

Beneath the Silence

Romy Verbruggen

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First Edition

Chapter 1

The alarm went off at 06:47.

Emma didn't open her eyes right away. She lay still, as she did every morning - just listen to see if it was safe. Whether there were footsteps. Whether there were votes. Whether there was something that told her she had better stay.

Silence.

She exhaled.

The room was small. A mattress on the floor, a curtain that didn't quite close, a crack in the ceiling that she knew so well that she could draw it at night with her eyes closed. She was twenty-two years old and this was her life - a nine-square-meter room in a city that didn't know her name.

She got up. She took her sweater before she stood up, a custom from the past. Clothing as protection. Clothes as a wall.

In the bathroom she looked at herself in the mirror. Brown eyes. Circles. A mouth that had forgotten how to laugh without feeling learned.

"Good morning, Emma," she said to her reflection.

The mirror image said nothing back.

Chapter 2

At work, they called her the silent one.

She worked in a supermarket, behind the cash register, from eight to five. She said "good morning" and "have a nice day" and "do you have a bonus card?" She did well. She always did well. She had learned how to wear a mask so early that she almost forgot it was a mask.

Her colleague Noor thought she was nice but difficult to gauge.

"You're always so... quiet," Noor said one day, while they ate sandwiches together in the staff room.

Emma smiled. "Is that bad?"

"No," said Noor. "Just... I never know what you're thinking."

Well, Emma thought. That is exactly the intention.

What Noor didn't know: that Emma sat in the parking lot for ten minutes every morning before she went in. Just sit. Breathe. Reminding herself that she didn't have to be here who she had been at home.

That she could just be Emma here.

Whoever Emma was.

Chapter 3

There was a house. There is always a house.

It was on Merwedestraat, number 14, with a blue front door and a mailbox that was always full of bills. From the outside it looked like any other house. Curtains. A doormat. A bicycle next to the facade.

Emma had grown up there.

She didn't like to think about it - not the smell of cigarettes and old clothes, not the sound of her mother's footsteps on the stairs, not the way the walls seemed to shrink as night fell. She had learned to push it away, those memories, put them in a box and close the box.

But boxes sometimes open.

At night, when the city was quiet, the images came back. Patches. A voice. A door that locked. Her own voice that she no longer heard screaming because she had taught herself to keep quiet.

She was nine when she understood that silence was the safest language.

She was twenty-two and she still spoke to him fluently.

Chapter 4

On Tuesday, Emma went shopping at the small Albert Heijn around the corner. Not the supermarket where she worked - that felt too close, too exposed.

Mrs. De Bruin was always with the vegetables. A woman in her seventies, short, with white hair and a shopping bag with flowers on it. She greeted Emma every week.

"You again," said Mrs. De Bruin, this time with a smile. "Do you have cucumber yet?"

"Not yet," Emma said.

"Take one. They are good today."

Emma picked up a cucumber. She didn't know why, but she felt something warm in her chest during that little conversation. It was so little. So ordinary.

At home she sliced the cucumber and ate it with salt, Standing at the counter, while the evening was getting dark outside.

She thought of Mrs. De Bruin. How easily that woman smiled. As if that was just. As if that cost nothing.

For Emma, a smile always cost something.

Chapter 5

There was a calling card in her drawer. Dr. M. Verhoeven, GZ psychologist. She had received it from her doctor, eight months ago, after an appointment where she had been too honest. Not too fair - just a little bit. A crack in the mask.

She had said that sometimes she couldn't sleep at night.

The doctor had looked at her in a way that Emma did not like. Too understanding. Too soft. As if he was looking straight through her.

He had given the ticket. "You don't have to do anything with it," he had said. "But if you want to talk..."

She had nodded. She had left. She had put the card in the drawer.

Since then, she had taken it out three times. Three times the number almost called. Put the phone down three times.

What would she say? Where would she start?

In the beginning, people always said. Start at the beginning.

But the beginning was a place Emma hadn't dared to go to for years.

Chapter 6

Thursdays were the hardest.

She didn't know exactly why. Maybe because Thursday was the day her father used to be home. His day off. The day the atmosphere in the house changed as soon as his key went into the lock.

She remembered how as a child on Thursday she felt her stomach contract at breakfast. How she stayed outside as long as possible after school. How she learned to read the faces of others - was he about to explode, or was it quiet today?

She had become an expert in reading faces.

Now, twenty-two years old, she still felt that tension in her stomach on Thursday morning. Even though the house on Merwedestraat was far away. Even if he was no longer there.

