

The Last Breath Between Us

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Chapter 1

Lost. That was the only word Ayla knew for herself on the nights she walked alone through the streets of Velora. The city throbbed around her like a living creature - neon lights flashing in puddles of rainwater, people shuffled past her without seeing her, the distant rumble of trams sliding over wet rails. She was always in the middle of it, but never really a part of it. She was present without being present. A shadow between shadows.

She was twenty years old and felt that she had already experienced the hardest of her life.

Her mother had passed away three years ago, not due to illness or an accident, but just - away. One morning in November, there was a suitcase at the door and a note on the counter. Two sentences. Ayla had reread those sentences so many times that she could repeat them in her sleep, but she had never kept the note. She had torn it, as small as possible, and thrown it through the window. The wind had taken the shreds. That would have been enough.

Her father worked. He always worked. He worked not to have to think, not to feel, not to have to be at home in the moments when the silence became too harsh. Ayla understood him. She did the same, only it was not called work for her - it was called walking.

Every night, when the sun sank behind the buildings of Velora and the sky took on that specific color of spilled ink, Ayla put on her coat and walked into town. No destination. No plan. Only her feet on the asphalt and her breath in the cold air. She now knew the city better than anyone - which alley smelled of fresh coffee, which bridge moaned the softest when you stood in the middle of it, which bench offered the farthest view of the river flowing through the heart of Velora.

It was on one of those evenings, a Tuesday in March, that she first saw him.

He was at a sandwich shop on Havenstraat. A small tent with a red awning and a handwritten menu in the window. Not the kind of place where people stopped for a long time - you bought your sandwich, you walked on, you forgot it before you got around the corner. But he was there. Just. With his hands in his pockets and his gaze somewhere far away, at a point that Ayla could not see. He was tall, just over the meter eighty, with dark hair that was just too long to be neat and just too short to

look sloppy. He was wearing a dark blue jacket that was a size too big for his shoulders.

Ayla stopped.

She didn't know why. She never stopped. That was the unwritten rule of her evening walks: move, always move, never stand still because when you stood still you started to think and when you started to think the things you would rather not think came. But something about him - his attitude, his silence, the way he seemed completely in his own world - held her tight.

He bought his sandwich without smiling at the woman behind the counter. He turned around, took a bite without looking at what he was eating, and walked into Havenstraat, away from Ayla. She watched him until he was around the corner. Then she walked on.

But that night, when she was lying in bed with the ceiling above her like a white canvas, she thought of him. Not in a special way. Just - she thought of him. On his coat. To his gaze that was not focused on anything. To the fact that he also seemed to be like her: present, but somewhere else.

She didn't sleep until three o'clock.

The next evening she walked along the Havenstraat again. He wasn't there. But the night after that. And that time he looked up. Just for a moment, a fraction of a second, before he looked away again. Enough for Ayla to see that his eyes were light gray, almost silver in the glow of the streetlights. She walked on without slowing her pass. But her heart was beating just a little faster than usual, and that irritated her, and she took that irritation with her like a stone in her shoe for the rest of the evening.

She had no name for what she felt. She wouldn't recognize it if it hit her in the face.

She had taught herself not to feel anything.

And that, she thought, as she walked along the river and saw the black water flowing beneath her, was the only thing that kept her afloat.

Chapter 2

She would never have called herself a stalker.

That word was too big, too ugly, too loaded with connotations of obsession and illness. What she did was different. She observed. She was interested in people the way a biologist is interested in a rare bird - at a distance, without intervening, without disturbing. She had always walked through the city like this: looking, noting with her eyes, turning people into small stories in her head.

But with him it was different.

With him it had something that she could not fully explain. A kind of recognition, perhaps. Or curiosity. Or just the simple, human need to understand someone who looked just like she felt.

She began to pay attention to his routines.

He always bought his sandwich on Tuesdays and Thursdays, always between half past eight and a quarter to eight in the evening. He always took the same thing - she couldn't hear it through the glass, but the woman behind the counter took it ready before he opened his mouth, so it was always the same. He always paid with appropriate money, so he had already taken it out of his pocket in advance. He was a man of habits.

On Wednesday morning he walked along the river. Always at a quarter past eight, always on the west side, always with earplugs in. He walked fast, not the pace of someone enjoying the morning, but the pace of someone trying to come from somewhere. His shoulders were then pulled forward, his jaw tense.

On Saturday afternoon he was in the library on the Grote Markt. Not in front of a computer, not with his phone - with a book. Always a real book, always thick, always with a worn cover. She had tried to read what it was, but she had never dared to get close enough. He always sat at the same table: second row, by the window, with his back to the wall. Someone who likes to see what is happening around him without being seen.

She knew that. She did it herself.

It was on a Saturday, three weeks after she first saw him, that she came too close. She had taken a book from the shelf - just like that, the first thing her hand touched -

and had sat down at a table near him. Not too close. Two tables ahead. She pretended to read. She didn't read.

She looked at him.

He had dark bags under his eyes that she hadn't seen before, or that weren't there before. He read with a kind of intensity she rarely saw - not relaxed reading, but reading like you drink when you're thirsty. Pages turn quickly, his finger following the lines. His mouth sometimes moved very slightly, as if he tasted the words.

