THE PAINTED SKIN

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CHAPTER 1

The Dig

I was making coffee when the email came, and I read it at the counter with the kettle going behind me.

Re: preliminary site findings, 350 Jackson. The gray the company kept for bad news dressed up as procedure; two paragraphs, no signature, no name to reply to. During the 2025 excavation, human remains had been recovered at the new headquarters site. In accordance with standard practice the remains were removed and reinterred at a cemetery in Colma. A third-party forensic consultant had since raised a question about the chain of custody of the documentation. The matter was under review. No further action was required of any employee.

I read the second paragraph twice.

Chain of custody. I had heard the phrase twice before in my working life, both times in a room with a lawyer in it, and both times it had meant the opposite of what it said. It did not mean the bones had been handled correctly. It meant: stop asking who handled them.

Behind me the kettle clicked off. I had not heard it come up.

I knew the block. 350 Jackson sat where Chinatown thinned into glass, on the seam the city had been trying to erase since the first tech boom, and I had walked it a year ago, the month they poured the foundation, when the ground was still open and the excavators stood in it with their buckets down and their engines ticking as they cooled. The company sent the face team through on a morale walk — *see where we're building* — as if the building were a promise and not a hole. Ray Delacroix took us around. Sunburned, cheerful, hard hat tipped back like a man at a barbecue, and at the lip of the excavation he stopped and pointed down at the clay.

"Found a whole goddamn person down there," he said. "Old bones. Company had 'em hauled off before the county got nosy." Then he laughed, and the laugh was not quite a joke, and he moved the tour along to the rebar.

I moved along too. I am good at that. It is, I sometimes think, the actual skill I was hired for — not the lip-sync model or the loss function, but the ability to stand at the edge of a hole, hear what is in it, and get back to work.

Eidolon makes faces. The company says *digital humans*, which is marketing; what we make is faces — photoreal, generative, alive enough that your eye forgives them before your brain catches up. The one on the far wall is life-size, with seven floors of open plan between her and the elevators, and she turns her head to follow people who are not looking at her. I built the lip-sync. The small hesitation of muscle before a word, the mouth moving a half-beat ahead of the sound and then catching up; that was mine. I was proud of it. It stopped being mine the day it shipped.

I am thirty-four. I live in Duboce Triangle with Mina, in a one-bedroom we bought with my first options grant, and if you asked me to describe the apartment I would describe the light — north-facing, gray in the mornings, good for screens. Mina is an ER nurse at the General, overnights more than she wants. She comes home at eight with the hospital still on her scrubs and sleeps while I take calls with my headphones on. A year of that. Not the reason I keep the second phone; the reason has a different shape. But the year is where it lives.

The work phone is real. Eidolon issued it. I use it for work, and then for Kindred. Kindred is a swiping app, the same as the others, and it is not the kind of app you leave on the counter. I know that. The knowing is part of it.

I have never met anyone. That is the line, and I trust the line the way a man with clean hands trusts his hands. Looking is not doing, doing it once is not doing it, a drink is just a drink: three sentences I have said to myself so often they have worn smooth, and smooth sentences do not catch on anything.

Most mornings I watch Mina leave. She never looks back from the corner, and I have never decided whether that means she trusts me or has stopped checking. Then I go to the drawer. Some days I do not open it. Those days are worse than the others, which tells me a fact I would prefer not to finish.

Some nights I stop at the taproom on the corner and drink one beer too slowly, watching the door the way you watch a door you have no reason to expect anything from. Mina and I met in a place like it, years ago, back when she still went out after a shift and I still pretended to enjoy it. She asked what I did and I

said *I make faces*, and she laughed — really laughed, head back — and I did not correct her, and that laugh was, more or less, the whole beginning. I knew it even then. I ordered her another drink anyway.

The next morning she came off a shift at seven and found me at the window. She set her bag down and stood behind me a while without saying anything, which is how she checks on me — not with questions.

"You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep."

She rested her forehead between my shoulder blades, a thing she does when words are too much work. She smelled of antiseptic and the street.

"Come back to bed."

"Work."

"Work," she said, and smiled, and it was a question she already knew the answer to.

That night she was asleep after a double. I sat on the edge of the bed with the phone and listened to her breathe through the wall. I swiped. The app gave me what I swiped for, which is the business it is in and also the trap: it learns the shape of what stops my thumb and brings me more of it, and the shape narrows every week. I did not let it become a sentence. A sentence can be looked at. I wanted this in the dark, where it could not.

The profile was bad, which made it good — one photo, wrong light, half her face in shadow, caught mid-turn like the camera had surprised her. Mid-thirties. White. Nothing about it was posed, and that is why my thumb stopped.

I swiped right.

The match came back before I set the phone down, which almost never happens, which felt like a gift.

Hi, she wrote.

I lay in the dark beside Mina and typed. *Hi.*

You looked honest.

I did not answer that. I wrote something light; she wrote something light back. We traded light things for an hour, and under the guilt I felt the old, cheap warmth of being chosen by a stranger for no better reason than that I had asked.

At one I put the phone in the nightstand drawer and lay on my back and listened to the fog against the glass. Across the city, under a tarp and a chain-link fence, an excavation sat in the dark, and no one was required to do anything about it.

Under the building, in the hour when the city goes quiet, what had been waiting since 1926 finished what it had been doing. A brush. A face painted on the inside of a face that was not its own. It lifted the skin, shook it out the way you shake out a coat, and put it on. Then it went to the window and looked out at San Francisco, which looked back with every face it had.

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CHAPTER 2

The Box

The case had been under Zhang Yuan's bed for six years. He had not opened it in all that time, which was not the same as forgetting it. He knew its weight when he dragged it out. He knew the smell of the oiled cloth before the clasps were undone. A man does not forget a thing he has spent six years not opening.

He was twenty-nine, a doctoral candidate at Stanford, working on the mathematics of the human face — the landmark points, the manifold of expressions, the loss function that measured how close a reconstruction came to a truth the machine had never seen. His adviser, Okafor, called it the last real problem in computer vision and said it the way a man says a thing he has said at a hundred dinners. What Zhang liked was that it was clean. A face turned into numbers could not lie to him, and he had come to California to be far from people who could.

The headline found him on a Tuesday, between a bus schedule and a bill. *Human remains found at site of tech firm's new SF headquarters.* 350 Jackson. The company declined to comment. The remains, a woman's, had been relocated for reinterment.

Relocated. He sat with the word. He spent his working life reading sentences written by people who wanted him to see one thing and not another, and *relocated* was doing what a loss function did — making a fact look like a procedure. He read the story twice, and both times it stopped at the same place, at the company's silence, and he recognized the silence because it was the silence his own field produced when a model did what no one could explain and everyone agreed to call it a feature.

His family came from Mount Longhu, in Jiangxi. For two thousand years the Zhang line had held the seal of exorcism — the ordination registers, the authority over what the tradition called 阴 (yin), the dark, the things that would not stay dead. His father had walked away from all of it. He had emigrated, married a

woman from outside the line, and raised Zhang Yuan in a clean apartment in Shenzhen on one lesson: the mountain is far away, and it should stay there.

His grandmother taught him the rest, in summers he was not given a choice about. She was a small woman who had never once lied to him; she kept her hair in a knot with a wooden pin and smelled of camphor and the oil she kept the sword in. In the low house below the mountain she showed him the 法箓 (falu), the lineage registers; the 符 (fu), the paper talismans written in cinnabar; the 桃木剑 (taomu jian), the sword of peach wood that carried 阳 (yang) and warded yin; the 葫芦 (hulu), the gourd a defeated spirit is drawn into and sealed. She made him walk the 禹步 (yubu), the steps of Yu, until they lived in his legs and not his head.

"Where does a thing stay?" she asked him once, when he was twelve and had forgotten a line of the 咒 (zhou) for the third time.

"In the mind," he said.

"In the muscles," she said. "The mind forgets. The muscles do not."

One summer she took him into the room where the falu were kept, unrolled the longest of them across a table, and put his finger on the blank space at the bottom, under two thousand years of names. The space was his if he wanted it or not. He asked her, with the cruelty of a boy who wanted to hurt the thing that frightened him, whether she actually believed any of it. She did not flinch. She looked at him for a long moment with the flat patience of a woman who had outlived everyone who ever asked her a careless question.

"I have seen what the story is about," she said. "When you have seen it, you will not ask me that again."

What she had told him about the dead came back now whole: *When the dead are moved without rites, the grievance is not moved. It is let out. The bone is the lock. You do not open a lock and expect the room to stay empty.*

He had thought it was a story. He still thought it was a story. The difference was that now the story had a body count.

He got down on his knees and pulled the case out.

Black, hard-sided, two brass clasps gone dull. Inside, wrapped in oiled cloth: the falu bound with a cracked red cord; the fu in his grandmother's hand, the

cinnabar faded to the color of old blood; the 蝇拂 (yingfu), the fly-whisk, its white hairs yellowed; the taomu jian, no longer than his forearm, the grain dark with oil; and the hulu, its neck sealed with wax over a folded fu. He unwrapped them one by one on the floor while the radiator knocked, and each weighed more than he remembered, and he understood that the weight was not in the objects. It was the distance between what they were and what he had spent six years insisting they were.

He said the zhou under his breath to see if he still could. It came back whole, out of his legs, and the sound of it in the quiet apartment was the first honest thing he had said in a long time.

He sat on the floor a while with the case open in front of him. Outside, the fog pressed at the glass; a car went by with its lights on, and then the street was still. Okafor would call the headline and the grave two data points a tired mind had joined with a line. His grandmother would have called them a lock and a key. The two of them had never agreed about a single fact except this one, that a face is never only a face, and Zhang had spent his whole adult life unable to decide which of them he was.

Then he put the taomu jian in his bag and went out into the city to see what there was to see.

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CHAPTER 3

A Man Opened

They found him on a Friday, in an SRO off Sixth Street, in the part of SoMa that still shares a ZIP code with the fentanyl market and nothing else with the towers. I heard about it the way I hear about everything now — on the shuttle, through a screen, on the way in.

The first post was four lines. *Body found in SoMa. Police investigating.* By lunch there was more. The man had been in the room two days. The neighbor who called it in told a reporter, off the record, that the smell was not what made her call. The silence was. The particular silence of a room where the television should have been on and was not.

By afternoon, a name. Ray Delacroix.

I did not place it. I read the name twice and kept scrolling. Then the photograph loaded — not of the body, of the block — and I knew the block, and then I knew him.

The word the news used was *gruesome*. The word they did not print, and did not need to, was that he had been opened. His belly laid open cleanly, as you would open a box, and the heart gone out of the cavity, taken with two hands, and the room painted with what had come out of him. A paramedic who had been on scene said, off the record, that he had seen combat in Fallujah and never a room like that. He said it flat, the way a person says a thing they are trying to keep at arm's length.

There was one more detail, and it stayed with me. The man's face was calm. Not peaceful. Fixed. His eyes open, his mouth not quite slack, his last expression a kind of wanting — the look of a man in the second before a kiss. He had not been afraid. He had not seen it coming, because it had come wearing the one face he would never have flinched from.

Ray Delacroix had been the site supervisor on the Jackson job. I met him once, the month the ground was open, when the company walked the face team through as if the building were a promise and not a hole. At the lip of the

excavation he had pointed down at the clay and said, "Found a whole goddamn person down there. Old bones. Company had 'em hauled off before the county got nosy. You didn't hear it from me."

I heard it. I nodded. Then the memo came, and I read it once and put it down. That is the sequence, and it is worth putting plainly, because for a while I kept trying to rearrange it. He told me the truth at the edge of a hole. Three days after the memo I read the truth on a screen, and it was his name.

Eidolon sent a memo that afternoon. It did not say the dead man had worked for the company, or for the contractor, or that he was the one who had overseen the removal of the bones from the foundation of the building where the memo was being read. It said the company was saddened. It said grief counseling was available. It said the incident was believed to be isolated.

