they don’t matter.”

“Okay.” Mateo picked up his bag.

He waited four days.

Dom knew he was waiting. He watched his son track the house each evening. The temperature of the room. The quality of the light. Mateo was seven. He waited.

On Thursday after school Mateo found him in the kitchen.

“Dad, can I ask you a question.” “Yeah, bud.” “Remember when you said we could look at the things on the high shelves in my room.” “I remember.” “I would like to do that today. After school.”

Dom set down his coffee. Looked at his son. The deliberate patience in his posture. The careful neutrality of his face.

“Yeah,” Dom said. “Let’s do that.”

They brought them down one at a time. Laid them on the carpet. Dom got the soft cloth from the cabinet and they went

through them slowly.

The Millennium Falcon first because it was theirs. Dom wiped the surface. Mateo did the underside. Both of them remembering different Saturdays. The afternoon they couldn't find the piece for the cockpit and spent forty-five minutes looking before Boone walked in from the hall with it somehow. The Sunday Mateo's tunnel vision locked in and Dom made sandwiches and left them on the floor beside him without interrupting and came back an hour later to find three sections completed.

Then Dom's things.

The crane set got a story Dom had to reconstruct in pieces. The allowance arguments. His mother's skepticism. The Christmas morning it finally appeared. Mateo's follow-up arrived before Dom finished the sentence.

"What did you do first when you opened it?"

Dom tried to remember. The smell of the box. His grandfather's chair in the background. He thought he built the whole thing that day.

"The whole thing?" "Most of it. My hands wouldn't stop."

Mateo nodded.

The Corvette last. Dom held it for a moment before he started talking. The doors still slightly misaligned. His uncle Pete's garage. A Saturday in November. The glue setting faster than Dom expected and Pete watching him try to correct it and saying nothing. Uncle Pete watched. Said nothing. Let the doors stand.

"He let you mess it up?" Mateo said.

"He let me make it mine."

Mateo turned the car over in his hands. Looked at the doors.

"I think that's better," he said.

Mateo's hand was already in the next box. He pulled out something flat and stained. The cover the color of an old grocery bag.

He opened it. Drawings.

Buildings, mostly. A house cross-section with the joists labeled. An apartment block from above. A bridge with the load arrows drawn in pencil and then traced over in pen. Some of the pages had numbers in the margins.

"Is this you?" Mateo said.

"Yeah."

Mateo turned a page. Then another.

"You drew houses." "I drew houses."

He looked at one for a while. A church with the roof cut away so the inside shows.

"It's good," he said.

He closed the book. Set it on the carpet beside the Corvette. Then he went back to the next thing.

Mateo asked what Dom missed most about being a kid.

Dom tried to answer honestly. The bikes. The neighborhood. The whole day disappearing into something with no outcome required. Then the Nintendo story. The wrong charger. The fried circuit board. The flat silence of a machine that wouldn't turn on anymore.

"What were you maddest about?" "That it was just gone. No fixing it. Just — gone."

Mateo sat with this. His fingers working the invisible Rubik's cube. Solving something only he could see.

"What did you miss most about it. After."

Dom thought about it for a moment. "I kept going to the corner of the basement where it was," he said. "For about a week. Like it would be there."

The invisible Rubik's cube went still.

Then he asked what the weather was like the day they painted the Corvette and Dom had to think hard and said he was pretty sure it was cold and they had the garage heater going and it smelled like gasoline and WD-40 and Mateo asked three more questions before Dom finished answering the first one.

They stayed on the floor a long time.

At some point Mateo went quiet in a different way. Not processing quiet. Finished quiet.

"Dad." "Yeah." "Let's get a snack."

They put the things back carefully. The Falcon. The crane set. The Corvette with its slightly misaligned doors. Back up on the high shelves where they belonged.

But tucked at the very bottom of the second box, beneath the yellowed instructions for the crane, Dom's hand brushed against an old leather zip-case he hadn't thought about in years.

He slid the metal zipper back. The teeth caught once. Released.

Inside, resting in fitted velvet, a heavy, matte-steel mechanical pencil.

It was cold against his fingers.

He lifted it.

The weight arrived first. Dense. Balanced. The specific heft of a tool that knew exactly what it was for.

He turned it once in his palm. The knurling at the grip worn smooth in two exact places.

His thumb found the depression. Knew it before the rest of him caught up.

Durham. The restaurant with the low ceilings and the vinyl booths. Warren sliding it across the table fifteen years ago. Not a gift. A handoff. The kind that happens when someone

recognizes a posture in you and decides to name it without speaking.

Dom didn't remember the words Warren said. He remembered the table. The vinyl sticking to his forearms. The way the pencil had settled into his hand and stayed there.

He pressed the end button.

A precise internal click. The lead advancing a fraction. Invisible. Ready.

He didn't look at Mateo. Didn't tell the story. Didn't attach meaning to the cold steel or the worn grip or the way his hand had automatically found the balance point.

He just set the case down on the carpet beside the sketchbook.

The velvet caught the afternoon light. The metal held its own temperature.

Mateo was already pulling out the next thing.

Dom's fingers lingered on the case for half a second. Then withdrew.

Then they went to the kitchen.

Vim was in the master bathroom. The sound of his tasks. Faint. Regular. Like weather.

Dom made grilled cheese. Two sandwiches in the pan. Butter going. The kitchen filling with the smell of it. Mateo at the counter watching.

"Not too much cheese on mine." "I know."

Dom put the extra slice on his own.

Mateo made a face.

Dom left it.

Twenty-Seven: The Slab

Dom drove down on a Saturday he hadn't planned to take.

Walt had said come on, I'm here.