She wondered what he was reading. She wondered if he was sleeping. She wondered what his voice sounded like.

And then he looked up.

Not to space, not to the window - to her. Straight to her. His gray eyes met hers and there was a second - a single, endless second - in which they both did nothing. No smile, no looking away, just that silent clash of two looks that found each other when they didn't expect it.

Ayla looked at her book.

Her cheeks were burning. She stared at the letters without seeing them. Her heart was pounding in her throat. She sat for another twenty minutes, long enough not to come across as suspicious, and then stood up. She walked to the exit without looking back.

Outside, in the cold air of Velora, she stood for a moment with her hands in her pockets and her eyes closed. She took a slow breath.

That had been too close. She should be more careful.

She walked home and tried not to think about his eyes. The way he had looked - not alarmed, not irritated, but calm. Almost as if he had expected her. As if he had seen her longer than she thought.

That thought scared her. And yet - and here she hated herself a bit - it also did something to her that she couldn't quite name. Something warm, somewhere deep in her chest, a place that had been cold for so long that she almost forgot that place was still there.

She closed the door of her apartment behind her and leaned against it in the dark.

She thought: I have to stop this.

She thought: I'll stop tomorrow.

She knew, while she thought it, that she was lying.

Chapter 3

His name was Finn Laurens and he was twenty-two years old and he had known for two weeks that someone was following him.

He had noticed it on a Thursday, at the sandwich shop. A shadow in the corner of his eye - too quiet, too steadfast for someone who just happened to walk by. He hadn't turned around. He had taken his sandwich and had run away and kept his senses open the way you learn that when you grew up in a family where silence could be dangerous. You learned to read what was happening around you without looking at it.

He would have taken her better next time.

Small, with dark brown hair that she wore loose and that moved with the wind. A light gray coat, a little too big, the sleeves just a little too long so that her hands half disappeared in them. She walked with her head slightly down, her shoulders pulled in, the posture of someone who is used to being invisible. But her eyes - when he got hold of them - were sharp. Dark brown, almost black, and they recorded everything.

He knew it in the library. She had pretended to read but her gaze had not been on the pages. He had felt that he was being studied, in the quiet, systematic way in which you study something you want to understand.

It didn't scare him. That was perhaps the strange thing about it.

It had made him curious.

Because there was something about her that he recognized. The way she was present in a room without really belonging. The way she always stayed on the edge, never in the middle, always with a way out in her field of vision. She was someone who had learned to keep the world at bay, and she was good at it, but not good enough that Finn didn't see it.

He saw it because he did it himself.

Finn had entered town eight months ago, after his brother. Thomas. Three years older, three times the size of space he took up, and now - gone. Not dead, not the way people think about leaving. But get away from Finn's life in a way that felt like an amputation. They had had a fight, the kind of quarrel that builds up for years and

then in one night bursts into words that can't go back. Finn had said things he didn't mean. Thomas had said things he meant, and that was worse.

He had come to Velora because he had to go somewhere and had no reason to go anywhere. An apartment on the third floor of a gray building on the Keizersgracht. A job as a graphic designer that he did from home, behind a screen, with headphones on. Little reason to go out. But sitting still and thinking was more unbearable than moving, so he moved.

He had built his own routines as you build a foundation - not out of love for the structure, but because you sink away without a foundation.

And then suddenly there was her.

He had decided to give her a chance to reveal herself. People who followed always did that in the end - they got too close, made a mistake, or disappeared. But she did neither. She stayed at exactly the right distance, moved at exactly the right time, and looked away at exactly the wrong time.

She wasn't good enough to deceive him. But she was good enough for him to respect her.

On a Wednesday morning, along the river, he had delayed his pass. He had taken off his earbuds and stopped his music and waited. After three minutes he had heard footsteps that also slowed down, twenty meters behind him. He had smiled, for the first time in weeks. It was a small smile, almost nothing, but his muscles had remembered it.

Tonight, a Friday night in April, he walked through Marktstraat. It was busy - weekend crowds, people with shopping bags and children on their hands and smiling voices that rose in the cool evening air. He walked slowly, his hands in his pockets, his gaze straight ahead.

And then he stopped.

Just. In the middle of the sidewalk. He turned around.

She was there. Ten meters behind him, frozen the moment he turned around, with her eyes a little too wide for someone who happened to walk by.

He looked at her. She looked at him. People shuffled around them as if they were two rocks in a river.

Finn did something he hadn't seen himself do - he raised his hand. Not a wave, not a warm gesture, just a slight lifting of his hand. A greeting. An acknowledgment. As if to say: I see you. I've always seen you.

The girl - he didn't know her name, he didn't know her, she was a stranger who had been following him for weeks - did something he didn't expect either.

She turned as red as a beet.

And turned around and walked away, fast, almost running, her coat fluttering behind her.

Finn stopped until she was around the corner. Then he turned around again and walked on, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slightly looser than they had been that morning.

He thought: tomorrow I will also walk along the Havenstraat. He thought, "I want to know her name."

