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ALEXEY GOLDIN
THOSE WHO WERE NEVER MEANT TO MEET

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# Those Who Were Never Meant To Meet

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## Аннотация

Six strangers find themselves in a mysterious city that does not appear on any map. Rebecca, Dion, Brad, Carisa, Jessica, and Mike have no memory of how they arrived there. Each carries secrets, regrets, and unanswered questions. Yet something binds them together — an inexplicable connection they cannot understand or escape…

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## Alexey Goldin

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**Those Who Were Never Meant to Meet**

# Chapter 1. An Unfamiliar City

Rebecca opened her eyes and stared at the gray sky for several seconds.

It was raining.

A fine, cold rain. The drops fell on her face, ran down her temples, and slipped beneath the collar of her jacket. Rebecca grimaced, lifted her head, and slowly sat up.

She was sitting on a bench beside some kind of square.

A metal trash can stood nearby. Beyond it stretched a strip of wet pavement, and on the other side stood old buildings with façades darkened by damp. A traffic light was working across the street. Its red signal was reflected in a puddle, blurring with every raindrop that struck it.

Rebecca rubbed her face with her palms.

"What the…"

Her voice sounded hoarse. She cleared her throat and looked around again, hoping that familiar surroundings would finally emerge through the unpleasant, sleep-heavy fog in her mind.

Nothing had changed.

The square remained unfamiliar. The buildings, the street, the bench — everything looked perfectly ordinary, yet not a single detail stirred a sense of recognition.

Rebecca tried to remember how she had got there.

She remembered the rain.

Or did she only think she remembered it?

Her mind was blank. Not in the way it was after a heavy sleep, when memories slowly returned if you lay still with your eyes closed for a while. Here, it was as though an entire stretch of her life was missing. Rebecca could reason, notice details, and assess her surroundings, but whenever she tried to look a little deeper, her thoughts ran into a solid wall.

She frowned.

First, she had to work out where she was. Then she had to find out why she had ended up there.

Rebecca patted the pockets of her jacket, checked the back pockets of her jeans, and found her phone in an inside pocket. That reassured her a little. At least, not everything was lost.

The screen lit up.

The battery was almost full. No signal.

She unlocked the phone and checked the date. It showed yesterday's date.

Rebecca tapped the screen several times and checked the settings, but nothing changed.

"All right. That's something."

She opened her recent calls. A few familiar contacts, a missed call, messages. Nothing unusual at first glance. She was about to open her messages when she realized she couldn't remember whom she had called last or what she had been texting about.

It was unsettling.

Rebecca closed the list and looked at the square again.

There were no people.

Not a single one.

No passersby wandered past, no one hurried along with an umbrella, no one waited at a bus stop or chatted outside a café. There weren't even any cars on the road. Only the traffic light kept changing, as though the street were following its usual schedule and simply hadn't noticed that everyone who was supposed to use it had disappeared.

Rebecca stood up.

Her knees trembled slightly, and for a moment she grabbed the back of the bench. She had the impression that she had been lying in an awkward position for a long time, although her body didn't hurt and she couldn't find any sign of a fall on her clothes.

She straightened her jacket and headed for the nearest intersection.

At the corner stood a sign bearing the street names. Rebecca read them, but none meant anything to her. She opened the map on her phone. The app tried for a long time to determine her location, then reported that it couldn't load the data.

"Perfect," she muttered.

All she had to do now was find someone and ask for directions.

She started walking down the street.

The buildings looked ordinary: brick façades, balconies, plastic windows, air-conditioning units mounted on the walls. Some balconies held pots of withered plants. Wet leaves lay by the entrances. Downpipes rattled in gusts of wind.

On one windowsill, she spotted a white mug. A towel hung to dry on the balcony opposite, darkened by the rain. Someone had left a child's bicycle on the ground floor, chained to a metal railing.

These little details convinced her that the city was real. People lived here. They cooked meals, did laundry, went shopping, and came home from work. Everything around her bore the traces of everyday life.

And yet the people themselves were nowhere to be seen.

Rebecca passed a bus stop. Beneath its transparent shelter stood a bench, and an open umbrella lay on it. Water dripped from the fabric onto the paving stones.

She stopped.

The umbrella looked as though someone had only just left it there. There was no bag or anything else beside it. Rebecca looked along the street, expecting to see someone who might come back for it.

No one.

She shrugged and continued on her way.

A couple of minutes later, she came to a small grocery store. A sign on the door listed its opening hours, but the door was locked. Through the glass she could see shelves of goods, a checkout counter, and advertising posters.

Rebecca knocked.

There was no answer.

She walked around the building and peered through a side

window. Inside was a small room with a plastic table. A cup stood on the table. Beside it lay a phone connected to a charger.

Everything looked as though the shopkeeper had stepped out for a moment.

Rebecca returned to the entrance and tried the handle again.

"Is anyone there?"

Silence.

She was about to leave when she noticed her own reflection in the glass.

A man was standing behind her shoulder.

Rebecca spun around.

The street was empty.

She looked at the glass again. It reflected only her, the wet pavement, and the gray buildings across the street.

For several seconds, Rebecca didn't move.

She had seen the man clearly. A dark coat, a motionless figure, his head tilted slightly, as though he were trying to get a better look at her face. Yet she had heard neither footsteps nor the rustle of clothing.

"Wonderful," she said quietly to herself.

She tried to sound calm. She didn't even want to admit to herself that she had been frightened.

Perhaps she had imagined it. Fatigue, bad weather, her head not quite clear after waking. Maybe something behind her had been reflected in the glass and she had mistaken it for a person.

The explanation was unconvincing, but she had no other one.

Rebecca slipped her phone into her pocket and walked on.

At the next intersection, she saw a café sign.

Tables stood behind the glass, and menus lay on the counter. Rebecca approached the door and pulled the handle. This time, it opened.

The place smelled of coffee and damp wood.

"Hello?"

Her voice sounded unexpectedly loud.

No one answered.

Rebecca went inside. A coffee machine stood on the counter, with paper cups beside it. A saucer with a half-eaten croissant had been left on one of the tables. A jacket hung by the window, and a child's glove lay under a table.

She went behind the counter and pressed the coffee machine's button, but nothing happened. The socket was empty.

The café was almost as cold as the street.

Rebecca walked between the tables and peered into the back room. There were boxes, a bucket, and a mop. In the corner was a door leading into an inner courtyard. It was locked.

Rebecca returned to the seating area.

A calendar hung on the wall. She walked over and checked the date.

Yesterday's date.

The same as on her phone.

She took it out and opened the settings. The date was set to update automatically, but for some reason no time zone was

listed. Rebecca tried changing the settings manually. The phone froze, then returned to the home screen.

She put it away.

Now what was happening was beginning to irritate her.

Where was everyone?

Even if the city had lost its phone service, people wouldn't simply disappear. Someone should be sitting at home, someone walking down the street, someone arguing with a shopkeeper over a price or hurrying to an appointment. She should have been able to meet at least one person who wouldn't mysteriously vanish around a corner or appear only in reflections.

Rebecca left the café.

The rain grew heavier. The wind caught a few yellow leaves and drove them along the road. One stuck to her shoe.

She shook it off and looked down the street.

At the end of the block stood a man in a dark coat.

He was quite far away, near the intersection, and he was looking in her direction.

Rebecca felt almost physically relieved.

Finally, a person.

She raised her hand.

"Excuse me!"

The man didn't react.

Rebecca walked toward him, carefully avoiding the puddles. When there were about twenty metres between them, he turned and disappeared around the corner.

"Wait!"

She quickened her pace.

The corner was empty. Beyond it was a narrow passage between two buildings leading into a courtyard. Rebecca looked inside, but saw no one.

She went a little farther.

There were rubbish bins, several bicycles, and an old stroller in the courtyard. A faded poster hung on the wall. Water dripped from the fire escape.

The man was nowhere to be seen.

Rebecca returned to the street.

This time, she wasn't smiling.

She took out her phone and dialled the emergency number. The call wouldn't go through. She tried another number, with the same result.

"What on earth is going on here?"

Her voice was swallowed by the sound of the rain.

She opened her contacts and stared at the familiar names for several seconds. She had the feeling that if she tapped one of them, everything would fall back into place. Someone would answer, ask where she had been, and be surprised to hear her voice. An ordinary conversation. Nothing complicated.

But Rebecca couldn't decide whom to call.

Not because she didn't know the numbers. She knew the people whose names appeared in the list — or at least, she thought she did. Yet whenever she tried to picture the faces

behind those names, she felt a strange uncertainty.

As though her memory had preserved the captions but erased the photographs themselves.

Suddenly, the phone vibrated in her hand.

Rebecca flinched.

The screen went dark, then lit up again. An incoming call notification appeared.

The number was unavailable.

She stared at the screen for several seconds, unable to decide whether to answer. Then she pressed the green button and raised the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

At first, she heard only crackling.

It wasn't the ordinary noise of a poor connection, but an uneven rustling, as though someone on the other end were slowly running a palm over dry paper.

"Hello?" Rebecca repeated. "Can you hear me?"

The rustling stopped.

Silence filled the line.

She was about to end the call when a voice came through.

A man's voice. Quiet and muffled, as though he were speaking with his face turned away from the microphone.

"Rebecca…"

She froze.

He said her name as though he had known her for a long time. He didn't ask who she was or check whether he had

called the right person. He simply called her by name — with a kind of weariness that made something inside Rebecca tighten unpleasantly.

"Who is this?"

She heard a short intake of breath in response.

"You weren't supposed to…"

The voice cut off.

"What? What wasn't I supposed to do?"

Something clicked on the line.

Rebecca pulled the phone away from her ear and checked the screen. The call was still active. The connection indicator hadn't disappeared.

"Listen, I don't understand. Who are you? How do you know my name?"

The man spoke again, but this time his words were drowned out by interference.

She made out only a few fragments:

"…don't open…"

Then came a sound like a blow against wood.

And an almost inaudible whisper:

"…too late."

The call disconnected.

Rebecca stared at the screen for several seconds.

The number was unavailable. No new entry had appeared in her call log. The phone displayed the same list as before, as though the call had never happened.

She opened the call history again, refreshed it, and checked her notifications.

Nothing.

"No. That's impossible."

She said it aloud so she could hear her own voice. It sounded reasonably confident, although unease was already rising inside her.

Someone could have been playing a prank on her. In theory. But how had that person known her name? Why hadn't the call been recorded? And what had those final words meant?

She tried to remember the voice.

She couldn't.

Then again, she couldn't remember whether she had heard it before, either. It seemed both unfamiliar and strangely familiar — as though it were a melody she couldn't recognize until the next note sounded.

Rebecca put her phone away.

She needed to find people. Real people whom she could see without looking in a reflection, people who wouldn't disappear the moment she came closer.

She continued walking, now examining the buildings more carefully. She hoped to find a police station, a hospital, or at least an open pharmacy. Any place where someone might be able to explain what was happening.

On one of the streets, she noticed an entrance to an underground passage.

A lamp glowed above the stairs. Its light was reflected in the water gathered on the steps.

Rebecca stopped and listened.

Voices were coming from below.

She took several steps toward the staircase.

The voices were quiet but distinct. One was male, the other apparently female. They were speaking at the same time, and she couldn't make out the words.

Rebecca descended a few steps.

"Hey!" she called. "Is anyone down there?"

The voices fell silent.

She waited.

Then a man's voice came from deep inside the passage.

"Don't come down."

Rebecca froze.

"Why?"

There was no answer.

"Listen, I need help. I don't know where I am."

Something stirred in the depths. She heard footsteps, but they weren't approaching. They were moving away.

Rebecca looked down. The passage continued underground, and beyond the bend there was darkness.

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

She decided not to go any farther.

Back on the street, Rebecca zipped up her jacket and looked

at the sky. The clouds hung low, almost concealing the rooftops. The rain showed no sign of stopping. The wind drove yellow leaves across the asphalt, where they caught on drain grates, the wheels of parked bicycles, and the corners of steps.

Suddenly, she realized that she had no idea how long she had been in this city.

Her phone showed a date, but she couldn't be certain it was correct. The clock continued to run, yet the street itself seemed to be devoid of its usual movement. Nothing changed here except the rain and the leaves.

Rebecca looked back.

A man in a dark coat stood on the opposite side of the street.

It was the same man, or another one — she couldn't tell.

He wasn't approaching or trying to attract her attention. He simply stood in the rain, watching her from a distance.

Rebecca felt her shoulders tense.

"Hey!"

The man didn't answer.

She took a step toward him.

He remained where he was.

Another step.

The wind struck her in the face. Rebecca closed her eyes for a moment, and that was all it took.

When she looked across the street again, there was no one there.

She slowly exhaled.

Now she wanted to get warm, find people, and figure out what was happening. She was still trying to convince herself that there had to be a rational explanation: a confused state of mind, a lost memory, an unfamiliar neighbourhood, a communications failure. Perhaps she was ill. Perhaps she had suffered an injury she couldn't remember.

But none of those explanations answered the main question.

Why couldn't she remember how she had got there?

Rebecca glanced back at the empty street, then at the phone in her pocket.

"You weren't supposed to…"

She didn't know what she wasn't supposed to do. She didn't know who had called her or why his voice had seemed familiar. She didn't even know whether she could trust her own memories.

But there was one thing she understood with absolute clarity now.

Simply getting lost in an unfamiliar city wasn't enough to explain everything that was happening to her.

# Chapter 2. The Road Out

Rebecca decided that she needed to get out of the city.

As long as she remained among the identical streets, closed shops, and empty houses, everything that was happening seemed like some prolonged mistake. All she had to do was find a railway station, a bus terminal, or at least an operating gas station, and she would have an explanation. Perhaps she was in an unfamiliar district. Perhaps her phone had stopped working not because it was broken, but because there was no coverage. And the empty streets… After all, she had no idea what had happened here.

She tried to hold on to these assumptions. Not because she truly believed them, but because without them there remained something she did not yet want to think about.

Rebecca turned onto a wide street running between residential buildings.

The rain did not stop. At times it became almost imperceptible, leaving tiny dark spots on the asphalt; at other times it grew heavier, turning the sidewalks into a continuous glossy surface. Water flowed along the curbs, gathering yellow leaves and bits of litter. The wind tore leaves from the trees and drove them along the road until they stuck to the wheels of parked cars.

The city looked ordinary. That was what irritated her most.

Folding chairs stood on balconies, and flowerpots were

visible on windowsills. Behind one window hung light-coloured curtains; behind another, dark ones patterned with large flowers. A discarded advertising leaflet lay by an entrance. Beside the rubbish containers stood a child's bicycle, its handlebars turned sideways.

It all reminded her of a set after filming had ended and the people involved had gone home.

Only no one had taken the set down.

Rebecca took out her phone.

The screen still displayed a date that did not match what she remembered. She opened the map. A gray background, a motionless loading icon. No streets, no names, no blue dot that might have told her where she was.

"Come on," she muttered.

She closed the app, opened it again, and waited.

Nothing.

Rebecca slipped the phone into her pocket. After the strange call, she did not want to check her call history again. She had already opened it several times, and each time she saw the same thing: no incoming calls, no missed calls. It was as though the unfamiliar voice had sounded not through the speaker, but directly inside her head.

She was not going to admit that such a possibility existed.

Fatigue. Stress. Perhaps she had hit her head and simply could not remember it. These things happened. People sometimes lost their bearings after injuries, and memory could reconstruct

events incorrectly.

But why, then, could she not remember how she had ended up on the bench? Why did she not know where she had come from? And why had the voice said her name as though it had known her for a long time?