Isolated. I read that word four times. I had written sentences like it myself, whole tables of them, and I knew what it was for. Not a finding. A wish. It was what you said when you wanted a thing over before it started, when you wanted everyone to stop looking at the hole and get back to the floor.

At lunch I stood in the kitchenette with Sasha, who does perceptual quality and has never in her life said a surprising thing, and she said, in the low voice people use for the dead, "They're saying it was a heart attack." Then she stopped. Then she said, "They're saying the heart was gone. Not failed. Gone."

I set my coffee down. My hands had started to shake, and I did not know why, and I knew exactly why, and the distance between those two facts was the whole of the rest of my day.

The floor worked. The avatar smiled. People went to meetings and came back and went to meetings again. Underneath all of it, in every conversation that stopped a beat too soon, in every glance at a phone, there was a man I had met once, opened in a room off Sixth, and a city already doing the long work of forgetting him. That was what stayed with me more than the blood. Not the death. The speed of the forgetting. He was not in the ground yet.

That night I did not open the app. I meant to. I sat on the edge of the bed with the phone and Mina in the shower and the water running, and every time I thought of Lena's face I thought of the room off Sixth, and the two things had gotten tangled.

The phone lit up on its own.

You've been quiet, Lena wrote. *Everything okay?*

The water stopped. Mina was drying her hair in the other room, and the small domestic sounds of it came through the wall. I sat with a dead man's room in my head and a stranger's message in my hand.

Long week, I wrote. *I could use a drink.*

The reply came fast.

Me too, she wrote. *I know a place.*

So did I. I told her so. It was a lie and not a lie.

Mina came out of the bathroom in her robe, her hair dark and wet, and looked at me with the expression she had had lately — half love, half the beginning of a question.

"You look terrible," she said. "Are you sleeping?"

"Fine," I said. "Long week."

She nodded, and did not believe me, and went to bed. I lay awake beside her with the phone in the drawer and arranged to meet a woman I had never seen, and told myself, the way I always told myself, that a drink was just a drink.

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CHAPTER 4

The Reading

The temple was on Waverly Place, three floors up, above a restaurant already cooking for lunch. The stairwell smelled of joss and old varnish and, underneath, soy and hot oil. The street noise fell away a floor at a time, and by the top Zhang felt he had climbed out of the San Francisco of screens into an older, narrower one that had been in the walls all along.

He did not believe in any of it. He said so to himself on every landing, the way a man says *dry* while standing in rain.

The keeper was a man his family had written to for decades — not a priest of the Zhang line, not a relative, just a man who kept the doors and the incense and the silence, and who recognized Zhang's name the way a bell recognizes its own note. He was old, with yellowed eyes and hands that did not shake. He listened without expression. Then he said, in Cantonese, the thing Zhang had come to hear and did not want to hear.

"The lock is open. You are not wrong."

Zhang had not told him why he had come. The keeper had not asked. He had known before Zhang reached the top of the stairs. That was the way of the men who kept these rooms: they did not read your face, they read the air you brought in with you, and the air around Zhang had been wrong for days the way air goes wrong before a storm.

He led Zhang into a back room and lit three sticks of sandalwood and set them in a brass bowl and watched the smoke. His face did not change. The silence did. After a while he said, quietly, the word Zhang had not wanted to hear in a room that was not his grandmother's.

"厉鬼 (ligui)."

"Yes," Zhang said, and it was the first time he had said it aloud.

"Not a small one," the keeper said. "A hundred years of grievance, kept in the bone, and the bone opened by men who did not know what they were opening. She has been waiting. She is not finished."

What he gave Zhang was a photograph, and the photograph undid him.

It was a crime-scene photograph of the dead man — the one that had leaked from a paramedic's phone to a forum and from there to the keeper, as such things leak, through the hands of people who cannot look away. Zhang had braced for the room, and there was the room: the man opened, the walls dark to the ceiling, all of it the color of old rust under the flash.

He did not look at the room.

He looked at the face.

The dead man's face was not frightened. It was the face of a man looking at something beautiful — the eyes fixed, the mouth not quite slack, the last expression a kind of eagerness, the look of a man in the moment before a kiss. And across the brow, faint and wrong, like breath on cold glass, a bloom of color the camera had caught and the eye would call a shadow: a greenish-gray smudge at the temples that Zhang's grandmother had made him memorize, and that he had never once seen on a living or a dead face until now.

邪气 (xieqi). Evil qi. The residue of a thing that has fed.

Zhang's hand went to the photograph as if to a wound. The keeper watched him with the patience of a man who had seen a hundred skeptical grandsons come through his door and leave changed.

"She was never going to stop," the keeper said. "The bone was the lock, and the company opened it, and now she is out, and she is hungry, and she is not the only one with the mark."

Zhang looked up. "The only one?"

"The mark is on the dead," the keeper said, "and on the living. On a man who is not dead yet. She is beside him now, or she will be. She always is, before the heart."

Then the keeper said the cruelest thing he could have said, because it was true.

"You can read it. Your grandmother opened your eyes a long time ago, and you never closed them all the way."

Zhang left the temple into the fog and stood on the street while the city moved around him. He thought about Okafor and the loss function and the clean mathematics of faces, and none of it explained the bloom on a dead man's

brow. He walked for a long time. He kept his hand on the photograph in his pocket, not to protect it but to keep it close, the proof that made the work real.

He called the number on the card the keeper had pressed into his hand. It belonged to a detective who would not believe him and would need him anyway.

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CHAPTER 5

Lena

The bar was three blocks from the tower, in that narrow band of SoMa that did not exist ten years ago and will not in ten more: low light, high prices, a wall of bottles lit like specimens. I got there early, because I was nervous, and being nervous makes me early, and being early made me order one gin and tonic too fast and a second before she came.

I saw her before she saw me. That is how it goes with the app — the photograph made real, a person stepping out of a flat screen into three dimensions, and the half-second where the body decides before the mind does.

She was real. That was my first thought and it was the wrong one. She was as real as the photograph had promised and then refused: hair down, one side of the face in shadow, a small unremarkable beauty that read as true because it was imperfect. Dark coat, no makeup I could see. She moved through the room like someone who had been somewhere a long time and was not in a hurry to leave.

"Theo," she said, and sat down.

She ordered wine without looking at the menu. She asked what I did, and I told her more than I meant to — the avatar on the wall, the lip-sync, the strange pride of making a face that was not a face.

"You make people," she said. "Out of nothing."

"Faces," I said. "Not people."

"Is there a difference?"

I gave her the company line, and it felt true because I had said it so many times, and she let it stand there between us, and I moved the conversation along. It was the one true thing said all night, and she said it, and I would not come back to it until there was nothing to do but come back to things.

There were small things I filed away and did not examine. She did not blink quite as often as people blink. Her hand, reaching for her wine, moved a beat behind where I expected it, as if she were remembering how a hand moved and then doing it. The light sat wrong on her skin, so that for half a second at a time

her face looked less like a face and more like a face painted on something else, and then the light would shift and she would be beautiful again. I filed all of it in the drawer where I keep things I do not think about.

She told me a story, the kind a man like me has heard before and never thought to doubt, because it is built to make him feel chosen. There had been a man, before. Not here, somewhere else. He had not been kind. She had left, and the leaving had cost her everything, and she had come to this city with one bag, and she was only now beginning to breathe again.

She told it in a low voice, without looking at me for the worst parts, and I leaned forward the way men lean forward, wanting to be the proof that not all men were the thing she had left. I did not notice that the story had no specifics in it — no city, no name, no face — that it was a story made of the shape of stories and that the shape was exactly the one I wanted to hear. I noticed only that she was looking at me like I was safe.

We left after eleven. The fog had come in off the bay and softened the towers and made the streetlights into moons, and the city looked the way people want it to look. She walked close. Our hands did not touch, and then they did.

"Come up," I said, and heard myself say it, and did not stop.

The apartment was dark. Mina was on the overnight — I had known that when I said yes, and the knowing sat in my stomach like something I had swallowed whole. I did not turn on the lights. I poured two glasses of water I did not drink, and she stood in the doorway of the bedroom and looked around with an expression I could not read and would spend a long time trying to.

"Your partner," she said. "She's a nurse."

She did not ask it as a question. I had not mentioned Mina. Not once all night.

"How do you—"

"The scrubs," she said, and nodded at the chair where Mina's second pair hung.

The cold place under my ribs closed. I felt foolish and relieved, and I did not ask why the question had not been a question.

I crossed the room. She was still in the doorway. What happened next was ordinary, and that was the horror of it, and I have never been able to explain it to

anyone, least of all myself. I reached for her, and she let me, and underneath the ordinary there was the sensation that I was not touching a person but being touched through one, the way light comes through a shade. I had been with women before, and there had always been, under the act, a small answering thing, a pressure back, the sense of another person on the other side of the skin. There was none of that. There was only the surface. It gave me everything I asked for. There was no one behind it.

She was gone before dawn. I woke alone, and the empty side of the bed was still warm in a way that felt wrong — warm the way a thing left behind is warm, not the way a person is. A glass of water stood on the nightstand that I did not remember pouring. No note. No trace of her at all, except that the apartment felt emptied, the way a room feels after a bell has rung and stopped.

I got up and moved through the rooms touching things, as if to confirm they were still mine. The scrubs were still on the chair. The two glasses of water stood on the counter, one untouched. I stripped the bed and stood in the middle of the bedroom with the sheets balled in my arms and understood that I was trying to erase a night I had chosen.

My phone lit up. Mina, from the hospital. *Home late. You okay?*

Fine, I typed. *Slept badly.*

I love you, she wrote.

I lay back down in the cold bed with the lie already sent, and I understood that I was going to see Lena again, and that I could not have stopped myself if I had wanted to, and that some part of me did not want to.

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CHAPTER 6

A Woman Flayed

The body was in a service alley behind a Pacific Heights mansion under a hundred-thousand-dollar renovation, and the men who found it were two builders who had come in early to beat the sun. One of them had stepped behind the dumpster to smoke where the foreman could not see him, and what he stepped into, in the half-light, was the thing the city would spend three days not looking at.

Zhang heard about it from Renner, who did not believe him and needed him anyway, exactly as the keeper had said.

Lieutenant Paul Renner was in his fifties, Homicide, with the face of a man who had stopped being surprised by the city twenty years ago and kept the job anyway. He met Zhang at the mouth of the alley because Zhang had said, on the phone, the one thing a man in Renner's position could not ignore: *The man on Sixth Street was not killed by a man. And it is not going to stop.*

Renner had not asked how he knew. He had given an address and hung up.

They stood behind the tape. The fog was still in the street, and the cruisers' lights turned in it, red and blue, and the early traffic moved past on the avenue without slowing.

"She's not the first," Renner said. "We've had three women missing in two weeks. We did not know what we were looking at until this one."

He told Zhang the part the papers did not have yet. The three missing women were not alike except in the one way that mattered: none of them had ever been seen again and none had left a trace. The department had treated them as three separate vanishings, because the department treated vanishings the way the city treated its history — as unrelated events, each explainable on its own, none of them adding up to the shape that was there if you were willing to look. Renner had been willing. He had been looking for weeks, and this morning the looking had found him an alley in Pacific Heights and a body without a face.

Zhang made himself look, because his grandmother had taught him that a thing you will not look at keeps its power.

She had been flayed.

The department would not use the word. Neither would the news, or Renner. It was the only word. The skin had been taken — not torn, not cut the way a madman cuts, but removed, cleanly, the way you take a coat off a body, from the crown down, leaving the muscle and the wet red under-layer open to the cold. There was almost no blood on the ground. That was what had made the two builders, when they could speak, say she had been *emptied* rather than killed.

Her face was gone. The face is part of the skin. What looked up from the alley was not a face at all but the architecture of one: the skull's own face, what lives under every face, what Zhang had spent his adult life teaching machines to reconstruct and had never once had to look at.