Chapter 4

Ayla hadn't gone out for three days.

She had groceries delivered. She had replaced her evening walks with walking laps in her small apartment - from the kitchen to the living room to the bedroom and back again, five steps per route, over and over again, like an animal in a cage she had built herself. She had made tea that she didn't drink. She had opened a book that she didn't read. She had turned on the television, stared at the picture without seeing it, and turned it off again.

She had been so stupid.

She repeated it in her head on the cadence of her footsteps: so stupid so stupid so stupid. He had seen her. He had known she was there - for how long? All those evenings, all those mornings, all those carefully calculated distances, and he had just known. And then that hand. That quiet, confident lifting of his hand as a kind of capitulation offering, not even a confrontation, worse - an acknowledgment. He didn't wave her away. He had not ignored her. He had greeted her.

That was worse.

She could have carried an accusation. She could have understood anger. But that silent recognition, that calm I-see-you, had completely dismantled her at the most unexpected moment.

On the fourth day, she went out anyway. She had to. Her head became full of herself, of the circling thoughts, of the four walls that seemed to get closer and closer. She put on her coat - another coat, a red one this time, as if that changed anything - and walked outside, into the cold evening air.

She wouldn't walk to the Havenstraat. She wouldn't walk to the river. She would choose a new route, a part of the city that she knew less, and she would just walk and not think and tomorrow it would be better.

She walked north, through the Prinsenwijk, past the bakeries that were already closed at this time and the small galleries with their illuminated shop windows. She walked past a playground where a father pushed another small child on a swing in the dark, the little smile of the child rising in the evening like a bird. She walked past a cafe from which music leaked, soft and warm, something with guitar.

She was almost convinced that she was calm.

And then she heard his voice.

"You forgot another jacket."

She turned around.

He stood six meters behind her. Not pushed in, not cautious - just standing, with his hands in the pockets of his too big blue coat, his gray eyes fixed on her with that unbearable peace she now knew.

Her mouth was dry.

"Excuse me?" Was all she could release.

"You always wore a light gray coat," he said. "I thought for a moment it wasn't you. But then there's the way you walk." He made a small gesture with his head, the meaning unclear. "I recognize that way."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He raised an eyebrow. Not mocking. More like someone considering an interesting move.

"Good," he said. "Then I don't happen to know you and you happen to be the same person I've come across over and over again in recent weeks. On the Havenstraat, by the river, in the library." He dropped a silence. "Coincidentally."

Ayla opened her mouth. Closed him again.

The warm color that crawled over her face was unstoppable. She hated herself heartily for it.

"I..." she began.

"What's your name?" He interrupted her, not unfriendly.

She looked at him. He looked at her. Around them, the city moved on in its usual rhythm, completely indifferent to this moment that for Ayla felt like the beginning or the end of something - she didn't know which of the two.

"Ayla," she said, so softly that she could hardly hear it herself.

He nodded, as if he had expected it. "Finn."

Don't stick out a hand. No smile. Only his name, offered as something equivalent to hers. A barter of two words.

"Finn," she repeated, and it sounded strange in her mouth, too familiar for someone she didn't know.

"There is a coffee bar on the corner of Prinsenstraat," he said. "If you want - if you happen to go that way too - I could offer you a coffee."

She wanted to say no. She should have said no.

"Okay," she said.

They walked side by side to the coffee bar without saying anything else. But the silence was not uncomfortable. It was the silence of two people who had been walking side by side for a long time, even if one of them has always kept the appropriate distance.

Ayla thought: this is a mistake.

But she walked on.

Chapter 5

The coffee bar was called Daglicht and was exactly the kind of place Ayla would normally shun - too hot, too small, too full with the possibility of conversation. Wooden tables with stains from old coffee cups, a light above each table that threw a small golden circle on the surface. It smelled of ground beans and cinnamon and wet coats.

They took a table by the window. Finn ordered black coffee without asking what she wanted, but she didn't blame him because she would take the same thing anyway. She also ordered black coffee and he looked up from the menu - which he didn't actually need - and something in his gaze shifted slightly.

"No milk," he said.

"No."

"No sugar."

"No."

He nodded. Put down the menu. Looked at the window, at the passers-by in the night, at his own vague reflection in the glass.

They were waiting for coffee and Ayla thought he would ask her something - how she found him, why she followed him, what on earth she thought - but he didn't ask anything. He was just sitting. His hands were on the table, folded, his fingers long and quiet. He didn't drum, fidget, didn't look at his phone.

It was Ayla who finally spoke, because the silence made her fuller than she could handle.

"I have to apologize," she said.

He looked at her.

"For following. It wasn't meant to be scary. I'm not - I don't normally do that." She was silent. "Actually, that's a lie. I always observe people. But not so long. That was different."

"Why else?" He asked.

The coffee arrived. They both enclosed their cup with two hands without lifting it.

Ayla thought of the right words. She wasn't someone who just talked about what was going on in her head - that was one of the things she had learned, after her mother, after years of quiet rooms and absent glances. Words made things real. If you didn't utter something, it remained vague, and vague was safe.