The sawmill sat at the bottom of the draw where the gravel road dissolved into creek clay. Dom found Walt at the far end of the shop, bent over a pale trunk Dom didn't recognize.

"Paulownia," Walt said, not looking up. "Fell two months back. Invasive as hell but the grain's something." He was routing a channel through the center, the bit throwing yellow curls. The wood smelled like cucumber.

Dom stood watching. He'd called Thursday. Walt had said come on. Dom hadn't mentioned why he was coming. Walt hadn't asked. Walt was his mother's youngest brother, named for the father who had worked the telephone relays at Bell Labs. He was the one who had run behind Dom's blue Schwinn down the gravel lane forty years ago, his palms flat against the cold vinyl of the banana seat until the balance caught. His hands were thicker now, the skin around the knuckles stained grey from iron-tread mill blades.

"Trade show booth," Walt said. "Outfit out of Charlotte. They want the whole signage rig hidden in a trunk section. Speakers, cable runs, the lights." He laughed at the thing itself. "Stupid money. I'm enjoying the hell out of it."

Dom looked around the shop. The oak he'd been measuring in his mind for three years wasn't visible from where he stood. Maybe stickered somewhere. Maybe already moved.

"You want to help?" Walt asked. "I'm trying to figure if the HDMI will kink in the bend."

"Yeah," Dom said. "Show me."

They worked for two hours. Dom fed cable through the channel while Walt held the trunk steady. The first line kinked. They rerouted. The second run went clean. Walt made a note on a scrap of paper and pinned it to the trunk with a nail already there.

At some point Dom looked up. The oak was stickered against the back wall, four or five down from the top of the stack. Walt was bent over the paulownia. Dom looked back down at the cable.

They talked about Walt's daughter in Raleigh who'd stopped calling. They talked about the booth client's other commissions, a Greenville restaurant with live-edge tables that had warped because the client wouldn't listen about kiln schedules. Dom's hands found the rhythm of the work. The paulownia gave under pressure. The smell was unfamiliar.

At four Walt drove him to the ridge where the road got thin. The truck was Walt's, older than Dom, the seat springs gone soft. Every time the chassis dropped into a rut, Dom's lower back registered the identical jolt of the gravel lane from that summer on the Schwinn, before the training wheels were off.

"Tuesday," Walt said. "After this guy. Come back if you want."

"Okay."

Dom drove home with nothing in the truck bed. He stopped at the gas station at the last intersection, the independent one with the hand-lettered sign. He bought a coffee that was too

hot and sat in the cab until it cooled.

At home Luna was at the counter, her laptop open, the light ring pulsing blue above the refrigerator. She looked up when he came in.

“There’s chicken from last night,” she said. “I made the lemon thing.”

“Yeah.”

They ate without the speaker on. Luna told him about the call with her partner — a freelancer they’d worked with twice had quoted them double for the holiday rush. Sarah wanted to negotiate. Luna had said no. Sarah wanted to argue. Luna had said no to that too. They were going to find someone else.

Dom listened. His hands remembered the paulownia’s give, the cable through the channel, the kink, the second run.

After dinner he went to the garage. The graph paper was on his workbench, the shaky elevations, the wrong roof pitch, the X on the east wall where Mia wanted her porthole. He looked at it. Folded it. Put it in the drawer.

The paper caught the edge of his thumb. The grid lines were faint blue but still held the shape. The pencil marks bled slightly into the fiber. The wrong roof pitch drawn twice. The X on the east wall where Mia’s porthole wouldn’t fit.

He lined up the fold. The crease cracked once. Sharp. Clean. He folded it again. A smaller rectangle. The error tucked inside. The porthole X hidden against the wood grain of the bench.

He opened the drawer. The metal runners caught halfway. A familiar resistance. Dust and grease in the track. He pressed. The drawer slid the rest of the way in. The sound of the garage shifted. The compressor ticking as it cooled. The settled quiet of a room without the project on the bench.

He wiped his hands on his jeans. The sawdust transferred to

the denim. He walked back to the house.

The kitchen doorway held its frame. The air inside was warmer. Wet. He stopped. Luna stood at the sink. Her back to him. The water running. Her hands buried in the suds. Steam rose from the basin. Caught the overhead light. Drifted toward the ceiling.

He didn't cross the threshold. His shoulder rested against the doorframe. The wood cool through his shirt. The water hit the ceramic. A steady rhythm. Her hands moved. Lifted a fork. Turned it under the stream. Set it in the rack. Water dripping. The lemon scent from dinner still in the room. Mixing with the steam. Mixing with the soap.

Dom stood where he stood. His hands hung at his sides. Heavy. Still remembering the give of the paulownia. The cable feeding through the channel. The kink. The clean second run. He watched her back. The line of her spine under the cotton. The way her shoulders moved when she reached for the next plate. The small shift of her weight against the counter. He didn't speak. Didn't offer to help. Just stood in the doorway and let the water run.

He went back to the kitchen. Luna was washing dishes, her back to him, her hands in the water. Dom stood in the doorway and watched her.

Twenty-Eight: The Saturdays

The Saturday came.

They weren't sure it would — the rain two days before had been serious, had stood water in the low spots of the yard — and the night before Dom had pressed his palm against the back window glass and held it there, feeling for cold, trying to read the yard. The morning arrived dry and bright and that was that.

He hadn't been to Ashe County since January. The agent had stopped flagging it in the morning digest sometime in February. The perc test waited unread in his inbox. The cottage was still possible on the far edge when he caught up to it.

Dom made breakfast. Bagels. Mateo had his two miniature ones with cream cheese and a little jelly on both. They ate at the kitchen counter without saying much, both of them looking out the back window at the oak, which was standing in the early light doing exactly what it had been doing, which was waiting.