Rebecca quickened her pace.

A bus stop appeared ahead. Beneath the transparent shelter, a wet bench stood darkened by rain. At its edge lay an open umbrella, one of whose ribs had bent and stuck out to the side.

She stopped.

She had seen that umbrella before.

Rebecca slowly examined the bus stop, then looked at the road. Residential buildings stretched along it, with small shops beginning farther on. Nothing unusual. Nothing that could explain why this place seemed familiar to her.

She decided not to linger.

A timetable hung on the pole beside the stop. Rebecca came closer and tried to make out the lettering. Most of it had faded, and the route names were almost impossible to read. She ran her finger across the wet plastic surface, but it changed nothing.

There were no buses.

She continued walking, hoping to find a railway station. If the city really existed in a world where roads, trains, and communications were supposed to function, a station seemed the most sensible landmark.

An intersection had a signpost. Rebecca read the street names,

but none of them meant anything to her.

She chose the direction that, according to the diagram on the pole, led toward the centre.

The houses gradually gave way to low office buildings. Through their glass façades she could see desks, chairs, and switched-off monitors. A mug with a dried coffee stain stood on one windowsill. In the neighbouring room, a board covered in marker writing hung on the wall. Rebecca could not make out the words through the reflections on the glass.

She slowed down.

A light was on in one of the buildings.

Behind the window was a small shop. Boxes, jars, and bottles stood on the shelves; a stack of paper bags lay beside the checkout. Everything looked as though the shopkeeper had simply stepped out for a moment and was about to return.

Rebecca approached the door and pulled the handle.

Locked.

She knocked on the glass with her knuckles.

"Is anyone there?"

Her voice sounded quieter than she had expected.

No answer came.

Rebecca pressed her palm against the glass and tried to peer inside. Beyond the reflection of the street, she could make out an aisle between the shelves, but there was no one there.

She stepped back.

The light might have been left on by accident. It proved

nothing.

She repeated the thought to herself and walked on.

After several more streets, an automobile bridge came into view. A wide road ran beneath it, and railway tracks could be seen beyond the bridge. Rebecca felt a wave of relief that was almost painful. Rails, a bridge, road signs — all of it belonged to a comprehensible world. There should be timetables and stations and trains here. People should be travelling somewhere, meeting one another, running late, arguing over delays.

Everything here was supposed to work.

She climbed the stairs onto the bridge.

From above, she could see the tracks disappearing between buildings. Wet leaves lay on the rails. Bushes grew along the embankment, their thin branches swaying in gusts of wind. Farther away, beyond the low buildings, a strip of trees began, almost dissolving into the gray sky.

There were no trains.

Rebecca looked in one direction, then the other. No sound of wheels, no distant engine rumble. Only rain rustling against the metal railing.

She crossed the bridge.

A different district began on the other side. Low buildings, warehouses, workshops with wide gates. Metal grilles covered some of the windows; old advertisements had been pasted on others. A tool trolley stood beside one of the garages. A dirty rag dangled from its handle.

The road gradually narrowed.

Rebecca noticed a signpost and approached it.

Exit from the city.

She read the words again, making sure she had not misread them.

"Finally," she breathed.

The arrow pointed toward a road between vacant lots. A fence stretched along the left side, behind which stood several trees with almost bare branches. On the right lay wet grass, flattened by the rain. Farther ahead, a forest darkened the landscape.

Rebecca headed toward the exit.

She tried to walk steadily and not look back. She felt that if she began listening to every sound and searching for a trap around every corner, she would simply be unable to continue.

The road was almost empty. A plastic bottle lay on the shoulder, and a yellow leaf floated in a shallow puddle. The wind fluttered an advertising poster attached to the fence. Its image had faded so badly that the faces of the people on it had become blurred patches.

Rebecca passed a leaning road sign.

Beyond the bend, another signpost appeared.

She stopped.

The name of a city was written against the white background.

The same name she had already seen on a sign in the centre.

Rebecca frowned and looked ahead. The road led toward an intersection beside which stood a plastic bottle. A little farther

away was a dark puddle, and near the edge of the sidewalk she could see a crooked sign.

She recognized everything.

Not merely a similar place. Not a coincidence.

The same intersection. The same bottle. The same puddle.

Rebecca slowly turned around.

Behind her, the road led toward the bridge she had crossed only a short while ago.

She could not understand how it had happened. Perhaps there was another road, hidden from view. Perhaps she had taken a wrong turn and returned without noticing. But she remembered walking between the vacant lots, reading the sign, and looking at the forest on her right.

She remembered everything too clearly to explain what had happened as ordinary absent-mindedness.

Rebecca hurried back toward the bridge.

This time she did not cross it. She turned onto a neighbouring street, passed a row of houses, then turned again. She tried to memorize every landmark: a cracked paving stone by an entrance, a red rubbish bin, a sign with a torn corner.

After a while, a bus stop appeared ahead.

The same one.

The open umbrella still lay beneath the transparent shelter.

Rebecca stopped so abruptly that she nearly slipped on the wet asphalt.

“No,” she said.

The word came out quietly, almost inaudibly.

She took out her phone and opened the camera. She photographed the bus stop, the umbrella, the advertising poster, and the intersection behind it. Then she opened the map again, as though it might change if she stubbornly tapped the screen one more time.

Gray background.

Nothing.

Rebecca looked at the photographs she had taken. They were ordinary. There was nothing in them except a wet street, a bus stop, and an umbrella.

She sat down on the bench.

Beneath the shelter, the rain sounded muffled. Water ran down the transparent roof and gathered at its edge in large drops. Across from the bus stop stretched a row of houses. An empty flowerpot stood on one balcony; on another hung a towel, soaked and heavy with water.

Rebecca closed her eyes, trying to collect her thoughts.

She did not know how much time had passed since she had awakened. Her phone continued to display a date, but that information now seemed useless. There were no people, no transport, no sounds of a functioning city around her. And whatever she did, she kept returning to the same place.

She wanted to call someone.

Her family. A friend. Anyone whose voice could confirm that the world beyond this street still existed.

But she did not know whom to call.

That thought was more unpleasant than all the others.

Rebecca tried to remember the names in her contacts…

Rebecca tried to remember the names in her contacts, but the thought slipped away before she could grasp it.

She opened the list again.

There were names she recognized, numbers she had apparently saved a long time ago. Yet none of them seemed connected to a particular person. She could not picture a face, hear a voice, or remember a conversation.

It was as though someone had taken her memories and carefully removed everything that mattered.

Rebecca closed the contacts.

The rain continued to fall.

She sat beneath the shelter for a while longer, watching water collect in the cracks of the pavement. Then she noticed a movement at the far end of the street.

A man was walking toward her.

At first, she thought he was another phantom, another figure that would disappear as soon as she tried to approach him. But he continued walking. His steps were steady, and he seemed to be looking at the road rather than at her.

Rebecca stood up.

The man stopped several metres away.

He was young, perhaps a little older than she was. Dark hair, a black jacket, a tired expression. His clothes were wet, and a few

strands of hair clung to his forehead. He looked as though he had been walking through the rain for a long time.

For several seconds, they simply stared at each other.

Then Rebecca spoke.

"Are you real?"

The man raised his eyebrows.

"Excuse me?"

She realized how strange the question sounded.

"I mean… Are you actually here?"

He looked around the empty street, then back at her.

"As far as I can tell."

Rebecca let out a breath she had not realized she was holding.

"Thank God."

The man studied her more carefully.

"You've been here long?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know?"

She shook her head.

"I woke up somewhere in the city. I've been trying to find a way out."

"And?"

"I keep coming back."

The man's expression changed slightly.

"Back to the same place?"

Rebecca nodded.

"Same streets. Same bus stop. Same umbrella."

He looked toward the shelter.

For a moment, something like recognition crossed his face, but it disappeared almost immediately.

"I thought it was just me," he said.

Rebecca took a step closer.

"You've tried to leave too?"

"Yes."

"And you came back?"

"More than once."

He said it without any dramatic horror, rather with the exhaustion of someone who had spent too long trying to solve a problem without an answer.

"Do you remember how you got here?" Rebecca asked.

"No."

"Not at all?"

"I woke up in some building. Went outside. Then everything was like it was for you: empty houses, closed shops, not a single person. The phone doesn't work. I tried to find a station, then a road out of town." He gave a crooked smile. "I suppose you already know how that ended."

"How long have you been here?"

The man glanced at his phone but did not take it out.

"I can't say. It feels like a long time. But I don't know how much I can trust my own sense of time."

Rebecca nodded.

She felt a little better. Not because the man could explain

anything — apparently, he knew no more than she did. It was simply that what was happening no longer belonged exclusively to her. Another person had seen the empty city, tried to escape, and returned.

That did not mean they had not both lost their minds.

But at least now she did not have to face it alone.

"Have you met anyone else?" she asked.

"No."

"Heard any strange sounds? Voices?"

The man looked at her more attentively.

"What kind of voices?"

Rebecca fell silent.

She could tell him about the phone call. About the unfamiliar voice that had spoken her name and then vanished as though it had never existed. But she did not want to see in his eyes the same expression she saw in her own whenever she tried to make sense of what she had heard.

"Never mind," she said. "I was just asking."

The man did not insist.

He looked at the empty street again, then at her.

"Dion."

Rebecca did not immediately understand that he was giving her his name.

"What?"

"My name is Dion."

He held out his hand.

She shook it.

Dion's palm was cold and damp from the rain. Rebecca noticed a small scratch near his thumb and a dark stain on the cuff of his jacket. Ordinary details. For some reason, they helped her calm down a little.

"Rebecca."

Dion silently repeated her name to himself.

For a moment, his expression became strange. It seemed he was about to say something, but changed his mind. His gaze lingered on her longer than simple politeness required.

"What?" Rebecca asked.

"Nothing."

He released her hand.

"It's just…" Dion frowned, as though trying to catch an elusive thought. "I had the impression I'd heard that name before."

"Mine?"

"Yes."

Rebecca waited for him to continue.

But Dion only shook his head.

"Probably mistaken."

She wanted to ask where he could have seen her, but stopped herself. She, too, had increasingly felt that familiar things appeared where they had no reason to be. A street name that meant nothing. A voice on the phone calling her by name. The feeling that someone was watching her from behind the glass.

Perhaps Dion was experiencing something similar.

“What do we do?” she asked.

He looked at the road.

“I don’t know. But I don’t want to stay here alone.”

“Neither do I.”

Dion nodded, as though they had already made their decision.

They headed toward the intersection, keeping closer to the buildings so that the wind would not strike them directly in the face. Rebecca told him about the road leading to the exit and how she had ended up back near the bus stop. Dion listened without interrupting. Occasionally, he asked short questions: what the sign had looked like, how many turns she had taken, whether she had seen any other roads.

He did not try to convince her that she had made a mistake. Nor did he rush to agree that what was happening was impossible to explain.

Rebecca liked that.

They stopped at the entrance to a shop. Dion pulled the door toward himself, then pressed the handle down and pushed with his shoulder. The lock did not give way.

“Locked,” he said.

“I noticed.”

“Maybe there’s another entrance.”

They went around the building. Behind it was a narrow courtyard cluttered with plastic crates. Two empty barrels stood against the wall, and a wet cardboard box lay near the back door. The door was closed.

Dion tried the handle and let go.

"Nothing."

Rebecca peered through a small window. Inside, she could see shelves and a narrow passage leading to the checkout. A rag lay on the floor beside a bucket.

"Everything here looks as though people stepped out for a moment," she said.

"And never came back."

Rebecca looked at him.

Dion did not avert his gaze.

"Do you think something happened to them?"

"I think I don't know what to think."

He said it calmly, but Rebecca noticed how tightly he had clenched the phone in his pocket.

They returned to the street.

The rain continued. The wind drove leaves along the asphalt, and they clung to the soles of their shoes as Rebecca and Dion passed the trees. A dark strip of forest stretched beyond the buildings. It seemed very close, although a wide, empty road lay between the last houses and the trees.

Rebecca looked at the forest.

Suddenly, she wanted to go there. Not because she expected to find an exit, but because the city was beginning to press in on her with its windows, doors, and endlessly repeating streets. At least the forest did not pretend to be familiar.

"Maybe we should try going around the outskirts?" she

suggested.

Dion followed her gaze.

"Toward the trees?"

"Yes."

He thought for a moment.

"Let's check one more street first. If we end up back here again, we'll go there."

Rebecca wanted to argue, but realized he was right. Running in any direction simply because it was frightening to stay where they were was not the best idea.

"All right."

They turned the corner.

An old mailbox hung on the wall of a building. Its lid was slightly open, and the edge of a white envelope was caught inside. Rebecca stopped to examine it, but there was no name or address visible on the envelope.

She was about to move on when she heard a quiet click behind her.

She turned.

The mailbox was closed.

Rebecca looked at her hands. She had not touched it.

"What is it?" Dion asked.

"Nothing."

She answered too quickly.

Dion held her gaze for a moment but did not ask any questions.

They continued on their way.

At the end of the street stood a small park. Wet paths crossed the grass, and trees with sparse yellow leaves grew along them. In the centre stood a fountain, long since switched off — or simply left without water. Leaves lay on its stone rim, stuck together in dark clumps.

Rebecca slowed down.

She had the impression that she had seen the park before. Perhaps through the café window. Perhaps while walking along another street.

"Have you been here?" she asked.

Dion looked around.

"I don't remember."

"I think I've seen this fountain."

"Maybe."

He did not tell her she was mistaken.

Rebecca approached the rim and ran her fingers over the wet stone. Its surface was cold and rough. A deep crack filled with water ran along the edge.

She looked toward the opposite side of the park.

A person stood between the trees.

Rebecca froze.

The figure was far away, almost concealed by the rain. A dark coat, a motionless posture. She could not make out the face, but it seemed to her that the person was looking straight at her.

"Dion…"

He turned toward her.

“What?”

Rebecca pointed at the trees.

“Someone’s standing there.”

Dion followed her hand.

The person had disappeared.

Not walked behind a tree, not turned away, not vanished into a crowd — simply ceased to be visible. Between the trunks there were only wet bushes and dark gaps.

Dion took a few steps forward.

“Hey!”

His voice carried across the empty park and faded.

No one answered.

Rebecca kept looking at the spot where the figure had stood.

“Did you see him?” she asked.

Dion slowly turned around.

“No.”

She felt the familiar tension rising inside her again.

“I definitely saw someone.”

“I believe you.”

The words sounded so simple that Rebecca did not immediately understand their meaning.

“Really?”

“Yes. But I didn’t see him myself.”

Dion looked at the trees once more.

“We’d better go.”

Rebecca agreed.

They left the park and came out onto a wide street. Beyond the buildings, the railway tracks were visible again, and farther away stood the familiar bridge.

Rebecca stopped.

She recognized it immediately.

Dion noticed the bridge too. He said nothing, but his face grew tense.

They approached the intersection.

The bus stop was in the same place as before. Beneath the transparent shelter lay the open umbrella with its bent rib. A dark stain marked the wet bench, resembling the imprint of someone's palm.

Rebecca did not bother checking the photographs.

She already knew what she would see on the screen.

Dion stopped beside her.

"So you weren't mistaken," he said.

"Looks like I wasn't."

They stood in silence, listening to the rain.

Rebecca stared at the empty road and tried to understand what was more frightening: that the city would not let them leave, or that perhaps it was not an ordinary city at all.

The phone in her pocket remained silent.

But now she could not shake the feeling that the call had not been accidental. Someone knew her name. Someone had tried to warn her. And perhaps that person was somewhere nearby.

