

Grieve

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Chapter 1

The alarm went off at a quarter past seven, as always.

Luca Meerman was lying on his back, with his arms along his body, and staring at the ceiling. It was a normal ceiling. White, with a small stain at the corner of the window — water leak from two winters ago that he had never painted because Sara had said she thought it was charming. Characteristic, she had said, and she had kissed his nose as if that was the end of every conversation he would ever want to have.

He had already heard the alarm clock go off at six o'clock. And at half past seven. He had always expressed it without knowing it, his hand automatically moving over the bedside table, over the place where her watch had been, her lip balm, her booklet with donkey ears in the corners.

Those things were still there.

He hadn't touched them.

It was three weeks and two days ago. Twenty-seven days. Six hundred and forty-eight hours, although some hours had not borne the weight of hours but of years, of centuries, of something for which the Dutch language had no word — and he had searched, at night, on his telephone, in the spotlight of the screen while the darkness outside was thick and oppressive. He had found Japanese words, Portuguese words, Danish words for kinds of grief that he recognized as his own reflection. But not a single word was big enough. Not a single word fit what was in his chest as a thing that was too heavy to carry and too big to put down.

Luca was thirty-four years old. He felt eighty.

He turned on his side and looked at her side of the bed. The pillow still carried the vague impression of her head. He didn't straighten it out. He hadn't touched it. At night he was pushed to his side as far as possible, afraid that he would accidentally move it, destroy it, make it disappear as she had disappeared — suddenly, without notice, without the chance to say goodbye in a way that wanted to say goodbye instead of see you later, see you tonight, see you tomorrow morning.

Sara had turned twenty-nine in April.

She had died in June.

A brain hemorrhage, the doctor had said. Subarachnoid hemorrhage. Luca could not have uttered the word. He had looked it up on his phone, read it three times, and then clicked it away as if the letters themselves were dangerous. A blood vessel in her head had burst. So quickly that she had not felt any pain, the doctor had said, and Luca had repeated this to himself as a prayer is repeated by people who no longer believe but still pray — but every prayer feels empty when the church has collapsed.

She had gone to work that morning. Luca had kissed her at the front door, fleeting, like you kiss someone when you think there is also a morning tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and a whole life full of mornings. She had taken her bike. She had waved without looking back, in the way he had sometimes found annoying because he couldn't see her face.

Now he would give anything for one look at that face.

She had parked her bike at the gate at the office. She had gone inside. She had hung up her coat. Her colleague Nora had later told her that she had made coffee, that she had laughed at something on her phone, that she had said she wanted to eat wok in the evening. Little things. Ordinary things. And then she sat down at her desk and never got up.

Nora had called her name. Nora had touched her shoulder. Nora had screamed for help and the receptionist had called the emergency number and the ambulance had come and everything had been moving, a lot of people moving, but Sara had remained silent.

Luca had his phone on silent. He was sitting in a meeting with his phone upside down on the table and had thought about the agenda for the afternoon, the groceries he still had to do, whether they would drink white or red wine at the wok tonight. He had seen three missed calls at a quarter to twelve. Nora. He had called back as he walked down the stairs to the parking garage, and picked up the ambulance staff.

He didn't remember how he got into the car.

He didn't remember how he got to the hospital.

He only knew that he had walked through a sliding glass door and that it was too cold inside — always too cold in hospitals, as if the cold was part of the protocol — and that a woman in a white coat had pronounced his name in the tone that people use when they carry bad news as a burden that they can not only bear but also cannot put down.

They showed him where she was.

Her face was peaceful. That was the word. Sone. A word he hated ever since with an intensity that surprised him, for he had thought he was a quiet person, a patient person, a person who does not hate — but the word peaceful had taken away something it should have given. Her face was not peaceful. Her face was silent. And silence is not the same as peace.

Her hands were folded on the sheet. He had taken her hand and it had been warm.

That heat had destroyed him.

More than her closed eyes. More than the squeak of the monitor that had stopped before it arrived. More than the word the doctor had used with a soft voice and bowed head: not to save. More than all that, that warmth had destroyed him, because warmth meant life and life meant Sara and Sara meant everything, and yet she was dead.

Warm and dead.

He didn't understand. Three weeks later, he still didn't understand.

Now he got up from the bed. Not because he wanted to, but because his body forced him to do so in the way that bodies have of being inevitable. The bladder. The thirst. The hunger he ignored but kept coming. The life that continued to force him to function even though he wanted the opposite.

In the bathroom, her toothbrush was still in the glass. Pink. She had chosen pink because he had taken blue and she had said they didn't want the same color as an older couple who mixed everything up.

"We are not an older couple," she had said.

No. They would never become it.