Dom put on his tool belt first. Checked the pouches. Screws in the left. Lag bolts in the center. Nails on the right. He ran his thumb over each pouch and when it was right he picked up Mateo's tool belt — the smaller one — and fitted it around his son's waist and adjusted the buckle and checked the pouches

the same way.

Mateo watched him do this without moving.

Dom opened the toolbox. The hammer, the screwdrivers, the level nested in its spot. One slot in the wrench set was empty. He ran his thumb over the blank space, then closed the lid. They had enough.

They carried the ladders out together.

Dom took the chalk pen — the white one — and opened the plan on the ground. He measured the distance twice, found the mark where the bottom of the first 2x6 would sit, and transferred it to the tree. Hammered a small nail in at the mark. Tied a piece of string to it. Came down the ladder.

He moved the second ladder to the other oak. Secured it. Climbed. Took the level from his bag. Touched it to the string. Watched the bubble. Adjusted until the bubble settled at center. Marked the tree.

Mateo stood at the base of the first oak watching all of this. His hands at his sides. The cube not turning.

He did not move until Dom came down.

Your first job, Dom said. He handed Mateo the two impact drills. *Change out the bits. Red one for driving. Black one stays set up for the long bit when we need to pre-drill.*

Mateo took both drills. Looked at the bits then at the bag. Found what he needed. Dom watched without helping.

Mateo held them both up when he was done.

Dom checked them. Good.

He pulled out the rubberized paint next. A small container, black, brush attached to the lid.

“Pressure-treated wood,” Dom said. “It can live outside. But when we cut it — when we expose a new surface — we paint this on. Otherwise that edge rots faster than everything else.”

He showed Mateo. Unscrewed the lid, ran the brush along the cut end of a board.

“Your job is to remind me, Dom said. I can forget. Any time we expose new wood, we coat it.”

Mateo looked at the brush. *What if we don't cut it but there's still a new end?*

We coat it.

Okay. He held out his hand. *I'll do it.*

Dom gave him the brush.

On the fourth cut of the morning Mateo coated an edge Dom hadn't asked him to coat. A board end that was just sitting there. No cut. Just an end.

We didn't cut that one, Dom said.

I know, Mateo said. *But why not.*

Dom looked at the edge. Fair.

He knew his son. When Mateo was interested in a thing he went all the way into it. You didn't interrupt that. You handed the brush back and kept building.

Dom held up a lag bolt before they started the first one. Ten inches long.

“These go into the tree,” he said. “Deep.”

Mateo looked at the bolt. Looked at the tree.

“Is that hurting it?”

Dom set the bolt down. He'd read the section in the treehouse book more than once — the part about anchoring, about what hurt trees and what didn't. He knew the answer in his head and in his hands.

But Mateo needed to hear it from somewhere else.

He took out his phone. The response came in thirty seconds. The agent had used the word compartmentalization without defining it.

Dom handed the phone to Mateo anyway.

Mateo read. His lips moved. He looked up.

“What’s compartmentalization.”

“The tree builds a wall around the bolt,” Dom said. “And keeps growing.”

Mateo looked back at the phone. Read it again. Then: “So it just grows around it.”

Yeah, Dom said. “It becomes part of the tree.”

Mateo handed the phone back. Something released in his posture. He looked at the oak the way he looked at things he’d decided to trust.

“Okay,” he said.

He reached for the next bracket.

Dom put the phone in his pocket.

They drove the first lag bolt at 10:47. Dom on the ladder. Mateo below him, brush in hand, watching.

The impact driver turned. The bolt disappeared into the wood.

The tree didn’t move.

Now, Mateo said.

Dom looked down. Mateo was already brushing sealant around the bolt head, working it into the gap between metal and bark.

That’s not a cut surface, Dom said.

No, Mateo said. *But why not.*

Dom came down the ladder. They stood together looking at the first bolt. The tree above them, unchanged.

Good call, Dom said.

By noon they had three lag bolts in and the first joist seated. Mateo had used a full third of the rubberized paint.

Boone lay in the grass twenty feet back. Not at the oak itself

— at a respectful distance. His surveillance ongoing.

Dom's phone lit up on the ground beside the tool bag. The agent's power installation report. He looked at it. Set it face down.

What do you want for lunch?

Mateo ran his hand along the length of the joist. *Sandwiches. And then brisket.*

Sandwiches now, Dom said. Brisket Saturday is later.

Deal. Mateo looked up at the tree. How many Saturdays?

Dom looked up with him. The first joist in its position. The chalk line still visible. The lag bolts in the living wood, the tree already beginning to do what it does.

As many as it takes, he said.

Mateo screwed the lid back onto the paint container. Set the brush inside. Closed the bag. The same care he'd used on the bits, on the pouches, on every edge he'd coated whether asked or not.

Dom watched him.

They went in for lunch.

The platform was rougher in the morning light than it looked from the ground. The first two boards from the week before caught the angle of the early sun and showed every variance. Dom crouched at the join. Ran his thumb along the gap. Not a problem. Just a record of where they'd started.

"Hand me the level."

Mateo was already reaching into the toolbox. The level came up and Dom caught it without looking.

Dom set it on the next board.

Not level.

He went quiet.

"Dad."

“Yeah.”

“What if we just — okay so what if we shimmed it. Or we could put more screws in it. That would hold it. Or — what if we cut a little off the end, the end that’s sitting high, and then it would sit flat. Or we could—”

Dom was looking at the board. At the joist beneath it. At the angle of the platform frame relative to the branch above. His lower back was dull from the lifting. More support now, because the wood was heavier than the system expected. He had driven twice as many structural lag bolts because he had refused to split the timber.