"Rebecca," Dion said quietly.

She turned toward him.

“Yes?”

He seemed about to say something important, but changed his mind.

“Don’t wander too far away from me, all right?”

There was no command in his voice. Rather, it sounded like a request he himself did not fully understand.

Rebecca looked at him carefully.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Dion nodded.

They remained beneath the shelter, beside the open umbrella, while the rain drummed against the transparent roof.

Rebecca did not yet know why this unfamiliar man seemed a little closer to her than someone she had met only a few minutes earlier should have seemed.Nor did she know that Dion, looking at her, was trying to remember something far more important than her name. But neither of them was ready to say aloud what they could not explain.

# Chapter 3. The Man Behind the Door

The rain showed no sign of stopping.

Rebecca barely noticed her wet hair or the cold drops trickling down her collar anymore. After several hours on the deserted streets, her clothes had ceased to seem like a problem in their own right. Something else bothered her far more: the city was too much like a real place for her to dismiss everything as a dream, yet too wrong for her to keep believing that it was all an ordinary coincidence.

She walked beside Dion, trying to memorize the route. At every intersection, they made mental notes of distinctive details: a sign, a crack in a wall, a tree with a broken lower branch. If the streets started leading them back to the same place again, at least they might be able to figure out exactly where it was happening.

For now, everything was quiet.

Parked cars lined the sidewalks. Lights were on in some of the windows. Behind the glass of a café, neatly arranged chairs and cups left on tables were visible. A small sign displaying opening hours hung on the door, but there were no customers or employees inside.

Rebecca stopped beside the window.

“Maybe people are just staying at home?” she said. “We haven’t checked every apartment building.”

Dion looked at her.

"We have."

"Checking two buildings doesn't mean we've checked the whole city."

"I'm not suggesting we give up. I just don't want us going around knocking on every door we come across."

"Then what do you suggest?"

He thought for a moment.

"Finding somewhere we can get help. A police station, a hospital, some kind of public service. If they exist, there should be people there."

"And what if there aren't?"

"Then we'll figure out what to do next."

Rebecca wanted to argue, but stopped herself. There was nothing wrong with what he was saying. She was simply tired of every reasonable plan ending with yet another deserted street.

They continued walking.

Several blocks later, they came across a low building with wide windows. Part of the sign above the entrance remained, but several letters had fallen off, making the name impossible to read. A light was on behind the glass.

"Should we check it out?" Rebecca asked.

Dion nodded.

The door opened without resistance.

Inside was a small lobby. A dark mat, soaked with rainwater, lay on the floor. To the right stood a reception desk with a monitor switched off, and a clock hung on the wall. Its hands

were frozen at 10:24.

Rebecca looked at the screen of her phone.

It showed the same time.

"At least the clocks agree," she said.

"So far, that's the only thing they've confirmed for us."

Dion said it without smiling.

They went behind the reception desk. The adjoining room contained workstations, filing cabinets, and several computers. A mug of half-finished tea stood on one desk. Beside it lay a pair of glasses and an open planner.

Rebecca approached it.

The pages were filled with brief entries: names, phone numbers, reminders of appointments. Nothing unusual. The last entry was on a page dated the same day as the one displayed on her phone.

She ran her finger along the edge of the paper.

"Dion, look."

He came closer.

"What is it?"

"The last entry was made on this date. At least, that's what the planner says."

Dion read a few lines.

"Maybe they simply left their paperwork behind."

"With their tea?"

"Maybe."

"And the lights on?"

He didn't answer.

Rebecca closed the planner. She didn't like how easily they had begun inventing explanations for everything. Each one seemed plausible on its own, but together they formed a picture she didn't want to believe.

A dull thud came from a room farther down the building.

Rebecca flinched.

Dion immediately turned toward the corridor.

They stood still and listened.

A few seconds later, the sound came again. This time it resembled the scrape of chair legs across a floor.

"Someone's here," Rebecca whispered.

"Possibly."

Dion headed toward the corridor.

"Wait," she said.

He turned.

"Don't go alone."

Dion looked at her for a few seconds, then gave a brief nod.

They went together.

The corridor was narrow. Doors lined both sides, some closed, others left ajar. The first opened onto a small conference room with a long table. The second was locked. A faint scraping sound came from the third.

Dion carefully pushed the door open.

Inside stood a desk, several cabinets, and a large metal safe. A folder of papers lay scattered across the floor. The window was

slightly open, and the wind stirred the edge of the curtain.

There was no one else.

Rebecca looked around.

"Probably a draft."

Dion didn't answer. He approached the window and looked down. A narrow courtyard lay beneath the building, cluttered with containers and empty crates. The rain blurred the traces on the ground.

"What is it?" Rebecca asked.

"Nothing."

He closed the window.

Rebecca was about to leave when she noticed the wet footprints on the floor.

She stopped.

The shoeprints began near the window and led toward the door. They were clear enough to reveal the tread pattern. Water still glistened on the floor.

Rebecca looked at her boots.

Their soles left a different pattern.

She raised her eyes to Dion.

"Do you see that?"

He followed her gaze and crouched beside the nearest print without touching it.

"Yes."

"So someone was here."

"Looks like it."

“But we didn’t meet anyone.”

Dion stood up and examined the room. He looked behind the cabinets, checked the space beneath the desk, and opened the door to a small storage room.

Empty.

Rebecca approached the window. It overlooked the courtyard, but there was no staircase or fire escape beneath it. The wall dropped almost vertically. Even if someone had climbed out through the window, they would have had to jump from the second floor.

She looked at the footprints again.

They led from the window to the door.

Not the other way around.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

Dion didn’t argue.

They returned to the lobby. Rebecca headed for the exit but stopped near the reception desk.

The door to an adjacent office stood slightly ajar.

She didn’t remember passing an open door earlier. Perhaps she simply hadn’t noticed it. But now the gap seemed unnaturally narrow, as though someone had deliberately left it that way so that only part of the dark room could be seen from the corridor.

“Did we go in there?” she asked.

Dion looked at the door.

“No.”

Rebecca moved closer but didn’t look inside.

A voice came from the office.

"Help me."

She froze.

It was a human voice. Quiet and hoarse, as though someone were speaking after a long period of silence.

Dion stepped forward.

"Who's there?"

There was no answer.

He approached the door and pushed it open.

The room was small. A desk, two chairs, a filing cabinet. The window was closed, and raindrops slowly slid down the glass.

Nobody.

Rebecca remained in the doorway.

"Someone just spoke," she said.

"I heard it."

Dion entered the office and examined it. He looked behind the door, opened the cabinet, and checked the space between the desk and the wall. Then he turned toward Rebecca.

"There's no one here."

She forced herself to step inside.

A single sheet of paper lay on the desk.

White, without a seal or lines. In the middle, one word had been written.

Too late.

Rebecca stared at it for a long time.

"Too late for what?"

Dion picked up the sheet by one corner and examined both sides. The paper was dry. There was no signature, no date, no other writing.

"I don't know."

"Maybe the person whose footprints we found left it?"

"Possibly."

"But why would someone ask for help and then leave a note like that?"

Dion put the sheet back.

"Maybe it wasn't the same person."

Rebecca looked at him.

The thought had occurred to her as well, but she didn't want to say it aloud.

If someone really was here, why wouldn't they show themselves? Why hide behind doors, leave footprints, and speak as though they couldn't come out to meet them? And, most importantly, why were things still happening in a city devoid of people — things that suggested someone was there?

Rebecca stepped away from the desk.

"We need to leave."

Dion didn't object.

They hurried out of the office and crossed the lobby. Only when the building's door closed behind them did Rebecca realize that she'd barely been breathing the entire time.

Outside, it was cold and damp, but the rain now seemed almost reassuring. It was understandable. It didn't disappear

behind doors or leave notes.

Rebecca took a deeper breath.

"We need to find the police," she said.

"If there's a police station here."

"There has to be."

Dion said nothing, but walked beside her.

They crossed several streets and came to a small square. Trees with sparse yellow leaves grew along the paths. Water covered the benches, and grass pushed through the gaps between the paving stones. An old fountain stood in the center, long since drained. Leaves and raindrops had collected in its basin.

On the opposite side of the square stood an old building with a heavy wooden door.

Rebecca noticed movement behind one of the windows.

She stopped.

A figure flickered behind the glass on the second floor.

This time, she didn't immediately say she'd seen someone. She watched the window for several seconds, trying to make out even the smallest detail.

The figure didn't appear again.

"Dion," she said quietly.

He followed her gaze.

"What?"

"I think someone's there."

They waited.

The window remained empty.

"I saw something moving too," Dion said. "But I'm not sure it was a person."

Rebecca looked at the entrance.

"Let's knock."

They crossed the square and climbed three stone steps. There was no sign on the door, only a small metal plate bearing the building number.

Rebecca knocked.

There was no answer.

She knocked again, louder.

Footsteps sounded behind the door.

Someone was approaching. Rebecca could hear the floor creaking, the footsteps stopping just on the other side, but the door remained closed.

"Who's there?" a man's voice asked.

Rebecca exchanged a glance with Dion.

"We need help," she replied. "We're trying to figure out what's happening in the city."

Silence fell behind the door.

"How many of you are there?"

"Two."

"Have you been together long?"

Rebecca frowned.

"We've only just met."

The silence stretched this time. Then the lock clicked, and the door opened a crack.

A man's face appeared in the gap. Short dark hair, tired eyes, a tense mouth. He looked to be around thirty. He wore a gray T-shirt, and headphones hung around his neck.

First, he looked at Rebecca.

Then his gaze shifted to Dion.

And froze.

It lasted only a few seconds, but Rebecca noticed the change. The man seemed to have seen not a stranger, but someone he'd long believed lost.

"You," he said.

Dion frowned.

"Do we know each other?"

The man didn't answer.

He opened the door wider and stepped onto the threshold. His gaze moved across Dion's face, lingered on his eyes, as though searching for confirmation of something he himself couldn't believe.

"That's impossible," he whispered.

Rebecca felt once again that she'd found herself in a situation where everyone knew something except her.

"Listen," she interrupted. "We don't understand what's happening. The city is empty, the roads keep bringing us back to the same place. We found footprints in a nearby building, but no one was there. And then we heard a voice…"

"What voice?" the man asked sharply.

Rebecca fell silent.

"Someone was asking for help," Dion answered for her. "But there was no one in the room."

The man looked at him suspiciously.

"Did you both hear it?"

"Yes."

He slowly rubbed a hand over his face.

"Damn."

"Do you know what's going on?" Rebecca asked.

"No."

"Then why are you looking at Dion like that?"

The man turned toward him again.

"Because I've seen you before."

Dion didn't move.

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"You just said you've seen me."

"I said I've seen you. I didn't say I remembered where."

Irritation crept into his voice, but something else lay beneath it — an anxiety he either couldn't or didn't want to show.

Dion took a step closer.

"What's your name?"

The man seemed to remember only then that he hadn't introduced himself.

"Mike."

He didn't offer his hand.

Rebecca looked at him, then at Dion.

"I'm Rebecca. And this is Dion."

At the sound of the name, Mike tensed again.

This time he tried to hide his reaction, but it was too late.

Dion noticed.

"Something wrong?"

Mike shook his head.

"No."

"You clearly know something."

"I don't know anything."

"Then how do you remember me?"

Mike glanced toward the street, as if checking whether anyone else was out there. Then he stepped back from the doorway.

"Come in."

Rebecca didn't move.

"Why?"

"Because we shouldn't discuss things we don't understand out here."

"And you'll be able to explain them inside?"

"No," Mike replied. "But at least you'll stop getting wet."

He said it so casually that Rebecca unexpectedly felt a little trust toward him. Not much, and certainly not unconditional — just a small willingness to give him a chance.

She stepped over the threshold.

Dion followed.

Mike closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Then he stood beside it, listening to the sounds outside. Only after that

did he turn toward them.

"Tell me one thing," he said.

"What?" Dion asked.

Mike stared at him for a long time.

"Do you remember how you died?"

The question hung between them.

Rebecca felt her fingers growing cold.

Dion didn't answer immediately. He looked at Mike as though trying to determine whether the man was joking. But there was nothing remotely humorous in his expression.

"No," Dion finally said.

Mike closed his eyes.

Just for a moment.

When he opened them again, his expression had changed. He no longer looked surprised. Rather, he looked as though he had heard the answer he had feared — but expected.

"Then we're in serious trouble," he said.

And a quiet knock sounded at the door.

# Chapter 4. The Noise in the Hallway

Mike stood in the middle of the room, listening.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Rain tapped against the windowsill, water trickled down the glass, and somewhere beyond the wall, the ventilation hummed softly. Ordinary sounds, the kind that should have been reassuring. Yet Mike kept staring into the hallway as though someone he feared to see might emerge from its darkness.

"Maybe it's a neighbor," Rebecca suggested.

Mike slowly turned toward her.

"What neighbor?"

"Someone could have come in through another door. You can't possibly know what's happening throughout the entire building."

"I checked the whole house."

"Then perhaps you missed something."

"I checked every room!"

His voice rose sharply, and Rebecca instinctively stepped back. Mike noticed, pressed his lips together, and turned away. It was obvious he wasn't pleased with his outburst, but he had no intention of apologizing.

Dion rose from his chair.

"Let's not shout. If someone's here, we'll find out."

Mike looked at him irritably.

"Are you always this calm?"

"No."

"Then why now?"

"Because shouting won't help."

Mike seemed about to answer, but changed his mind. He took a small flashlight from the shelf and tested the switch. A narrow beam swept across the wall, slid over the doorway, and disappeared into the hallway.

"I'll check again. You stay here."

"No," Rebecca said.

Mike turned around.

"What?"

"We're coming with you."

"I didn't ask for your help."

"And I'm not going to sit on the sofa and wait for someone to come out of the next room."

Dion gave a silent nod.

Mike let out an irritated breath but didn't argue.

They stepped into the hallway.

It was cooler here than in the living room. The dark wallpaper had begun to peel away from the walls in places, and the wooden floor was marked with scuffs and scratches. A bathroom door stood to the left, a bedroom door to the right. At the far end of the hallway was another door, one Rebecca had barely noticed before.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"A storage room."

"Have you checked it?"

"Yes."

"Then let's check it again."

Mike gave her a look that seemed intended to remind her whose house this was, but he turned the handle anyway.

The door opened with a faint creak.

It was indeed a storage room. Boxes, old jars, and a few tools stood on the shelves. A vacuum cleaner rested in one corner, with a crumpled package lying beside it. There was enough space between the boxes for someone to hide, but no one was there.

Dion directed the flashlight toward the floor.

"It's dry in here."

"So?" Mike asked.

"If someone came in from outside, they might have left tracks."

Rebecca examined the floor near the doorway. There were no droplets of water, no dirt, no footprints.

They checked the bathroom and bedroom next.

The bathroom smelled of soap and dampness. Two bottles stood on the shelf, and a towel hung nearby. In the bedroom, the bed was neatly made, and a folded pile of clothes lay on a chair. A glass of water stood on the bedside table, next to a book opened halfway through.

Nothing suggested that anyone had recently left either room.

That left the front door.

Mike approached it and examined the lock. Then he pulled the handle toward himself, pressed it down, and checked the key again.

"It's locked."

"Are you sure you locked it?" Dion asked.

Mike spun around.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"I was just asking."

"And I'm answering. I remember turning the key. I remember checking the handle. I'm not that absent-minded."

Dion said nothing more.

Rebecca wasn't looking at the lock. She was looking at the floor.