He had read, in his grandmother's books, what came next, and the reading had been a horror he could hold at a distance because it was old and far away. The skin was not discarded. It was laid out and painted, the way a woman paints her face, with colored brushes, and then lifted and shaken out like a garment and worn. Whatever had done this was not a butcher and not a madman. It was a maker. It had made this woman into a face, and the body in the alley was not the point but the leavings — the husk of a thing whose purpose had been taken and worn.

The tradition had a name for it. 画皮鬼 (huapi gui). The painted-skin ghost. It could not appear as itself, and so it appeared as whatever you most wanted.

It came out later, in the car, the way such things come out — not as a confession but as a fact, delivered in the flat voice Renner used for things that had already happened. One of the three missing women had been a neighbor's daughter, a girl he had watched grow up on the other side of a fence in the Sunset. He had gone to her mother's door two weeks ago and sat with the woman while she waited for a phone call that was not going to come. He said it without looking at Zhang, and Zhang understood that this was the thing Renner was carrying, and that Renner was not a man who believed in ghosts. He was a man who believed in debts, and he had come to the alley to collect one.

Zhang told him the whole of it, standing in the cold with the lights turning, and it came out of him the way the zhou had come out in the apartment — whole, and from the muscles. The huapi gui. The skin. The heart. The man on Sixth because he had dug her up and been the wrong shape. The women gone because she needed new faces. It could not appear as itself, and so it appeared as whatever you most wanted.

Renner listened without interrupting. When Zhang finished, he was quiet a moment. Then he said, evenly, "You understand I can't put that in a report."

"I understand."

"You understand I'm a white man and a cop," Renner said, "and by your own account that makes me the thing she eats."

"Yes."

Renner nodded slowly, and something in his face did the thing Zhang would remember — it did not flinch. It settled. It was the face of a man who had just been told the worst true thing about himself and had decided to keep standing anyway.

"Then you'd better know how to stop her," Renner said, "before either of us finds out whether you're right."

They did not shake hands. There was nothing to shake on, no agreement either could have put into words — only the shared understanding that the city would keep not-seeing and that the two of them had stopped, and that this made them, in a way neither of them wanted, partners.

Renner turned and walked back toward the tape and the lights and the body without a face, and Zhang stood at the mouth of the alley and watched him go, and understood that he had just acquired the only ally he was likely to get: a white man and a cop who was, by the rules of the thing they were hunting, already dead, and who did not seem to mind.

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CHAPTER 7

The Ward

The xieqi was faint and it moved, and for three days it led him in circles through the city before it settled, one evening, on a building in Duboce Triangle — a walk-up with a bay window and a dead plant on the sill and, in the second-floor window, a woman in nurse's scrubs drawing the curtains against the fog.

Zhang stood across the street in the cold with the taomu jian in his bag and the mark burning at the corner of his vision like an afterimage, and understood that the man he had been following was the man she was beside, and that the man did not know it.

The tracking had not been clean. The mark moved with the man, and the man moved the way such men move — to work, to a bar, to the corner store, home — and the mark flared and guttered as he moved, so that sometimes Zhang lost it entirely and had to stand on a corner and wait for the world to quiet, as his grandmother had taught him, until the residue came back like a radio signal through weather. Three days of it. Three days of watching a man he had never met live a life he could not save.

He did not knock. He was not sure what he would have said.

He waited until the woman left for the hospital at ten, and then he crossed the street and did the thing his grandmother had told him he would do and he had never believed he would do in a city on the other side of the world.

He hung the yingfu over the door.

The fly-whisk was small, its white hairs yellowed, and against the gray door frame it looked like nothing — a dried flower, a charm, the sort of thing a landlord might hang and a tenant not notice. He hung it on a loop of red cord and said the zhou under his breath. The words were old and his mouth remembered them, and when he finished, the weight in the air of the hallway settled as water settles after a stone.

He was coming down the stairs when the nurse came back. She had forgotten something, a badge or a phone, and she came up fast and stopped when she saw him, a stranger, coming down out of her building in the dark.

"Who are you?" she said. She did not step back.

He told her the truth, badly. He said he was a friend. He said he was not a friend. He said the words *protect* and *door* and *your partner* in an order that made no sense, and she looked at him the way a nurse looks at a man in the ER who is insisting the thing in his chest is not his heart — with care, and with the flatness of someone who has decided not to argue.

"I'm calling the police," she said, and took out her phone.

"Don't. I'll go. Just — leave the charm on the door. Leave it there. Please."

He saw, in the second before he turned, the thing he would carry out of that stairwell, and it was her stillness he carried, not her anger. She had not stepped back and she had not raised her voice, and there was something in the way she held the phone that was not fear at all but grief — the grief of a person who has been waiting for the bad thing to arrive and has just learned it has a stranger's face and a stranger's voice. He had come to warn her, and what he had done instead was hand her the proof that the thing she had been afraid of, without ever being able to name it, was real.

He went. He did not look back. Behind him he heard her say something to the empty stair — *unwell*, probably, or *drunk* — and then the apartment door open and close.

She did not leave the charm. He knew that before he reached the corner, as you know a thing has been undone. But he had seen what he needed to see: the mark on the man in that apartment was fresh, and deep, and worsening, and the woman in the scrubs loved him, which was what was going to be spent.

He came back that night, after she had left for the hospital, and hung a second charm, higher, in the shadow of the lintel, and he did it quickly and without ceremony, because a thing done twice loses its first clumsiness. He did not believe it would stay any longer than the first. But he had learned, in the weeks of this, that the work was not one thing done well but a hundred small things done badly and repeated, and that the only way to hold a door against the

thing in the city was to keep putting your hand back on it, as many times as it took, until the door or the hand gave out.

She came anyway. Not because of the charm — the charm was gone by then, folded into a drawer or dropped in the trash, and Zhang had watched it happen in his mind the whole way home. She came because she came every night, or near enough, because the man had opened a door and could not now close it, because desire, once it is let in, does not leave on its own.

What happened that night, Zhang reconstructed later from a hallway camera, and he watched it alone, twice, and then put it away and did not watch it again.

The camera was a small gray box over the stair, and it saw the hallway in fisheye and black-and-white, and at two in the morning it saw a woman come up the stairs. She was ordinary — a coat, hair down, a face the camera flattened to nothing. She walked to the door of the second-floor apartment, and she did not knock, and she stopped.

Her hand, raised to the door, did not touch it. It hovered an inch from the wood, and stayed there, and the whole of her stayed there, and on the screen she stood perfectly still in the grainy dark with her arm raised, like a person at the edge of a thing they cannot cross.

Then she made a sound. The camera had no audio, but Zhang did not need audio. He saw the jaw move, and the head lower, and the stillness break into a shiver that was not a shiver, and he knew the sound. His grandmother had described it once, in the low voice she used for the things that were real, and he had never forgotten it.

She gnashed her teeth at the door.

Not at the wood. At the space where the charm had hung, the empty air over the lintel, the place that still held the shape of what had been taken down. She gnashed and she did not cross. She stood in the hallway a long time, and then she turned, and the camera caught her face for one frame — flat, wrong, the light hitting it at an angle that made it look less like a face than like a face drawn on something — and then she was gone.

Zhang sat in the dark with the video paused on the empty hallway and understood two things at once.

The first was that she would not cross a consecrated door. The door could be held.

The second was that a door is only held if someone leaves the charm on it, and the man in that apartment had no one who believed, and so the door would open again, and when it opened, Zhang would have to be the one standing in the hallway with the sword.

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CHAPTER 8

The Mark

I stopped sleeping, and I told myself it was the app and the guilt and the lying, and it was none of those things, and it was all of them.

I was unraveling. That was the word Mina used, once, and then took back, and then did not take back. Late to work. Early to nothing. The avatar on the wall kept smiling, and I kept catching myself staring at it the way I stared at Lena's messages, which came less and less and which I answered more and more, the hunger growing in exact proportion to what was withheld.

There was something wrong with my face. I noticed it first in the men's room at work, in the flat light, a grayness at my temples that I took for exhaustion and could not wash off. The mirror was not the problem, because the mirror showed it every time, in every light, from every angle. My health was not the problem, because my health was fine, and the doctor Mina made me see told me so in the bored voice of a man who had seen a thousand exhausted tech workers and would see a thousand more. It was the color of a thing left out too long, a bloom at the edge of my face that was not a bruise and not a shadow, and I took to standing farther from mirrors, and then to not standing in front of them at all.

My work was the first thing to go. I sat in review meetings and lost the thread. I opened my terminal and stared at code I had written and could not remember, for whole minutes, what it was for. Once, coming back from the men's room, I caught myself smiling at the avatar, a reflex, as if she were a colleague I had passed in a hall, and the smallness of that — a grown man alone in a corridor, grinning at a face he had built — told me more clearly than the gray in the mirror that I was coming apart.

My body went with the rest of me, the way a room goes dark: gradually, and then all at once. I lost weight I did not have to lose, and my clothes hung on me in a way that made Mina's eyes flick to me and away. I ate without tasting. I drank coffee until my hands shook, and the shaking hands became, in the small hours, a kind of companion, the one part of me still honest about what the rest

of me was doing. I had always been a man who looked after himself in the careless way of men who never had to, and now I watched that man recede, and the watching was the worst part, because I could see the shape of what I was becoming and could not find it in myself to care.

I saw her once more. A second drink, a second dark bar, and she was different in a way I could not name — the same face, the same low voice, but the set of her shoulders had changed, the way a photograph changes once you learn something about the person in it. She kissed me at the door and said, "Not tonight," and left me on the street with my hands in my pockets and my blood up and a feeling, sharp and sick, of having been measured and found something.

The measurement stayed with me. I had spent my life doing the measuring — reading faces, reading rooms, reading the small shift of a person's attention that told you whether you were wanted. To have it done back to me, so cleanly, was a sensation I had no name for and could not stop turning over. She had looked at me at the end in a way that was not hungry and not cruel and not even interested, and I understood that whatever she had come to the bar for, it had not been me. I was not the thing she wanted. I was the thing the thing she wanted lived inside. And I had gone home and lain beside Mina and wanted her anyway.

"You look wrong," Mina said, one Tuesday morning, coming off a shift so long her eyes were red. "You look like you're running a fever that isn't there."

I said I was tired. I said work. I said the word *stress* the way men say it when they mean *I am doing something and I cannot stop and I will not tell you what it is.*

She looked at me for a long time. The kettle boiled and shut itself off behind her.

"Theo," she said, and her voice was careful, a nurse's voice at the edge of a wound. "I found a charm on the door last week. A little brush thing, on a red string. I threw it out. Did you—"

"No," I said, too fast. "No idea what that is."

"A man was in the stairwell," she said. "That same night. He said he was protecting you. He said—" she stopped, and made herself say it — "he said something was coming for you."

I laughed. It came out wrong, a bark with no humor in it, and I saw her face close, and I understood that I had just spent another small coin of her dignity without meaning to, as I spent all of them.

"It's nothing," I said. "Some street guy. The city's full of them."

"The city is full of women going missing," she said quietly, "and you look like a ghost, and you won't tell me what's wrong, and now some man is leaving charms on our door. You don't get to tell me it's nothing."

She was right in every particular, and I stood in the kitchen with the kettle gone cold and did the only thing I had left, which was to lie again, more carefully, and watch her believe it, and know that she did not believe it.

She left for her shift without kissing me, and the absence of the kiss was louder than words, and I stood at the window and watched her go down the steps and did not call after her, because calling after her would have meant either lying more or telling the truth, and I could no longer tell which would be worse.

I dreamed almost every night, and the dreams were not mine. Not the dreams of a man who has drunk too much or worked too late. The dreams of a place. The place was a room, and the room was small and the walls were close and there was a door that would not stay shut. In the dream I was not myself, or I was myself but smaller, and there was a woman in the room with me who was not Lena and not Mina, and she was trying to say a name, and her mouth moved around it the way a mouth moves around a word it has been told to forget. I would wake with the taste of salt in my mouth and the name not said on my tongue.