Or, Mateo said, running now, “we could put a piece under the low side. Like a little block. To bring it up. And then it would be—”

“That one,” Dom said.

Mateo stopped.

“The shim,” Dom said. “But not under the low side. Under the joist. Before the board goes down. You shim the thing that holds the thing, not the thing itself.”

A pause. The cube starting at his side.

Oh, Mateo said. “Because otherwise it looks fixed but it’s not actually fixed.”

“Right.”

“Because the board would just—Pivot.”

“Yeah.”

Mateo looked at the board. Then at the joist. The tunnel vision on.

Dom reached for the pry bar.

“Hand me the—”

“It was already coming up.”

The tape measure went on the third Saturday.

Just — off the platform edge when Dom reached for the drill and caught the case with his forearm, the sheer bad luck of a motion that was right in every other context. He heard it hit the ladder on the way down. Then the rock at the base of the oak. Then nothing.

He came down.

The case had a crack along the bottom — one clean fracture where the plastic had met the rock at exactly the wrong angle. He pressed the thumb lock. It moved but didn't hold. He extended the tape, let it go. It retracted without catching.

"Is it broken?" Mateo said from above.

"It works," Dom said. "It just doesn't lock."

He took out his phone. Lag bolts — the specific size, confirmed — and a replacement tape measure. Same model. Dom approved both. The agent confirmed delivery for Monday.

He put the phone in his pocket and reached into the bolt bag for the last of the current supply. His hand found a folded slip at the bottom. Printed. Small.

Recommended torque: 35 ft-lbs. Based on species and ambient humidity data.

He read it once. Folded it. Put it back.

Then he climbed back up.

For the rest of the afternoon the tape measure was in his hand every twenty minutes. He'd extend it, hold it at the mark with his thumb — the thumb doing the lock's job now — and call the number to Mateo, who wrote it in the notebook in his large uneven handwriting. The cracked edge of the plastic against his palm. Not painful. Just present.

Monday the new one would come.

Today he had this one.

The back door opened.

Luna appeared on the deck with popsicles. Behind her — Boone, moving at his own pace, with the dignity of something that had decided this moment required his presence. And behind Boone, already talking before she'd cleared the doorway: Mia. In something impractical for the weather. Of course.

"Can I bring you hard working guys a popsicle," Luna called up.

"Yes!" Mateo was already on his feet at the platform edge.

"You can have mine," Dom said to Luna.

She looked up at him in the tree.

The expression of a woman reading something she didn't need translated.

Mia was already at the ladder.

"I want to help," she said.

Dom came down. Crouched in front of her. She had the serious expression of someone who had been thinking about this for some time and had arrived with a plan.

"Okay," he said. "You can be the parts counter."

He handed her the bolt bag.

She took it with both hands, looked inside, looked at Dom.

"Count them," he said. "Tell me how many we have left."

She sat in the grass at the base of the oak and began counting bolts into her palm with the focused ceremony of someone doing something that mattered.

The toolbox sat open beside her. She glanced inside between counts. She did not touch anything.

Dom took the popsicle Luna held out. Cold. Orange. He bit it rather than licked it, which was the wrong way, and Luna

watched this with the expression she reserved for his most predictable habits.

Through the back window the kitchen was lit and quiet. Vim moved across it with the bathrobe belt still tied around its leg.

Mateo had looped it there one Saturday weeks ago. Not tight. Just a loop. A test. Vim had stood still. The ring had pulsed once. Did not remove it.

The belt was faded at the knot now. Dust in the weave. The fabric caught on the drawer handle as Vim passed. The drawer opened anyway.

“Juniper at work?” Dom said.

“Noon shift,” Luna said.

He nodded. The oldest already gone, already in the first rehearsal of the life that didn’t need him.

He checked his phone.

The digest had a new item. Treehouse: Power Options. 3 items. He scrolled past without opening. Put the phone back.

The agent did not comment.

Mateo finished his popsicle. Looked at the ladder. Looked at Dom.

“Ready,” Dom said.

They went back up.

By two the work had settled into something quieter. Dom was on his knees checking a bracket when he noticed Mateo had stopped handing things up.

He looked over.

Mateo was on his back on the platform boards, arms at his sides, looking up through the canopy at the sky.

Dom sat back. Let him be there.

A minute passed. Maybe two.

“Dad.”

“Yeah.”

“Could we put power up here?”

Dom looked at him. “Power?”

“Like electricity. For the lights. And a place to plug in.” A pause. “For video games.”

Dom looked up through the branches. At the logistical problem of running cable through living wood into a platform in a backyard oak.

“I have ideas about that,” he said.

“When we get to that bridge, we’ll cross it.”

A beat.

“Bridge!,” Mateo said. “What bridge?”

Dom looked at his son. Flat on his back on the boards he’d helped build, completely serious, the phrase having arrived without its idiom.

“It means we’ll figure it out when we get there,” Dom said.

Mateo considered this. Looked back up at the sky.

“But I think we could do it,” he said.

“I think we could too,” Dom said.

His hand found the back of his neck. Stayed there.

By three the railing posts were set. Not finished — the horizontal rails still to go, the sanding, the treatment — but set. Standing. The platform bounded on three sides by something that said: this is the edge, and past it is not the treehouse anymore.

Mateo stood at the railing and put both hands on the top post. His fingers were still. Just both hands on the wood, his weight against it, looking out over the yard.

Dom stood beside him.

The yard quiet in the way of a late afternoon that had been well used.

His palm had a faint mark where the cracked plastic had been. He pressed it. Released it.

“Next Saturday,” Dom said, “we start the rails.”

Mateo nodded. His hands still on the post.

“And then,” Dom said, “we’re close.”

Mateo looked at him. The expression of a boy who has been building something long enough to understand that close is different from done but better than far.