A dark, damp patch had appeared near the door. It was small, about the size of a palm. Water had gathered between the floorboards, reflecting the faint light from the hallway.

"There's water here," she said.

Mike and Dion moved closer.

Rebecca crouched and carefully touched the puddle with her fingertips. The water was cold.

"Maybe it dripped off someone's clothes," Mike suggested.

"But we were standing in the living room," Rebecca objected. "And the puddle is right by the door."

Mike examined the bottom of the door. The wood was dry. The narrow gap beneath it was dry as well.

Dion crouched beside Rebecca, studied the puddle, then

looked at her.

"Was the water here when we heard the sound?"

"I don't know. I only noticed it now."

"Then we can't say it appeared after the sound."

"But we can't explain it either."

Dion stood up.

"Let's go outside. See if there's anyone around the house."

Mike clearly didn't want to go out. He glanced back toward the hallway, then checked the lock again before opening the door.

They stepped out into the rain.

There was no one around the house. Yellow leaves lay scattered across the sidewalk, and water flowed slowly along the curb. Across the street stood a parked car with fogged-up windows. On the neighboring porch, an overturned flowerpot lay with wet soil spilled out of it.

Dion went around one side of the house. Mike headed in the other direction. Rebecca remained by the entrance, watching the windows.

A curtain moved on the second floor.

She looked up.

The window was closed. Nothing moved behind the glass.

Rebecca took a few steps back to get a better view of the façade. On one windowsill stood a pot with a dried-up plant. On another lay a book, open and face down. No figures anywhere.

"Did you find anything?" she asked when Dion and Mike returned to the porch.

Both shook their heads.

"Nothing," Mike said. "Not on either side."

"Maybe the sound didn't come from the house," Dion suggested.

Mike looked at him.

"I heard a door close."

"I heard it too. But we don't know which door, or where it is."

Mike tightened his grip on the flashlight.

"I live here alone."

He said it as though he were repeating something he needed to convince himself of.

Rebecca looked at him.

"Are you sure?"

Mike frowned.

"About what?"

"That you live alone."

He didn't answer right away.

"I haven't seen anyone here."

That was a different answer.

Rebecca wanted to ask more, but Dion lightly touched her elbow, stopping her. She looked at him and realized he had noticed the difference too.

Mike turned away and opened the door.

"Let's go inside. We won't figure anything out out here."

Inside, he locked the door again. This time he checked it three times, then put the key in his pocket and remained standing by

the entryway.

Rebecca returned to the living room and sat on the edge of the sofa. Dion took the chair opposite her. Mike poured himself some water, took a few sips, and set the glass on the table.

His hands were no longer trembling, but he kept glancing toward the hallway.

"We need to figure out what's happening with our memories," Rebecca said.

Mike gave a wry smile.

"Great. Let's figure it out. Maybe you'll do better than I have."

"What do you remember last?" Dion asked.

Mike sat down.

"I don't know what to count as the last thing. There are separate memories. An apartment, work, some people. I remember talking to someone, I remember a voice, but I can't recall the face. When I try to put things in order, everything falls apart."

He frowned, searching for the right words.

"It's as if I remember individual pages from a book, but someone has torn out everything in between."

Rebecca slowly nodded.

She knew the feeling. She could picture her own room, the touch of a door handle, the light on the wall. But as soon as she tried to remember what had happened before she woke up on the bench, an emptiness appeared before her.

"Do you remember where you lived before?" she asked.

"Yes. I think so. I can picture the apartment, but I don't remember how I got there the last time. I don't remember what I was doing before I ended up here."

"And why did you decide you lived in this house?"

Mike looked at her.

"Because I woke up here. In the bedroom. On the bed."

"And you immediately decided it was your house?"

"No. I checked the rooms first. Then I found my things."

"What things?"

"Clothes. A phone. Keys."

He took a key ring out of his pocket and placed it on the table. A small metal keychain with no inscription hung from it.

"I don't know why I had them," Mike added. "But the key fits the front door."

Rebecca looked at the keychain.

"Maybe someone brought you here."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Then that explains nothing."

"I'm not saying it does."

Mike looked away. There was something familiar about his irritation to Rebecca: the reaction of someone afraid he might never find an answer, and therefore angry at every question.

"What about you?" he asked. "What do you remember?"

Rebecca tried to gather her thoughts.

"I remember being somewhere. I can't say where. Then I woke

up on a bench in the rain. I had a phone, but I don't know where it came from. I don't remember how I ended up in the city."

"Nothing before that?"

"There are some separate sensations. But I'm not sure they're memories."

"What kind of sensations?"

Rebecca hesitated.

She could tell him about the voice that had called her by name. About the short phrases she had heard during the phone call. But for some reason, she didn't want to repeat them in front of Mike. She felt that saying the words aloud might give them a meaning she didn't yet understand.

"It's as if I've forgotten something," she finally said. "Something important."

Mike studied her closely.

"I feel the same way."

Dion sat silently, his gaze lowered to his hands.

"And you?" Rebecca asked.

He didn't answer immediately.

"I remember certain places. I don't know if they're real. Sometimes I feel as though I'm looking for someone, but I can't remember who."

"A person?"

"Probably."

"A man or a woman?"

Dion raised his eyes.

"I don't know, Rebecca."

She felt she had touched on something painful, though he hadn't openly shown it.

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for."

Dion ran a hand over his face.

"When I try to remember, I feel worse. Not physically. Just… as if I'm standing beside a door and know there's something behind it, but I can't open it."

Mike looked sharply at him.

"A door?"

"It's just an image."

Dion frowned.

"What's wrong with you?"

Mike didn't answer. He stared at Dion as though he had heard a word he'd been trying to remember for a long time.

"What door?" he asked.

"I told you — it's an image. I don't know."

Mike got up and paced across the room.

"I've seen a door too."

Rebecca lifted her head.

"Where?"

"Not here. In a memory. Or a dream, I don't know. A dark door, with something drawn on it. I couldn't make out what."

"Did you open it?"

Mike stopped.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because someone told me not to."

Rebecca felt her fingers grow cold.

"Who told you?"

"I don't remember."

"A man or a woman?"

Mike looked at her irritably.

"I already told you I don't remember."

She fell silent.

For several seconds, the only sound in the room was the rain.

"So all of us have gaps in our memories," Dion said. "Each of us has something left, but we can't put it together into a complete picture."

"And there's also someone I apparently know, even though I can't remember where from," Mike added.

He looked at Dion.

"And that worries me more than anything else."

"Why?" Rebecca asked.

Mike was silent for a long time.

"Because when I saw you at the door, I wanted to drive you away. Not because you were a stranger. It was something else. As if something had already happened between us, something that meant I shouldn't have to see you again."

Dion held his gaze.

"I don't remember anything like that."

"I don't remember exactly what happened either."

"Then why did you decide you should hate me?"

Mike shook his head.

"I didn't decide. It just came over me."

He sat back down and picked up his glass, but didn't drink.

"Maybe I really did hate you. Or maybe someone wanted me to think that. I don't know."

Rebecca felt that the conversation was no longer simply an attempt to recover their memories. They had begun talking about things they couldn't explain, and every new hypothesis only raised more questions.

"We need to find other people," she said. "If there are three of us, there may be others."

"Possibly," Dion agreed.

"And if someone remembers more than we do, they might be able to help."

Mike gave a wry smile.

"And what if they know what's going on but don't want to tell us?"

"Then at least we'll know that someone knows."

Mike looked at her and unexpectedly gave a brief smile.

"All right. That makes sense."

For the first time, Rebecca felt that they might actually be able to work together. Not because they trusted one another — trust was still a long way off. But they had a common goal now, and that was better than wandering aimlessly through an empty city.

She stood up.

"Let's search the house again. Not the rooms themselves. The belongings. Maybe we'll find something that tells us who lived here and why you ended up here."

Mike frowned.

"I've already searched everything."

"But you were looking for a way out and trying to figure out where you were. Now we can look for specific things."

Dion stood up as well.

"I agree."

Mike watched them for a while, then waved a hand.

"Fine. Just don't throw anything away or move things around."

They began with the living room.

The shelves held books, most of them ordinary: novels, reference books, and several albums of photographs of cities. Old newspapers lay on the coffee table, but the pages containing dates had been torn out. In the bottom drawer, Rebecca found a stack of blank sheets and a pen.

On one of the sheets, there were pencil marks — several lines, as if someone had tried to draw a circle but never finished it.

"Did you draw this?" she asked.

Mike leaned over the table.

"I don't know."

"But the paper is yours?"

"Looks like it."

Rebecca studied the lines. They were uneven, breaking off

several times before starting again. In one place, the pencil had pressed so hard that it had almost pierced the paper.

She turned the sheet over.

There was nothing on the back.

"Maybe it's just a drawing," she said.

"Maybe," Dion replied. "But let's keep it."

Rebecca placed the sheet on the table.

They checked the cabinets and drawers. They found several envelopes, an old charging cable, two lighters, and a notebook with blank pages. There were no names, addresses, or notes that might explain what had happened.

The bedroom proved just as fruitless. The clothes had no name labels, and there were no documents. Several jackets and shirts hung in the wardrobe, but Mike couldn't say for certain which of them belonged to him.

"So we found nothing," Rebecca said.

"Nothing yet," Dion corrected.

Mike returned to the window and looked out at the street.

"I still don't understand who was in the hallway."

"Maybe we'll never find out," Rebecca said.

He turned toward her.

"Don't say that."

She was surprised by his reaction.

"Why?"

"Because if we start believing we'll never find out anything, we'll simply stop looking."

Rebecca didn't answer.

There was anger in his words, but beneath it she sensed something else. Mike was afraid not only of the unknown. He was afraid of being powerless in the face of it.

Perhaps that was why he clung so tightly to the locks, doors, and order in the house. As long as there was something he could check, lock, or count, the world remained at least somewhat manageable.

Rebecca glanced toward the hallway.

The door at the far end was still closed. The puddle near the entrance had disappeared, leaving only a slightly darker mark between the floorboards.

She didn't mention it to Mike.

Not because she wanted to hide anything, but because she wasn't sure the water had really disappeared. Perhaps the floor had absorbed it. Perhaps they simply hadn't noticed the puddle getting smaller.

But Rebecca remembered the spot.

She was noticing more and more little things she couldn't explain. And she was increasingly aware that she didn't want to turn away from them, even when they frightened her.

When they returned to the living room, Dion stopped beside the table.

"We need to agree on something," he said.

Mike folded his arms.

"On what?"

“If any of us remembers something important, we tell the others.”

“Even if it’s unpleasant?” Mike asked.

“Especially if it’s unpleasant.”

Mike looked at him suspiciously.

“And what if the memory concerns one of us?”

Dion paused.

“Then all the more reason to tell the others.”

Mike didn’t answer immediately.

Then he nodded.

“Fine.”

Rebecca looked at them both.

“One more thing. Let’s not jump to conclusions. We still don’t know who we are to each other or what happened to us.”

Mike lowered his eyes.

“That, at least, I understand.”

He said it quietly, almost inaudibly.

Rebecca didn’t ask what he meant.

Outside the window, the rain continued to fall. The glass reflected three figures standing in the room: Rebecca, Dion, and Mike. Their reflections were slightly distorted by the water, and for a moment Rebecca thought she saw someone else standing behind them.

She turned sharply.

There was no one there.

Dion noticed her movement.

“What happened?”

Rebecca looked at the glass, then at the empty corner of the room.

“Nothing. I thought I saw something.”

But she was no longer sure she could trust her own eyes.

And even less so her own memory.

# Chapter 5. The First Journey

The station was located beyond the old shopping district.

A wide street led to it, lined with closed shops. Faded signs still remained in the windows: shoe repair, watch repair, bookshop. A sign displaying opening hours hung on one of the doors, but the paper beneath the plastic had long since become damp and warped. Behind the glass of the bookshop, empty shelves stood in darkness. An overturned wooden crate lay on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, and the wind was scattering wet leaves from it.

The rain never stopped. At times it became almost imperceptible, only to begin drumming against the roofs and awnings again, making water run down the drainpipes in thin, continuous streams.

Rebecca walked beside Dion, occasionally glancing at the buildings. She wanted to remember the route. Not merely the direction, but every little detail: a sign, a crack in a wall, the shape of an intersection, the arrangement of windows. If the city really was an ordinary place, even if it had been emptied for some inexplicable reason, paying attention should help.

And if it wasn't an ordinary place, she needed to remember everything all the more.

Mike walked ahead. He didn't look like someone who believed in a favorable outcome, but he moved with determination, as

though the very possibility of stopping and admitting that they understood nothing irritated him more than the rain.

"Are you sure the station is even operating?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm not even sure it exists," Mike replied. "But if there's any way out of here, it makes sense to start there."

"And what if the road leads nowhere?"

Mike glanced back.

"Then we'll find out."

He said it without irritation. He simply didn't want to discuss something for which they had no answer yet.

Dion looked at Rebecca.

"We should try anyway."

She nodded.

She didn't like how easily he said things like that. Not because she didn't trust him. Quite the opposite: she felt calmer around Dion, and that was precisely what troubled her. They had known each other for such a short time — or so her memory suggested. Yet sometimes, in his presence, she felt as though she didn't need to explain the most important things.

All it took was a glance at him to understand that he felt the same strange closeness.

Rebecca didn't know what to make of it, and for now, she preferred not to ask questions.

The station turned out to be a squat building made of dark brick. A concrete awning hung over the wide entrance, with thin streams of water dripping from its edges. Several windows had

been boarded up. The others reflected the gray sky, making it impossible to tell whether the lights were on inside.

The doors were unlocked.

Inside, the air smelled of wet clothing, dust, and old metal. The large waiting hall was almost empty. Rows of plastic chairs stood along the walls, some with broken backs. Signs hung above the closed ticket windows, and dark streaks ran across the ceiling, resembling the traces of long-ago leaks.

The electronic departure board was working.

That was the first thing Rebecca found truly strange.

Neat white lines glowed against the black screen, but none displayed a city name, platform number, or route designation. There were only empty fields separated by thin lines. Occasionally, a few symbols appeared, only to vanish again, as though the system were trying to load information that no longer existed.

Mike stopped beneath the board and looked up.

"Well, of course."

"What?" Rebecca asked.

"I'd like to see something working properly for once."

"Maybe it's just malfunctioning."

"Maybe."

He didn't argue, but his expression made it clear that he didn't believe that explanation himself.

At the far end of the hall stood a city map. Rebecca approached it and ran her finger across the glass, clearing a patch

of condensation.

The streets were marked with thin lines. There was a bridge, a small park, several squares, residential districts, and a northern neighborhood. A railway line ran past the city center. It began at the station and extended beyond the edge of the map, as though the cartographer hadn't needed to show anything further.

"Look," Rebecca said. "There's a northern district."

Mike came closer.

"And what's there?"

"I don't know. But at least we have a direction."

Dion didn't answer. He stood near one of the windows, looking toward the opposite platform.

Rebecca noticed the change in his expression.

It wasn't much. He had simply stopped frowning, as though he had seen something familiar and, for a few seconds, forgotten what he was supposed to be doing.

"Dion?"

He didn't turn around.

Rebecca followed his gaze.

A girl stood on the platform.

Dark hair, a pale face, a long coat. Her hands were tucked into her pockets, and she was looking straight at Dion. The rain couldn't reach her beneath the canopy, but her hair near the temples appeared damp. She wasn't moving or trying to attract anyone's attention. She was simply waiting.