The body forgets nothing.

She had read that somewhere. The body forgets nothing, even when the mind tries to forget.

She believed it.

Chapter 7

On a Saturday afternoon Noor rang the bell.

Emma was shocked by the sound of the doorbell - she always needed a second to remind herself that a doorbell was just a doorbell. That there was no danger on the other side of the door.

It was Noor, with a tupperware tray and a shy smile.

"I've made too much," she said. "Moroccan lentil soup. My mother always says that I cook for an entire army."

Emma stood in the doorway. She didn't know what to do with this gesture - with this warmth that just stood on her doorstep, uninvited and well-intentioned.

"Thank you," she finally said.

"You don't have to let me in," Noor said quickly, as if she felt Emma didn't want that. "I just wanted to..." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I was just thinking about you."

Emma looked at her. "Why?"

Noor thought for a moment. "Because you're always there for everyone at work. And I don't think anyone will ever think of you."

Emma couldn't say anything.

She took the tray. She closed the door. She leaned her back against the wall and stood there for a long time, the hot tray pressed against her chest.

She didn't cry. She had taught herself to cry.

But there was something - a lump, somewhere deep - that loosened for a moment.

Just for a moment.

Chapter 8

There was a phrase that Emma never forgot.

She had been fourteen. She had told her mother - for the first time, with trembling hands and a voice that was almost nothing - what was happening at home. What her father did. How scared she was.

She had waited. She had hoped.

Her mother had looked at her. Long. And then she had said:

"Don't exaggerate like that."

Three words.

Emma had swallowed them, those three words, and they had never come out again. They had nestled inside somewhere, like spines, and every time she wanted to start about something after that, she felt them. Don't exaggerate like that. Don't exaggerate like that.

She had stopped doing it. With talking. With trying.

She had chosen silence, and silence had chosen her.

And so they had stayed together, Emma and the silence, all those years.

Chapter 9

She ate Noor's soup that evening, at the small table by the window.

It was warm and spicy and tasted like cumin and tomato and something she couldn't name - home feeling, perhaps. That's how home felt if you had had it normally. She imagined it.

People walked by outside. A man with a dog. Two teenage girls laughing at something on a phone. An older woman with an umbrella.

Everyone had a life.

Emma too, she said to herself. Emma too.

But sometimes it felt like her life had begun as a book from which the first chapters were torn out. She tried to understand the story without the beginning. She tried to know herself without knowing who she should have become.

She rinsed the tray. Put it on the counter.

Tomorrow she would bring it back to Noor.

That was already something. Tomorrow. Bring back. Norwegian.

Little things. She lived on small things.

Chapter 10

She couldn't sleep that night.

She lay on her mattress and stared at the crack in the ceiling. The city hummed softly outside. Somewhere in the distance a siren, then silence.

She thought of her mother. To her father. At the house on the Merwedestraat.

She thought of Noor, who had just thought of her.

She got up. Walked to the drawer. Took out the ticket.

Dr. M. Verhoeven, GZ psychologist.

She read it. Once, twice.

She picked up her phone. Dialed the number - not to call, she said to herself, just to see what it looked like on her screen.

But her finger hung above the green call button.

She thought of the soup. To Mrs. De Bruin and the cucumber. To the general practitioner who had looked at her with too much understanding.

To the fact that she was twenty-two and had never told anyone what had really happened.

She took a breath.

She called.

It went over twice.

"You are connected to the practice of dr. Verhoeven We are currently closed. Our opening hours are-"

She hung up.

But she had called.

For the first time she had called.

She didn't put the card back in the drawer. She put it on the counter, next to Noor's washed-up container.

Visible. Reachable.

Ready for tomorrow.

Chapter 11

The Monday after the night she had called - or almost called, because a call text hardly counts as a real step, said a little voice in her head - started like every Monday started. With the alarm clock. With listening. With the silence she had to check first before she could relax.

Emma lay on her back and looked at the ceiling. The crack was still there. Of course he was still there. Cracks don't go away. They grow at most, slowly and patiently, as everything you try to ignore.

She had slept badly. That wasn't new, but this night had been different than usual. Normally she woke up to images - shreds of memories that she chased away during the day but that went their own way at night. Tonight it had not been an image. It was a feeling. A kind of vibration deep in her chest, as if something was moving that had been standing still for years.

The ticket.