He brushed his teeth. He didn't look at himself in the mirror. He couldn't stand the face that looked back — the face of a man who had let the last morning go without kissing her properly, who had thought there was another morning tomorrow, who had waved at the front door and had gone back to the kitchen to take his coffee to work as if that was the most important thing he had to do that day.

He made coffee in the kitchen. Automatically. The espresso machine they had picked out together in a store in the city where the seller had been too enthusiastic and Sara had bumped at him and whispered: watch out, soon we will buy a professional

device for three thousand euros. They had finally bought this one, for two hundred and eighty-four euros, and she had served it every morning with the precision of someone who had turned coffee into a ritual.

Now he is serving him himself. Every morning. Capsule in, press button, wait for the sound. Same sound as always. But the sound sounded different now that there was no one to hear it.

He took his coffee to the living room and sat down in the chair, her chair, the chair he had always avoided because she always sat in it with her legs pulled under her and a book on her lap. He was in it every morning now. Not because he wanted to close her with it, but because it was the only place in the house where he felt like he was sitting somewhere instead of nowhere.

Outside the day began.

Neighbors who walked the dog. A child on a bicycle. The garbage truck in the street. The ordinary noise of an ordinary morning in an ordinary street in an ordinary city that knew nothing of the extraordinary loss that had been struck here, in this house, at this address, in this man like lightning that strikes not once but again and again, every minute, every morning, every time he hears the espresso machine and turns to say something to her.

He drank his coffee.

He said nothing.

There was no one to say anything to.

Later — how much later he didn't know, time had lost its structure, hours were no longer hours but just units of enduring — his mother called. He let it go. She called again. He let it go again. She sent a message: Luca. I'm worried. Just give me a call. He read it and put his phone upside down on the coffee table next to the remote control he hadn't used for three weeks and next to Sara's book that opened on page one hundred and forty-three, the page she had stopped on, the page she had put it on that last night because she had said she wanted to fall asleep with her head on his shoulder instead of with her nose in a book.

He had grabbed her shoulder and pulled her towards him.

She had slept with her head on his chest.

He had been lying and listening to her breathing and had thought that this was it, this moment, this silent togetherness in the dark — this was what he had, what he

wanted, what was enough and more than enough. He had thought: tomorrow I'll tell her how beautiful I think this is. Tomorrow I say that I love her in a way that words can't really handle but that I try anyway.

Tomorrow.

There had been no tomorrow.

There would never be another tomorrow with her.

The day passed as the previous days had passed — slowly and inevitably at the same time, like a disease that you cannot shake off but that does not kill you either, that only holds you in a state of half-functioning, of being present without being there, of breathing without living.

At half past four in the afternoon he called his mother back.

"Luca," she said, and in that one word was everything mothers can say without using words — the concern, the fear, the powerlessness of someone who sees her child drown and doesn't know how to save him.

"I'm still here," he said.

It was the only truth he could offer at that moment.

"Do you want me to come?" She asked.

He looked at the living room. Her book on the table. Her coat still on the coat rack by the front door, the light summer coat she hadn't put on that last morning because it was already warm enough. Her shoes at the door, two pairs, one next to the other as she had always done.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

That was a lie. Or maybe not. Maybe it wasn't a lie but just the truth that he wasn't ready for another human body in this house, for another presence, for someone who would say things like: she's in a better place now, or: time heals all wounds, or just: I feel so sorry for you — because even that last sentence, no matter how meant, had something he couldn't stand, something that made the pain palpable for another, and he wanted to keep the pain to himself, alone, in this house, in this silence.

After the conversation, he stood up.

He walked to the bedroom.

He sat down on her side of the bed.

And for the first time in twenty-seven days he put his hand on her pillow, gently, as you touch a living thing — and he felt the fabric, cool and smooth, and he felt the slight impression that was still in the foam, and he cried.

Not with sound. Not with shocking shoulders. Just tears that came without permission, that fell on the pillow, that darkened the fabric in the place that had held her head.

He cried until there was nothing left.

And then he sat, his hand still on the pillow, the light falling through the window on the stain at the corner of the ceiling — the stain she had found charming, characteristic, the proof that a house had been lived.

The house was lived.

She was gone.

And he didn't know how those two things could coexist.

Chapter 2

People came.

That was the first thing he had underestimated — not the grief itself, but the number of people who would bring that grief to him in the form of their presence, their dishes, their words that were meant as comfort but felt like little knives that he kindly received and then put away in a drawer to never look at again.

The first day after the funeral — a week after her death, seven days of making plans he didn't want to make for a day he didn't want existed — his mother had come. And his father. And his sister Elien with her husband who always found Luca too hard for no reason but who had not laughed that day, who had sat quietly in a corner and held his phone like an anchor.

Sara's parents had also come.

That would have been the hardest.