That night I opened the app and wrote to Lena: *I need to see you.*

I meant it in every sense. I did not know, in the dark of the bedroom with Mina breathing beside me, that the thing on the other end of the message was not a woman, and that the message was not an invitation but an address, and that I had just written it in my own hand.

The reply came at once, as it always came.

Soon, Lena wrote. *I promise.*

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CHAPTER 9

The Shift

The second skinless body was a woman named Jennifer Okafor, and it was the name that broke the pattern open.

She was twenty-six, a first-generation Nigerian-American nurse, and she had worked the same floor at the General as the woman Zhang kept seeing in the second-floor window of Duboce Triangle. She had gone missing on a Sunday and been found on a Thursday in a stairwell near Civic Center, arranged, flayed, her face gone.

Renner spread the photographs on the table in the Homicide annex as a man spreads a losing hand — all of them, face up, so nothing could hide. The first flayed woman had been white: a gallery owner from the Marina. The second was white too: a tech worker from Noe Valley. The third, they had thought, would follow, because for two terrible weeks the pattern had seemed to be *white women*, and a pattern, once you see it, is a comfort even when it is a horror, because it promises to hold.

Jennifer Okafor was not white.

There was more to it. She had not been chosen for what she was. She had been chosen for what she looked like, or rather for what a man looking at her would see, and the man looking at her, in the week before she vanished, had been a white man in the Marina whose search history, when Renner's people pulled it, was a long quiet catalogue of a particular kind of want. The ghost had not gone to the Marina for Jennifer. The ghost had gone for the man, and Jennifer had been the face she borrowed to get to him.

"So the pattern's not white women," Renner said.

"No," Zhang said slowly. "The pattern is changing."

He had been reading the lore for weeks, as he had not let himself read it in years, and the pieces had begun to arrange themselves into a shape he did not want. The huapi gui did not choose at random. She read her prey. She read what he reached for, gave it to him, and then fed.

"The first women were white because she was learning," Zhang said. "Because the men she hunts — the ones whose hearts she wants — most of them want a white face. But not all of them." He looked up. "She has been reading them. Their phones. Their histories. The way they look at women on the street. And she has found what a lot of them actually want."

Renner was very still. "Say it."

"An Asian face."

The room was quiet. Through the thin wall a phone rang and rang and no one answered it.

"So the question the papers keep asking," Renner said, flat, "'why did the bodies change' — the answer is she found the most effective face and switched."

"Yes."

"And the next women she takes will be Asian."

"Yes. And the next man she opens will be a white man who wanted one."

They looked at each other across the table, and Zhang saw the moment Renner understood that the pattern was not a comfort but a weapon, and that one end of it was aimed slowly at every man in the city who carried a certain quiet want in his pocket — including, perhaps, the man across the table.

"Then we find the men," Renner said. "Before she does."

"Or we find her first, and make her face us."

Zhang did not say what he was thinking, because it would have sounded like a confession. He was thinking that he had spent his adult life building faces for a machine, the same way the men on Eidolon's floor built faces, the same way the app built faces, the same way the thing in the city built faces, and that he had told himself the whole time that his work was clean, that a face reduced to a loss function could not be used the way a living face could. The mathematics did not care. The mathematics was a tool, and the tool did not know whether it was reconstructing a missing person or painting a fantasy, and the city was full of men who would use it for the second and never ask what it was for. He had known that, and gone on working, and the work had stayed clean only because he had refused to look at what it was for. The ghost had looked. The ghost had looked at the whole machine — the apps, the faces, the wanting — and seen it for

what it was, and turned it into a weapon. And the men the weapon was aimed at were the men who had built the machine.

It happened to Renner before either of them was ready, on the fourth night.

Zhang had taken to walking the detective to his car in the structure under Bryant, a small escort neither of them acknowledged, and he had pressed a folded fu into Renner's palm that first week, written in his own hand now, the cinnabar fresh and wrong against the gray world of the man who carried it. Renner had taken it and looked at it and not thrown it away, which Zhang had learned to read as a man's whole confession.

She was waiting by the car.

Zhang felt her before he saw her — the xieqi, the bloom of it at the edge of his sight, and the air on the concrete level gone the way air goes before a storm. He said Renner's name, and Renner stopped, and the overhead light over the far stairwell died, and then she was there, standing beside the sedan, wearing a face neither of them had seen. An Asian face, young, the face of a woman whose body was probably even now being found in some stairwell across town.

She looked at Renner. Not at Zhang.

"A cop," she said, and her voice was the low voice, and under it another voice. "You all came back for me once. A hundred years ago, in the alley. You came to rescue me."

Renner's hand was on his sidearm and it was shaking, and Zhang saw that the detective understood, with his body if not his mind, what was being offered to him.

She took one step toward him. Zhang was between them before he knew he had moved, the taomu jian out, the zhou already rising, and the air thickened, and she stopped — not at the sword but at the fu in Renner's palm, the little folded paper that had begun, impossibly, to smoke. She gnashed her teeth at it. She did not cross.

"Next time," she said, to Renner and to Renner alone. "You'll come to me. They always do."

And she was gone, and the light came back on, and Renner stood with his back against the car and the smoking fu in his hand and a face Zhang had not

seen on him before — the face of a man who had spent twenty years believing in nothing and had just been handed the one belief he had not asked for.

"I'm in her file," Renner said. His voice was steady as a voice is steady when there is nothing left to fear for. "Good. That means she can find me, and I can find her, and either way it ends."

Zhang did not tell him that the fu would not hold forever, or that the next time she came she would wear the face of whatever Renner wanted, or that a white man and a cop was the first and last shape on her list. He only walked him the rest of the way to the car and stood in the empty structure and watched the taillights climb toward the street, and understood that the investigation had become a hunt, and that he was now the only thing standing between the ghost and every man in the city too proud to run.

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CHAPTER 10

Inventory

The thing that undid me did not come through the door. It came through a browser, on a Thursday, in an email from a person I had never met.

Data-retention audit, it said. It was from Trust & Safety, addressed to the face team, and it said that as part of a routine review the company had flagged certain account activity and that employees were reminded that company systems were company property and that nothing stored on them was private. It did not name me. It did not have to. Attached to the email, for everyone on the distribution list, was a summary of the audit's findings — anonymized, the email said, but not anonymized enough, because I read it and saw, in the rows of the table, a shape I recognized the way you recognize your own handwriting.

User T., the table said. *Linked accounts: 4. Match rate against known-deceased profiles: high. Predominant profile attribute: ethnicity. Repeat query class: east asian, 20–34. Flag basis: pattern of deceased-identity reuse consistent with synthetic engagement.*

I read it twice. I read it three times. The room was very quiet, and the avatar on the wall kept smiling, and I understood, with a clarity that made my hands cold, that the company had been reading me the way I read other people, and that what it had found was not a secret I kept from the company but a secret I kept from myself, and that it was now on a screen in front of forty of my colleagues.

I was not the only one. The table had other rows — *User D*, *User M*, *User R* — and the attributes differed but the shape was the same, and for one long moment I looked around the open floor at the men I worked with and understood that the company had built a machine to paint faces and then, with the same hands, reached into its own employees' desire and held it up to the light. The fetish was not mine alone. It was something the city wore like weather.

And the audit had not been random. It had not been routine. The word *routine* was doing the same work as the word *isolated* in the memo about the

bones. The company was auditing its employees because men were dying, and the men who were dying were men like the men on that floor, and someone had noticed the shape of it, and the company, in its flat procedural gray, had decided to look at its own people before the authorities did. The audit was about the pattern. I was in the pattern. The pattern was killing men, and the company had held it up to the light and called it a retention issue.

The morning after the email, the floor was quieter than I had ever heard it, in a way that was not silence but the absence of the ordinary noise people make when they are not afraid of each other. Nobody said the word. Nobody had to. When the men at their desks did look at each other, it was the look of people who had all, at the same moment, discovered that the walls of the house were glass and that any one of them could see through it into any other. I caught myself doing the arithmetic — which row was which man, whether *User D* was the director who had laughed too hard at a joke once, whether *User R* was the quiet one in the corner. I hated myself for the arithmetic and could not stop.

I went into the men's room and locked a stall and sat on the lid with my head in my hands and tried to make it into a sentence, the way you try to make a nightmare into a sentence so it will stop being one.

I have a thing, I thought. *I have a thing for Asian women.*

Then I said it again the way the table had said it, in the language of the company, because the company's language was the only one that would hold it without breaking.

Predominant profile attribute: ethnicity.

I said it out loud, once, in the tiled room, and the sound of it was worse than the reading, because the reading had been done to me and the saying was mine. It was the whole of my secret life reduced to a row in a table, and the reduction was not wrong. It was complete. It left out the love and the shame and the years of not-saying and the texture of the wanting, and what it put in their place was the truth: that all of it had been organized, the whole time, around a category. Not a person. A category.

I thought about Mina. The years of it — the story I had told myself that Mina was Mina, that I loved Mina, that the wanting was a separate thing in a separate drawer. The drawer was open now, and the thing in it was not separate

from Mina at all, and I understood with a nausea that came up through the floor that the woman I had been chasing on the app was not beautiful because she was beautiful but because she was *that* — the shape of the thing — and that I had not once, in any of it, seen her at all.

I tried to find where it had started, and the finding was worse than the not-finding. It had not started anywhere. It had been there before I had words for it, a preference I had never chosen and never questioned, carried the way a man carries the shape of his own hand. I had told myself it was taste. All the while the wanting had been busy making a type out of the women I reached for, flattening each one into the same shape, so that by the time I met Mina I could no longer tell whether I loved Mina or loved the shape Mina fit into.

I did not go back to my desk. I walked out of the building and stood on the sidewalk in the gray light, and my phone buzzed, and I did not look at it, because I knew what it would be, and I knew I would answer it, and I knew that knowing was not the same as stopping.

I did try to delete the app that week. The trying was the whole shape of the thing in miniature. I opened the work phone, found the app, and held my thumb over it the way a man holds his hand over a door he is about to close, and then I did not press. I told myself it was because the app was company-adjacent, because my login was tangled in it, because there were messages I had not read. All of it was true, and none of it was the truth. The truth was that I did not want to delete it. I put the phone back in the drawer and closed the drawer and did not open it again for an hour, and the hour felt like a victory, and then I opened it, and the wanting was exactly where I had left it.

It was Lena. Of course it was Lena.

I can see you're upset, she wrote. *Come meet me. I can help you forget.*

I stood on the sidewalk with the cold coming up through my shoes and the whole architecture of my desire held up to the light for the first time in my life, and felt the wanting rise in me like a tide, and understood that this was the trap, and that it had been the trap all along, and that I was going to walk into it anyway.

I can see you're upset, she had written. *Come meet me. I can help you forget.*

And I knew, with the certainty that comes when a man has stopped lying to himself, that I would answer her, and that I would go, and that whatever was waiting for me at the end of it had been waiting my whole life, and that I had spent that whole life walking toward it with my eyes open and my hands in my pockets, calling it something else.

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CHAPTER 11

The Coaching Paper

The records were in a federal archive in San Bruno, in a room that smelled of old paper and was cold the way rooms full of the dead are cold, and Zhang spent three days in it reading by the flat light of a microfilm reader, reconstructing a woman the city had spent a century trying not to remember.

He had not come looking for her. He had come looking for a way to stop her, and the stopping required the naming, because the tradition was precise about one thing above all: the name is the handle. A spirit called by its true name is weakened. A spirit whose name you do not know can slip anything you set for it. So he had gone to the archive, because the archive is where the city keeps the things it will not look at, and because the woman had come from somewhere, and somewhere would have written her down.

What he found came in fragments.

He found the raid report first. A San Francisco Police Department file, 1926: a raid on a Chinatown establishment listed in one place as a noodle house and in another, in a different hand, as something else. The Golden Lantern, on an alley off Waverly Place, and behind its kitchen, through a door you knocked on three times, the House of the Jade Screen. A brothel run by a woman the report called "Sixth Auntie." The report was proud of itself. It used the word *rescue* seven times.