“And then brisket,” Mateo said.

“Yes! And then brisket,” Dom said.

They stayed up there for a few more minutes. The oak holding them. The yard below going amber in the late light. The thermos empty. The toolbox needing to go down.

Neither of them moved yet.

Twenty-Nine: The Treehouse

The go-kart parts were on the workbench when Dom went to find the drill. Mateo had laid them out in his sequence — the engine in the middle, the chain to the right, the brake assembly to the left, the frame components arranged by which order they bolted together. He had done this without being asked.

Dom stood there for a moment.

Then he found the drill on the bottom shelf where he'd left it. Picked up the screws. Picked up the bag with the brackets. Carried them out to the yard.

The go-kart could wait.

Dom walked up to the oak without speaking.

He put his right hand on the bark. Felt it through his palm — the firmness of it, the surface giving just slightly under pressure. Not fragile. The bark held.

Then his left hand.

Wider now. Not testing it. Just — taking it in. The width of it. The way it held its own weight without effort.

Behind him:

“Where are the drinks?”

He didn't turn.

“Truck.”

By the time the word landed Mateo was already moving —

feet across the grass, the back door of the car opening before Dom had taken his hands off the tree.

He stayed there.

Then he turned and followed.

The cooler was half out of the back seat when Dom got there. Mateo had it by the handle, pulling at it with both hands, the lid knocking once against the door frame as it came free.

They set it down in the grass.

Mateo opened it. Blue Gatorade. He twisted one open and drank without pacing it, the first half gone before his body had caught up to the fact that he was thirsty.

Dom took one. Drank slower.

They stood there for a moment. The tree ten yards away. The boards still in the truck.

Mateo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. *Let's go.*

The boards came down first.

Two by tens. Longer than Mateo was tall. Dom took one end, Mateo took the other, or something like it — hands on wood, weight uneven between them, the board tilting slightly until Dom corrected the angle without saying anything.

They carried it to the base of the tree.

Set it down.

Picked it back up.

Adjusted.

Tried to bring it into position.

It didn't hold.

The far end dipped before Dom had the near side where he needed it. Mateo shifted his grip, too late or too early, the board sliding a few inches before Dom caught it and brought it back under control.

Dom lowered it.

Let it rest.

Looked at the tree.

Then he lifted one end again and leaned it into the trunk.

The wood met bark and stayed there.

Mateo moved in closer, hands on the board now not lifting, just keeping it from shifting sideways. It held.

Dom stepped back half a pace. Looked at it. Not level. Not right yet. But possible.

The ladder came next.

Dom carried it over, one hand on the side rail, the other guiding the base. He set it down, angled it up, and brought it into the tree.

Wood against bark.

A dull contact.

It slid an inch before catching.

He adjusted the feet. Pressed it in again.

This time it held.

Tape.

Mateo was already moving.

The toolbox came open too fast, tools shifting against each other as he dug through it. He found it, came back with the tape measure already halfway extended, the metal tongue snapping out ahead of him.

Dom took one end.

Hold it.

Mateo grabbed the other. Pulled it out farther than it wanted to go. The tape bowed in the middle, lost its tension, collapsed inward and snapped back a foot.

He caught it.

Adjusted his grip.

They tried again.

This time Dom steadied it with his thumb against the wood. Mateo held his end lower. The tape stretched between them, not perfectly straight but enough.

Dom looked at it. *Thirty-six.*

Mateo said it again under his breath. *Thirty-six.*

Dom reached into his pocket. Pulled out the pencil.

He made the first mark on the board.

Not deep. Just enough to be seen.

Mateo was already looking at the next step.

The drill sat in the open toolbox. The screws beside it. The board against the tree. The ladder ready.

He looked at Dom.

Didn't say anything.

Just waiting.

Dom picked up the drill.

Held it for a second.

Then stepped onto the first rung of the ladder.

The tree didn't move.

He brought the drill up.

Lined it with the mark.

The bit touched the wood.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The sound was immediate. Clean. The screw biting into the board, the board pressing into the tree, the resistance giving just enough to accept it.

The first one went in slightly off. Not crooked. Not perfect. It held.

Mateo was already reaching for the next screw.

Dom climbed up last, after the rails were in, after lunch, after the brisket promise had been kept. He stepped onto the platform and stood.

Below him Mia was looking up with both hands shielding her eyes from the afternoon sun. Her face did what her face did.

“Daddy,” she said. “YOU DID IT!!”

Dom looked at his daughter.

“Honey,” he said. “We did it. Teamwork—
MAKES THE DREAM WORK!” Both kids.

Mateo from three rungs below on the ladder, Mia from the grass, simultaneous, the family completing the sentence it had heard enough times to know where it was going.

Dom laughed. Actually laughed — the full version, the one that came without deciding to.

Mateo came up the last rungs and stepped onto the platform beside him. They stood together. Below them Boone was working the perimeter of the yard in the methodical way of a dog who had lost track of something worth finding.

Dom put his hand on the railing. The wood smooth where he’d sanded it. Solid where the lag bolts went through.

The yard looked different from up here. Smaller and more itself at the same time. The back door. The kitchen window. The counter archaeology visible through the glass.

He pressed his palm against the top rail.

“You know what this means,” Mateo said.

Dom looked at his son.

“Brisket,” Mateo said.

“Brisket,” Dom said.

Mia was already at the base of the ladder.

“I want to come up,” she said.

“Come up,” Dom said.

He reached down. She took his hand.

Thirty: Wonder State

The second cup.