Rebecca couldn't explain why she felt she'd seen this girl

before. Not in person — at least, she couldn't remember ever meeting her. It was more as though her face resembled an image that had long lingered at the edge of her memory and had finally come into focus.

Dion headed toward the platform exit.

"Wait," Mike said.

Dion stopped but didn't turn around.

"Do you know her?" Mike asked.

"I don't know."

The answer came too quickly.

Rebecca looked at him more closely.

"Then why are you going to her?"

Dion hesitated.

"I don't know," he repeated, more quietly this time.

Mike let out an annoyed breath, but didn't argue. Together, they left the hall.

The girl remained where she was. As they approached, her gaze shifted from Dion to Rebecca, then to Mike. Surprise flickered across her face, quickly giving way to wariness.

"So you came after all," she said.

"Where?" Mike asked.

The girl frowned.

"I don't know."

"Were you waiting for us?"

"Probably."

She sounded uncertain, as though she herself had only just

heard her answer.

Rebecca stopped beside Dion.

"What's your name?"

The girl looked at her. Irritation flickered in her eyes, but it wasn't anger — more like the weariness of someone who had to answer the same question over and over again.

"Jessica."

She fell silent, as though expecting the name to change something.

Nothing changed.

"Do you remember how you got here?" Rebecca asked.

Jessica turned her gaze toward the tracks.

Water darkened the spaces between the rails. The canopy beams were reflected in it, while raindrops shattered the reflection into countless tiny circles. Beyond the platform lay an empty stretch of railway, disappearing between overgrown embankments. There was no train in sight.

"I remember a room," Jessica said. "There were people in it."

"What kind of people?"

"I don't know. I can't make out their faces."

She clenched her fingers inside her coat pockets.

"We were arguing. Someone said we had to stop. Someone else answered that it was already too late. Then everyone started talking at once, and I couldn't understand who was saying what anymore."

"Do you remember what you were arguing about?" Mike

asked.

"No."

"Where was the room?"

"I don't know."

Mike looked at Rebecca as though he wanted to say, Here we go again. But this time, he remained silent.

Jessica raised her eyes to Dion.

"Do you remember me?"

He held her gaze.

"No."

She didn't look away.

"That's strange."

"What is?"

"When I saw you, I felt as though I'd already asked you that question. And you'd answered exactly the same way."

Dion slowly exhaled.

Rebecca felt the familiar chill creeping between her shoulder blades. It wasn't caused by her wet clothes or the wind slipping beneath the canopy. She remembered her phone, the voice of an unfamiliar man, and the brief fragments of words that had never formed a coherent message.

You weren't supposed to…

Don't open…

She still didn't understand who the voice belonged to or why the caller had known her name.

"Have you seen anyone else here?" Mike asked.

Jessica didn't answer immediately.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A man. Tall. He had a scar above his eyebrow."

Mike straightened.

"When?"

"I don't know. I can't tell how much time has passed here. He was standing on the other side of the street. I wanted to approach him, but he disappeared around the corner. By the time I got there, no one was there."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No."

"Did he notice you?"

Jessica thought for a moment.

"I think so."

Mike was about to ask another question, but Rebecca noticed that the girl was looking somewhere behind them.

Her face went pale.

"What is it?" Rebecca asked.

Jessica didn't answer.

Rebecca turned around.

A woman in a dark coat stood by the staircase leading to the passage between the platforms.

She was too far away for her features to be made out, but there was something familiar about the way she stood. The woman remained perfectly still, her head tilted slightly, watching them

as though trying to make sure she had found everyone she was looking for.

Rebecca blinked.

The woman was gone.

She took several steps toward the staircase.

"Wait."

"What happened?" Dion asked.

"Someone was standing there."

Mike turned quickly. The platform was empty. The staircase descended into the dim passage, and droplets of water glistened on the wet steps.

"Who?" he asked.

"A woman. In a dark coat."

"Where did she go?"

"I didn't see."

"Rebecca, there's no one here."

"I know you can't see her now."

She heard how sharply her words had come out and forced herself to stop.

Mike didn't answer. He simply examined the staircase and the nearby doors, as though still hoping to find a simple explanation.

Jessica stared at the place where the woman had appeared.

"She found us too," the girl whispered.

Rebecca turned toward her.

"Who is she?"

Jessica shook her head.

"I don't know."

"But you've seen her before?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Jessica ran a hand over her face.

"I can't remember. I only know that when I saw her the first time, I wanted to leave. Immediately. Without even asking who she was or why she'd come."

"Why?"

Jessica looked at Dion.

"Because I felt as though she remembered me."

Dion lowered his eyes.

Rebecca noticed the movement and realized that he was hiding something again. Perhaps not deliberately. Perhaps he himself couldn't explain why certain words affected him so deeply.

But she didn't ask.

They had too few answers as it was to demand clarity from someone else.

They left the station together.

Jessica agreed to go with them without protest. She stayed close to Dion, though from time to time she glanced at Rebecca, as if trying to understand what place the latter occupied in their strange little group. Dion pretended not to notice her looks. Mike walked a little ahead, occasionally turning around to make sure everyone was following.

At the exit, Rebecca paused.

She looked at the electronic board through the glass. The white lines still glowed against the black background. For a moment, she thought one of them had changed.

The empty field had been replaced by letters.

She froze.

The word vanished before she could call the others.

Rebecca moved closer to the glass and examined the board carefully. The lines were empty again.

“Are you coming?” Dion called from the doorway.

She turned around.

“Yes.”

“Did something happen?”

Rebecca looked at the screen once more.

“I don’t know.”

She stepped out into the rain beside him.

For a while, they walked in silence. Rebecca tried to convince herself that she might have been mistaken: a reflection, a glare, fatigue. But the word had been too clear. She hadn’t merely thought of her name — she had seen it.

And this wasn’t the first time.

Mike asked a question as they turned onto a wide street.

“Only one?” Jessica asked.

He gave her a brief glance.

“For now, one. If something brought all of us here, why does nobody remember how we met?”

"Maybe we never knew one another," Jessica said.

"Then why do we have the same gaps in our memories?"

"I don't know, Mike."

She said his name so naturally that all three of them stopped.

Mike turned to her.

"What did you say?"

Jessica frowned.

"I called you by your name."

"How do you know my name?"

She looked at him in confusion.

"You told me."

"When?"

Jessica opened her mouth, but no answer came.

Rebecca remembered how she herself had discovered that she knew her name, although she could not recall the circumstances in which she had arrived in the city. The name had remained intact, as though it had been cut out of the rest of her memory and preserved separately.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," she said, though she wasn't sure of that herself.

"Maybe," Mike replied. "But I'd rather know which things I actually remember and which only seem familiar."

Dion looked at him.

"Then we'll have to check everything we can."

"Excellent plan. Any suggestions where to start?"

Rebecca remembered the magazine at the station.

"The House of Culture. There was a photograph of an old building, and the magazine had a picture of a place that looked similar. We could try to find it."

"The North District," Dion added.

Mike nodded.

"At least that's a concrete direction."

They continued on.

Ahead, the street gradually narrowed. The houses grew lower, and empty lots overgrown with wet grass appeared more frequently between them. At an intersection stood a sign bearing the district's name. Its arrow pointed toward a long street, beyond which dark silhouettes of trees could be seen.

Rebecca took out her phone.

There was still no signal. Nothing had changed in the call log. She checked her messages, opened her notes, then turned off the screen.

She wanted to call someone. Anyone whose voice she might recognize. To hear an ordinary, irritated "Hello?", explain that she was lost, and receive a perfectly mundane piece of advice in return — to contact the police, find the nearest open place, or ask someone for directions.

But she couldn't remember a single phone number.

Rebecca stopped beside the window of a closed shop and looked at her reflection.

A tired face. Damp hair. Dark circles beneath her eyes. Nothing unusual.

Dion and Mike were reflected behind her shoulder. Jessica stood a little farther away.

Rebecca turned her head to look directly at her.

Jessica was walking behind Mike.

She glanced at the glass again.

There was no one reflected behind her shoulder.

Rebecca turned sharply.

Jessica was only a few steps away. She noticed Rebecca had stopped and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Are you all right?"

Rebecca looked at the shop window once more. Only three people were reflected in it.

"Yes," she answered. "I only thought I saw something."

She caught up with the others without explaining.

Now she was frightened not only by what was happening around her. She was afraid that her own senses and perception could no longer be trusted.

If she could not be sure of what she had seen, how could she discover the truth about what she could not remember?

They continued toward the North District. The rain drummed against the street, water ran through the gutters, and yellow leaves clung to their soles. A building with broad windows appeared beyond the turn.

Rebecca did not know whether it was the place they were looking for.

But Dion stopped when he saw it.

He stared at the façade as though there were something behind the glass he had once lost.

"Dion?" Rebecca called softly.

He did not turn at once.

"I've been here."

"Do you remember?"

Dion shook his head.

"No. Not exactly."

He took a step toward the building.

"But I have a feeling someone is waiting for us inside."

# Chapter 6. The Man Everyone Remembers

“Are you sure you’ve been here?” Rebecca asked.

Dion didn’t answer immediately. He stood in front of the building, his head tilted slightly, as though listening to a sound the others couldn’t hear.

The cultural center looked old, but not abandoned. Traces of light-colored paint remained on the façade, peeling in places down to the gray concrete. Wide windows began almost at ground level and stretched along two floors. Heavy curtains hung behind some of the panes; others were covered from the inside with something dark.

Letters from the old sign remained above the entrance. Several were missing, while the others had darkened from the damp. It was impossible to read the name in full.

Rebecca looked at the door. A sheet of paper was attached to the glass with four strips of yellowed tape. Water ran down it, but the writing inside remained dry.

She stepped closer.

“Entrance from the courtyard.”

“So the main entrance is closed?” Mike asked.

He pulled the door toward himself. It opened without resistance.

"Or someone simply didn't want people coming in this way," Jessica remarked.

"Very reassuring," Mike said.

Inside, it was cooler than outside. The lobby smelled of damp plaster, dust, and old paper. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling, several of its bulbs dark. Water stains discolored the floor, and chairs were stacked against the wall.

Everything looked as though the building hadn't been closed down completely, but had simply been left in the middle of an ordinary working day. Except there was no movement at all. No voices from neighboring rooms, no sound of footsteps on the upper floor, not even the familiar hum of ventilation.

Rebecca ran her fingers along the stair railing. Dust remained on her skin.

"No one's been here for a long time," she said.

"Then where does the light at the station come from?" Mike asked. "And the electricity here?"

"Maybe the buildings operate automatically."

"For whom?"

Rebecca didn't answer.

She understood that Mike wasn't expecting an explanation from her. He was simply voicing what everyone was thinking, and each new question made their situation a little more absurd.

Dion moved toward the wall where a notice board hung. Several faded posters remained on it: a concert, a children's play, an exhibition of local artists. Most of the dates had been erased.

One poster still showed a photograph of people standing on a stage. Their faces were too blurred to recognize anyone.

Dion looked at the photograph longer than the others.

"Does it look familiar?" Rebecca asked.

"I don't know."

He raised his hand, as though intending to touch the photograph, but stopped.

"I think I heard music here."

"What kind?"

"I can't remember. Just a sound. People sitting in the hall, someone playing the piano…"

He frowned and lowered his hand.

"And then everything stops."

"Suddenly?" Jessica asked.

Dion looked at her.

"Yes."

The girl turned away. Rebecca noticed that she had clenched her fingers so tightly that her knuckles had turned white.

"Did you remember something too?" she asked.

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

Rebecca didn't press her. She had already realized that trying to force memories out usually led only to irritation or a headache. And sometimes to something worse — to the feeling that a door was opening inside one's mind, with someone invisible standing behind it.

Meanwhile, Mike was checking the rooms on the ground floor. In one room, scenery was piled up; in another, there were long tables and cabinets filled with folders. The door to a third room was locked.

"Did they leave the keys here?" he asked, turning around.

"Check the drawers," Dion suggested.

"Already did."

Mike pulled the handle again, then knocked on the door.

The sound was dull.

He froze.

"What is it?" Rebecca asked.

"Nothing."

Mike placed his palm against the door and knocked again, this time a little higher.

Something creaked behind it.

Jessica came closer.

"Is someone in there?"

"Or something's loose," Mike replied.

He said it confidently, but took his hand away from the door.

They waited. Nothing else happened.

"Let's not break it," Dion said. "We'll check the other rooms first."

Mike clearly wanted to object, but eventually stepped back.

They walked into a long corridor. Photographs of past events hung on the walls. Rebecca barely looked at them until she noticed one frame positioned slightly lower than the others.

The glass was cracked in one corner.

The photograph showed people standing in front of the entrance to this very building. Some were smiling, some looking away, and one person was holding a folder. The picture was old, its colors almost faded, but several faces were still distinguishable.

Rebecca stopped.

"Dion, look."

He came over to her.

A woman in a dark coat stood in the center of the group.

The very same woman Rebecca had seen on the platform.

Rebecca felt her shoulders tense.

"That's her."

Mike returned from the neighboring room and looked at the photograph.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Her face wasn't really visible on the platform."

"But I remember her."

Jessica approached last. When she saw the photograph, she turned pale and stepped back.

"No."

"What?" Rebecca asked.

Jessica was staring at the woman in the center of the photograph.

"She shouldn't be here."

"Why?"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't know. Just… she shouldn't."

"Do you know her?"

"I told you I don't know!"

Jessica's voice echoed down the corridor. She herself flinched at how loud it had been, then fell silent.

Rebecca didn't continue questioning her. She looked at the photograph, trying to understand exactly what was troubling her. The woman stood slightly apart from the others, wasn't smiling, and held her hands in front of her. At first glance, there was nothing unusual about her. But now that Rebecca knew what the woman looked like, it seemed to her that she hadn't simply ended up in the photograph by chance.

She was looking into the camera as though she knew who would be examining the photograph.

"There's someone else here," Dion said quietly.

He pointed to the edge of the picture.

A man stood there. Tall, wearing a dark jacket. A scar was visible above his right eyebrow.

Mike swore under his breath.

"There's our acquaintance."

"So he's been here too," Rebecca said.

"Or the photograph was taken somewhere else," Dion remarked.

Rebecca looked at him.

"You said yourself that you recognize this building."

"I said it seemed familiar."

"What's the difference?"

Dion didn't answer. He looked at the photograph again, as though hoping to see something in it that would help him make sense of things.

Mike took the frame off the wall. There was nothing on the back — only cardboard, darkened along the edges, and rusty metal fasteners.

"Someone didn't just gather us in one place," he said. "Someone is leaving us clues. Photographs, inscriptions, strange calls. And all of it leads to people we supposedly don't remember."

"But why?" Jessica asked.

Mike looked at her.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to find out."

He placed the frame on the windowsill and headed for the stairs.

"Let's check the second floor. If there are more photographs here, maybe we'll find something useful."

Rebecca lingered by the picture. She didn't want to leave it unattended, but standing in the corridor staring at unfamiliar faces seemed pointless too.

She was about to follow the others when she heard a quiet sound.

A rustle.

Very close.

Rebecca turned toward the locked room.

The rustle came again. Then there was a faint knock, as though someone had struck an object against the wall.

She stepped closer.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

Rebecca looked at the handle. It remained motionless.

"Rebecca?" Dion called from the stairs.

She didn't answer at once.

"I thought there was someone inside."

Dion came back to her. Mike and Jessica approached as well, but no one touched the door.

"We've heard this before," Mike said. "And found nothing."

"But you heard it too," Rebecca objected.

"I did."

"Then why are we just leaving?"

Mike looked at the locked door.