"You looked," she said slowly, "how I feel."

He dropped a silence. No hurry to fill it up.

"And how do you feel?" He finally asked.

She looked at her coffee. "Like someone who has walked in a city for a long time without knowing what she is looking for."

He drank a sip. Looked at the window. "I know that," he said.

And that was all. No streading, no story behind it, no unnecessary opening of interior doors. Only those two words, offered as proof of understanding.

They talked for an hour and a half that night. Not about heavy things - about the city, about places they both knew and experienced differently, about the phenomenon of people in libraries who always occupy the same table as if it were theirs. Finn had a dry sense of humor she didn't expect, dry in the way of someone who doesn't do it for the audience but for herself, and the first time she heard it she almost had to laugh - almost, it almost stayed.

She learned that he was a graphic designer. That he worked from home. That he had come to Velora eight months ago. She didn't tell him much - her name, her apartment in the Westerwijk, that she worked in a bookstore three blocks away. Small things, the things you give to a stranger without giving anything of yourself.

They got up at half past twelve. Outside, on the sidewalk, the night was around them.

"Thank you," Ayla said. She meant the coffee. She also meant more, but she left out the lake.

"No problem," Finn said. He put his hands in his pockets. Looked at her for a moment with those silver-gray eyes that she knew too well by now. "Tomorrow I'll walk along the river. At a quarter past eight. If you happen to walk along that side."

She looked at him. He looked at her. She wanted to say: I don't think so. She wanted to say: this was fun but I'm better off alone. She wanted to say: I don't do this, I don't

do people, I don't connect, I've learned how to do without that and I've become good at it.

"Maybe," she said.

He nodded. Turned around and walked into the night, his shoulders in the too big coat, his steps even and quiet.

Ayla stood on the sidewalk and looked at him until she didn't see him anymore. Then she looked up at the sky above Velora, dark and full of stars that were almost displaced by the city light, almost but not completely.

She walked home. She set her alarm to a quarter to eight.

Chapter 6

He was there.

She had secretly hoped that he would not be there, that it had been a joke or a test or just one of those things that people say at the end of an evening without meaning it. But he stood on the west bank of the river, by the willow tree that left its branches hanging to the surface of the water, and he didn't have his earplugs on.

She noticed that. He didn't have his earbuds in.

She had seen him walk along the river four times, and he had always had earplugs on. Not today. She didn't know if that was for her, or just coincidence, and she decided not to ask.

"You're here," he said.

"I walk here more often," she said. It was a lie and they both knew it was a lie and neither of them did anything with it.

They walked. In the beginning there was a kind of tense adjustment - two people tuning their individual walking pace to the other's, something that is strangely intimate in a way that people rarely realize. Finn walked a little faster than her, but he adjusted his pass without her having to ask him. She registered that.

The river was lead gray that morning, moved by the wind coming from the north. Seagulls circled above the water with their sharp cries. The city on both sides was still half asleep, the morning rush just getting started, cyclists shooting past them like colored arrows.

"Why did you come to Velora?" She asked, before she knew she was going to ask.

One step. Two steps. The pebbles under their feet.

"I had to go somewhere," he said. "Velora looked like nothing." He was silent for a moment. "I mean that as a compliment. A city that looks like nothing is a city where you can be anonymous."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes." He looked at the water. "You?"

"I was born here," she said. "I never left."

"Did you want that?"

She thought about it. Real question, real consideration. "No," she finally said. "I don't think I want to go anywhere. I just want to be here less. In my head. You know what I mean."

"Yes," he said, and from the way he said it she understood that he really understood, not in the polite-I-understand-you way of people who listen to answer but not to hear.

They walked to the Chain Bridge, where the river became narrower and the sound of the water changed from a broad murmur to something sharper, more defined. They stopped there for a while. Ayla leaned her arms on the railing and looked down at the dark water flowing under them.

"My mother has left," she said. She didn't plan to say that. It just came out, as things sometimes come out when you're outside in the cold air for too long and your shield doesn't work well.

Finn also leaned on the railing, next to her but with enough space in between. He also looked at the water.

"When?"

"Three years ago. She just - gone. Left a note." She shrugged her shoulders, a gesture she had learned for moments like this. Nonchalance as protection. "My father has been working too much since then. I live alone."

"That's a lot," he said.

She looked at him. People normally said different things. They said something bad, or did she not come back?, or how do you do that? He said that's a lot and that was it: a lot. Two words that include the right amount without asking too much or acknowledging too little.

"You?" She asked.

"Brother," he said. "We fought. Big fight. I went after that." He was silent. "I miss him. But going back is harder than leaving was."

She nodded. She knew what he meant.

They stood on the bridge for ten minutes, looking at the water, silent. It was a different silence than yesterday. Yesterday the silence had been empty. Now she

was filled with the things they had said and with the things they had not yet said but which were already there, which already existed in the space between them.

When they walked back to the city, Finn asked, "Do you work today?"

"This afternoon. The bookstore opens at eleven."

"Then you still have time for breakfast."

She looked at him.

"There's a sandwich shop," he said, and there was something in his tone - a slight dryness, almost a smile - that said: I know you know it.