The house had already been itself for an hour — breakfast cleared, the youngest's cereal bowl rinsed and left at an angle in the drying rack the way she always left it, Mateo somewhere in the basement doing what Mateo did on Saturday mornings, the focused silence of a boy who had disappeared into something and would surface when he was ready. The morning had run. The points had cleared. The boots were on the correct feet.

Dom stood at the counter with the second cup and looked out the window at the yard.

The oak was in full leaf. That saturated late-spring green. Saturated. Certain of itself. The treehouse was up there. Not the vision from the sauna, not the platform in Mia's crayon drawing, not the thing he'd been measuring with his eyes for three years without meaning to. The actual one. Boards slightly uneven where the first two hadn't quite aligned before he'd found the angle. The ladder attached the way Mateo had insisted — lower than Dom thought necessary, accessible, the kind that felt more like building than play.

The first screw had gone in slightly off.

Not crooked. Not perfect.

It held.

He looked at Juniper's window.

The blinds were drawn against the morning light. Her room doing what her room had been doing for weeks now — holding itself slightly apart from the house, operating on a different schedule, the quality of a space that belonged to someone who was already somewhere else in her mind even when she was still physically inside it.

The text from Julia had come in the night before.

A photograph. Juniper on the Coastal campus. Accepted-student day. She'd committed in January, choosing the beach over the mountains, and the community college credits would transfer after the first year. She wanted to see the ocean for herself.

She wanted to see it for herself.

Then a second message a minute later.

I didn't tell your machine.

Dom hadn't replied.

Hadn't told Luna yet.

Hadn't opened the agent.

The phone went warm against his palm. He didn't notice when it cooled.

She was leaving in August.

The morning already shifted.

He heard the back door.

The familiar sound of it — the latch releasing, the hinges, the familiar resistance of a door that had been opened ten thousand times by people who never thought about opening it. Then outside. Small feet in the grass. He turned.

Mia.

Moving across the backyard in the morning light with the toolbox in both hands, the weight pulling slightly to one side,

her grip adjusting every few steps without slowing her down. She was wearing something impractical for the weather. Her boots — on the correct feet, the morning system had seen to that — were already dark at the toes from the dew in the grass.

She was moving toward the oak.

Not looking back.

Dom stood at the counter with his second cup and watched his youngest daughter cross the yard toward a tree she had drawn in crayon and handed him with both hands. He thought about the first drawing crumpled at the edge of the table. The second one already forming before the first had fully landed. The way she'd bent over it with her whole body, the tip of her tongue at the corner of her mouth, the crayon moving like she was solving something rather than making something.

He didn't go out.

Didn't call to her.

Didn't open the agent.

She reached the tree.

Set the toolbox down in the grass.

Opened it.

The lid caught on the latch. She pressed it down. The plastic gave.

Inside, the molded tray held its shapes. The hammer in its slot. The screwdrivers lined up by size. The level nested in foam. One slot was empty. The plastic still held the outline—a clean depression where the wrench should have been. The ghost of a tool that hadn't been placed.

Mia's hand hovered over it. Then moved past. Her fingers brushed the rubber grip of the pry bar. The steel of the tape measure. The cracked case sitting beside the bolt bag. She lifted the tape. Put it down. Lifted it again.

The dew on the grass soaked through the hem of her dress. Her boots sank slightly into the wet soil. The weight of the box pulled at her wrists. She adjusted her grip, shifting it to the left. The screws inside rattled once—a dry, specific sound against the plastic.

She looked up. The platform above her. The boards slightly uneven where they hadn't aligned. The lag bolts swallowed by the bark. The morning light filtering through the late-spring leaves, catching dust in the air, falling in patches on the grass.

Stood there for a moment looking up at the oak — at the platform, at the ladder, at the boards that weren't perfectly level and held anyway — with the attention of someone who has looked at a thing for a long time and is now looking at what comes next. The morning light coming through the canopy.

Then she reached in.

Dom stood at the kitchen counter with his almost-black coffee warm in his hands.

He didn't know what she was going to build.

Neither did she.

The agent ran in the background. Tending what didn't require him.

The digest already building for tomorrow. The surplus allocated. The lenders pre-filled. Mr. Vim stood in the corner of the kitchen, its light ring pulsing once, then dimming. The room had already adjusted around him.

The Ashe County land sitting on its thirty-four acres with the stream running cold underneath the tree line, the perc test pending, the building sites better on the far edge where he'd put Julia's cottage someday when he caught up to it.

All of it running. All of it tended.

The go-kart parts were still on the workbench in the garage.

The sparkly blue helmet still on the shelf.
Standing at the counter. Late spring. Second cup warm. Mia
crouched at the base of the oak, reaching into a toolbox.
The oak held the light.
The yard still belonging more to morning than to day.
His daughter reached into the toolbox again.
Just — here.
The counter solid under his free hand.
The coffee warm.
The refrigerator cycled on. A low hum. The yard held the
light. The girl held the tools.
The morning didn't ask for anything.
She reached in again.

Thirty-One: The Mountain

The dirt road was more itself than Dom remembered.

The ruts deeper where the spring runoff had cut through, the gravel thinner on the steep sections, the trees closer to the shoulder than they were in November. The truck took it in second gear, the bed loaded with the cooler and the tool bags and the cast iron skillet. Luna was in the passenger seat with her hand on the handle above the door.

Warren was in the back seat between the kids. Mia had given him the middle. She was explaining the property to him — the stream, the rocks, the tree with the fork in the trunk. Warren was listening, his head tilted toward her, his hands resting on his knees. Mateo had the Rubik's cube going at his side. The soft click of the plastic filled the silence between Mia's sentences.

Dom watched the mirror. Warren's head tilted toward Mia. He kept his voice low.

"The box is in the bag," he said.

Luna looked at him. "The whole trip?"

"I was thinking yes."