She had felt it, even from the bedroom. That little rectangle of paper on the counter, white with black letters. Dr. M. Verhoeven She had almost dreamed of it - not the card itself, but the idea of it. A door. A door she had never tried to open.

She got up. She took her sweater. Walked to the bathroom.

In the mirror she saw herself: brown eyes with red edges, hair that she had tied together in a sloppy braid, a small wound

on her lower lip that she had bitten at night - a habit she had had since she was a child, a way to focus on something when the fear became too great. She had scars from it, very small, which were only visible when the light was right.

She brushed her teeth. Washed her face. Did her hair again.

In the kitchen was Noor's tray. And the ticket.

She looked at it for a moment, then took her phone and put it down the screen on the counter. She would decide later. Now breakfast first. Now just function first.

She put on water for tea - she never drank coffee, although most people around her had an almost religious connection with it. Coffee smelled of the mornings in the house on Merwedestraat, of her father's first cup of the day, of the sound of the coffee maker that meant that he was gone, that the day began, that she had to be vigilant. Tea was her own. She had chosen tea herself.

She ate a sandwich with cheese, standing, looking out the window. It was gray outside. A typical November sky, low and heavy, as if the sky had trouble staying up. A cyclist drove by in a yellow raincoat. A blackbird sat on the windowsill of the apartment across the street and looked at her with his small, sharp eyes.

Emma looked back.

"What?" She said softly.

The blackbird flew away.

She washed her plate, grabbed her coat, her bag, her keys. Rituals, that was it - small, fixed actions that gave the day

structure. She had deliberately built them all up after she fled the house on Merwedestraat four years ago. Seventeen years, a backpack and a train ticket that she had bought from savings that she had hidden in an old pencil case. She had no plan. She only knew she had to leave.

Now she had an apartment. A job. A blackbird looking at her.

It wasn't much. But it was hers.

She locked the door and walked down the stairs.

Chapter 12

She had decided to bring the tray to Noor for her service.

Noor didn't live far away - they had once discussed it casually, one of those superficial colleague conversations where you discover that you live more or less in the same neighborhood without it really leading to anything. Ten minutes walk, Noor had said. Emma had remembered it without knowing why.

She walked through the streets with the tray under her arm and felt uncomfortable, not because it was cold or because she got up too early, but because this was a social gesture and social gestures always made her feel like she was playing a play whose rules she didn't know well. What do you say when you return someone's tray? Do you thank them again? Do you say anything about the soup? Do you ask how they are doing?

In people who had grown up in a normal family, these were automatic actions. For Emma, every social moment was a small mystery that she had to solve with too few clues.

She rang the bell at number 34. A porch door, some intercom system, a lot of names on a faded sticker. She searched for Noor - Noor El Amrani was there, in clear handwriting.

It took a while. Then: "Yes?"

"It's me. Emma From the work." A short silence. "I'll bring your tray back."

"Emma!" Norwegian voice sounded genuinely happy, without the forced warmth that Emma recognized so well in people who told polite lies. "Come up! Third floor."

The door opened.

Emma walked up the stairs. The stair railing was made of wood, a little gnarled, and there was a smell of herbs and something fried - garlic, perhaps, or onion. A warm smell. A smell that told that people lived here who really cooked, not just warming things up.

Noor was already in the doorway. She wore a big pink sweater and had her hair down, which Emma had never seen before - at work, Noor had always put it on. She looked younger like that. Ordinary. However.

"You didn't have to come specially," Noor said, but she smiled in a way that said the opposite.

"It's your tray," Emma said, and gave it to her.

"Did you like the soup?"

"Yes." Emma hesitated. "Very tasty. It tasted like... I don't know. Warm."

Noor looked at her with an expression that Emma couldn't completely decipher. Not pity - she recognized that, and she hated it. Something else. Something softer.

"Do you want to come in? I just made tea."

Emma wanted to say no. She had almost said it, the word was ready on her tongue, neat and safe and trusted. But she thought of the card on the counter. She thought of the blackbird. She thought of the soup that had tasted like

something she had never really had but that she could have imagined.

"Okay," she said.

She stepped inside.

Chapter 13

Noor's apartment was small but full.

Not full in a messy way - more full in a way that told there was someone living who loved things. On the windowsill were plants, at least eight, of all kinds. On the wall hung pictures, framed, of people laughing in places that seemed warm and sunny. On the bookshelf were books next to small figurines and a candle that was almost out. On the table was a magazine, open, half read.

It was a life. A visible, livable, habitable life.