Zhang read *rescue* seven times, and each time it landed like a stone.

It recorded the women it had rescued in a list, with ages and a column for disposition. Most names were followed by *released*, or *deported*, or *hospital*. One name — the paper name, Wong Sau-ling — had no word after it at all. Only a date, and a note in a cramped hand that Zhang had to enlarge three times to read. *Removed from premises, night of the 14th. No further action.*

No further action. He sat with the phrase a long time. The report did not say what happened to the girl who had spent that night believing the men in uniform had come to free her. The report would never say. But the unmarked

grave said it, and the century of silence said it, and the thing that had come up out of the ground in 2025 said it loudest: the men who came through the door calling themselves her saviors had done something worse to her than the men who sold her, and she had died of it, and no one had written it down, because the men who did it were the men who kept the records.

He found more over the next two days, because the archive kept everything, and the city, for all its forgetting, had never been able to throw anything away. A missionary's ledger, kept in a cramped hand by a woman who ran a rescue home on Clay Street: the names the girls gave and the names the girls were given, and beside one entry — *No. 14, admits she came from Shunde, says the sea was bad, will not say the rest* — a small black mark that Zhang took a long time to understand was not a mark but the character for silence.

A coroner's form, 1926, cause of death left blank, the word *hemorrhage* written and crossed out and written again, and in the space for the name of the deceased only the paper name, Wong Sau-ling, and under it, in a different hand, the characters that had been scratched out everywhere else, and one English word: *unknown*.

And in the evidence locker, in a box the company had left behind in its haste, there was a photograph he almost missed — not of her, there was no photograph of her, but of the alley off Waverly Place as it had been in 1925, the Golden Lantern's sign half out of frame, and below it a row of slatted windows on the second floor, and behind one of them, just visible, a face. An insurance assessor had taken the photograph for a fire map, and the face behind the slats was not supposed to be in it, and for eighty years no one had looked at it twice. Zhang looked. He enlarged it until the grain broke apart, and he could not be certain the face was hers, and he was certain anyway — a girl, young, looking out from behind the bars the way a person looks out from a place they have stopped believing they will leave.

The coaching paper came next. A 口供纸 (kougong zhi), the interrogation sheet the trafficked were made to memorize before the immigration inspectors — the same lies written over and over until the hand and the mouth could not be separated from them. It was for a girl the paper called Wong Sau-ling. It said she was the daughter of a laundryman named Wong Fook, born in a village the paper

named, coming to America to join her father. It was all a lie. The answers were written twice — once in a clean hand, once in the cramped hand of a girl learning them — and in the margin of the second copy, in pencil so faint Zhang enlarged it twice, someone had written characters and then scratched them out.

He could read only two of them. They were enough to tell him the paper held only lies and that the truth had been erased, and that someone — a coach, an inspector, a madam — had known the girl's real name and chosen to bury it under the paper one.

The comb he found in the evidence locker, in the box of what the site had given up before the lawyers got involved. Tortoiseshell, cracked, and along the spine someone had carved two characters with a knife, as a girl who cannot write well carves the only two words that matter.

Zhang lifted it under the light, and the characters caught it. 美玉 (Meiyu). Beautiful jade.

He read them twice, and the cold of the room went into him. They were the same two characters from the margin of the coaching paper, the ones that had been scratched out.

He did not have the surname. He had half a name, and half a name is not a handle. A spirit does not bend to half a name. He knew her paper identity, and the shape of the lie, and that she had been sold and trafficked and taken across an ocean on a memorized falsehood. And he knew, because the report's *rescue* and the later silence and the unmarked grave all pointed the same way, that the rescue had been worse than the captivity, and that she had died in it, and that the city had buried her and forgotten her and then dug her up and left her angry.

What he did not have was the name that would make her bend. And so he went back to the microfilm and the flat cold light, because somewhere in the paper the city had kept, a girl's real name was written down, and he was going to find it before the city had to learn it the other way.

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CHAPTER 12

Grace Li

The memorial was in a rented room in the Mission, because Grace Li was twenty-five and had no family in the country and the company did not want the funeral on its premises, so her friends rented a room and put photographs on a folding table and tried to make the word *gone* mean something.

There were flowers from a corner store, wilting in plastic. A projector that did not work, and a laptop on a chair playing a slideshow of her face — Grace at a birthday, Grace on a hike, Grace at the kitchenette making coffee with her back to the camera, caught the way you catch people you do not know you are losing. Her roommate, Ana, stood by the table and told the room, in a voice that kept threatening to break and did not, that Grace had been saving to bring her mother over from Guangzhou, and that the money was still in the account, and that she did not know what to do with it. Nobody did. The room was full of people who did not know what to do with it.

I went because I had known her a little, and because not going would have been an absence people remember. I stood in the back with the others who had known her a little, and looked at the photographs, and thought about the last thing she had said to me, months ago, in the kitchenette, when she showed me the direct messages on her phone and laughed the way people laugh to keep from crying.

They don't even see you, she had said. *That's the thing. They look right at you and they're looking at something else. At a shape. At an idea of what you are. And you're supposed to be flattered.*

She said it without anger, and I made a sympathetic noise and went back to my desk, and I did not think about it again until now, standing in a rented room with her face on a loop, because a man somewhere had looked at her and seen a shape and an idea and wanted it.

I had wanted it. That was the sentence I could not get out of my chest. Not me, not Theo, not for Grace — but the shape of it, the machinery of it, the

wanting that flattens a person into a thing. I had run that machinery. I was running it still. The auditor's table was in my head, *predominant profile attribute: ethnicity*, and Grace Li's face was on the table, and the two things were the same thing, and I could not make them separate, and I was not sure I deserved to.

There was a memory I kept returning to, and it was not a real memory so much as a moment I had been present for without being in. Grace had come to my desk once, a month after she started, to ask about a tool the face team used. I answered her without looking up. She stood there a beat longer than the answer needed, waiting for the thing new people wait for when they are trying to be seen, and I did not give it to her. I went back to my screen, and after a moment she went back to her desk. A nothing. A half-minute in a long year. Now it was the thing I could not put down, because the not-looking was the whole of it. It was the same not-looking I did to Mina. It was the same not-looking that had been done to Grace her whole life, by every man who looked at her and saw a type. I had not killed her. I knew I had not killed her. But I could no longer find the clean line between looking away from a woman and what happens, downstream, when enough men look away for long enough.

Mina found me at the back of the room. She had come because she had been on shift when the news broke, and because she knew some of the nurses who knew Grace's roommate, and because Mina came to these things the way she came to everything — showing up.

She stood beside me without speaking for a while, and we watched the slideshow go around again, and I was aware, as I was always aware now, of the distance between us, which was not the distance of two people who had grown apart but the distance of two people between whom a secret sits like a third person. She had stopped asking me what was wrong. That was the worst of it — not the asking, which I had learned to deflect, but the stopping, which meant she had decided the truth was something I would either say or not, and that she could not keep standing in the doorway of it forever.

"You okay?" she said.

"Yeah," I said, and she looked at me the way she had been looking at me for weeks, and I saw, in her face, that she had stopped believing the small lies and was only waiting for the big one.

"I have to tell you something," I said.

The words were out before I decided to say them, and they hung between us like a held breath, and I saw the thing move across her face that I had been dreading — the hope, the fear, a woman bracing for the sentence that will change everything.

I wanted to say it. In that rented room with a dead woman's face on a loop and Mina's whole unguarded attention on me, I wanted to empty the drawer and let her see what was in it, and for one long second I was closer to it than I had ever been, and I could feel the shape of the truth in my mouth, and I understood that this was a door I could still open, that the only thing between me and the truth was my own hand on the latch.

Before I could say it, my phone buzzed. Once. Then again.

I did not look. I made myself not look. But Mina's eyes dropped to my pocket, and the held breath went out of her.

"It's her, isn't it," she said. Not a question.

The door I had almost opened closed, and I felt it close, and I knew I would never be that close again. The truth had been one word away, and I had let a phone in my pocket take it from me, and Mina had watched it happen.

I looked at my phone, because I was a coward and because the wanting was stronger than the shame, and I read the three words on the screen, and the room with the photographs and the candles and the word *gone* went very far away.

Come now, Lena had written. *Or I'll find someone else.*

I read it again, and the cruelty of it — the casual, practiced cruelty of a thing that knew exactly what it was withholding and exactly what the withholding would do to me — should have broken the spell, and it did not, and the not-breaking was the worst thing I had ever learned about myself. I had stood in a room with a dead woman's face and a living woman's love and still, at the bottom, wanted to be chosen. The wanting had never been about Lena. It had never been about any of them. It had been about the being-wanted, the being-chosen, the small electric proof that I was real, and I had spent my whole life mistaking that proof for a person, and now the proof was on my phone in three words, and I was going to answer it, because a man who has spent his life

mistaking a reflection for a face does not stop reaching for the reflection just because someone has finally held up a mirror.

I looked at Mina. She was watching me, and her face was the face of a woman who had just watched a man choose, in real time, the thing that was going to destroy him, and who had known, before he did, which way he would choose.

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CHAPTER 13

The Belly

Mina was on the overnight, and I was alone, and the apartment was very still, and against every warning my body had tried to give me, I sent the address.

Come, I wrote, and the word was on its way before I could un-choose it. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

The waiting had a texture, and I would remember the texture more than anything else about the hours before she came — the way the apartment, which I had lived in for years, stopped being mine and became a stage; the way every small sound of the building settling became a footstep; the way I checked my phone and put it down and checked it again, the wanting and the dread braided so tightly I could no longer tell which was which. I did not eat. I did not turn on the television. I sat in the darkening room and waited, and the waiting was a kind of consent all by itself.

The knock, when it came, was soft, and the softness almost saved me. A knock like that — too gentle, too patient, the knock of a person with all the time in the world — touched the animal part of me that still knew when the thing at the door was not what it appeared to be. I stood in the hallway with my hand on the latch and did not open it, and for one clean second I understood that I could still choose, that the door was shut and would stay shut if I willed it, and that everything on the other side was waiting only for my consent.

Then the wanting rose, and I opened the door.

She was there. Lena, and not Lena, standing in the dark hallway with the coat and the hair down and the small unremarkable face that had undone me in a wine bar a month ago. She smiled, and the smile was the first thing wrong, though I could not have said how, and then she stepped forward, and she stopped.

At the threshold.

Her foot, crossing the doorframe, met something that was not there, and she stood with one hand on the jamb and her head tilted, and the whole hallway held

its breath, and I saw — or thought I saw, or would later swear I saw — something flicker in the air above the door, a faint shape like the ghost of a hanging thing, a little brush of pale hairs where nothing hung.

And she gnashed her teeth at it.

The sound was nothing like a woman. It was a sound like a saw drawn across bone, and it came out of her mouth without her face changing, and every hair on my body stood up at once, and then the sound stopped, and the something-that-was-not-there gave, as a thread gives, and she stepped through the door and into the apartment and shut it behind her.

I would not understand until much later what I had just seen, and when I did it would be the understanding that undid me most. The thing in the doorway had been stopped, for the length of a breath, by a charm — the little brush of pale hairs that had hung there, the one Mina had thrown out, the one I had told her was nothing — and in that breath it had gnashed its teeth at the empty air where the charm had been, and the gnashing had been rage, and the rage had been real, and it had not crossed. And then the empty air had not held, because the charm was gone, because Mina had thrown it out, because I had told her it was nothing, and so the thing had stepped through, and the only thing that had ever stood between it and me was a woman I had lied to and a charm I had dismissed and a man in the stairwell I had refused to believe existed.

"You let me in," she said, and it was the same low voice, and under it another voice, like another room under a room.

Then she murmured something in a language I did not know — three soft syllables, 月光光 (jyut gwong gwong), the sound of a child's song — and that was worse than anything she had said, because for one instant the voice was not Lena's, and not the voice under Lena's, but the voice of someone who had been sung to sleep a long time ago, in another country, by someone long dead.