Ayla let out a real smile for the first time in weeks. Not big, not warm, but real. She heard it herself and it surprised her.

"Yes," she said. "I know that case."

Chapter 7

April changed the city.

Ayla had known Velora in all seasons but spring had always been the most treacherous - she made the city more beautiful than it was, hung flowers on the chestnut trees along the Promenade and turned the gray facades into something that looked like gold in the afternoon light. The terraces emerged like turtles from their shells. People walked slower, looked up, seemed to forget for a moment what it was like to rush through the city with your head down.

In April, Ayla also started walking differently.

She didn't notice it until one afternoon, as she walked out of the bookstore after her shift and the sun touched her face. She had raised her face up. Not intentionally - it was just a gesture, as a reaction. She had never raised her face to the sun before. She had always dodged the sun in the way you dodge something that you know can affect you.

In the weeks after the coffee shop, after the river, after breakfast at the sandwich shop, Finn had become a constant in Ayla's life in the way water becomes a habit - slowly, noticeable, until you no longer understand how you could ever do without it.

They had no agreements in the traditional sense of the word. No messages from: fancy having lunch at one o'clock? No plans that were made a week in advance and put in an agenda. It was looser than that, more organic, almost as if it had grown by itself without one of them having intended or sent it. They met by the river on Wednesday morning. They drank coffee on Thursday night after his sandwich and her shift. On Saturdays they sometimes both sat in the library - still each at their own table, but now with the conscious knowledge that the other was also there.

It was a weird kind of friendship, if you could call it friendship. There was no noisiness in it, no fun in the broadest sense, no invitations to birthday parties or groups of friends or messy dinners. It was quiet and two-sided and just the right temperature for two people who were startled by too much heat.

On a Thursday evening at the end of April, they walked through the Promenade after coffee. The chestnut trees were in bloom, white flowers fell like snow on the sidewalk. Children ran through it. A couple walked hand in hand, the woman laughing at something the man said, her head back, her hair loose.

Ayla looked at them and felt something she couldn't push away fast enough.

"What's up?" Finn asked next to her.

She looked at him. "Nothing."

He also looked at the couple. Looked back at her. Said nothing.

That was one of the things to Finn that she had learned to appreciate and fear at the same time - he never insisted, but he didn't look away either. He registered things and he had them register and he waited for you to finish. That made Ayla feel like she sometimes had to choose between telling or fleeing, and fleeing these days felt more and more like the easier option, which was paradoxical because Finn was the least threatening person she knew.

"I'm not used to this," she finally said.

"To what?"

She searched for words. "To someone who is just there. Which is just always there. Without it being a burden or an obligation or -" She was silent. "I don't know how to say this."

"You don't have to say it," he said.

"No, I want it." She kept walking, her gaze straight ahead. "My mother left without explanation. My father is there, but he is not really there. I've learned that people go. That's just - that's how it is. But you're not going." She was silent for a moment. "Not yet."

It was a strange, vulnerable sentence and she felt the vulnerability of it as she pronounced it, like a snail that takes off his house and expects to be crushed.

Finn walked next to her. They passed a street musician playing the violin, a slow piece that took off in the evening air. They walked through it and on the other side of the music Finn stopped.

She also stopped.

He looked at her. His gray eyes in the light of the lanterns.

"I'm not going," he said.

Two words. Offered in the same way that he always offered his words - without exaggeration, without promises he could not deliver, just the establishment of a fact as he saw it.

Ayla looked at him. She believed him. And that was the scariest thing that had happened to her in weeks.

They walked on, the chestnut blossoms under their feet, the violin music dying behind them.

Ayla thought: I'm never going to tell him how this feels.

She thought: that's the only safe thing I have left.

Chapter 8

The bookstore was called Tussen de Regels and was exactly what the name promised: a narrow store full of books that were not in order and light that was too little and an owner, Mrs. Kaat, who had been behind the same counter for twenty-five years and knew exactly where each book was without ever looking for anything. Ayla had worked there for two years now, three afternoons a week, and she loved it the way you love a place that asks you for nothing but gives you everything.

On a Tuesday in May, Finn brought her a cup of tea.

She worked alone that afternoon, Mrs. Kaat was at the dentist, and the store had been quiet except for a woman who had thought about novels for an hour and finally bought a cookbook. Ayla was packing an order when the bell above the door rang and Finn came in with two paper cups in his hands.

She looked up. "What are you doing here?"

"You said yesterday that you worked alone." He put a cup on the counter for her. "I thought: tea."

She looked at the cup. Looked at him. "You're crazy."

"That's possible." He looked around the store, his gaze sliding along the spines of the books, slowly, as if reading them. "Nice place."

"You've never been here."

"Did I know I was welcome?"

She wanted to say something back but the tea smelled of ginger and honey and she picked up the cup and took a sip and it was perfect, the right temperature, and she thought: he paid attention to how I drink tea.

He stayed for an hour. He sat on the stool next to the counter and they were both working - she was packing up, he was working on his laptop on some design - and hardly any words were needed. A customer came, Ayla helped him, Finn pushed aside a bit to make room, the customer went. They read together in their own way, each in their own world but the worlds side by side.