Emma stood in the middle for a moment and felt something she could hardly name. Desire, perhaps. Or sadness. Or both at the same time, because sometimes those two are the same.

"Sit down," Noor said from the kitchen. "Milk in your tea?"

"No, thank you."

Emma sat down on the couch. Cautious, as she always sat - on the edge, light, ready to stand up. A habit. You are not comfortable if your comfortable sitting has been dangerous.

Noor came back with two mugs. She gave one to Emma and sat down in the chair opposite her, her legs folded under her, at ease in her own space in a way that almost hurt Emma to look at.

"How are you?" Asked Noor. Not in the automatic way that people ask that question and at the same time already know that the answer is "good". In a real way.

Emma embraced the mug with both hands. The heat was nice.

"Good," she said. Automatically.

Noor nodded, but was silent. She waited.

Emma felt the silence. People normally filled up silences quickly - they were afraid of it, as if silence was something you had to fight. Not Noor. Noor just let the silence exist, calm and patient, as if she knew Emma needed more than a second to move on.

"Actually..." Emma began. She stopped.

"You don't have to," Noor said softly.

"I know." Emma looked at her tea. "I don't sleep well. For a while. That's all." She shrugged her shoulders, as if it was nothing, but she felt her hands hold the mug a little tighter.

"For a while," Noor repeated. "How long is a while?"

Emma thought. "For as long as I can remember."

Noor said nothing. She just nodded, very slowly, in a way that said: I hear you. Not: I understand, not: that sounds heavy, not: have you ever tried to... Just: I hear you.

Emma drank her tea.

They sat for half an hour. They talked about the work, about Norwegian family, about a series that Noor was watching. Ordinary things. But the ordinary things felt

different than usual that morning - as if they were taking place in a room where Emma was really allowed to be present, not just her mask.

When she left, standing on the sidewalk in the gray November sky, Noor said from the doorway: "Emma?"

Emma turned around.

"You can come over more often. Just like that. Without a tray."

Emma nodded. She couldn't say anything.

She walked out of the street. And for the first time in a very long time, she felt something similar - very vaguely, very cautiously - the idea that perhaps, one day, there would be someone she could trust.

Quite possibly.

Chapter 14

The next morning she called again.

This time at a quarter past nine, when the practice was open. She stood in the kitchen, the card in her hand, her phone against her ear. Her heart was beating too fast - she felt it in her throat, which was ridiculous because she called a psychologist, not the police, not her father, not someone who could do anything to her.

But the body forgets nothing. And the body knew that talking was dangerous.

"Praktijk Verhoeven, good morning."

A woman's voice. Friendly, professional, neutral.

Emma opened her mouth. Closed it again. Opened it again.

"Good morning. I... I would like to make an appointment. At dr. Verhoeven.

"Of course. Have you been with us before?"

"No."

"And do you have a referral from your doctor?"

"Yes." She thought about the conversation with the doctor, eight months ago. She did not know if a reference would remain valid for so long. "I think so. I got a ticket."

"That's enough as a starting point. We officially request the referral from your doctor. May I have your name?"

"Emma. Emma van Dijk."

She heard typing.

"And can you tell me something about the reason for signing up? Very short, only for intake."

Emma looked at the counter. To the place where Noor's bowl had stood.

"I don't sleep well," she said. "For a long time. And I..." She searched for words. Safe words. Words that didn't give away too much but didn't lie either. "I had a difficult childhood. I think I need help with that."

A short silence on the other side. Then: "That's very brave of you to call. We currently have a waiting period of about three weeks. Would an appointment in the third week of December suit you?"

December. Three weeks. Twenty-three days.

"Yes," Emma said. "That works."

She wrote down the date on the back of the card. Put the phone down. Stayed for a moment.

Twenty-three days.

She had waited thirteen years. Twenty-three days was nothing.

And yet it felt like an eternity.

Chapter 15

There were things Emma had never told anyone.

Not to Noor. Not to the doctor. Not to the teacher at elementary school who had once taken her aside and asked if everything was going well at home, in a tone that suggested that the teacher already knew that the answer was no. Emma had said yes. She had always said yes.

The things she had never said were of all kinds.

There were little things. That as a child she had never taken friends home, not because she didn't have boyfriends but because she was too afraid of what they would see, hear, or feel in the air of that house. That at the age of ten she had kept a diary that she had burned after three weeks, page after page, above the sink, because she was too afraid that someone would read it. That she had learned to walk so gently on the stairs that even the steps didn't know.