I tried to run. That was the last thing that was mine. I turned and ran, and the apartment was small and there was nowhere to run to, and the thing behind me did not hurry, because it did not need to, and I reached the bedroom and slammed the door and locked it and stood with my back against it and my heart going like a machine, and I heard her stop on the other side, and I heard her laugh, and the laugh was the worst of it, because it was still Lena's laugh.

"Theo," she said through the door. "You don't have to be afraid. You wanted this. You wanted me. That's the only reason I'm here."

I closed my eyes. I thought of Mina. I thought of the word *rescue* and the word *honest* and the auditor's table and Grace Li's face on a folding table, and I understood, with the clarity of the dying, that I had spent my whole life reaching for a face and never once looked at the thing beneath it, and that now the thing beneath it had come to look at me.

The door did not open. It did not need to. It was never the door.

She was in the room. I did not see how. One moment the door was shut and the next she was between me and the bed, and the light had gone wrong, the way light goes wrong underwater, and her face — her face was slipping.

It was the most ordinary horror I have ever seen, and that is what I would carry, if I carried anything: that a face could slip, as a mask slips when the string breaks, and that underneath was not nothing but something worse than nothing, a green and blue thing with teeth like a saw, and that the hands that reached for me were not the hands that had touched me in the dark a month ago but the hands of whatever had always been wearing her.

I had time, in the space between the slipping and the opening, to understand all of it, and the understanding came not as a thought but as a weight, pressing me against the locked door that was not a door. I had wanted a face. I had been given a face. The face had never been anything but the outside of the thing that had come to collect me, and the wanting had been the address I wrote, and the bed I made, and the door I opened, all of it my own work, done with my own hands. I did not scream. There was no one to scream to, and the thing in front of me would not have cared. I only stood there, with the light gone wrong and the face slipping, and watched the thing that had always been under the face come toward me, patient, unhurried, certain.

The belly opened. I did not feel it, not at first — only the wet and the cold and the room tilting — and I looked down and saw what her hands were doing, and understood that I was watching my own death, and that my death was methodical, and that there was no anger in it. That was the coldest part: no anger. It was hungry, and I had been nothing to it but a shape and a heart.

The front door opened.

It was Mina, not Zhang — home early off the overnight because something, she would say later, had been wrong all night, a wrongness she could not name, the same wrongness that had made her leave the hospital an hour before her relief came. She came through the door with her keys still in her hand and called my name once into the dark, and the thing above me went still.

I tried to speak. Nothing came.

Mina reached the bedroom doorway. She saw the thing — the green and blue thing, the teeth, the skin pooled on the floor like a shed garment — and she did not scream. That was what I would remember afterward, more than the teeth or the blood: Mina did not scream. She set down her bag, looked at the thing, and said, very quietly, "Get away from him."

And the thing turned to her.

The Lena face was gone. This was the true face, and it turned to Mina, and it looked at her, and it saw her, and then it did the one thing that saved her — the one thing no one would ever be able to explain, the single deviation from every rule it had followed since the grave. It reached for her. Its hand, the hand that had been in my belly, came up toward Mina's face, toward the skin of her, and it stopped.

An inch from her cheek. It stopped.

The hand hung there. The green face looked at Mina, and for one breath there was something else in it — not the mask, not the beauty, but the girl, the girl who had been seen as a shape her whole life, recognizing, without understanding, another woman the world had tried to turn into a shape. It did not take her. It lowered the hand, and it made a sound — not a word, not a scream, a sound like a bell heard underwater — and it turned back to me and raised its hand to finish.

The last thing I saw before the dark took me was not the teeth and not the blood. It was Mina, standing between me and the thing with her arms out, and the little brush of pale hairs in the doorway, and the man beneath it with the wooden sword coming through with his mouth full of an old language and his eyes full of a courage I had never once, in all my life, found in myself.

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CHAPTER 14

The Sword

Zhang came through the door with the taomu jian already drawn and the zhou already rising in his throat, and what he saw stopped him half a step — not the blood, not the open belly on the floor, but the woman.

Mina Chen stood between the thing and the dying man, her arms out, her back to Theo, and the thing had already turned away from her and was reaching down again toward the belly, toward the heart, and Mina was saying something Zhang could not hear over the ringing in his ears, and she was not running.

"Get back from the door," he said, and the words came out in a voice that was not his — the voice his grandmother had used, the voice that did not ask. "And stay behind me."

She did not move. She did not have to. The thing had already turned to him.

She was mid-form. The Lena skin hung half off her, peeled at the jaw, and beneath it was the 狞鬼 (ninggui) — green-faced, blue-lipped, the saw-teeth bared, smeared with what had come out of the man on the floor. Zhang stepped over the threshold, and the yingfu over the door turned once on its red cord, and he began the yubu.

His grandmother had made him walk it until his feet knew it better than his name. It came back whole, out of his muscles — the step of Yu, the walk that closes the ground against the thing that should not be on it — and as he walked he spoke the zhou, and the room changed, the air thickening like water after a dropped stone, the light going a degree wronger. The thing that had been Lena watched him come with its head tilted, and it was not afraid, and that, more than anything, told him the fight was already half lost.

He felt the cost in his body the way a man feels a debt coming due. The yubu was not a dance; it was a binding, and the binding took from the one who walked it as surely as it held the thing it was set against, and by the time he had crossed the floor he could taste copper at the back of his throat and feel a tremor in his legs that had nothing to do with fear. His grandmother had told him once that

the exorcist did not win by being stronger than the spirit. He won by being willing to spend himself down to nothing, because the spirit, for all its rage, would not spend itself at all. It would take and keep taking, and the only thing that could outlast a century of hunger was a man who had decided, before he walked into the room, that he was not coming out whole. Zhang had not decided that. He had only come.

"Leung Mei—" he started, and the half-name came out before he could stop it, and she flinched.

It was the first time he had seen her flinch, and it told him everything. The name was a handle, and half a handle was not a handle, and she knew it, and she smiled at him with the saw-teeth.

"You don't know it," she said, and her voice was the beauty and the voice under the beauty at once. "You have half, and you think that's enough."

Then, in Cantonese, low and mocking: 你唔知我系边个 (nei m ji ngo hai bin go). *You don't know who I am.*

She lunged.

What happened next Zhang would never be able to tell anyone in any order, because it happened as the yubu happened, out of his muscles and not his head. He stepped the steps of Yu across the blood of the floor, and the taomu jian came up, and it met her, and the thing that happened when the peach wood touched her was like nothing he had ever seen or heard — a sound like cloth tearing, a ripping that was not cloth, and the skin came off her all at once, the whole of the false face, peeling away from the thing beneath with the sound of a garment rent from neck to heel, and the ligui stood bare in the middle of the room and screamed.

The scream shook the glass. It shook the teeth in Zhang's head. And it did not stop her.

She came again, and the sword was between them, and he knew, with the cold certainty his grandmother had planted in him before he was born, that the sword could kill but could not hold, that the ritual would not close without the name, and that he did not have the name, and that the man on the floor was bleeding out, and that he was running out of the only currency that mattered, which was time.

His grandmother had told him what the fight would cost, and he had not believed her then, and he believed her now, too late. The ritual was not a spell you cast. It was a door you held open with your own body, and the thing on the other side leaned against it with the whole weight of its grievance, and the man who held the door did not get to put it down. He felt it now, as the ligui circled him — the yubu carving the room, the zhou burning in his throat, the peach wood warm and wrong in his hand, and behind it all a fatigue that was not of the body but of the line, two thousand years of Zhangs pressing down on his shoulders, and the certainty that he was the first of them to have to do this without the name.

The comb fell out of his pocket.

He had carried it since the evidence locker — tortoiseshell, cracked, the one with the two characters Meiyu carved along its spine — and now it skittered across the blood-wet floor and struck the baseboard and broke, cleanly, along the crack that had been in it for a hundred years, and the two halves lay open, and the wrong light of the room fell across the inner curve of the comb, the place where a girl would hold it against her palm, and Zhang saw what had been hidden there for a century.

Two more characters. Carved faint, worn by a lifetime of a girl's thumb, on the side of the comb that faced her palm and not the world.

梁 (Leung).

And his grandmother's voice rose in him whole: *The name is where the girl put it, and a girl puts her name where only she will see it, so that the world cannot take it from her.*

The ligui saw him see it. Her eyes — the only thing in that face that had ever been human, and even they were not human now — went wide, and she lunged, and Zhang stepped the last step of the yubu and spoke the name whole, the true name, the name a dead girl had hidden against her palm so the world could not take it, and the world had not, and now he gave it back to her, and it bent her.

Leung Mei-yuk.

She stopped. Not from any blow. She stopped as a bell stops, mid-ring, when the hand closes on it. The scream went out of her. The green face turned to him, and for one instant there was something in it that was not the ninggui and not

the beauty, but the girl, the girl from Shunde, the girl who had been sold and trafficked and rescued and buried, and who had hidden her name against her palm so that something of her would survive the taking of everything else.

Zhang understood what the name had done, and what it had cost. The name was not a weapon, not in the end. It was a calling. It had reached down through a hundred years of rage and found, at the bottom, the one thing the rage had been built to protect — the girl who had been Leung Mei-yuk before the paper and the brothel and the grave — and it had held her up to the light for one instant, and she had seen, for the first time since the men in uniform came through the door, that someone had known her. The rage did not leave her. The rage was the only thing left of her. But for one instant the rage and the girl were the same shape, and the shape was looking at him, and then he brought the sword down.

And then Zhang brought the taomu jian down, and took her head, and it was done.

All through it, Mina had not moved from Theo's side. She had knelt in the blood with her hands pressed into the wound and her weight against the man, and she had not looked away from the thing in the middle of the room, and Zhang had been aware of her the whole of the fight as a fixed point in the corner of his sight — not running, not crying out, holding a man's life in her hands while two thousand years of exorcism played out a few feet away. It was the bravest thing he had ever seen, and he had no time to think it, and later he would understand that the ritual had not saved Theo Bridger. The ritual had killed the thing. It was Mina Chen who had kept the man alive long enough for the rest of it to matter, and the tradition had no word for that, so Zhang carried the memory instead.

The body did not fall. It came apart as the lore said it would — not with blood but with smoke, thick smoke, black at the edges and gray in the middle, rising off the severed form and the green face and the saw-teeth until there was nothing left but the smoke itself, coiling in the room like a thing that did not want to go. Zhang was already moving. He had the hulu in his hand — the hundred-year-old gourd, the stopper of wax and fu — and he spoke the closing words, the words his grandmother had made him say until they were not words but a latch, and he drew the smoke into the gourd, and the smoke fought, and

the smoke went, and when the last of it had passed the neck he stoppered it and held it, and the room was suddenly, terribly quiet.

Mina looked up at him, her hands still pressed into the open belly, her face wet. “Is it over?”

“Yes,” Zhang said, and he did not know if it was true, and he had learned enough that night to know those were two different things.

Then he dropped to his knees and did the only thing left to do, which was to call the number that would bring the ordinary world crashing back in, and to keep the gourd, and the smoke inside it, as far from Mina Chen’s face as his own shaking hands would allow.

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CHAPTER 15

The Ordeal

The hospital was Zuckerberg SF General, and Theo Bridger was in the ICU, and the medicine had done what it could, which was not enough.

Zhang stood at the window of the waiting room at three in the morning with the gourd in his bag and the smell of the apartment still on his hands no matter how many times he washed them, and watched Mina Chen through the glass, and understood that the worst part of the story was not over.

The surgeons had closed him. They had stopped the bleeding and tied off what could be tied and put the blood back, and they had stood at the foot of the bed and used the word *stable*, and then in the hallway, away from her, they had used the word *failing*. The heart was the problem. It had been nearly out of him — the surgeon's phrase, *nearly out of him*, spoken once and not again — and it had been traumatized past what the body could be asked to recover from, and there was nothing in the hospital's long bright rooms that could call a heart back from where his had started to go.