Her mother, Annelies, was a small woman with short gray hair and hands that were never quiet — she always folded things, napkins, papers, tea bags — and that day she had folded and folded and folded while saying nothing. Her father, Dirk, was a big man who talked little and worked a lot and of whom Sara had said she had only discovered that he loved her at her twenties, really and deeply and in a way that he could not pour into words but only into deeds. He had entered that day, had taken Luca's hand with two hands, and had looked at him without speaking, and in that look Luca had recognized something he had not seen in anyone else: the exact mirror of his own pain.

He too had lost his daughter.

He didn't understand it either.

They had held each other for a moment, two men who didn't know how to cry in public, and then they had let go and life had resumed its usual course — pouring coffee, cutting cake, having soft conversations about nothing, about the weather, about the funeral itself, about how beautiful the flowers had been.

The flowers.

There had been so many flowers.

White roses, yellow tulips, a huge bouquet of her friends with a card that read: For Sara, who had the most beautiful smile we have ever seen. He had read that card three times and then put it in his chest pocket and then never thought about it again because his brain refused to absorb more information at that moment.

Now, two weeks after the funeral, people were still coming.

Not every day anymore. The first days they had come in waves — colleagues of hers, friends of his, people whose existence he had forgotten but who now remembered, people he recognized but whose names he could not place. They came with casseroles and cakes and soup in glass jars and wine that he didn't open. His refrigerator was teeming with other people's worries. He hardly ate. He occasionally ate a biscuit because his stomach protested, because his body refused to give it up even though his mind regularly considered it.

Today it was Thomas who was at the door.

Thomas was his best friend. They knew each other from college, from too much beer in too small rooms, from nights that ended with conversations about life and death and the meaning of everything — conversations you have at twenty, when death was still abstract, a philosophical concept, something for later.

Now Thomas was at the door with a six-pack of beer and a face that didn't know what expression to take.

"I don't know what to say," Thomas said.

It was the most honest sentence anyone had said to him in three weeks.

Luca opened the door further.

They sat at the kitchen table, each with a beer slowly getting hot because it was already hot enough outside, too hot for June actually, Sara had said they finally wanted to buy an air conditioner this year but he had said it was a waste of money for three weeks a year and she had given him a kiss on his cheek and said: you're right, dearest, you're always right, in the tone she said that when she thought he was wrong.

He told this to Thomas.

Thomas laughed for a moment, briefly, and then wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"She was the smartest person I knew," Thomas said.

"Yes."

"Smarter than you."

"Much smarter than me."

They are silent. Outside a car drove by. Somewhere a baby was crying. Life did its thing, undisturbed, uninterested in the fact that there were two men here who didn't know how to deal with it now.

"How are you really?" Thomas asked.

"Bad."

"Yes."

"I'm not sleeping. Or I sleep too much. I can't see the difference anymore. I eat beschuiten. I called my work to say I'll be back next week but that's a lie and my manager knows it's a lie and has told me not to think about it, and I'm constantly thinking about it."

"About the work?"

"About everything. About nothing. About the way she stirred her coffee — always with a teaspoon even though we used capsules and there was nothing to stir, but she did it anyway, five times, always five times, and I never asked her why."

Thomas nodded.

"I didn't ask for so many things," Luca said. "So many things I thought: we have time. I'll ask later. There is always later."

"You didn't know."

"No. But that doesn't make it any better."

Thomas was silent. He was wise enough not to object.

They drank their beer, now really too hot but both have no intention of getting up for something cold from the fridge. They sat like two men who know that it's not about the beer, that it's about the table, about sitting at the table together, about the presence of another body in a house that otherwise only breathes silence.

Later, Thomas said, "There are people who say it's getting better."

"Yes."

"Do you believe that?"

Luca thought about this. He wanted to be honest. Thomas deserved honesty.

"I think it's changing," he finally said. "I don't think it will get better. I think it will make you a different kind of person. But better? I don't know. I can't imagine ever looking back on this moment and thinking: ah, good thing this happened, because look what I've learned from it."

Thomas nodded slowly.

"I understand that," he said.

"She was twenty-nine," Luca said. Not as a reproach. Just as a fact. As if the figures themselves were an argument against which there was nothing to contribute.

"Twenty-nine. She could have lived another sixty years. Seventy maybe. She could have written books — she wanted to, did you know that? She had a folder on her computer with the beginning of a novel. I found him. I didn't open it. I can't do it yet."

"Maybe later."

"Maybe never." He was silent. "Maybe that's good too."

Thomas got up at nine o'clock. He gave Luca a hug — a real, firm, masculine hug of the kind that Luca could never have given as a twenty-year-old but now allowed because being hugged was the only form of touch he had left.

At the door, Thomas said, "I'll come next week too."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to."

Luca nodded.

After Thomas' departure, he stood in the hallway and listened to the sound of the street slowly becoming quieter. He looked at Sara's coat on the coat rack. To her shoes at the door.