"Because I'm not going to open something unknown just because I heard a sound."

"What if there's a person in there?"

"Then they could have answered."

Rebecca understood his reasoning. And yet the thought that someone might be behind the door, waiting for help, wouldn't leave her alone.

She knocked cautiously.

"If you can hear us, say something."

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then a voice came from the other side:

"Rebecca."

She recoiled.

It was a man's voice. Quiet, almost calm. He said her name as though he had known her for a long time.

Dion grabbed her hand.

"Don't answer."

Rebecca looked at him. His face had tightened, and his fingers were gripping her palm firmly.

"Did you recognize that voice?" she whispered.

"No."

But he stared at the door as though afraid of what might come next.

Mike stepped closer.

"Who's there?" he asked.

There was no answer.

He knocked harder.

"Hey! Can you hear us?"

Silence.

Mike tried the handle. It was locked.

"We need to find the key," Rebecca said.

"Let's check the upper floor first," Dion replied. "If someone really is here, they won't go anywhere."

Rebecca wanted to object, but the voice behind the door didn't

come again. And the longer they stood in the corridor, the more she felt she might have imagined it.

They went upstairs.

The second floor had several offices and a large hall with a wooden floor. Chairs were stacked along the walls, and an old piano stood at the far end. Its lid was closed, and a thick layer of dust covered its surface.

Dion approached the instrument.

He ran his finger along the edge of the lid, leaving a clean streak.

"Here," he said quietly.

Rebecca stopped beside him.

"What?"

"This place."

He looked at the hall, the windows, the empty rows of chairs.

"I remember it."

"What exactly?"

Dion closed his eyes.

"I was standing here. Someone was sitting in the hall. A woman was talking to me. I couldn't see her face, but I knew she was angry."

He opened his eyes.

"I wanted to explain something. But I couldn't."

"Why?"

"I don't remember."

Rebecca felt her own memory — or whatever it was —

respond to his words. For a moment, a room appeared before her eyes, lit by a reddish glow. Several people stood around a table. Someone was speaking too loudly. An open book lay on the table.

Rebecca drew a sharp breath.

The image disappeared.

"What's wrong?" Dion asked.

She shook her head, trying to pull herself together.

"I saw something."

"What?"

"A room. People. A book."

Dion watched her without interrupting.

"Was it here?" he asked at last.

"I don't know."

She wanted to add that the light had been red, but for some reason she couldn't bring herself to say those words. They seemed too important, although Rebecca didn't understand why.

Mike stood by the door, watching them. Jessica had moved to the window. She was looking out at the street, where the rain blurred the outlines of the houses.

"We need to find the others," she said.

Rebecca turned to her.

"Do you know who else should be here?"

Jessica slowly shook her head.

"No. But I'm sure there are more of us."

"How do you know?"

The girl didn't answer.

Instead, she pointed at the window.

Outside, on the opposite sidewalk, stood the man with the scar.

Brad.

This time he wasn't trying to hide. He was looking straight at the second-floor windows.

Rebecca rushed to the glass.

"Brad!"

The man raised his head, as though he had heard her, although the distance between them was too great. Then he turned away and headed toward the building's side entrance.

"He's coming here," Mike said.

Dion was already going down the stairs.

They reached the lobby just as the door below opened.

The man entered and stopped when he saw them all together.

Up close, he looked older than Rebecca had thought from the street. His wet hair clung to his forehead, his stubble was uneven, and the scar above his right eyebrow was thinner than it had appeared from a distance. His face bore the weariness of someone who hadn't rested in a long time, although he himself seemed not to notice it.

He looked carefully at each of them.

His gaze lingered a little longer on Mike.

Then he looked at Jessica.

And only after that — at Dion.

"So you did get together after all," he said.

"Do we know each other?" Dion asked.

The man smiled faintly.

"Good question."

"We found a photograph," Rebecca said. "You're standing next to a woman in a dark coat."

At the mention of the woman, the man's expression changed. Only slightly, but Rebecca noticed.

"Where did you find it?"

"Here," Mike answered. "On the wall."

The man looked at the staircase, then back at them.

"You shouldn't have come here all together."

"Why?" Jessica asked.

He paused.

"Because I don't know what will happen if we're together again."

"You speak as though you remember what happened before," Mike remarked.

"I remember some things."

"Which things?"

The man tiredly ran a hand over his face.

"Faces. Voices. A few conversations. Sometimes I think I remember entire events, but as soon as I try to put them back in order, everything falls apart."

"What is your name?" Rebecca asked.

He looked at her.

"Brad."

Rebecca felt a strange sense of relief. His name had seemed familiar even before he spoke it, as though she'd been waiting for precisely that answer.

"Do you remember us?" she asked.

Brad looked at her for a long time, then shifted his gaze to Dion.

"I remember your faces. But I can't say I know you the way I should know people I'm acquainted with. It's more as though I've seen you in a dream and tried to remember it after waking up."

"And the woman?" Mike asked. "The one in the photograph."

Brad didn't answer immediately.

"I remember her better."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"Can you at least explain why we've all ended up here?"

Brad looked at each of them. There was no mockery in his expression, nor any desire to evade the question. Only weariness and something resembling anxiety.

"If I knew," he said, "I'd have found a way out of here long ago."

He turned toward the exit.

"Where are you going?" Rebecca asked.

"To a place where we can talk without unwanted ears listening."

"You just said you don't know what's happening," Mike reminded him.

Brad stopped.

"I don't know what's happening now. But I know one thing: if you want to recover what you've forgotten, you'll have to learn not to trust every memory."

He looked again at the photograph in Mike's hands.

"And not every person who seems familiar to you."

After that, Brad went out into the rain.

For several seconds, no one moved.

"Are we going after him?" Jessica asked.

Mike looked at Dion.

"Do we have a choice?"

Dion was already heading for the door.

Rebecca followed him. She didn't know why Brad had stirred such a strong feeling of recognition in her, and she didn't understand whether she could trust him.

But one thing she knew for certain: the man hadn't been surprised to see them together.

He had been afraid of exactly that.

And apparently, it wasn't the first time he'd been afraid.

# Chapter 7. What Was Left Behind the Door

Brad didn't look back.

He walked down the narrow street, holding the collar of his coat, although the rain still seeped through the fabric. Water ran down his face, gathered at his chin, and fell onto the wet asphalt. He moved confidently, as though he knew where he was going, but there was something tense about his gait. Sometimes he slowed slightly, as if listening for a sound behind him, then quickened his pace again.

We followed him.

I couldn't say why I'd agreed to follow someone I'd known for only a few minutes. He hadn't explained how he knew the faces in the photograph, why Dion had reacted so strangely to his appearance, or what he had meant when he said we shouldn't trust every memory.

But after his words, I had an unpleasant feeling: perhaps he knew more about us than he wanted to tell us.

Or perhaps he was afraid of learning even more.

The street gradually narrowed. Low houses with darkened façades stretched along both sides. Curtains were visible behind some windows; others were covered with dust and small cracks. Downpipes rattled dully under the pressure of the water. In one

courtyard, the wind rolled an empty tin can across the ground, and its metallic ringing repeated so evenly that after a while I stopped perceiving it as an accidental sound.

The city seemed to be trying to convince us of its own normality.

There were houses, streets, signs, rubbish against the walls, and forgotten things on windowsills. Everything looked as though people had briefly left their places, intending to return in a few minutes. But no one came back. And the longer I remained here, the more clearly I understood that the emptiness of this city was unlike the emptiness of an abandoned place.

It seemed deliberate.

As though someone had removed everyone from here except us and was now watching what we would do.

"Brad!" Jessica called to him.

He didn't stop.

She quickened her pace, stepping around puddles, although some were so wide that there was no way to avoid them. I noticed her wrapping her arms around herself. Her clothes were soaked, her hair clung to her temples, but she seemed hardly to notice.

"Can you at least tell us where we're going?"

Brad finally turned his head.

"Somewhere we can talk."

"And we can't talk here?"

He looked at the windows of the nearest houses.

"I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know who might hear us."

Mike gave a quiet chuckle.

"Excellent. We've found someone who knows what's going on around us, but instead of explanations, we get riddles."

"I never said I knew what's going on," Brad replied.

"Then how do you know we shouldn't trust one another?"

Brad stopped.

The rain continued to roar over the street. Water ran down the walls, gathered along the curbs, and washed the dirt between the stones away. Brad looked at Mike, then shifted his gaze to the others.

"Because I've already heard people here talking about their memories. At first, everyone was certain they were telling the truth. Then it turned out that one remembered only the beginning, another remembered the end, and a third had been present at an event that had never happened at all."

"Are you saying we're making everything up?" Jessica asked.

"No. I'm saying that a memory can be real, while the conclusions drawn from it can be wrong."

He said it calmly, without trying to impress anyone. And that was precisely why his words seemed convincing to me.

I remembered the phone call. The male voice that had spoken my name. The fragments of sentences I'd been trying to piece together ever since I had arrived in this city. I remembered my own fear, remembered pressing the phone to my ear, trying to

make out the words.

But I didn't know who had called me.

I didn't know whether the person on the other end of the line had really wanted to warn me of danger.

And I couldn't be sure that I'd remembered everything I heard correctly.

"And you?" I asked. "Do you trust your own memories?"

Brad looked at me more attentively.

Something in his face changed. Not his entire expression, just some small detail: his gaze became wary, his lips tightened slightly. I had the impression that the question had affected him more than he'd expected.

"No," he said after a pause. "That's why I'm not going to ask you to take my word for it."

He walked on again.

This time, no one asked any questions.

We reached a small building squeezed between an old pharmacy and a closed shop. Faded traces of an inscription could still be made out on the façade, but most of the letters had crumbled away along with the plaster. A wooden bench, blackened by moisture, stood in front of the entrance. An awning hung above the door, beneath which the rain sounded quieter.

Brad took a bunch of keys from his pocket.

I stopped.

"You have keys?"

"Yes."

“Where did you get them?”

He looked at the keys as though he’d only just noticed them in his hand.

“I don’t know.”

Mike let out a short breath.

“This is getting irritating.”

“It’s irritating me too,” Brad replied.

He tried one key, then another. The third turned in the lock with a dry click.

The door opened.

Inside, it smelled of damp wood, dust, and something faintly sweet — perhaps old paint or paper that had been lying in a closed room for a long time. Brad felt for the light switch. The ceiling lamp flickered several times before lighting up, illuminating a narrow corridor with peeling walls.

I entered last.

The rain remained outside the door, but its sound hadn’t disappeared. It seeped inside through gaps in the frames, echoed dully through the pipes, and somewhere far away, behind a wall, turned into a barely audible rustling.

The room was small. A staircase stood on the left, two closed doors on the right.

At the end of the corridor was a room filled with chairs and tables. Rolled-up carpets lay on the floor, and a tall cabinet with empty shelves stood along the wall.

“What is this place?” Dion asked.

Brad didn't answer immediately.

He ran his fingers along the doorframe, paused at a small indentation in the wood, and frowned.

"I think I've been here."

"You think?" Mike repeated.

"I remember this corridor. But I don't remember exactly when."

Dion stepped closer.

"What were you doing here?"

Brad slowly shook his head.

"I don't know."

Mike rolled his eyes but said nothing. Jessica went into the far room and stopped beside a table. Several sheets of paper, yellowed at the edges, lay on its surface. She carefully picked up the top sheet, looked at it, and turned it over.

"There's something written here."

We approached her.

The paper contained short lines arranged one beneath another. The handwriting was uneven, almost illegible in places. Some words had been crossed out several times, as though the person writing them had kept changing their mind.

Jessica leaned closer to the lamp.

"'Don't try to remember everything at once.'"

She moved her gaze to the next line.

"'If you hear a familiar voice, don't answer until you understand who it belongs to.'"

I felt my fingers grow cold.

A familiar voice.

For a moment, it seemed to me again that the phone was lying in my hand and the quiet, almost broken breathing of an unknown person was coming from its speaker.

"Rebecca…"

I involuntarily looked at the pocket of my coat where my phone lay.

It was switched off. At least, I remembered turning it off after trying to check the call log. But now I didn't want to take it out and look at the screen.

"Keep reading," Dion asked.

Jessica continued:

"'Don't trust someone just because they remember your name.'"

She fell silent.

"Is that all?"

"No," I said.

At the bottom of the page, almost at the very edge, another line was visible. The ink had blurred, but the letters could still be made out.

I leaned over the table.

"'Especially if they remember who you were.'"

The room fell silent.

Even Mike couldn't find anything to say.

I stared at the sheet, trying to understand who might have

left it there. Someone who knew us? Someone who had watched us come to our senses? Or had one of us written these words ourselves before forgetting what we'd done?

The last thought seemed so unpleasant that I hurried to dismiss it.

"Maybe someone's trying to scare us," Mike said.

"Maybe," Brad agreed.

"Or someone decided to leave a useful instruction for people who don't even remember how they got here."

"That's possible too."

"Can you say something definite at least once?"

Brad looked at him.

"I can. We shouldn't stay here too long."

"Why?"

Brad pointed to the sheet.

"Because whoever wrote this knew we might come here."

"How did you figure that out?"

"It addresses several people. Not just one. And it's written as though the person knows we'll have trouble with our memories."

"Everyone in this city has trouble with their memory," Mike remarked.

"Then why is it warning us in particular?"

Mike didn't answer.

I took the sheet from the table. The paper was dry, although the entire room smelled of dampness. There was no signature or date on the back. Only a few faint marks resembling fingerprints.

When I ran my thumb over one of them, I suddenly felt as though I'd held this sheet before.

Not just a similar one.

This very one.

For a moment, I saw my own hand leaning over a table. Beside it stood a cup with steam rising from it. Someone was speaking behind me, but I couldn't make out the words. The room was warm, and rain was falling outside the window.

I knew I was supposed to write something important.

Something that mustn't be forgotten.

The flash disappeared so quickly that I barely had time to understand what had happened.

"Rebecca?"

Dion's voice brought me back to the room.

I raised my head. He was standing very close, looking at me with concern.

"You've gone pale."

"I thought I'd seen this note before."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Dion didn't question me further. He only looked at the paper, then at me, as though trying to decide whether he should say something else.

"Did you remember anything?" Jessica asked.

"Just a room. A table. A cup. And someone's voice."

"A man's?"

I thought about it.

"I'm not sure."

Jessica nodded, but tension appeared in her face. She had remembered something too — I was almost certain of it. However, she didn't tell us, and I wasn't going to force her.

We knew too little about one another to demand complete openness.

And yet the words on the sheet wouldn't leave my mind.

"Don't trust someone just because they remember your name."

I looked at Dion.

He had remembered my name from the very beginning. When I first saw him, he had spoken it as though it were familiar to him. At the time, I'd decided it was a coincidence, that he'd simply heard me introduce myself or somehow learned my name beforehand.

Now that certainty seemed fragile.

"Dion," I called quietly.

He turned to me immediately.

"Yes?"

I wanted to ask him how he knew me. I wanted to ask why he sometimes looked at me as though something important had already happened between us, something I myself couldn't remember.

But the words caught in my throat.

I wasn't afraid of his answer.

I was afraid it might be one I'd heard before and forgotten.

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted to make sure you're here."

He looked at me for several seconds, then gave a barely perceptible nod.

"I'm here."

It was a simple promise. Perhaps he hadn't even understood how much I needed to hear it.

We decided to examine the other rooms.

Behind the first door was a small office. Metal cabinets stood along the wall, an open notebook lay on the desk, and beside the window was a chair with a broken leg. Water had collected on the windowsill, although the glass was intact.