Mina had not left the bedside. She had come off the overnight still in her scrubs and had not left, and now she stood in the doorway of the waiting room and looked at him and said, without preamble, "You're him. The charm on the door. The man in the stairwell."

"Yes."

"Tell me how to save him."

She did not ask it and did not plead. It was the voice of a woman who had spent her life saving people and would not be told this one could not be saved.

So Zhang told her.

He told her the whole of it, standing in the fluorescent light with the city asleep outside, and he did not soften it, because she had not asked him to, and because the thing had to be done willingly or not at all. He told her what the tradition said about the man who fishes for another's beauty and pays for it with the dignity of those who love him. He told her the old story — the one the

tradition had kept, about a scholar named 王生 (Wang Sheng), who was undone by a beautiful woman who was not what she appeared, and who lay dead with his heart torn out, and whose wife went into the street to a beggar and begged for a way to bring him back, and was told the only cure was to swallow what the beggar gave her, the lowest thing a person could swallow; and that from that filth a heart had been made, and put back into the husband, and that he had lived.

He told her the exchange had never been about the filth. It had been about dignity: a person choosing, willingly, in front of witnesses, to spend the thing they hold dearest so that someone else might live.

Mina was quiet a long time. Through the glass the machines kept their small green numbers and the man on the bed did not move.

She was not thinking about the filth, or not only. She had spent ten years in emergency rooms. She had seen what came out of people and had learned long ago that the body has no dignity to spare and that the only dignity in any of it is the one you choose to carry. What she was thinking about was the shape of the thing being asked — that it had to be *seen*, that the witnesses were the point, that spending it in private would not count. She had spent her whole adult life being watched without being seen, the way every woman she knew had, and she had learned to spend her dignity in small careful coins, always in private, where it could be kept. This was the opposite. This was the whole purse, emptied on a public street, for a man who had lied to her for a year.

She looked at the man on the bed, and at the stranger with the gourd, and Zhang saw her decide. She had decided the moment she stepped between the thing and him with her arms out; everything after was the long walk toward what she had already agreed to do.

"Where?" she said.

He took her to the Tenderloin.

It was the only place, he explained, and she did not argue. The original had been a beggar in the street; the modern street was Turk and Hyde, where the fentanyl market ran in the open and the city's other population slept against the walls of buildings that shared their ZIP code with the towers. The people there would be witnesses, and that was the point, and Mina Chen, an ER nurse who

had spent years pulling overdoses out of those same gutters, understood the point better than he did.

There was a man at the mouth of the alley, sitting on a crate with a dog asleep at his feet, and Zhang stopped in front of him and spoke low, and the man listened, and then he looked at Mina, and he nodded once, as men in that neighborhood nod at things they have decided not to be surprised by.

Mina stepped forward. She did not look at Zhang. She looked at the people — the men and women of the street, the ones who had watched overdoses and beatings and worse without once turning away — and she began to speak.

She told them who she was. Her name, her job. She told them, in a voice that did not shake, the whole of what her fiancé had done to her — the app, the second phone, the wanting, the other women's faces — and she told them that she had known, and had stayed, and had let him think she did not, because the dignity of not being the woman who was lied to had been worth more to her than the truth. She said it all out loud, on a sidewalk in the Tenderloin, in the cold, in front of strangers, and with every sentence she spent a thing she had spent her whole life guarding, and the strangers watched and did not look away, and by the end her voice was steady but her hands were not.

Then she knelt in the gutter.

The water in it was black, and something moved in it, and Mina Chen — who knew exactly what was in that water — bent, and put her mouth to it, and drank.

She drank once, and again, and then she straightened and wiped her mouth and stood, and she did not look away from any of them, and then she said, to Zhang, in a voice that was steady and terrible, "Now give him his heart back."

The witnesses did not applaud. They did not look away. They had seen, in that sidewalk, a thing that did not belong to the ordinary currency of the street — not a fight, not an overdose, not a transaction, but a woman spending the one thing the street could not take from her because she was giving it freely — and they marked it the way such people mark such things, by going very quiet and then going back to what they had been doing. One of them, an old woman in a gray coat, touched Mina's arm as she passed, and did not say anything, and that

touch, more than anything else, was what Zhang remembered afterward — that in a city that had forgotten how to see, a stranger had reached out and seen.

He brought her back through the city to the hospital, and the city did not know what it had witnessed, and that was the horror of it in its own way — that a woman had just spent the one thing she had spent her life guarding, on a sidewalk in the Tenderloin, in front of strangers, and the city had not paused. Mina sat in the passenger seat with her face to the window and did not speak, and Zhang did not speak, and the fog came in off the bay as they crossed the city, and he understood that the city was built on such silences, on the things spent on its sidewalks and never recorded, and that the woman beside him had just paid, in one act, the debt of a hundred years of exactly such forgetting.

And in the room where the man lay dying with his belly sewn shut, Mina Chen knelt at the bedside and leaned over him, and she opened her mouth, and what came up out of her was not the filth she had swallowed but something else — a dark, hot, living thing the size of a fist, and it was a heart, and it beat once in the air between her mouth and his chest.

She set it against the wound. It sank in. The machines did not know what to make of it, and then they did, and the numbers began to climb, and the heart of Theo Bridger, which the surgeons had given up on, began — slowly, and then with a stubborn, ordinary certainty — to beat again. The man on the bed took a breath that was not a machine's breath, and the nurses came, and the word *stable* was said again, and this time it meant what it said.

Zhang had not been able to look away, and he would not be able to describe it afterward, not to anyone. The tradition said the exchange happened in the old stories, in the villages, in the time before the cities forgot. It did not say what it looked like in a room full of machines, under fluorescent light, with the man's fiancée kneeling beside the bed in her scrubs. It did not say that it would be the most ordinary and the most impossible thing he had ever seen, that the heart would look like a heart and beat like a heart and that the whole of it would take less time than the kettle took to boil in a kitchen in Duboce Triangle. The tradition said *the exchange*. It did not say *the cost*, and the cost was standing in the room with him, and Zhang understood, watching her, that the cost was not the gutter and not the strangers and not even the swallowing. The cost was the

choosing: choosing to be seen spending her dignity, willingly, for a man who had spent hers for a year without asking.

He did not feel triumph. He felt what his grandmother had promised he would feel, which was nothing so clean as relief — only the weight of the exchange, and the knowledge that some debts are paid in the coin of the people who love us, and that paying them is the only thing that keeps any of us alive.

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CHAPTER 16

The Bones

I came back to the world slowly, the way a tide comes back, and I came back to a world that had changed its mind about me.

I woke in a hospital room with a scar down my middle that would never quite heal, and Mina asleep in a chair, and a man named Zhang Yuan standing in the doorway who did not come in, and for a long time I lay there and did not speak, because there was nothing to say that would not be a lie, and I had used up my lies.

What I learned, in the weeks after, came in pieces. The company, under a pressure no one would name on the record, had disgorged what it tried to bury. The bones — her bones — had been returned from the potter's field in Colma, and the paperwork had been found, the chain-of-custody forms and the compliance memo and the signature of the man who had signed a girl's century into a cardboard box. The story came out the way such stories come out, in a slow leak and then a flood, and the city was briefly, publicly, ashamed of itself, and then it was not, and the tower kept rising.

I was not there for most of it. I was in the hospital, then in a chair by the window of the apartment, then walking, slowly, to the corner and back, learning again the ordinary miracle of a body that does what it is told. The world came back to me in the wrong order, as the world comes back after a thing like that: first the light, then the sounds, then the faces of the people who had been there, and then, last and worst, the memory of what had been in the room with me, which arrived in the small hours and did not leave when the light came. I learned that a man can survive a thing and still be followed by it, that the body heals on its own schedule and the rest of him on none, and that the only way through is the long, unglamorous work of staying in the room with it until it stops being the only room.

But the bones were out. That was the thing. The bones were out, and they were going to be put back, and it fell to me — because I was the one who had

been opened, and the one who had been let in, and because the debt, whatever else it was, was mine — to see that they were put back right.

We reinterred her at a cemetery on the edge of the city, where the fog came in and the ground was soft. There were only four of us at the graveside: Zhang, who had carried the gourd and would carry it still; Mina, who had paid for the man standing beside her; me, who was the man; and the keeper from Waverly Place, who had come unasked to say the words neither of us knew. The keeper burned joss paper and incense, and the smoke went up straight in the still air and then bent with the wind, and I stood with my hands in my coat pockets and my scar aching and understood that a funeral is not for the dead, who are beyond needing anything, but for the living, who need to be seen doing the one right thing after a long line of wrong ones.

The marker had her name on it. Leung Mei-yuk. 1908–1926. Not *unknown*, not the paper name, not *the woman from the site*. The name the comb had kept.

I did not go back to Eidolon. I tried, in the first weeks of my recovery, to imagine sitting again at the terminal with the avatar smiling on the wall, and the imagining made my hands cold, and so I resigned, quietly, and the company accepted it with the same flat procedural gray it used for everything. A part of me wanted to say more, to tell them what I had seen and what the tower was built on, and I did not, because I had learned that the company did not want the truth, it wanted the memo, and the memo was always going to say the same thing. Letting go of the job, the floor, the smile on the wall, the clean machine I had spent a decade feeding — that was the second hardest thing I have ever done, and it was nothing compared to the first.

I told the city what I knew, in the weeks after, though I was never sure the telling did any good. Not to the papers, because the papers would have made it the wrong kind of story, the kind with a monster and a hero and a neat moral at the end. I told the people who could use it — the archivists who kept the records, a historian who had been trying for years to get the city to mark the old sites, the daughter of a woman who had worked in a house like the Jade Screen and never once spoken of it. I told it in the flat, careful voice I had learned from the company, because it was the only voice I had for saying true things without breaking, and the people I told listened the way people listen to a thing they have

been waiting to hear said out loud. It was not much. It would never be enough. But the name was in the record now, and the record is the thing the city keeps even when it forgets.

I told Mina the truth in our kitchen, a month later, when I could stand again and the scar had healed to a line.

I told her everything. Not the parts. Not the version I had been telling myself for years. The whole of it, in the plain morning light of a kitchen that had almost been my last room: the app, the second phone, the wanting, the faces I had reached for and never once looked beneath. I told her that she had saved me, and what saving me had cost her, and that I knew it, and that I would spend the rest of my life owing it.

I told it badly, and then I told it again, and the second telling was worse, because it was the truth without the story I had wrapped it in. The memo, the bones, the first time I opened the app in the dark with her breathing in the next room. Lena, the bar, the night — and what the night had really been, which was not an affair but an opening, a door I left ajar and then could not shut. Grace Li, the funeral, the sentence that had come so close to leaving my mouth and died there, killed by a phone in my pocket. I told her that I had not once, in any of it, seen a single one of them — not Lena, not Grace, not her — and that the not-seeing was the thing I could not now stop seeing, and that I did not know if a man could come back from a life of it, or if I would spend my days teaching myself, slowly and badly, to look.

She listened without interrupting. The kettle boiled and shut itself off. And when I was finished, she looked at me a long time, and I saw the whole history in her face — the love, the wound, the arithmetic of what I had done and what she had paid — and she said, quietly, "I know."

"You know?"

"I've known," she said. "I knew before the charm, before the man in the stairwell, before any of it. You never hid it as well as you thought you did." She looked away, out the window at the gray city that had built itself over everything it could not face. "What I didn't know was whether you would ever tell me. That was the only thing I was waiting for."

"You were waiting," I said, and the words were small in the room.

"I was waiting. Not because I couldn't have gone. Because I wanted to see what you'd do when I wasn't the one holding the truth up for you to look at. Whether you'd pick it up yourself." She turned back to me, and her face was not angry and not soft. "You did, in the end. Late. But you did."

I opened my mouth to say something and found there was nothing to say, and so I did the only honest thing left to me, which was to stay quiet, and let the truth sit in the room between us, and not, for once, reach for anything at all.

Not forgiveness. Not the end. A beginning, of the kind that costs everything and promises nothing, and I, who had spent my life mistaking faces for people, understood at last that this — this plain, unexalted, expensive thing — was what it meant to look at someone and actually see them.