There were bigger things.

The night she was locked in her room, for hours, without understanding why, as she heard the voices rise and fall through the door. The time she fainted from hunger at school because there had been nothing to eat at home for three days. The way her father looked at her when he drank - not with aggression, which had been almost easier to understand, but with something else, something she couldn't name as a child and still tried not to name as an adult.

And then there were the things that were deeper than words. Things that were not a story but a feeling. A constant

state of alertness, of knowing that the world was unsafe, of never really being able to relax. The feeling that she was a burden to everyone around her. The conviction, deep and stubborn as a weed, that if people really knew her - really, from within - they would run away.

She had never said those things.

She carried them with her, every day, like stones in her pockets. She had become so used to it that she had almost forgotten what it was like not to walk with it.

Sometimes she wondered how light she would be without them.

Chapter 16

November had always been a tough month.

Emma didn't know exactly when she discovered that - it wasn't one specific moment but a pattern, a recurring heaviness that came back every year as the days got shorter and darkness began earlier. When the light pulled away at four o'clock in the afternoon, the world seemed to become smaller, the walls of her apartment closer, the silence heavier and full of things she would rather not hear. Autumn had a way to wrap her like a wet blanket - not dangerous on its own, but oppressive, exhausting, a constant reminder of how hard life could feel if you've been wearing it alone for years.

She had learned a name for it: seasonal gloom, an article called it that she had once read on a night when she was too tired to sleep and kept scrolling her phone like a kind of anesthesia. But Emma thought it was more than that - more than a lack of sunlight or vitamin D or whatever the article claimed. She thought November was a memory month for her too. A month full of birthdays and commemorations and moments she didn't want to commemorate but came anyway, like guests who weren't invited but who still had a key somewhere from a door she thought she had locked for a long time.

Her father's birthday was in November. The fifteenth.

She preferred not to think about it. She had no contact with him - for four years, already from the day she had left at eighteen with a backpack and a train ticket without leaving a note. She didn't know where he lived, if he was still in the

house on Merwedestraat, if he was still alive at all. She had actively decided not to know. Ignorance was sometimes the only protection you could give yourself.

But she still knew his birthday. It was in her, engraved in a place deeper than conscious memory, and every year on the fifteenth of November she woke up with a heaviness in her chest that had not been there the day before. As if her body kept the date independent of her mind. As if a clock was ticking in her that only he had set.

On the day itself, she did her extra best to be ordinary.

Just being - that was her greatest achievement and her toughest task at the same time. She had practiced it for years until it had become second nature, that artificial normality, that mask of everyday life. She finished her shift without mistakes. She said good morning to the first customer of the day, a man with a scarf up to his chin and a cart full of weekly groceries. She scanned his products one by one. Yogurt. Bread. A bag of apples. Detergent. The rhythmic squeak of the scanner was soothing in a way she didn't always want to admit to herself - it gave structure to the hours, a clear beginning and end to every action. There was nothing to interpret with a squeaky scanner. It was good or it wasn't good, and if it wasn't good it squeaked differently and then you knew what to do.

People were not like that.

After her shift, she walked home along the long route - along the canal, past the trees whose last leaves had been released and now floated on the water like small, soaked shipwrecks. She had her hands deep in her pockets and pulled up her scarf high. She walked without haste, but also without enjoying - walking was not pleasure but a transition, a way to

get from one part of the day to another without having to be who she was at home, who she was at work, who she was at all.

At home she ate a sandwich. Drink tea. Read three pages of a book that she hadn't gotten any further for weeks because her concentration always slipped away in the evening, like water through a cracked floor. She did the dishes. Brushed her teeth. Sent off the light.

And only when she was lying in bed, in the darkness of her small room, the city softly rumming outside like an animal sleeping but not really sleeping, did she let it. Very briefly, checked, like a tap that lets you drip one count before you close it again. She had become very precise in it - allowing feeling in small, measurable doses, just enough not to choke but never enough to drown.

She thought of him. Not to the monster of her nightmares - not to the voice that could cut, not to the eyes that turned glassy from the drink, not to the atmosphere that could fill a room like a poison gas. But to the other version. The version she had so desperately tried to find as a child, like a child looking for water in a desert, again and again, even when all the signs say that there is nothing to be found.