The notebook contained entries, but every other page had been torn out. The remaining pages contained isolated words: "name," "memory," "door," "return." The last word had been circled so heavily that the paper had almost torn through.

Rebecca — or rather, I — didn't say it aloud.

I don't know why. Perhaps I didn't want it to be spoken in that room.

In the adjoining room stood shelves filled with books and folders. Most of the books had no titles. Some covers had swollen from the damp, while others were completely dry. On one shelf, I noticed a small wooden box.

It was closed.

"Don't touch it," Brad said.

I turned around.

He stood in the doorway, his face as tense as it had been on the street when I'd asked him about his memories.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Then why are you asking me not to touch it?"

Brad looked at the box.

"Because I think I've already seen what's inside."

"And what's in there?"

He remained silent for a long time.

"I don't remember."

Mike approached him and stood beside him.

"Listen, Brad. If you really want to help us, you'll have to start talking about more than just what you don't remember."

"I understand."

"Then tell us at least what you're sure of."

Brad ran his hand through his wet hair.

"I'm sure I knew some of you before. Not just met you on the street or seen you briefly. I knew you well enough to remember your habits, your voices, the way you look at someone when you don't believe them. But I can't remember where we met or what happened between us."

He looked at Jessica.

"Sometimes I feel I was supposed to do something. Or not do something. I remember the feeling, but not the event itself."

Jessica lowered her eyes.

"I get that too."

"With what?" Mike asked.

"With the feeling that I promised someone something. I can't remember exactly whom. I only know that I didn't keep the promise."

Mike turned toward the shelves and ran his fingers along the book spines. He was doing it too carefully, as though trying to keep his hands occupied.

"Maybe it's just the consequences of what we've been through," he said. "We don't remember anything because our memory is damaged. And the brain tries to fill in the gaps."

"Possibly," Brad replied.

"That's it. We don't have to look for a message from the past in every stain on the wall."

"I agree."

"Really?"

"Yes. But that doesn't explain why we've all ended up here."

Mike slowly turned toward him.

"And what if we never find out?"

Brad didn't answer.

Something struck the window. We all looked in that direction at the same time.

A yellow leaf lay on the windowsill. It had stuck to the wet glass, although the window was on the second floor. For several seconds, we watched it, waiting for it to slide down, but the leaf didn't move.

Then the light in the room flickered.

When it came on again, the leaf had disappeared.

"I saw that," Mike said quietly.

"We all did," Dion replied.

"No. I mean, I've seen it before."

Mike spoke uncertainly. He was staring at the window, but seemed no longer to notice the rain behind the glass.

"A yellow leaf on a window. I remember it. And I remember someone standing beside me."

"Who?" Jessica asked.

Mike pressed his lips together.

"I don't know."

He said it almost angrily, as though he were furious with his own memory.

Jessica didn't ask any more questions. She simply approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder. It was a brief, natural gesture, without any awkwardness.

Mike froze.

For a moment, his expression softened, and I thought he was about to tell her something important. But then he looked away.

"Don't," he muttered. "I'm not falling apart."

Jessica removed her hand.

"I know."

She said it without offense, almost tenderly.

Mike didn't reply, but he no longer looked quite so irritated.

I looked away, feeling that I'd accidentally witnessed something personal. There was clearly a trust between them that

hadn't disappeared along with their memories. Or perhaps it had appeared here anew — from small gestures, from the habit of noticing how another person was feeling even when they didn't want to explain anything.

I thought that such things might turn out to be more important than memories.

Not what we had once known about one another, but how we treated one another now.

We returned to the main room.

Brad stood by the table, examining the old notebook. He turned the pages slowly, without touching the damaged edges, occasionally pausing at individual lines.

"There's something else here," he said.

He turned the notebook toward us.

A circle had been drawn on the page. The lines were uneven, as though someone had tried to draw it several times. Inside were six small symbols connected by thin lines. Beneath each symbol was a word.

I couldn't read all the inscriptions at once.

"Return."

"Protection."

"Correction."

"Choice."

"Liberation."

"Control."

I felt my breath catch.

Six words.

Not names, not titles, not explanations — just six separate concepts, each of which seemed too personal to have appeared here by chance.

"What is this?" Jessica asked.

"I don't know," Brad answered. "But I've seen this drawing before."

"Where?" Mike asked.

Brad pressed his fingers to his temple.

"I can't remember."

"You remember everything except the most important thing," Mike said sharply.

"Do you think I'm doing it on purpose?"

"I think you know more than you're telling us."

"Perhaps," Brad replied. "But that doesn't mean I understand exactly what I know."

Dion approached the table.

He stared at the words as though trying to find a connection between them. His finger stopped beside one of the symbols, but he didn't touch the paper.

"Protection," he murmured.

I looked at him.

"Did you remember something?"

Dion didn't answer immediately.

"No. Just a feeling."

"What kind?"

He moved his hand away from the page.

"That I was supposed to protect someone."

"Whom?"

Dion closed his eyes for a few seconds.

"I don't know."

I noticed that his breathing had become uneven. It was as though he were trying to hold on to something elusive, but the harder he tried, the farther it slipped away.

I wanted to touch his hand, but stopped. We still didn't know how safe it was to awaken such memories, and we didn't understand why some of them came with fear.

"Don't force yourself," I said.

Dion opened his eyes and looked at me.

"I don't want to forget."

"Maybe you won't have to. But you don't need to remember everything at once."

He looked at me for a long time, and there was something strangely familiar in his gaze. Not a memory in the ordinary sense, but a feeling of closeness that needed no proof. I wanted to believe it belonged to us, rather than to something that had happened long before our meeting in this city.

"You're right," he said at last.

But his voice sounded as though he were trying to convince himself above all.

I looked at the notebook again.

"Return."

That word drew my gaze more strongly than the others. I didn't understand why. It evoked both hope and anxiety, as though it promised to bring something lost back without warning of the price.

For a moment, I thought I heard Alexey's voice.

Not clearly, not as a real voice — rather, the echo of a phrase I'd once heard and hadn't been able to forget.

If one day you're offered the chance to bring me back, don't agree…

I raised my head sharply.

No one noticed my reaction. Jessica was trying to examine the drawing, Mike was arguing with Brad about whether they should take the notebook, and Dion stood beside me, lost in his thoughts.

I didn't tell them about the voice.

Not yet.

I didn't know whether it was a fragment of a real memory or my own fear taking on a familiar shape. But I understood one thing very clearly: the word "return" meant something to me that I couldn't yet explain.

And perhaps that was precisely why I was most afraid to look at it.

We decided to take the notebook with us.

Brad didn't object, although when Mike put it in his bag, he continued looking at the table for some time. Then he slowly ran his palm over its surface, as though checking whether anything important had been left there.

"Are you sure you've been here before?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then why can't you remember how you got here?"

Brad looked at the door.

"Maybe because the most important thing happened somewhere else."

"Where?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you."

He said it without irritation. It seemed to me that he was genuinely tired of his own helplessness.

We went out into the corridor. The light overhead flickered again, and for several seconds the walls sank into darkness. When the lamp came on, I thought someone was standing near the staircase.

I saw only a silhouette — motionless, tall, with its arms hanging at its sides.

"There's someone there," I whispered.

Dion immediately turned toward the staircase.

"Where?"

I pointed.

The silhouette disappeared.

Mike stepped forward but stopped at the first stair.

"Did anyone else see it?"

Jessica nodded.

"Yes."

Brad said nothing. He stared at the staircase as though trying

to remember not the person's face, but the very reason that silhouette should have been there.

"We'd better leave," he said.

"Again?" Mike looked at him tiredly. "We've only just arrived."

"I know."

"Then explain."

Brad turned toward us.

"I don't know who was there. But I remember seeing a similar figure once before. And after that, someone disappeared."

"Who?" Jessica asked.

Brad fell silent.

I waited for him to answer, but he only lowered his gaze.

"I don't remember."

Mike swore quietly.

No one tried to stop him.

We went outside, leaving the building behind. The rain hadn't weakened. Water ran down the steps and spread across the sidewalk in thin streams. I looked back at the dark windows on the second floor, expecting to see the silhouette again, but there was nothing behind the glass.

Only the reflection of the street, our blurred figures, and yellow leaves the wind pressed against the wet asphalt.

Brad stopped beneath the awning.

"I have to tell you something."

Mike folded his arms across his chest.

"Finally."

Brad ignored his tone.

"When I saw you at the cultural center, I felt as though everything were repeating itself. I couldn't remember exactly what had happened before, but I recognized that feeling. As though we'd found ourselves once again in a place we'd already tried to leave."

"And how did it end?" Dion asked.

Brad looked at him.

"I don't know."

"You realize how that sounds?"

"Yes."

"You're saying we've met before, that all of this has happened before, that someone disappeared, but you can't explain anything specific."

"I know."

"And you still expect us to follow you?"

Brad lowered his head. For a moment, he seemed to me not mysterious or dangerous, but simply a confused man trying to hold on to fragments of something vast and terrible in his memory.

"No," he said. "I don't expect you to believe me. But if you want to understand what happened to us, we'll have to search together."

Dion was silent for a long time.

"Fine," he said at last. "But from now on, no one deliberately

hides anything."

Brad met his gaze.

"Agreed."

"And if anyone remembers something, they'll tell the others."

"Agreed."

Mike looked at Jessica, then back at Brad.

"And what if it turns out that one of us is responsible for what happened?"

The question came unexpectedly.

Jessica slowly turned toward him. Dion frowned. Brad didn't look away.

"Then we'll have to figure out exactly what happened," he replied. "And before judging anyone, understand what each of us knew at the time."

"And what if someone knew enough to stop it all?"

Brad turned pale.

Only slightly, but I noticed.

"Then that will matter," he said.

"A great deal," Mike added.

Brad didn't argue.

I watched them and felt something new gradually forming between us. Not trust — that was still a long way off. Rather, an agreement to keep walking together, even if one day we discovered that the past left us no chance of remaining friends.

I wanted to believe we could accept the truth, whatever it turned out to be.

But I was already beginning to suspect that it wasn't only a matter of what we'd forgotten.

Perhaps each of us had forgotten something of our own, and these separate gaps were pieces of a single story. If we put them together, we might find an answer. Or we might see just how badly we'd been mistaken in trying to explain everything separately.

We moved farther down the street.

Brad walked ahead, but now he occasionally looked back to check that we hadn't fallen behind. Jessica stayed beside him, asking short questions about places he seemed to remember. Mike walked on the other side and took little part in the conversation, although I noticed how attentively he listened to every word Jessica said.

Dion came to walk beside me.

For a while, we went in silence. I heard water squelching beneath our soles, the wind stirring the branches of trees behind low fences, and a loose door slamming somewhere in the distance.

"You were frightened in that building," Dion said.

"Yes."

"Because of the silhouette?"

"Not only that."

He didn't ask what else had frightened me.

I was grateful to him for that.

"Dion," I said after a few steps. "Did you really know me

before?"

He slowed down.

This time, he didn't answer immediately or try to hide his confusion.

"I think so."

"And who was I to you?"

He looked at me, and something flickered in his eyes that I couldn't understand.

"I don't know, Rebecca. But I think it was important."

I nodded, although something inside me tightened.

I wanted to hear a different answer. I wanted him to say that we'd been close, that he remembered me, that there had been something between us capable of surviving even the loss of memory.

But if he remembered nothing, I didn't want to force him to invent a past just to make me feel better.

"And now?" I asked.

Dion looked at me more attentively.

"What about now?"

"Am I important to you now?"

He stopped.

The rain drummed against the awning of the nearest bus stop, beneath which we'd found ourselves while the others walked a few steps ahead. Water ran along the edge of the roof, forming a transparent curtain in front of us.

Dion didn't look away.

"Yes," he said. "You are."

He said it quietly, without solemnity, and I believed him.

Not because he remembered our past. Perhaps he didn't remember it at all.

But because now, in this unfamiliar city, he had still stopped to answer my question.

And for the first time, I felt that there could be something real between us, even if the past remained hidden forever.

We caught up with the others.

Ahead, beyond the bend, another building came into view — a low, elongated structure with dark windows and a peeling sign. Brad stopped in front of it and stared at the entrance for a long time.

"Here," he said.

"What is it?" Mike asked.

Brad ran a hand over his face, wiping away the rainwater.

"I don't remember exactly. But I'm sure we need to go inside."

I looked at the building.

A small sign hung on the door. Most of the letters had worn away, but one word could still be read.

"Archive."

And for some reason, when I saw it, I felt more frightened than I had at the sight of any of the strange things we'd encountered so far.

Because I suddenly realized that perhaps our past really was stored somewhere here.

And perhaps it was waiting for us not so that we could remember it.

But so that we could finally find out what we'd done.

# Chapter 8. The Archive of Forgotten Names

The sign above the entrance was hanging by a single rusty bracket. The wind barely moved it, and every time the metal struck the wall, a short, dry knock could be heard.

"Archive."

I reread the word several times, hoping it would bring back at least some memory. But nothing happened. Only an unpleasant sensation beneath my ribs, as if I were standing before a door behind which something familiar and, at the same time, completely foreign was hidden.

Brad had already taken hold of the handle.

"Wait," Mike said. "Why are you sure we need to come here?"

"I'm not sure."

"You just said we should go inside."

"I said I remember this place."

"Wonderful. And what exactly do you remember?"

Brad released the handle and looked at him.

"The corridor. The cabinets. The papers. And the feeling that I was looking for something important here."

"What were you looking for?"

"I don't know."

Mike turned away irritably.

"Sometimes I think you're making fun of us."

"If I knew the answers, I wouldn't be standing here in the rain."

For the first time, genuine exhaustion sounded in his voice. Not irritation and not an attempt to hide fear, but the exhaustion of someone who had been trying for too long to hold on to something slipping away from his mind.

Jessica looked at the door.

"Maybe we'll find at least some documents inside. If this really is an archive, there must be records here."

"Unless they were destroyed," Mike remarked.

"Then we'll look for whatever remains."

She said it simply, without any confidence that the search would lead to anything useful. And yet there was more determination in her words than in everything we had said so far.

Dion approached the door.

"Let's at least check."

He gently pressed the handle.

The lock was not locked.

The door opened with a prolonged creak, and a smell of dampness, old paper, and dust hit us. I expected to see an ordinary abandoned room, cluttered with boxes and unnecessary documents. But beyond the threshold began a long corridor lit by dim lamps. Metal cabinets with drawers stood on both sides, and near the far wall there was a counter behind which an archive employee had probably once sat.

Several scattered sheets lay on the floor.

Some were crumpled, others had stuck to the tiles because of the moisture. A clock with motionless hands hung on the wall. Nearby was a window, with rain running down its glass.

I took a step inside.

And immediately felt that I had been here before.

Not in the way familiar streets or rooms had seemed familiar earlier. This feeling was much stronger. It was as though I remembered my own movements in this corridor: how I walked along the cabinets, how I stopped near one of the drawers, how I hurriedly searched through the papers for something.

But as soon as I tried to see myself more clearly, the memory fell apart.

Only a feeling of urgency remained.

And the fear of being late.

"Rebecca?"

I turned around. Dion was standing near the door, looking at me attentively.

"Did you remember something again?"

"I think so."

"What exactly?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know. As if I had already searched for something here."

He did not try to convince me that it was merely imagination. He simply came closer, and that made me feel a little calmer.

"Then we'll look together," he said.

I looked at him.

Sometimes it seemed to me that he understood too well when it was necessary to remain silent. Not to ask unnecessary questions, not to demand explanations, not to try to fill every pause with words. Perhaps it was a trait of his character. Perhaps he had always been like that.