"Saturday morning I might need to check in."

"Just the morning."

"Deal."

In the back, Mateo's cube went still for a moment. He went back to it.

"Deal," Dom said.

Mia leaned forward. "The fortress comes?"

"The fortress comes."

She settled back against Warren. Her hand found his knee.

The cabin showed itself in stages. The chimney first, moss-dark at the base. Then the roof, patched at the far corner where Dom had spent a weekend in April clearing what the previous owner had left — a hunting shelter, half-collapsed, the boards replaced and the windows resealed. Then the porch, the boards gone soft at the edges where the weather had been working on them.

Dom parked at the edge of the clearing.

The door opened inward. The air that comes out was dust and old wood and the metallic trace of a cold stove. Pine resin had crystallized on the windowsills. Dom presses his thumb against one of the deposits. It broke cleanly, releasing the cold smell of it into the room.

Mia stood in the center. She turned slowly.

"It smells like the earth," she said.

Mateo went to the window and presses his palm against the glass. "We need the stuff. For the cracks."

Luna was at the door with the first box. She looked at Dom. He nodded.

They worked.

The sealant went around the windows first — Luna on the ladder, Dom handing the tube up. Mateo placed the batteries in the cabinet and the lantern on the hook by the door. Warren carried the cooler to the counter, then went back outside. He returned with an armload of wood from the pile Dom cut last

fall. Sets it down by the stove. Straightens slowly, one hand at his lower back. Didn't move for a moment. Then he built the fire without asking. Newspaper, kindling, three small logs. He lit the match with one hand and holds it until the flame caught.

The cabin warmed.

Before they eat, Dom set the box on the counter. Luna slid her phone in without looking at it. Warren held his for a moment, then set it in with the others. Mateo opened the Switch case and places it carefully inside. Dom's goes in last.

Mia turned the lock.

They walk to the oak after lunch.

The stream is cold, running over dark rocks. Mia put her fingers in the water. Mateo moved upstream, looking at the bank. Luna took Dom's hand past the break in the trees and held it.

The tree is at the top of the rise.

The forked trunk. The two branches running parallel. The place where the platform would have gone. Dom stops at the base and looks up. The bark is a shade lighter than it was in November. Dull. In the upper canopy, the smaller branches catch the light with a brittle, skeletal thinness.

He has the arborist's report in his pocket. Folded twice. He feels the sharp corner of the paper against his thigh as he moves.

"Something's wrong," Mateo said.

He is looking at the base of the trunk, where the roots meet the soil.

"Oak Wilt," Dom said. "It's in the roots. It moves up. Nothing stops it."

Mateo reached out and touches the bark. Pulls his hand back quickly. Looks at his palm. His fingers go still — the cube quiet

for the first time since the truck.

“Can it spread?”

“The arborist thinks it’s already in the soil,” Dom said. “So maybe.”

Mateo looks at his palm again. Then he turned and walked toward the stream, his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

Mia stays.

She moves closer to the trunk, stepping over a high root. She doesn’t look at the canopy. She presses her forehead against the bark.

“The man said the roots are sick, Mia,” Dom said.

She doesn’t move. Her voice comes out muffled against the wood. “I know.”

“He thinks the tree is going to die.”

“I know what he thinks,” she said.

She pulls back and looks at the fork in the trunk. She traces a line in the air where the first board would have sat. Her hand is steady.

“It’s still holding the air,” she said.

Dom looks at the space she is pointing to. The empty V of the branches. He looks at his daughter’s hand, then at the graying bark. He puts his hand on her shoulder. The fabric of her jacket is cold.

“Let’s go find your brother,” he said.

The trail behind the cabin runs along the ridge. Around five o’clock, the light goes gold at the edges of everything and the mountain starts to close.

Warren and Luna are ahead. Dom follows at the distance that says: I’m here but this is yours. He can hear the register of their voices without the words — the specific frequency of a father and daughter in the last light.

Then he hears it.

One word. Warren saying something, the word landing differently than the words around it. Dom has been carrying that word without its shape. He knows it when it comes again.

He closes the distance. Not fast. The movement itself a question.

Warren glances back. Makes room without speaking.

“Where did the name come from?” Dom said. “Van.”

Warren slowed. His hand goes to his back pocket, comes back empty. He needed the hand to do something.

“Well.”

He looks at the trail ahead. The switchback going down through the rhododendron.

“It was the music,” he said. “You know.”

“Van Morrison,” Luna said.

“Van Morrison. Yeah. Claire — your mom — she loved him. Loved him.” He shakes his head a little. “I mean we both did. But she — there was a time she just played him. All the time. The car. The house. She had the record. The blue one. What’s the one — Astral Weeks. That one. She’d be doing dishes or whatever and she’d be inside it.”

He stops walking.

“It was raining the day we met. I don’t know why I —” He waves his hand. “That’s not what you asked.”

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“No, I know. I just — it’s all the same thing somehow. The rain. Claire. The records. The boy.”

He starts walking again. Slower. Dom and Luna stay with him.

“Sweet Thing. That was the one playing. In the shop. The record shop on Hillsborough Street.” He looks at Dom. “You

wouldn't know it. Long gone. But that was — yeah. Sweet Thing was on. And she walked in out of the rain.”

“How old were you?” Dom said.

“Twenty-three. Twenty-three, twenty-four. I don't — twenty-three, I think.” He laughs once, short. “I knew what a guy that age knows, which is nothing. But I knew enough to talk to her.”

They walk for a stretch.

“When she got pregnant we...”

“Weightless,” he said. “She said he was going to come out weightless. With no fear.”

He reaches for Luna's hand. Takes it without looking. Holds it.

“I haven't said that in years.”

Luna doesn't speak. Keeps her hand in his.