There had been an afternoon. She was seven. He had taken her to the zoo - just like, for no reason, one of those rare impulses of kindness that she could never have predicted or understood. She remembered the smell of the day: popcorn and animal smell and his aftershave. She remembered that they had stood at the giraffe enclosure and that she could not see well over the people. And he had picked her up - so simple, so obvious - and put her on his shoulders. She had felt his hands around her ankles. Firm. Warm. And she had looked

over the crowd at the giraffe slowly stretching its neck to a bunch of leaves high in the tree, and she had thought: this is what fathers do. This is how it should be.

She would have liked that so much. Just that. A father who folds his hands around your ankles and lifts you up so you can see the world.

She had gotten what she had gotten.

She turned on her side. Clamped her pillow against her chest as she had done as a child, replacing a hug that never came. A car was roaring outside. Somewhere in the building someone walked to the toilet.

She closed her eyes.

Tomorrow was the sixteenth. November went by, as everything went by. She just had to wait. She was good at waiting. She had been waiting all her life - for security, for peace, for the moment when the fear would finally become smaller than herself.

She eventually slept. Late, but still.

And in her sleep, she was not a twenty-two-year-old woman in a nine-square-meter apartment. She was seven, on his shoulders, and the giraffe ate his leaves, and the world was big and colorful and safe.

For a while.

Chapter 17

At work there was a colleague named Marco.

Marco was thirty-three years old, broadly built, with a smile that he always put just a little too wide, as if he had learned that a big smile opens all doors and had since decided to approach every door in his life with it. He was not a bad man - Emma had learned to be honest with herself about that, because not every man who made her uncomfortable was a bad person, and it cost her effort but she did her best. Marco was cheerful and noisy and had the kind of presence that filled a room without him doing anything for it, like smoke that automatically reaches every corner.

He had already tried to start a conversation with her a few times. At the coffee machine. In the staff room. Once in the parking lot when they arrived at the same time. Each time Emma had answered neatly - briefly, politely, functionally - and disappeared as quickly as she was decent. She didn't hate him. She just had no energy for him. Social interaction always cost her more than it seemed to cost others, as if everyone around her had a gasoline engine and she had one on pedals.

On a Thursday - always a Thursday, as if the week knew she was already weaker on Thursday - Marco had addressed her in the staff room. She had just finished her lunch break and wanted to get up, grab her bag, go back to the cash register. But he had stood in the doorway, not intentionally blocking, she knew that, but present in a way that made the space smaller.

"Hey, Emma." He grinned. "Finally a quieter moment. We've been working together for a year and a half and I don't really know much about you."

Emma packed her bag. "There's not much to know."

"Everyone says that." He leaned against the counter, arms crossed. His attitude was relaxed, casual, the attitude of someone who is used to the world receiving him with open arms and who does not understand that not everyone has learned the same. "Where are you from?"

"Here." Half a lie. She wasn't from here - she had fled here, which was something completely different, but explaining the difference was not something she intended.

"And your family? Do you have brothers or sisters?"

She felt the questions landing. Not as attacks - she knew that, she knew he didn't mean it that way - but like small pebbles that fell into the water, one by one, and made wrinkles she didn't want. Family. The word alone had a weight that people who had normal families would never understand. For them, family was just an answer to a question. For Emma, it was a whole area full of barbed wire.

"No close contact," she said. Quiet. Neutral. The mask was good.

"That sounds complicated." He didn't say it inappropriately - rather with a kind of mild curiosity, as you would say that sounds interesting about a movie.

"It is as it is."

She walked to the door. He stepped aside - not quite, just enough - and she slipped past him into the hallway.

"Hey," he said after her, and his tone was now a little different, a little less airy. "I'm just trying to be friendly."

Emma stopped. She had her back to him. She took a breath - one count, two counts.

"I know," she said, without turning around. "But I'm not very good at friendly."

She walked on.

In the hallway, around the corner, out of his line of sight, she stood with her back against the cool tile wall. She closed her eyes. Her heart was beating too fast - far too fast for a conversation that had been so innocent, so mundane, so completely normal. If someone had seen it, they wouldn't have noticed anything special. A colleague who tried to make a conversation. A woman who was not so social. Nothing wrong.

But Emma felt her hands tremble.

That was the problem with what had happened to her - it had reprogrammed her body in a way she had not chosen herself. Her nervous system had learned that questions about her family were dangerous. That men who filled the doorway were dangerous. That any situation in which she could not withdraw was dangerous. It made no distinction between Marco and the past. It just sounded an alarm, bright and urgent, even if there was no fire.