More people would come in the coming days. Neighbors who rang the bell with text about power. Colleagues of his who did not know what to do with their discomfort and turn it into practical questions: can I arrange something for you, something needs to be arranged, do you need help. A cousin of Sara's whom he barely knew but who had sent him a letter containing a reminder of Sara as a child — that they had both been nine years old and on holiday in Zeeland and that Sara

had built a different sand castle every day and populated each castle with names and stories and entire stories.

He had read that letter more than ten times.

He had put him under his pillow.

And at night he had sometimes put his hand on it, as he placed his hand on her pillow — as if paper could feel, as if memories had warmth.

They didn't have it. They were cold.

But it was the only thing he had, and he held it.

Chapter 3

On a Tuesday, thirty-five days after her death, he opened her wardrobe.

He didn't know why it was that day. There was no reason, no conscious decision. He got up in the morning, walked to the bathroom, looked at himself in the mirror for the first time in weeks — he looked bad, bald and hollow, his eyes that had a different depth than before — and then he walked to the bedroom, past the bed, and opened the closet on her side.

The smell struck him as something physical.

Her perfume — a light, floral scent that he had never been able to name exactly but that he had always recognized as hers, as something undeniable of her, such as her smile, her handwriting, the way she wrote her name with an extra curl at the S. That smell was in her clothes, in the fabric, in the fibers of everything she had ever worn, and he stood on his knees in front of the closet without knowing when his knees had touched the ground and he put his face in the hem of her winter coat and breathed.

Long. Deep.

Until nothing fit in his lungs anymore.

Her clothes were all still hanging there. Dresses he knew — the black one she wore for dinners, the red one she had worn on his birthday two years ago, the dark blue one with the collar he liked best. Sweaters neatly folded on the shelves above the rod. Her shoes at the bottom, arranged in a way he had never understood but that had a system in it that only she knew.

He touched everything.

Slowly, with two hands, as you touch things you're afraid of breaking — the fabric of her favorite blouse, silky and cool. The buttons of a jacket she had worn on their first real date, four years ago, in a restaurant in the city where the pasta was too cooked but the wine was good and the conversation had flowed so naturally that he had thought: this is it, with this woman I want to talk for the rest of my life.

On the top shelf he found a shoe box that he did not recognize.

He pulled him towards him. Put him on the bed. Opened it.

Letters. A stack of letters, handwritten, in her handwriting — the handwriting with the extra curl at the S.

He didn't understand at first. Then he understood.

They were letters to him.

Not with a date. Not with "dear Luca" at the top of the page — just sentences, paragraphs, thoughts that she had written down and put in this box and that he had never known existed. He took the first letter.

There are days when I look at you and I can't believe you're mine. Not in an uncertain way. In a grateful way. You are the only person with whom I am myself without having to do anything for it.

He had to stop.

He had to put down the letter because his hands were shaking too much to read the letters.

He put it down on the bed, next to the box, and got up and walked to the kitchen and drank a glass of water standing by the counter and looked at the street outside and saw nothing.

Five minutes later he walked back.

He picked up the letter again.

I'm writing this because sometimes I'm afraid I forget to say things. Not big things. I'll tell you. But the little things — like that I'm happy with the way you drink coffee with your eyes half closed, or that I like that you remember what music I play when I'm sad, or that I always check in the evening if you sleep before I go to sleep myself, just to know that you're there. I don't say those things enough. So I write them down. Just in case.

Just in case.

She had written this. She had kept a shoebox full of thoughts just in case. Did she know? No — that was impossible. A brain hemorrhage does not announce itself. But she had felt what all people feel who think well about life: that the little things disappear if you don't hold them. That everyday love is the most transitory, and the most precious.

He read every letter that day.

Ten letters in total. Some long, some just a paragraph. Some funny — she described how he slept and called it a "state of total surrender", which made him laugh through his tears. Some serious, almost painful serious, like the letter in which she wrote about her fear that she would not do enough with her life, that she would ever look back and think: I should have dared more, should have tried more, should have been more.

He read that letter twice.

She hadn't had a chance to look back.

Twelve weeks had been her whole adult life after that sentence, and he didn't know if she had found what she was looking for, if she would have said in the end — if she had known that, if she had been allowed to say goodbye — yes, this was enough, I've had enough.

He thought so.

He hoped so.

He didn't keep the letters in the shoebox. He took them to the living room and placed them on the coffee table, next to her book on page one hundred and forty-three, next to the remote control he did not use. He would read them again tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow. And after that.

He left her clothes hanging.

He couldn't give them away. Not now. Maybe never.

He knew that there would be people who would say it was healthier, that creating distance helped, that you had to move on. He knew in advance that he disagreed with them in a way he did not choose but which was simply his truth: giving away her clothes was losing her a second time, and he had not survived the first time in a way called survival.

He still survived but in a way called suffering.

And that, for now, was enough.