At one point Ayla looked up and saw him staring at his screen with his eyebrows frowning, his lip slightly bitten, the expression of someone busy with something he

takes seriously. She looked longer than she was supposed to. She looked at the line of his jaw, at his hands on the keyboard, at the small scar above his left eyebrow that she had seen before and had never asked for.

He looked up.

She looked at her work.

"Everything okay?" He asked.

"Yes," she said. "I was thinking of something."

"What?"

She quickly searched for something. "What book would I recommend to you?"

He looked at her with a look that said: I don't believe you but I'll let it go. "And?"

She got up, walked to a rack in the middle of the store, and pulled out a book without hesitation. She gave it to him. It was a thin novel with a worn cover, a story about a man who writes letters for a year after the death of his wife that he never sends.

Finn looked at the cover. Looked up. "Sounds heavy."

"Anything worth it is heavy," she said.

He looked at her for a moment. A small smile that he kept inside but that was still in his eyes. He put the book next to his laptop.

They continued to work. The afternoon slowly passed like a lazy river. When it was five o'clock, Finn got up, closed his laptop, put on his coat.

"Thank you for the company," he said.

"You were just there," she said.

"Crose." He took the book from the counter, placed a note of ten next to it, significantly more than the book cost.

"That's too much," she said.

"It's for the tea," he said.

She looked at the note. Looked at him. She wanted to say something - something that wasn't a thank you and it doesn't have to, something that was closer to the truth of what she felt, namely that this little hour in her narrow bookstore was something

she would take with her, something she would later keep in her memory as a photo you keep because you look better than you know yourself.

"Finn," she said.

He was already at the door. Looked around.

She searched for the words. She didn't find them. "Nothing," she said. "See you tomorrow."

He nodded. The bell rang. The door closed.

Ayla stayed in her shop, the empty paper cup in front of her, the note of ten, the silent rows of books around her.

She thought: I'm going to fall in love with him.

She thought it very calmly, as a statement, as someone who looks into the sky and thinks: it's going to rain.

She then thought: I can't let that happen.

Chapter 9

It was early June and the summers in Velora were short and intense and always a bit unreal, as if the city did not fully recognize itself in the heat. People became different - louder, more colorful, terraces full until midnight, music falling from open windows. Ayla didn't like the summer in the city. Too much. Too loud. Too many people who were happy in a way they didn't understand.

But this year was different.

This year she had Finn.

They did things they hadn't done before. He took her to an exhibition opening in a gallery on the South Side, friends of a friend of his, she didn't know anyone but she was standing next to him and that was enough. She took him to the market on Saturday morning, the farmers' market at the Grote Markt, and she let him taste a cheese he certainly wouldn't like and he indeed didn't like it and the facial expression he made with it gave her a laugh that she hadn't seen coming.

They had never heard each other laugh like that.

He looked at her while she laughed, with an expression on his face that she couldn't immediately place - something soft, something warm, something he quickly pulled away before she could see it properly.

They talked about everything and nothing. About his work - a campaign for a local music festival, he showed her the designs on his laptop and she sat next to him on the couch in his apartment and bent over the screen and smelled his turtleneck sweater and thought: I have to take a step back from this. About her work in the bookstore - a customer who came every week and always asked the same thing: do you have anything about trains? They had come up with a whole story about the man and his trains that became more and more extensive with each version.

They talked about their families in the cautious way you talk about open wounds - you touch them without pressing. They talked about Thomas, Finn's brother, and how the quarrel had gone, not the details but the contours, enough that Ayla understood how deep it was. They talked about her mother, and that Ayla sometimes dreamed of her and then woke up and was angry, not sad but angry, and that she almost liked anger more than sadness because anger was something to hold on to.

"Sadness is like water," she said one evening. "You can't hold it. It falls through your hands."

Finn had looked at her. "But it also goes away once it falls."

She thought about it. "Or it will find a way to something else."

They were sitting on his balcony, two chairs, a bottle of wine that was almost empty, the city lights under them. It was late. She didn't know what time, she had stopped looking at her phone sometime after ten.

"Ayla," Finn said.

She looked at him.

He looked at the city. "I'm glad you followed me."

She also looked at the city. Her heart did something in her chest that she was not allowed to allow.

"Me too," she said, so softly that she didn't know if he had heard it.

They sat until the wine was finished and the night reached its deepest point. Then she got up and said she was going home and he walked with her downstairs and outside on the sidewalk they said goodbye the way they always said goodbye - a nod, a small movement, no touch, never touch, that was the line they had drawn without ever naming it out loud.

But that evening, as she walked home through the illuminated streets of Velora, Ayla put her hand on her chest and felt her own heartbeat.

She thought it was too late.

She thought: I'm already in love.

She thought: I'm never going to say this.

And she walked on, her hand over her heart, through the warm June night, and somewhere she understood that this was the happiest moment she had had in years - and at the same time the most scary.

Chapter 10

July brought heat and silence and Ayla's decision.