Or perhaps I simply wanted to believe that I knew at least something about him.

"All right," I answered.

We entered the archive.

The first hall was more spacious than one might have expected from the street. Tall shelves stretched along the walls, with narrow passages between them. Folders, boxes, and books with worn covers lay on the shelves. Some racks were almost empty, while others were filled to the very top.

Each section had a metal sign with an inscription.

"Personal Files."

"Registration Records."

"Applications."

"Archival Copies."

The last sign was attached to a cabinet whose door was missing. Inside stood folders of the same size, but the titles on their spines had almost completely faded.

"Maybe our documents are here?" Jessica suggested.

"What documents?" Mike asked. "We have no addresses, no surnames, and not even an understanding of where we came

from."

"But we have names."

"Names can be written on any piece of paper."

"Mike," Dion said quietly.

"What?"

"Let's try not to argue for at least five minutes."

Mike looked at him but did not have time to answer. Jessica had already approached the nearest cabinet and pulled one of its drawers toward her.

It resisted.

Inside were dozens of cards arranged alphabetically. Jessica began sorting through them, carefully taking them out one by one.

"There are surnames here," she said. "And dates."

I approached her.

The cards really did contain names, addresses, and some numbers. Some entries looked quite ordinary. Others were almost empty: only a name was written on them, while the remaining lines were left blank.

I ran my finger along the edge of one card.

The paper was old but not fragile. The ink had not blurred, although the room felt damp.

"Look," I said.

The name "Dion" was written on one of the cards.

Without a surname.

Below it was a short line, and beside it an empty field intended

for a date.

Dion approached me.

For several seconds he silently stared at the card, then took it in his hands.

"This could be another person," Mike said.

"Could be," Dion replied.

But he did not let go of the card.

"There's no surname here," Jessica remarked. "And no date either."

Dion turned it over. There was nothing on the back.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," I said.

I tried to speak calmly, although I did not believe my own words. Too many things were happening here for every strange occurrence to be dismissed as a coincidence.

Dion placed the card on the table.

"Let's see if there are others."

We continued searching.

The cards were arranged not only alphabetically. In some drawers, the names were listed in reverse order; in others, the entries were grouped according to an unknown principle. From time to time, we came across cards without surnames, but none matched our names.

While I was sorting through the papers, I remembered a strange detail from that brief vision in the previous building: a table, a cup, an open book. At the time, I could not understand where I had been or why I had been trying to write something

down.

Now I was looking at the cards and feeling that the answer was somewhere nearby.

Perhaps I really had worked with documents. Perhaps I had come here for some reason. But if that was true, why could I not remember a single face or conversation?

I closed the drawer.

"Something wrong?" Dion asked.

"I don't know. I feel as though I'm supposed to find something specific here."

"Do you remember what it is?"

"No. Only the certainty that it's important."

He looked at the cabinets.

"Then let's not rush. If this is a real memory, it may come back."

I wanted to ask how he knew, but changed my mind.

Dion himself could not explain many things that were happening to him. There was no point in demanding certainty from him when he did not have it.

Instead, I returned to the cards.

Brad, meanwhile, had gone to the far end of the hall.

He moved slowly, running his eyes over the inscriptions on the shelves. Sometimes he stopped and touched the spines of the folders, as if hoping that a familiar title would help him remember his past.

At one point, he froze beside a narrow door almost hidden

behind a tall cabinet.

"There's something here," he said.

Mike approached first.

"What exactly?"

"I don't know. But I remember this door."

He tried the handle.

The door was locked.

Brad frowned, then took the same set of keys from his pocket that he had used at the previous building. He tried several keys, but none fit.

"Give it here," Mike said.

Brad handed him the bunch.

Mike tried two more keys, then returned them.

"Doesn't fit."

"Then we'll have to find another way," Jessica said.

"Or leave the door alone," Mike remarked.

Brad did not answer.

He stood in front of it, keeping his eyes on the handle. I noticed that his right hand had clenched into a fist.

"Brad?" I called.

He seemed not to hear.

"Brad."

He turned sharply.

"What?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

The answer came too quickly.

I looked at the door.

At eye level, just below the lock, there was a shallow scratch in the wood. Several lines crossed each other, forming an irregular symbol. It looked either like a triangle or a letter written by someone who did not know how to hold a pen.

Brad followed my gaze.

And suddenly stepped back.

"What is it?" Dion asked, approaching us.

"I don't know," I answered. "Some kind of symbol."

Dion leaned closer.

As soon as he saw the scratch, his expression changed. He did not step back like Brad, but recognition appeared in his eyes so clearly that I noticed it immediately.

"Have you seen it before?" I asked.

Dion did not answer.

"Dion?"

He slowly raised his hand and stopped it a few centimeters from the door without touching the surface.

"I think," he said, "I know what it means."

Mike stopped smirking.

"And what is it?"

Dion stared at the symbol as though trying to read words written in invisible ink.

"I can't remember."

He said it with such effort that I understood this was not

ordinary forgetfulness. Something was preventing him from recovering the memory. It was as if he were looking at a closed door not only in front of himself, but also inside his own memory.

I cautiously took his hand.

Dion flinched but did not pull away.

"You don't have to," I said quietly. "Don't force yourself."

He looked at our hands.

For a moment, it seemed to me that he wanted to say something, but instead he simply squeezed my fingers.

Brad was watching us.

I did not know exactly what he had seen in that gesture. Perhaps nothing special. But an expression flashed across his face that I could not interpret: not surprise and not envy, but rather the sadness of someone who had been reminded of something lost.

Then he turned back toward the door.

"We need to find the key," he said.

"Why?" Mike asked. "If we don't know what's inside, why open it at all?"

Brad remained silent for a while.

"Because I'm sure we've already tried to get in there."

"Who — we?"

Brad raised his eyes to him.

"I don't know."

Mike tiredly ran his hand over his face.

"Of course."

But this time he did not argue any further.

We found the key in the neighboring room.

More precisely, Jessica found it. It lay in a small tin box hidden behind a stack of folders. There were no inscriptions or drawings on the lid. Inside, besides the key, were several paper clips and a sheet of paper folded into four.

"There's something written here," she said.

I approached her.

There were only a few lines on the sheet, written in neat, almost calligraphic handwriting.

"If you have found this key, it means you have returned.

Do not open the door if you are not ready to learn what you remember incorrectly.

And do not let him decide for you."

I reread the last line.

"Who is 'him'? " Mike asked.

Jessica shook her head.

"I don't know."

Brad held out his hand.

"Let me see."

She handed him the sheet.

He read the note, and I saw his jaw tense.

"Do you understand who this is referring to?" I asked.

"No."

"But you clearly felt something."

Brad raised his eyes to me.

"Yes. I felt something."

"What?"

He hesitated.

"That this note isn't meant for a random person."

"For whom, then?"

Brad looked at the paper again.

"For someone who already knows what's behind the door. Even if he himself doesn't remember it."

No one answered.

I thought about the phone call. About the man who had said my name, about the warning whose meaning was still unclear. I remembered how I had tried to make out his words, how afraid I had been of missing even a single sound.

"Don't open…"

I suddenly drew a breath.

Dion immediately turned toward me.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

He did not believe me, but did not insist.

I looked at the key in Jessica's hand.

Perhaps the note had nothing to do with my phone call. Perhaps the coincidence was accidental. But I could no longer get rid of the thought that the warning I had heard at the very beginning referred precisely to this door.

And whatever was behind it, someone had already tried to keep me from seeing it.

"We need to decide whether to open it or not," Dion said.

Mike crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm in favor of opening it. If someone leaves warnings, then they have something to hide."

"And what if the warning was made precisely so that we wouldn't make a mistake?" Jessica asked.

"Then let them explain what the mistake is."

"If they could explain it, they wouldn't have to leave notes."

Mike looked at her but did not argue.

Jessica placed the key in her palm and thought for a moment. I noticed that she was in no hurry to hand it to Brad, even though he had been the one insisting on finding it.

"We don't have to open it now," she said. "We can inspect the other rooms first. Maybe we'll find something else."

"Agreed," Dion answered.

Brad looked at the closed door.

I expected him to start objecting, but he only slowly nodded.

"All right."

He said it calmly, but it seemed to me that he was holding himself back. As though every minute we spent away from the door took him farther from something he was supposed to remember.

I did not know whether that memory was real or merely a feeling.

But for the first time, I wondered what would happen if Brad was right and there really was something behind the door capable

of changing our understanding of the past.

We returned to the main hall.

Jessica placed the key and the note on the table so that no one would accidentally lose them. Mike continued inspecting the cabinets. Dion helped me check the folders, while Brad remained near the entrance to the far corridor.

I opened another drawer.

Inside were folders bearing names, but this time they were not arranged alphabetically.

Separate words were written on their spines, familiar to me from the drawing in the notebook.

"Return."

"Protection."

"Correction."

I slowly pulled out the folder with the first word.

It was almost empty. Inside lay a single sheet with just a few sentences written on it.

"Not everything that returns belonged to you.

Not every loss can be corrected.

And not every protection saves the one you want to save."

I read the lines to myself.

Then again.

The words were simple, but there was some bitter certainty in them. As though the person who had written them had already made a mistake and was now trying to warn someone who might repeat it.

I turned the sheet over.

There was nothing on the other side.

"Found anything?" Dion asked.

I handed him the paper.

He read it silently. His gaze lingered longer on the words about protection than on the others.

"There are no explanations here," I said. "Only warnings."

"Perhaps that's all that remains."

"Of what?"

Dion returned the sheet.

"Of what we forgot."

I looked at the folder again.

"Return."

A feeling of someone else's presence arose in my mind. Not a person standing beside me, but something distant, as though a voice were coming from a room where I had once been. I could not make out the words, but I felt that I had to answer.

I gripped the edge of the table.

"Rebecca?"

Dion's voice was quiet, but clear enough to bring me back to what was happening.

"Everything's fine," I said.

He did not contradict me.

I put the sheet back into the folder and closed the drawer.

At that moment, a sound came from the far corridor.

Quiet, barely distinguishable.

As though someone had run a fingernail across wood.

We froze.

The sound repeated.

This time I recognized it.

It was coming from behind the locked door.

Jessica raised her head. Mike slowly straightened. Brad came out of the corridor and looked at us as though he had been waiting for exactly this.

"Is anyone in there?" Mike asked.

There was no answer.

Only another scraping sound.

Then — a quiet knock.

One.

A second.

A third.

I felt a chill run down my back.

And suddenly I heard a voice.

It was quiet, almost calm. A man was speaking from behind the door as though he were standing very close and had no doubt we would hear him.

"Rebecca."

I stopped breathing.

Dion instantly turned toward me.

"Don't answer."

The voice behind the door fell silent for a moment.

Then it said my name again.

"Rebecca. I know you're there."

I could not move.

Everything happening around me seemed to recede into the background. I heard only that voice and my own heart, beating so hard that every thump echoed in my temples.

I felt that I was supposed to know this man.

Not simply recognize his voice — remember what he looked like, how he moved, how he pronounced my name. I felt that I had heard it many times before, but my memory gave me nothing except a painful sense of closeness.

"Who are you?" Jessica finally asked.

Dion sharply turned toward her.

"Don't."

But it was too late.

Something creaked quietly behind the door.

"You have come together again," the man said. "I thought you wouldn't find the way this time."

Mike stepped toward the corridor.

"Who are you?"

The man did not answer.

Instead, he said:

"Brad, you remember what happened last time, don't you?"

Brad froze.

His face became completely motionless. He stared at the door without blinking, and for the first time I saw not confusion in him, but genuine fear.

"Brad?" Jessica called quietly.

He did not answer.

The voice behind the door spoke again.

"You remember what you were supposed to do."

Brad took a step back.

"Shut up," he said.

He spoke so quietly that I barely heard him.

But the man behind the door heard.

"Do you still think silence will change anything?"

Brad abruptly raised his head.

"I said, shut up!"

His shout echoed off the walls and died away in the corridor.

For several seconds, silence fell.

Then a short, almost sad laugh came from behind the door.

"So you do remember something after all."

After those words, a key turned in the lock.

We all stepped back.

The door did not open. The handle simply slowly moved downward, as though the person on the other side were checking whether it was securely locked.

Then the handle returned to its original position.

We heard no footsteps.

No one knew whether the man had left or was still standing behind the door.

Brad stared at the lock, his hands clenched into fists. Jessica approached him but did not touch his shoulder as she had before.

She stopped beside him, leaving him the opportunity to decide for himself whether he wanted to speak.

"Who was that?" Mike asked.

Brad shook his head.

"I don't know."

"Don't lie."

"I'm not lying!"

He turned toward Mike, and this time there was so much pain in his voice that Mike fell silent.

Brad took several deep breaths, trying to calm down.

"I don't know who he is. But I know he wants me to remember something."

"What exactly?"

Brad looked at me.

His gaze was heavy, almost pleading, as though he wanted to warn me about something but could not find the words.

"I think," he finally said, "that we didn't end up here together by accident."

I looked at the closed door.

Now I understood that the archive was not merely a place where documents were kept. Someone knew about our return. Someone knew our names. And judging by the way the man addressed Brad, he knew much more about our past than we did ourselves.

But the most frightening thing was not that.

When the voice pronounced my name, I felt not only fear.

Somewhere deep inside me, a desire to open the door arose.

Not out of curiosity. Not because I wanted to know the truth.

But because a part of me already knew who was on the other side.

And that part desperately wanted to see him.

I did not tell anyone about it.

While we stood in the corridor, I remembered the phone call again. Not separate words, not fragments of phrases, but the voice itself — its timbre, the pauses between words, the barely noticeable rasp.

It seemed to me that I had heard it before.

Perhaps it was the same man.

Perhaps not.

But now I had a new suspicion: the warning I had heard at the beginning might not have referred to what was behind the door.

It might have referred to what would happen if I finally remembered who had been calling me.

I looked at Dion. He stood beside me, keeping his eyes on the door. Then he noticed me looking at him and turned slightly toward me.

"We'll figure it out," he said quietly.

I wanted to believe him.

But for the first time since we had met, I was afraid not only for myself.

I was afraid for him.

Because when the man behind the door pronounced Brad's

name, I saw how Dion reacted to that voice. He recognized it too.

And unlike Brad, he tried to hide it.

# Chapter 9. The Voice Beyond

The voice behind the door did not disappear immediately.

For a few more seconds after the last words faded, we stood in the archive corridor, listening. It seemed that if any of us moved, the man would speak again. But there was silence behind the door.

Brad was the first to step back.

"We should leave."

"Why?" Mike asked. "Afraid he'll speak again?"

"No. I'm afraid that one day he'll stop speaking."

Mike frowned.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know."

Brad answered too quickly. I noticed how he clenched his fingers, as though trying to hold back something ready to break free. He clearly wanted to say more but could not find the words.

Dion was still looking at the closed door.

"You recognized that voice," I said.

He slowly turned his head.

"Why do you think so?"

"When he addressed you, your expression changed. You weren't simply frightened. You recognized him."

"Perhaps I imagined it."

"You often think something seems familiar, Dion. And every

time, you try to convince yourself that it means nothing."

He held my gaze but did not answer.

I didn't want to pressure him. Lately, I had increasingly felt that there was something more between us than either of us was ready to admit. Sometimes Dion looked at me as though he knew something about me that I myself did not know. At such moments, I wanted to ask him everything at once. But I was afraid of hearing an answer that would change the little that had managed to develop between us.

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