Chapter 4

He no longer slept at normal times.

Sleep had become something that came to him like an attack — suddenly, unplanned, sometimes at three o'clock in the afternoon on the couch with his head in a corner that would hurt tomorrow, sometimes not at all, for hours not, the night for him like a black plane without beginning and without end.

Tonight was one of those nights.

It was half past two. He was lying in the dark, on his back, his eyes open and focused on a ceiling he could not see. It had become quiet outside — the street that lived during the day had rolled up like a cat and slept, the neighbors slept, the city slept, and only he lay awake with his hands folded on his stomach and his thoughts that did not stop at the limits that the night should impose.

He thought of the day they met.

A party at a mutual friend's — he hadn't been there but Thomas had forced him, literally grabbed his coat from the coat rack and said: you're going, you haven't done anything the last three weekends and that's unhealthy. He had gone along with the energy of someone who was done with it in advance.

And then he saw her.

She stood by the friend's bookshelf — a bookshelf that no one else looked at because who looks at books at a party now — and she pulled out a book and read the blurb and frowned in a way that was more attractive than anything he had seen that night. He had walked towards her not because he was brave but because his legs had decided it for his head.

"Good book?" He had asked. The stupidest opening line imaginable.

She had looked at him. Just a moment. Long enough.

"I don't know yet," she said. "I only read the blurb. Flap lyrics always lie a little."

"How do you know they're lying?"

"All books are 'grive' and 'doundly stunning'. When everything is stunning, nothing is amazing."

He had laughed. Really laughed, not the polite-forced laugh he had taken that evening as a social tool, but really, from his stomach.

She had looked at him with something he had later come to call looking at her — a kind of curiosity that was warm and sharp at the same time, like a beam of light through a prism.

"Luca," he had said.

"Sara."

And that's how simple it started.

Now he was lying in the dark and trying to remember every detail. The color of her dress that evening — blue-green, a color that is on the border of blue and green and never bothers to choose. The way she had put the book back on the shelf, not in its place but a place too far, and he had pushed it straight. She had thanked him with a look that said: useful.

The first time she had grabbed his hand, later that evening, when leaving the party — not romantic, just practical, there was a threshold and it was dark and she had taken his hand and not let it go until they stood outside on the sidewalk in the light of the street light.

"I'm going that way," she said.

"Me too," he said.

"You don't know which side this is."

"No. But I'm going that way."

She had looked at him. And then she had laughed — really, from her stomach, just like him earlier that evening.

They had walked together, half an hour, through streets he didn't know, and talked about everything and nothing, and in the end she had put her number in his phone and walked away without looking back, just like she did in the morning at the front door, and he had stood on the doorstep and knew this was something.

Now he knew how big that thing had been.

Four years together. Three years in this house. A life they had built from small decisions — which espresso machine, what color paint in the bedroom, why Saturday was the day for groceries and Sunday the day for nothing. A life of habits

and rituals and silent agreements that had never been spoken but had always been there, as a structure beneath the surface.

That structure was still there.

That was the problem.

The house still acted like she was there. The structure held up even though the person for whom the structure was made was no longer there. Saturday was still the day for groceries but he didn't go shopping anymore on Saturday because for what. The coffee was still first in the morning but there was no one to drink it with. The bookshelf was filled with her books, her taste, her choices — novels alongside essays alongside poetry anthologies he had never read in but which he did not take off the shelf.

He got up at three o'clock.

He walked to the kitchen and made tea — not coffee, coffee at three in the morning was too far. He took the tea to the living room, took her letters from the table, and read them again by the light of the floor lamp in the corner.

Ten letters.

He read them as slowly as he could, each word separately, as if the attention he now paid to them could make the words exist longer than they would otherwise. Her handwriting was familiar and painful at the same time — he knew every font, every quirk, the way her a's sometimes opened and her g's always had a tail that went a little too far to the right.

In the seventh letter there was a sentence that he had skipped the first time, or perhaps not skipped but not understood, not completely, not in its depth:

Sometimes I'm afraid we think we have all the time in the world. I know we don't have it. No one has it. But I'm afraid we'll pretend, and that the price of doing that will only be paid when it's too late.

He put down the letter.

She had known. Not in a predictive way, not in a magical way — but in the way people have when they think honestly. She had known what everyone knows and no one wants to know: that time is finite and that being finite means that there is a moment when the bill is presented.

The bill was presented.

To him.

He sat with his tea, which was now lukewarm, and looked at her handwriting on the paper and tried to understand how this could be — how a man who was so alive, so present, so full of thoughts and plans and fears and love and stir-coffee and read books and sleep with her head on his chest — how could such a person cease to exist.

He didn't understand.

He would never understand.

That was, he realized now at four o'clock in the morning with lukewarm tea in his hands, perhaps the hardest: not the loss itself but its incomprehensibility. The way life goes on while something fundamental has broken. The way the universe doesn't give an explanation, doesn't make excuses, doesn't offer compensation.