She had thought about it for a long time. In her apartment, on her evening walks, behind the counter in the bookstore while the hours passed like water. She had looked at it from all sides, had tried to convince herself that she imagined it, that it was friendship and nothing more, that her heart was wrong.

But her heart was not wrong.

She was in love with Finn Laurens the way you fall in love when you haven't been for so long that you don't recognize it when it starts - slowly, deeply, to the places you kept best hidden. She was in love with his silence and his dry humor and his oversized coat and the way he brought her tea and the way he never asked her for more than she could give. She was in love with his scar and his gray eyes and the way he read books like someone who is thirsty.

And that's why she would never say it.

She had followed this reasoning process accurately in her head, as accurately as an architect designing a building. She knew what would happen if she said it. Finn was the first person in years who knew her - not superficial, not the version she showed the world, but a little closer to the real Ayla, the Ayla who didn't sleep and walked along rivers and watched people because she was too afraid to really approach them. If she said it and he didn't love her back - and that was the most likely scenario, because why would he, why would anyone - then it was over. Then the friendship was gone and the river was gone and the bookstore was gone and the silence they had learned to build.

She had lost her mother. She had lost her father to his work. She couldn't lose Finn too.

So she was silent.

She was even good at it - pushing it away, converting it to something neutral, keeping the friendship at the right temperature. She had been good at it all her life. This was no different.

But it was different.

Because on a Wednesday in July, by the river, while they were walking side by side and the morning sun was on the water and Finn said something about a book he had read - the book she had given him, about the man and his unsent letters - Ayla stopped abruptly.

"What?" He asked, also stopping.

She looked at him. He stood in the light, his hair a little longer than usual, his eyes gray and clear, and she thought: this is it. This is what I never want to lose.

"Nothing," she said. "I was thinking of something."

He looked at her for a moment. Two moments. His gaze was not commonplace - there was something in it that sought, that tried to understand, that was closer to her than she wanted.

"You've been acting distant lately," he said.

"I don't."

"Well." No reproach in his voice. Just a statement, as he always established things. "You don't have to tell me why. But I notice it."

She looked at the river. "I'm just - I think a lot."

"What about?"

She swallowed. "About everything."

He nodded. Accepted it. Started walking again.

And Ayla walked next to him, her secret safe behind her ribs, her heart a guardian of something she never allowed herself to think out loud.

She thought: this is better this way.

She thought, that's how I keep it.

She thought - as Finn walked beside her, his shoulder almost touching hers in the morning sun, his voice low and calm as he talked through the book - she thought this was enough. That this could be enough.

She almost believed it.

Chapter 11

There are moments in a life when you can point out exactly when something changed. Not gradually, not innotible, but on a specific evening, at a specific hour, in a specific light. Ayla would return later - much later, in the darkest hours of the night - to this evening in August. She would turn him and turn him around like a stone in her hand, looking at all sides, trying to understand if she could have done something else, if she could have said something else, or it could have gone differently.

But on the evening, she didn't know that yet.

On the evening itself, it was just a Thursday.

It was half past nine and the summer heat was still hanging in the streets of Velora like a guest who had stayed too long. The air smelled of warm asphalt and somewhere in the distance fries and the faint sweetness of lindens standing along the Promenade. Ayla and Finn sat on the terrace of a small restaurant on Waterstraat - not their regular coffee shop, but a place that Finn had suggested because they had walked past it once and she had said that the menu looked nice and he had apparently remembered that, as he remembers things that she had long forgotten that she had said.

They had eaten. Pasta, simple, good. They had talked about the music festival for which Finn had made the campaign, which had been that week and had turned out bigger than expected, and about a customer in the bookstore who had been helping Ayla find the perfect farewell gift for three weeks for a colleague who was retiring, and who had finally come in today with flowers for Ayla because she had been so patient.

"She brought you flowers," Finn said.

"Red roses," Ayla said. "I didn't know what to do."

"What did you do?"

"She thanked and then put the flowers in the back room and Mrs. Kaat took them home because I don't have vases."

Finn looked at her with that look from him, the look that said he thought something was funny but didn't want to put words to it. "You don't have vases."

"I don't have vases."

"Who doesn't have vases?"

"Someone who doesn't expect people to give her flowers."

There was a silence. Not uncomfortable, never really uncomfortable with them anymore, but this silence had a different charge than usual. Finn looked at his glass, the last remnant of red wine in it. He turned it around slowly.

"People should give you flowers more often," he said.

Ayla looked at him. He looked up. Their eyes met and there was a fraction of a second - very briefly, so short that you could miss it if you didn't pay attention - in which his gaze was something he didn't normally show. Something soft. Something bigger than friendship, wider, warmer, something that was in the edges of his gray eyes like water that threatens to run over an edge.

She looked away.

"It's late," she said, although it wasn't late at all.

He said nothing. The waiter beckoned. Paid before she could say anything about it, which he did more often and what she had learned to live with, just as she had learned to live with the tea and remembering small things and the way he always took a step back when she left the bookstore so she could close the door herself.

Outside they walked side by side through the Waterstraat. It was that time of the evening when the city finds its second breath - the family bustle was gone and the nightlife hustle and bustle was not yet there, an interval of relative calm. Their footsteps echoed light on the boulders.