“The name was...” Warren tried. He can't finish. His grip tightens. “Give me a second.”

“Take your time, Dad.”

He nods. Looks up at the canopy. The light coming through it in pieces. Tries again.

“We never sat down and named him. He just was Van. From in there. From inside her. That was already his name when he came out.”

A breath.

“I couldn't hear any of his songs for a long time after. You'd be surprised — there's a way you avoid music. Every grocery store. Every restaurant. Years. I'd walk out of places. I'd leave a meal on the table.”

His hand tighter on Luna's.

“I still can't hear Sweet Thing. Or Astral Weeks. They take me back to the room. The room where she — where she had

him." He shakes his head. "It's not even a memory. I'm in the room. With Claire and him and the song."

The mountain holds the silence.

"I never know how to tell this," Warren says. "I get it wrong every time. I told it at his — at the service. I told it and I had the song wrong. I said it was Brown Eyed Girl. It wasn't Brown Eyed Girl. Brown Eyed Girl was later. In the car. It was Sweet Thing in the shop." He shakes his head. "Claire would've corrected me. She'd have laughed at me."

He pauses.

"He never heard a note of it out here," Warren said. "Out here in the world. But in there. In Claire. He had it the whole time."

He looks at Dom. Reaches for him with his other hand. Dom moves into the reach.

Warren holds them both. Dom's right hand moves — just slightly, just the start of a shape that doesn't belong here. Then stops. Warren squeezes.

They stand there in the last of the light.

Dom held it in.

"I feel like this land was meant to be," he said.

He hears it as he says it. Too much. Wrong register.

"I mean — Warren. The cabin. The land. It's been —"

He stops.

Nobody speaks. The trail. The trees. The light still going.

Then Warren squeezes them tighter. Doesn't say anything. Lets the squeeze be the thing.

Dom lets the weight go.

The trail runs on toward the stream. The dying oak somewhere behind them now, bark a shade lighter than November, the upper canopy brittle against the sky going gold,

holding on the way old things hold on without calling attention to it.

They stand for another moment. Then Warren begins to walk, and the two of them go with him.

The fire is the last thing Dom builds before dark.

He digs the ring deeper and lines it with stones from the stream. The flame catches on the first match. Mateo drags logs over for seats. Luna brings the blankets from the truck.

Warren takes the chair nearest the fire. He lowers himself into it with a short grunt. Dom sits beside him.

The fire finds its shape. The heat pushes outward in a growing radius.

Warren is humming. A melody that moves in a pattern Dom doesn't recognize. A doo-wop progression that doesn't resolve. His hand moves on his knee, tapping the rhythm of the missing strings.

"The harmonies were her part," Warren said. "I just held the beat."

Mia looks at him, then at the flames. She doesn't ask who. She accepts the beat as it is.

Mateo shifts on his log. He looks at the cabin, then back at Dom.

"Dad," he says. "The treehouse at home. That's still ours."

Dom looks at his son. The boy is watching a spark rise into the dark. Dom doesn't answer. He lets the spark go until it vanishes.

"Yeah," Dom said. "It is."

Dom looks at Warren. The fire on the side of his face. He thinks about the second room he started clearing last month. The cot frame still in pieces against the wall. He will finish it before winter.

The dark comes down in layers. The tree line goes first, then the clearing. Luna has Mia in her lap, the blanket pulled around both of them. Mateo has gone quiet beside Dom, the Rubik's cube still in his hand but not turning.

The box is on the counter inside. The lock turned.

Dom doesn't go in to check it. Out in the dark, the oak is a shape he can't see but knows is there. The fungus in the roots. The branches holding the air.

He watches the fire settle. The coals breathe orange, then gray, then nothing.

They loaded the truck in the first light. The cabin door closed. Dom drove. Luna slept against the window. The kids were quiet in the back. By the time they reached the interstate, the world had resumed.

Thirty-Two: The Toolbox

She came down in the dinner dress.

The one from the back of Juniper's closet — silk, wrinkled, already folded inside the always-packed suitcase that sat open on the bedroom floor. The suitcase was ready because someone in this house was always leaving. Mia had decided the dress was hers now. She'd paired it with her Crocs. Wrong shoes. Wrong dress. Chosen with complete certainty.

She carried the toolbox with both hands, pressed against her chest. Not by the handle — the way you carry something that requires your whole body to commit to it. The hardshell plastic was scuffed at the corners. The latches were closed.

Dom stood at the counter. The coffee was gone. The speaker was off. Just the refrigerator's hum.

His phone pinged.

He thought about the property. The stream. He thought about Juniper's door upstairs, still closed against the morning, the room already half-empty even though she wasn't leaving until August.

He put the phone face down on the counter.

The grass was wet. His shoes were wet by the time he reached the oak.

Mia had set the toolbox down in the grass. The latches were

open. The lid was up. Inside, the molded plastic held its shapes — the hammer in its slot, the screwdrivers lined up by size, the level nested in its form.

She was crouched at the base of the oak, the dress bunched at her knees, the Crocs dark with dew. Her hand was inside the box. Fingers moving slowly through the compartments. Tracing the borders.

Dom stood beside her. He didn't say her name. He didn't announce himself. He just stood where the shadow of the oak reached the grass, close enough to hear her breathing.

His eyes found the empty slot.

The molded plastic still holding the ghost of it.

"Dad," she said.

"Yeah."

She didn't look up. Her hand kept moving through the tools.

"The treehouse," she said. "It needs more."

"More," she said.

Mia's hand stayed inside the tray. Fingers dragging across the hard plastic. Moving past the hammer. The level. The screwdrivers lined up by size. The cracked case beside the bolt bag.

She hadn't found it yet.



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