She was there. Now she wasn't there.

That was all.

And that was too little.

He put the letters back, neatly, in the right order — he had numbered them in his head, knew exactly which was the first and which was the latter, although there were no dates on them. He put them next to her book on page one hundred and forty-three.

Then he went back to bed.

He didn't sleep.

But he was in it, and sometimes lying is enough.

Chapter 5

On a Monday, six weeks after her death, he drove to work.

He had packed his bag the night before — laptop, charger, the notebook he always used. He had prepared his clothes. He had set his alarm for half past eight. He was lying in bed and thinking: tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow.

In the morning, he had set the alarm three times.

At nine o'clock he was in the car.

The work was an architectural firm in the city, ten minutes drive in normal traffic, twenty in the morning rush hour. Luca was a project architect, a position he had built up for eight years, a function he was good at in the way that meant he did it without always thinking about it. He loved the work. He had loved it. He didn't remember how that felt.

His supervisor, Marloes, had been waiting for him at the entrance. Not intentionally, he hoped — she happened to be outside with a coffee. But she had seen him and waited and greeted him at the door with a hand on his shoulder that stayed longer than a normal hand-on-shoulder.

"I'm Glad you're here," she said.

"Yes," he said.

It wasn't nice. It was not unfine. It was just.

His desk was where it had always been. His computer was still the same. His mug — a mug with an image of a bridge he had received at a conference years ago and which he had never liked but had never thrown away — was in the drainer, clean, because someone had washed it. He didn't know who. He wanted to know but didn't ask.

The first two hours were bearable.

People passed by his desk. Some said something, short sentences he received and nodded, like packages that you accept without looking at the contents. Others just nodded — a kind of language he appreciated, the language of: I see you, I say nothing, I know that words are not the right tool now.

His colleague Benedikt — a fifty-year-old man with a beard who was always a little too tall and who was the best cartoonist of the agency — had only said: "Good that you are here. I make coffee."

And that was enough.

The problems started at eleven o'clock.

There was a meeting about a new project — a school building on the outskirts of the city, a project that Luca had taken with him for his sick leave, a project that he had partially handed over to a colleague but was now taking back. They sat at the meeting table, five people, drawings spread out, and the colleague who had taken over — a young woman, Vera, enthusiastic and competent — presented her ideas.

Luca couldn't follow it.

Not because the ideas were bad. They were good. But his head refused to absorb the information the way it had always done — with attention, with structure, with the analytical sharpness that his work required. His head did something else. It wandered. It went back to the kitchen of their house, to the sound of the espresso machine, to the smell of her clothes in the closet, to the letters in her handwriting on the coffee table.

"Luca? What do you think?"

Marloes looked at him.

He realized that he had been addressed. That an opinion was expected of him.

"Sorry," he said. "Can you repeat the question?"

There was a silence of the kind that politely acted as if there was no silence.

Vera repeated her question — something about the orientation of the main entrance, east or west, light capture in the morning or afternoon.

"West," said Luca. "The kids arrive in the morning. When the sun shines right in their faces as they enter, it becomes a problem."

It was a good answer. He knew it was good. But it had cost him effort in a way that had normally been effortless, and that effort was in his chest like a rock.

After the meeting, he walked to the toilet and stood by the sink, looking at his hands under the running water.

He thought of her hands.

How she washed her hands after cooking, always thoroughly, with soap, while telling him about her day. He had never really listened, not always, sometimes half, sometimes with one ear while checking his phone or setting the table or just being in his thoughts. He had thought: there is always tomorrow to listen better.

He turned off the tap.

He dried his hands.

He walked back to his desk and did his best the rest of the day. Not good — his best. There is a difference.

At half past five he grabbed his bag.

Benedikt walked along to the exit. They said little. In the parking lot, Benedikt said: "Tomorrow too?"

"Tomorrow too," Luca said.

"Good."

He drove home through the evening traffic, along the same roads as always, past the supermarket where they always did their shopping together on Saturdays, past the park where they sometimes walked when the weather was nice, past the restaurant where they had eaten on their birthday — her birthday in April, his birthday in November, that restaurant in the middle.

He parked in front of the house.

Sat in the car for a while.

The house looked the same as always. Red bricks, white window frames, a small sidewalk in front of the door. The geraniums in the windowsill that he had forgotten to water but were still alive — tough, those geraniums, tougher than you might think.

He got out.

Walked to the front door.

Opened it.

The silence of the house received him as silence does — totally, inevitably, just as big as everything that is missing.

He put down his bag.

He took off his coat.

He hung it next to hers on the coat rack.

And for the first time in six weeks, on this ordinary Monday at the end of an ordinary working day that had not been ordinary, he did not think about the future. Not to tomorrow, not to how it was, not to when it would get better.