At the junction of the Waterstraat and the Prinsenlaan, the point where their paths parted - he to the Keizersgracht, she to the Westerwijk - they stopped as they always stood at this point. But tonight was different. Tonight there was something in the air, or maybe in them, a tension that Ayla felt like you feel thunder before you hear it.

"Ayla," Finn said.

She looked at him.

He stood in front of her in the light of the street lamp, his hair a little confused by the evening wind, his hands in his pockets. He looked at her the way he sometimes looked when he wanted to say something but was organizing the words, his gaze clear and serious and at the same time somewhat vulnerable in it, something she rarely saw.

"There's something I've been wanting to say for a while," he said.

Her heart skipped a beat. She felt it physically, a stumbling, a disorder in the rhythm, as if her body understood the meaning before her head could process it.

"Finn -" she began.

"Let me say it," he said, not unfriendly but determined. "Because if I don't say it now, I might never say it."

She was silent. She stood as if nailed to the ground on the end of the Waterstraat, her hands cold despite the August heat, her breath just a little too high in her throat.

He took a breath. Looked at her. "I love you."

Three words.

She had expected them and at the same time never expected them. She had feared them and at the same time longed for the way you long for things that you know are dangerous. They stood there in the evening and they heard the city around them and somewhere music was playing and a car drove by and the lindens were smoking sweet and Finn was standing in front of her and had just said three words that changed everything.

"Finn," she said.

"You don't have to say anything," he said. "You don't have to say it back. I just wanted it - I wanted you to know. That's all."

She looked at him. To his face in the lantern, the sincerity in it, the courage it had taken to say this, she knew him well enough to know that this had not been easy for him, that he had carried this with him for a while and that saying it had cost him something.

She thought of everything she had felt in recent months. She thought of the flowers she hadn't expected and the tea at just the right temperature and the mornings by the river and the silence in his apartment that was not empty but full. She thought of her own decision, her own calculation, her own fear.

And she did all she could do, the only thing that felt safe, the only thing that protected her and protected him and protected the friendship and everything they had built.

She took a step back.

"I - I don't know," she said. Her voice was too soft, too uncertain. "I think you are very - you are very important to me. But I'm scared, Finn. I'm afraid that if we -" She was silent. "I don't want to lose you."

He looked at her. Long. There was pain in his eyes, a small pain, deep, but he hid it quickly enough. "You won't lose me," he said.

"You don't know that."

"No," he admitted. "But I know what's going on if we do nothing."

She knew what he meant. She knew exactly. But the fear was greater than the logic, the fear was greater than the desire, the fear was the foundation on which she had built her entire adult life and she did not know how to live without that foundation.

"Give me time," she said. "Please."

He nodded. Slowly, but he nodded. "Okay."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then she said goodnight and walked into Prinsenlaan, away from him, her heels on the ein, her hands clenched in her pockets. She walked fast, fast enough that it was almost fleeing.

At home, in her apartment, she lowered herself on her couch and sat in the dark for a long time.

She thought: he loves me.

She thought: I love him.

She thought, and I pushed him away.

She put her hands over her face and sat down, in the quiet room, while living outside the city without knowing that there was a girl in an apartment in the Westerwijk who had received the most beautiful and scary at the same time and did not know how to wear it.

She didn't sleep. Not that night. She lay with her eyes open to the ceiling and listened to the sounds of the city and repeated in her head, again and again, three words that someone who loved her had said.

Three words she didn't say back.

Not yet.

Chapter 12

The three days after that evening were the longest of Ayla's life.

She went to work. She packed books and helped customers and made coffee for Mrs. Kaat and did everything she always did, but it was as if she was looking at herself from a small distance, as if she was playing a role in a play about her own life. She ate. She slept, a little, enough to function. She walked through the city but avoided the Keizersgracht, the river in the morning, the Havenstraat. She avoided the places where he could be.

She didn't know what to say to him.

No was a lie. Yes was a jump over a gap that she was not sure to bridge. And the gap was real - she knew it, she felt its depth every time she thought about it. Not a gap between her and Finn, but a gap within herself. Between the Ayla who was in love and the Ayla who was too afraid to be. Between the girl who had lost her mother and had learned that people go, and the woman who tried to overwrite that girl with something new.

On the second day, Finn sent a message. Short, neutral, without pressure: All right?

She stared at it for a long time. Typed three different answers that she all threw away. In the end she sent: Yes. I'm still thinking.

He replied, Okay. I'm here.

Two words. I'm here. She put down her phone and stared at the ceiling of the bookstore and thought: that's exactly the problem. You are always there. You're not leaving. And I don't know how to believe that will remain true.

On the third day, her father called.

That was unusual in itself - her father rarely called, he sometimes sent a message, a short one how are you that actually meant I'm still alive and you too and that's enough. But now he called, on a Tuesday afternoon, and she answered with a sense of premeditated unrest.

"Ayla," he said. His voice sounded different. More than usual, or maybe she only heard that now that she was really paying attention.

"Dad. Everything okay?"