I did not get another job in the face trade. For a long while I did not know what that made me, a man of thirty-four with a scar and a skill he could no longer use and a drawer he did not open. I taught, for a time, at a community college across the bay, in a classroom that smelled of rain and old paper, and I found, to my surprise, that I was good at explaining the mathematics of a face without wanting to build one. The wanting did not leave me entirely — a thing you have fed for a decade does not go away because you stop feeding it — but it shrank, and changed shape, and I learned to sit with it the way you sit with an old injury that aches in the weather. I kept the work phone in a drawer for a year, and then dropped it into the bay on a cold morning, and did not watch it sink.

Mina did not leave. That was the part I could never quite believe, and never quite stop being grateful for, and the gratitude was its own discipline, because gratitude is not a thing you feel once and own; it is a thing you do, daily, in the small unglamorous ways. The kitchen was the same kitchen. The kettle still boiled and shut itself off. And in the plain morning light the two of us went on, not because it was easy but because we had both, in our different ways, stopped looking away.

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CHAPTER 17

What the City Remembers

The tower went up.

Zhang watched it over a year, as you watch a tide go out — not in any single moment but in the accumulation of moments, until one day you look and what was there is gone. The Eidolon campus rose over the block at 350 Jackson, over the ground where the cribs had stood and the noodle house had fronted and a girl had hidden her name against her palm, and the city poured concrete over the place and called it progress, and the city was, as it had always been, very good at calling things progress.

He did not go to the site often, and when he did he did not go close. There was nothing left to read there. But once, in the fall, he stood at the corner of Jackson and Kearny in the rain and watched a crew guide a pane of glass the size of a fishing boat up the face of the unfinished tower, and he thought about how the building would wear its face the way the ghost had worn hers — smooth, convincing, nothing behind it — and he let the thought go as soon as it came, because cleverness was what the city did instead of grief.

The news moved on. The deaths were explained — a transient, a cartel, a disturbed individual, the ordinary machinery of a violent city doing its ordinary work — and the explanations were all wrong and all sufficient, because the one thing the city could not explain was the one thing it had spent a century training itself not to see. The file closed, and then went cold, and then was archived, and Renner was transferred, or retired, or simply stopped talking about it; Zhang never quite learned which. He thought about Renner more than he expected — the white man and cop who had been told, in a concrete parking structure, the worst true thing about himself, and had gone back to his car anyway, and kept the smoking fu in his hand until it went out. Whatever else the detective had been, he had not run. The city was full of men who ran. Renner had not been one of them, and that had to count for something.

He went once to the keeper on Waverly Place, and they drank tea in the back room with the smoke and the silence, and the keeper asked him the only question that mattered, which was not whether the ghost was sealed but whether Zhang was. Zhang did not answer, because he did not know, and the keeper did not press, because the keeper had seen enough sealed things to know that a question asked twice loses its shape. When Zhang left, the old man gave him a small cloth bag of incense and a single fu, folded the way his grandmother had folded them, and said, in Cantonese, the words Zhang would carry out of the city with him: "You held the handle. That is the whole of the work. The rest is the city's, and the city will not do it, and that is why there will always be a Zhang."

Zhang walked Chinatown on his last day, the day before he left the city for good. He walked the dense blocks, past the SROs and the rent-controlled halls and the laundry fronts that had once hidden other fronts, and he stood a long time in the alley off Waverly Place where the Golden Lantern had been, where now there was nothing but a dumpster and a fire escape and the smell of cooking oil, and he thought about what the city remembered and what it chose not to.

It remembered the prices of things. It remembered the heights of buildings and the numbers on the screens. It did not remember a girl from Shunde, sold on a paper lie and buried without a name, and it did not want to, and that, Zhang understood, was what would kill it, eventually, in one form or another, over and over, as it always had. The city built over its history the way he had built over his own, and the history did not go away; it only waited, dormant, for the next excavation.

That evening he went home to the Richmond and got down on his knees and pulled the case out from under the bed, and he packed it slowly, the way his grandmother had taught him, which was to treat each thing as though it were alive and watching. The taomu jian first, because the weapon did not like to be handled carelessly. The fu next, folded so the characters faced inward, so that nothing in the dark of the case could read them and learn their shape. The yingfu, its hairs spread, so the ward would not tangle. And the hulu last, because the hulu was the reason for the case, and the reason went last, the way everything that matters goes last, so that it is the first thing you touch when you open the lid

again. He had learned the order as a boy and had not thought about it in years, and his hands remembered it perfectly.

He closed the case and pushed it back under the bed and sat on the floor of the small apartment with the night pressing at the glass, and he did not say the zhou, and he did not need to. It was in his muscles now, where his grandmother had put it.

In the morning he would take the case and go, and the city would not notice, because the city did not notice the people who did the quiet work — the ones who kept the doors and the names and the seals, the ones who stood at the edges and carried what the city would not look at. That was not a failure of the city. It was the city's one unchanging fact, and Zhang had made his peace with it, or as much peace as a man can make with a thing that will outlast him. He had held the handle. In the morning he would carry the case out into the fog, and the city would build over everything, and somewhere under the glass and the concrete the girl would sleep with her name at last on a stone.

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CHAPTER 18

The Gourd

The apartment was dark, and the city outside was loud, and the hulu sat on the shelf above the desk where Zhang had put it, because he could not bring himself to close it in the case under the bed, and because he had learned, in the year since the night in Duboce Triangle, that some things must be kept where they can be seen.

He did not look at it. That was the discipline. He sat at the desk with the fog on the window and the screens dark and the city going about its business below, and he did his work, and he did not look at it, and the hulu sat on the shelf and did not make a sound.

There were nights when the discipline was easy, and nights when it was not, and he learned to tell them apart only by the weight in the room. On the good nights the hulu was just a gourd, a dried thing with a wax stopper, and he could almost believe the whole of it had been a fever, a year he had dreamed. On the other nights it was a presence, a third thing in the room with its own temperature and its own patience, and on those nights he did not sleep and did not pretend that he could.

He had never once been tempted to open it, and the not-temptation was itself a kind of discipline he had not known he possessed. The hulu was not a thing you opened. It was a thing you kept, and the keeping was the whole of the work, and the work was the whole of the inheritance, and the inheritance was a door that stayed shut only because someone stood with his hand on it. He had learned, in the long year, that this was what his grandmother had been preparing him for all along — not the exorcism, which was the dramatic part and over in a night, but the keeping, which was the quiet part and went on forever. The city would have opened the hulu on the first day, out of curiosity, out of the belief that a thing sealed is a thing unfinished. The tradition knew better. The tradition had kept worse things for longer, and had done it by teaching its keepers that the seal was not a wall but a promise, and that a promise is kept by the keeping.

For a long time that was enough. The city forgot, as the city forgot. Theo Bridger walked out of the hospital into the rest of his life, and Mina Chen went back to the overnight, and the tower on Jackson rose and filled with light and the company kept making faces, and the hulu sat on the shelf, and the seal held, and Zhang told himself that held was the same as over.

He knew it was not. He had known since the night he stood in the apartment with the smoke in the gourd and the woman kneeling over the man on the floor, and said *yes* when she asked if it was over, and did not know if it was true.

And so he did the only thing the tradition had ever asked of him, which was to keep going. He finished his dissertation and defended it in a windowless room in front of men who asked about loss functions and never about the gourd, and he took a position that let him stay in the city, because the city was where the gourd was and the gourd was where the work was. He walked past the tower on Jackson sometimes, on his way to somewhere else, and did not look at it, and the not-looking became, over the months, as much a part of the discipline as the seal itself.

He saw Theo Bridger once, in the spring, from across a street in the Mission, and did not cross to speak to him, because there was nothing left to say that would not be a rehearsal of a thing already said. The man looked well, the way a man looks well when he has stopped carrying a weight he no longer needs to name. There was no mark on him anymore. He was holding a bag of groceries, and not looking at his phone, and Zhang thought that the man had done the one thing the tradition said could not be done and then gone on to do the harder thing, which was to keep living in the city that almost ate him, in the apartment where the thing came through the door, beside the woman who had paid for his life, and to not once reach for the drawer. Not redemption. The first step of a long walk, and the man was still on it.

He never saw Mina Chen again, and did not look for her. But he thought of her sometimes, in the small hours when the city went quiet, and of the thing she did on a sidewalk in the Tenderloin, and he understood that the tradition had no word for what she was, and that the absence of the word was the tradition's failure and not hers. She had held the door too, in her own way, with her whole body, with the one thing she had spent her life guarding, and she had spent it

freely, and the spending had called a heart back out of the dark. The tradition said the exorcist held the handle. It did not say what to call the woman who paid the price. So Zhang carried her in the same place he carried everything the tradition had no word for, which was a larger place than he had ever admitted, and did not try to name it.

And yet.

It began as it always began, with a sound, or the feeling of a sound, in the hour when the city went as quiet as it ever goes and the fog came in off the bay and laid itself over the streets like a hand. He had learned to know that hour the way a sailor knows the turn of a tide — not by any clock but by the stillness that came over the building, the radiators going silent one by one, the last siren fading, the foghorns beginning their long slow counting out on the water. It was the hour when the city stopped pretending, and it was in that hour, and only in that hour, that Zhang could hear what he heard.

In the small hours he heard it. A sound so faint he might have imagined it, and did not imagine it: a sound like breath, or like a bell that has rung and is only now deciding whether to stop.

He did not get up. He sat very still in the dark with his eyes on the shelf, and watched, and the sound came again, and then it did not, and the room settled back into the ordinary noise of the city, the sirens and the foghorns and the far-off sound of a million people not seeing.

In the morning the light came through the blinds, thin and gray, and fell across the shelf, and Zhang saw, in the pale cold of it, the thing he had spent a year not wanting to see.

A hairline crack in the wax of the fu seal. So fine it might have been there always. So fine it might have been nothing at all.

He looked at it a long time. Then he stood, and took the hulu down, and turned it over in his hands, and did not open it. The tradition did not say to open it. The tradition said to keep it, and seal it, and carry it, and he would keep it and seal it and carry it, as his grandmother had, as the line had for two thousand years, because that was the price of being the one who held the handle.

But he understood, holding it, what the crack was not and what it was. Not a failure, and not a promise that the seal would break. A reminder, and the

reminder was the thing the tradition had always known and the city never would: that a seal is not a wall, that a wall is not an ending, and that the only thing that ever holds the door against the dark is a person standing in front of it, in the gray light, with his hand on the handle, choosing, again and again, not to let go. The crack did not mean the thing inside was getting out. The crack meant the thing inside was still there, and always had been, and always would be, and that the keeping of it was not a thing you finished but a thing you carried, the way his grandmother had carried it, the way the line had carried it, the way the city carried everything it would not look at, down under the concrete, down under the forgetting, waiting.

He set the hulu back on the shelf, and put the case back under the bed, and left the apartment with the fog on the windows and the city beginning to move, and behind him, on the shelf, in the gray morning light, the crack in the wax held its small, patient, impossible shape, and did not widen, and did not close.

And the city, which had built over a trafficked girl's grave and called it progress, went on building, and the thing that had been contained in the hulu, and the thing that had been contained in the city, and the thing that is contained in all of us, went on waiting, as such things always wait, for the next door to open, and the next face to be wanted, and the next man to reach for a face and never once look beneath it.

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Colophon

愚哉世人！明明妖也，而以为美。

Yu zai shiren! Mingming yao ye, er yi wei mei.

Foolish are the people of this world — it is plainly a demon, and they take it for beauty. — Pu Songling, closing the tale of the painted skin, 1740

In 1740 Pu Songling collected a tale about a scholar who takes in a beautiful woman, and one night sees, through the window, what she actually is: a demon with a human skin spread on the bed, painting it. The tale is four pages long and has been filmed, operad and adapted ever since. This is that demon in San Francisco, in a year when a company a few blocks from her grave has learned to manufacture faces.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

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