He just thought: I'm still here.

It was the least that could be true.

But it was true.

Chapter 6

Saturday had always been her day.

Not officially. Not pronounced. But in the quiet grammar of their living together, the Saturday had always worn its color — she got up earlier than he did, made coffee, opened the curtains in a way that suggested that the day is welcome, and by the time he entered the kitchen there was already light and sound and the smell of something warm. They made a list for the groceries. Not always on paper — sometimes in their heads, overlapping, complementary, the kind of conversation that is about yogurt and bread but is actually about being together.

Now it was Saturday.

Luca was in bed until a quarter past nine. He had slept — really slept, five hours in a row, which was an unusual luxury for him in recent weeks. He lay with his eyes open and listened to the house. The house made noises in the morning, small noises — the heating pipes turning off, a bird on the roof, the neighbor starting his car. Sounds that had always been there but that he had never heard because when Sara was there he would have listened to her.

He stood up. Showered. Made coffee.

Stood by the window with his mug and looked at the street.

There was a market on Saturday, two blocks away. They had always gone there — not every week, but regularly enough that it was a habit. Vegetables at the greengrocer with the red beard. Cheese at the cheese farmer at the end. Sometimes flowers, when Sara saw that the living room looked gray. She had always said that flowers bring a room to life, and he had said he would rather have live plants because they last longer, and she had said that live plants also die if you don't take care of them and what that said about him.

Nothing, he had said. It says nothing.

Everything, she had said, and laughed.

He put down his mug.

Took his coat.

Opened the front door and walked to the market.

It was a mild morning. Cloudy but not threatening, the kind of weather that has no opinion. The market was busy — families with strollers, parents with children on their hands, elderly people walking slowly and looking at everything as if there was enough time. There was always plenty of time in the market, that was the agreement that everyone tacitly kept.

Luca walked through the stalls. He bought vegetables from the man with the red beard — who didn't recognize him or pretended not to recognize him, which was both good. He bought a piece of cheese because he walked past it and it smelled good. He stopped at the flower stall.

Roses. Tulips. Carnations. Ranunculus — Sara had once taught him how to pronounce that word, ra-nun-cu-lus, four syllables, and she had him repeat it three times until he got it right. He had found it ridiculous and later showed her in front of friends that he knew and she had looked at him with something that was proud but not allowed to be said.

He bought a bunch of white roses.

Not because he knew why. Not with a plan. His hand took them and his mouth called an amount and his wallet paid for it and his arms carried them home.

In the living room he looked for a vase — they had two, a high narrow and a low wide, both from her mother on a birthday. He took the tall narrow one, filled it with water, arranged the roses the way he had seen her do: not too straight, a little slanted, as if they happened to have fallen.

He put the vase on the windowsill.

Took a step back.

Looked at it.

The roses were white and the windowsill was old wood and outside the cloudy soft gray light was and he thought: this is a moment. An ordinary moment. A moment when nothing special happens and when no one is looking and when the world does not know that a man with a bunch of white roses is trying to understand how to live his life now that the person who gave his life structure is no longer there.

He ate his bread with cheese at the kitchen table.

He drank his coffee.

He washed the dishes.

All those small actions that are so much more than actions — rituals of a life that goes on in spite of itself, proof of a body that refuses to give up even when the mind doubts. He washed up and looked at his hands in the water and thought of nothing and everything at the same time, the way thoughts come when you do something with your hands: fragments, images, her voice saying a word that he could no longer reconstruct but of which he still felt the tone.

The afternoon passed slowly.

He read — tried to read, a book he had started before her death and in which he had not gone beyond page twelve because he could not hold the words, they slid away like water on a surface that does not absorb. He put it down. He looked at the roses on the windowsill. He looked at her book on the coffee table.

At four o'clock Sara's mother called.

Annelies called sometimes, briefly, always asking how it was going in a tone that did not ask for the real answer but for an answer that confirms that it is going. He understood that. He did it himself too.

"It's okay," he said.

"Have you been outside?"

"To the market."

"Good." A break. "I thought of you today. You always went to the market on Saturdays."

"Yes."

"I bought flowers. For her grave. Yellow tulips — she liked that."

"Yes," he said. "Yellow tulips."

"Have you been there yet? To the grave?"

He hesitated. "Not yet."

A silence on the other side of the line. No judgment — or perhaps judgment but of the kind that contains itself out of love. "It doesn't matter," said Annelies. "You go when you're ready."

"I don't know if I'll ever be done."

"No," she said softly. "I don't know that either."

They talked for about ten minutes, about little things — her garden, the weather, a series she was watching on television. Normal things. The kind of conversation that two people have who are connected by a loss but who are also just people who exist next to that loss.

After the conversation, he remained with his phone in his hand.

The grave.