She hated that. She hated that her body didn't trust her, or vice versa - she didn't remember exactly which of the two it was.

She took three deep breaths. Counted the exhalation as she had learned from an app she had once downloaded and then deleted because it felt like giving in, but of which she had unconsciously remembered the technique. Four seconds in. Hold for four seconds. Six seconds off.

Her hands became quieter.

She straightened her shoulders. Walked back to the cash register. Said good afternoon to the first customer who arrived.

She did her job.

She was good at her job.

Chapter 18

Emma had developed a habit in the weeks between making the appointment and the appointment itself.

She had conversations in her head.

Not with real people - she did too, but they were short and functional and rarely longer than necessary. No, she had conversations with an imaginary dr. Verhoeven. She had no idea how the real dr. Verhoeven looked like. She had looked up her name on the practice's website and found a small photo: a woman in her fifties, short gray hair, a calm expression. But in Emma's head, the imaginary version was slightly more abstract - more of a presence than a person. A voice that asked without judging. A silence that left space.

During the work, the imaginary dr. Verhoeven: How do you feel when you sit behind the cash register?

Emma thought, while her hands automatically scanned products. Safe, she would say. Because there is a counter between me and the world. I can see you, but you can't come to me. That's a pleasant construction.

And do you find it annoying when that border falls away?

Yes. No hesitation. I find every situation annoying where I can't oversee where the exit is.

In the evening, while she was cooking - or trying to cook, because she found cooking difficult, not because it was technically complicated but because it looked too much like taking care of herself, and taking care of herself was

something she had never learned well: What do you like to do?

Emma had been thinking about that question for a long time while the onions were sissing in the pan. What did she like to do? She read. She sometimes walked along the canal. She looked at the blackbird that sometimes sat on the windowsill across the street. She drank her tea slowly, with both hands around the mug.

But those weren't things she did because she loved it. Those were things she did because they were calm. Because they didn't made any demands. Because they couldn't disappoint or hurt her or leave her.

There is a difference, would the imaginary dr. Verhoeven say, between doing what is safe and doing what gives you joy.

I know," Emma would say. "But I don't remember how it feels to make a difference between those two.

And at night, the hardest hours: What do you think about when you can't sleep?

To the past. Always in the past. To the question if I could have been different if things had gone differently. Whether I would be happy if I had had a different childhood. Whether I would then laugh more easily, trust people more easily, more easily would be habitual.

And what do you think? Could you have been different?

Emma never answered that question, not even in her head. She didn't know if the answer was yes - that would mean she was short, that she wasn't doing something right. And she

didn't know if the answer was no - that would mean that this was all, that this would always be all.

Somewhere between those two answers she lived.

The real dr. Verhoeven might say something very different than the version in her head. Maybe she would be nice but businesslike. Maybe she would have a clipboard and a pen and write down things that Emma was not allowed to see. Maybe she would ask questions Emma didn't expect and get answers that would scare her herself.

That was the scary thing about real conversations: you never knew what would come up when you started digging.

Emma had not dug for thirteen years. She had flattened the ground and walked over it as if there was nothing underneath. She had learned to walk neatly, evenly, without stomping.

But sometimes, when it was very quiet, she could feel something moving down there.

Chapter 19

On a Wednesday evening, Emma wrote a letter.

She didn't have stationery and she wasn't looking for it either - she took the notebook she had bought a year ago in an attack of good intentions. It was a simple notebook, blue, with lined pages and a rubber band to keep it closed. She had bought it because she had read somewhere that writing helps. Journaling, people called it, a word that always sounded a little too neat for what it actually was: putting your thoughts on paper before it drives you crazy.

She had then put the notebook in the drawer and had not looked at it for seven months.

She took it out tonight.

She sat down at her small table, the notebook in front of her, a pen in her hand. The lamp cast a yellow light over the page. Outside it was quiet - not the good silence, not the quiet that brings peace, but the quiet of a city that takes a breath for a moment for the next day.

She didn't know who she was writing to. Maybe to himself. Maybe to the girl she had been. Maybe to no one, and writing itself was the point.

She put the pen on the paper.

I don't know if you'll ever read this. I don't know if I'll ever keep this, if I'll immediately tear it up tomorrow and throw it in the trash as I've done so often with things that came too close to the truth. But tonight I'll write it anyway. Tonight

I need that, and needing something has been so strange to me for so many years that I just have to practice with it.

She stopped. Looked at the words. She had always found her own handwriting just a little too big, just a little too clearly present on the page, but tonight she just let it be that way.

You did well.

She had to stop for a while after that sentence. Let him exist. He felt strange - not false, but uncomfortable, like a word in a language that you do speak but rarely use.

I know you've never heard that. I know no one has ever told you that, or at least not in a way you could believe. You did well. You were small and scared and alone and you opened your eyes every morning. You went to school every day with your backpack on your back and your mask on your face. You learned and survived and you endured even on the days when everything you had was.

That's enough. That's more than enough. I wish someone had told you that when it still mattered, at the times when you were looking for it the most. But no one said it. So I say it now, too late but still.

You were wrong about one thing. You thought it was your fault. That if only you were quieter, more invisible, better, rather, neater, easier - that things would have gone differently. That if you were different, they would be different. You've exhausted yourself so much trying to be the right version of yourself, the version that was safe, the version that didn't make them angry. You've become so good at it that you forgot who you were before you started trying.

But listen. It wasn't your fault. It is never the child's fault. A child adapts to the world around him because adaptation is survival - but adjusting does not mean that the world was good. You were good. You were always good. The world around you wasn't.

You should have been protected. You should have been safe. You should have had a mother who believed you and a father who used his hands only to lift you up and never for anything else. You should have just been a child - messy and noisy and error-making and safe, safe, safe.

You didn't have that. And that's the saddest thing I know.

But you're still there. Twenty-two years old, an apartment of your own, a job, a colleague who makes soup for you. Little things. I know. But small does not mean unimportant. Small sometimes means that you have fought back, millimeter by millimeter, from nothing to something.

You're still there.

That's no small thing.

She put the pen down. Her hand was a little stiff from writing. She didn't know how long she had been sitting - time had dropped a bit while she was writing, which was rare.

She read the letter back. Once. Twice. The third time she stopped halfway because she felt something in her throat that she didn't want to let go, not tonight, not just at this table.

She closed the notebook. She held the rubber band around it. She put it in the drawer - not on the bottom, not tucked away behind other things, but just in the drawer, at the top, visible when she opened it.

She got up. Stretched her back. She drank the last leftover cooled tea that was still in her mug.

She didn't feel better. Not really. But she felt a little less alone than an hour ago.

Sometimes that was the only thing you could ask of an evening.

Chapter 20

The night before the appointment with dr. Verhoeven couldn't eat Emma.

She had tried it - seriously tried, not just the idea of it. She had put water. Caught a pan. Put in pasta, salt, stir. She had opened sauce and put it in a saucepan and stirred it while looking at the bubbles that appeared on the edge. She had taken a plate, served it, put a fork on it. She had sat down.

And then her stomach had said: no.

Not in a painful way. More on the way a door just stays closed when you push it without a key - quiet, definitive, without negotiation. She had taken one bite and knew it wasn't going to work. She had put the pasta in a storage container and put it in the fridge and then she had stood at the window with a glass of water.

Outside it was the first really cold evening of December. The kind of evening where the sky was clear and sharp, without clouds, the stars visible if you kept your head in the right angle. Emma kept her head in the right corner. She looked up at the stars - bland, as stars are always bland in the city, like they have to compete with all the streetlights and illuminated windows and billboards and exhaust the fight a bit - and she thought about tomorrow.

Tomorrow she would sit in a room opposite a woman she didn't know.

Tomorrow she was supposed to say things she had kept all her life as if they were secrets that would destroy the world if they were spoken.

She was terrified. That was the only word for it - terrified, real and complete, without nuance. Not the kind of fear you feel for an exciting movie or a difficult conversation at work. The kind of fear that is in your body, in your muscles and your stomach and your chest, the kind of fear you know from a very young age, from the time when fear was your first language.

She picked up her phone. Scrolled to the appointment confirmation. Held her finger over the button with which she could cancel.

She stood like that. Five seconds. Ten. Twenty.

Then she thought of the writing in the drawer. To the words she had written down. You're still there. That's no small thing.

She put her phone down.

She went to bed. She didn't sleep, or hardly - she lay in the dark and listened to the city and felt the hours pass with a slowness that was almost physical. At two o'clock in the morning she got up and drank a glass of water. At four o'clock she was on her other side. At six o'clock she gave up and just stayed until the alarm went off at seven.

She washed her face. Longer than usual - the cold water was fine, grounding, something real in a morning that felt like a dream. She looked at herself in the mirror. Red eyes. Pale skin. But upright. Standing.