He had seen the grave on the day of the funeral, but the day of the funeral was a haze. A day of black clothes and people hugging him and a chest that seemed too small for everything in it — not the body, but life, the years, the plans, the coffee with five rounds of a teaspoon, the letters in a shoebox, the novel that was never written off.

He hadn't been there anymore.

He knew he had to go. Not because it had to — nothing had to, death does not make demands on the living — but because there was something in him that wanted to see the place, the stone, the letters of her name, proof of the existence of something that was now only proof.

But not today.

Today was enough to be Saturday.

He got up, walked to the windowsill, bowed to the roses and smelled them. They smell like roses — how roses smell, like flower water and soft and something you can't name but that you always recognize. They don't smoke at her. They smoked at nothing that was hers.

But they were there.

And tomorrow they were still there.

And that, he decided, was enough for today.

Chapter 7

One night, seven weeks after her death, he opened her laptop.

He hadn't done it all this time. The laptop had been on her desk — a small wooden desk in the bedroom that she had found at a flea market and had sanded and lacquered herself in a color she called dark green but which was actually a kind of blue-green, like her dress the night they met. The desk fit right in the corner next to the window and she had sat there in the evenings with her legs crossed on the chair and her hair in a sloppy twist, typing or reading or just staring at the screen in the way of someone who thinks and forgets that thinking is visible.

He had turned on the laptop. He knew the password — her birthday, a number he would never forget now even if he ever wanted to — and the desktop had appeared with her background: a photo of the two of them on vacation in Portugal, two years ago. They both laughed, he at her, she at the camera, and he looked at his own face on the screen and barely recognized it — that face from two years ago who knew nothing of what was coming, that laughed for no reason to look for a laugh.

He had been looking at that photo for a long time.

Then he found the folder.

She had given it a neutral name — just "text", no title, no clue - but he had known what it was because she had shown it to him once, fleeting, with the laptop half turned away as if it was something he was not allowed to see completely. "I'm writing something," she said. "But I don't know what yet."

"A novel?"

"Maybe. Or a long story. Or nothing. I don't know."

He had not insisted. He had thought: she will tell when she is ready.

Now he opened the folder.

There was one document. Without a name — just "document1", the default name that gives a computer if you forget to choose. He opened it.

Ninety-two pages.

He didn't expect this. A beginning, he had thought — ten, twenty pages perhaps, the first beginning of something that had never come any further. But ninety-two pages was not a start. Ninety-two pages was a world.

He began to read.

The story was about a woman in her late twenties — no name, not in this document, the main character was consistently called "she" — who returned to the city where she had grown up after a long absence. Her mother was sick. The woman had built a life elsewhere, a life of her own choice, and the return confronted her with everything she had left behind and with the question of whether leaving was always a kind of loss.

It was good.

Not "good for someone who had never published" or "good as a first attempt" — just good. The sentences were clear and precise, occasionally a sharp imagery that made him stop and read again. There were passages in it that were painfully honest about the way people love each other and fail each other at the same time. There was a scene in it, somewhere on page forty, in which the main character found her mother in the kitchen and they stood silently next to each other and the silence was so heavy that the light felt like an act of violence — and that scene had stopped him.

Sara had written this.

Sara, that coffee stirred in an empty cup. Sara, who arranged flowers in a vase as if they had fallen by chance. Sara, who had sat in the chair in the evening with her hair in a twist and her legs crossed and had written this — this world, these sentences, this woman without a name who returned to a place where she did not know if she was still at home.

He read until two o'clock in the morning.

Ninety-two pages in one session, his eyes dry and his head full and his chest a thing of compressed pain and something else, something he couldn't immediately name but felt like — proud. Proud of her. On what she had done in her evenings while he thought she was just sitting on her laptop. On the fact that she had created a world that existed independently of her existence, which was here even now that she was no longer there.

But also anger.

Unreasonable, irrational anger that he tried to place and couldn't.

She had never finished this. She had stopped on page ninety-two in the middle of a sentence — half a sentence, three words, then white paper. Three words and then nothing. The novel was unfinished. The woman without a name was stranded in a place in her story where she couldn't go, waiting for an author who wouldn't come back.

He read the last full sentence.

Then the half sentence.

Then the three words.

Then the white.

He closed the laptop.

Sat in the darkness of the bedroom at her desk in her chair and looked at the window where the nocturnal blue of the city shone in and thought of ninety-two pages and the woman without a name and the half sentence and three words at the end of it all.

He thought she could have finished this.

She had had the time. She had had the skill. She would have wanted it — that was clear in every sentence, the attention that was in it, the precision. She wanted it, but something had stopped her. Doubt maybe. Or fear. Or just life that asked other things at other times.

And now there was a ninety-two-page novel that would never become a novel.

He opened the laptop again.

Read the last sentence again.

She stopped in the doorway and looked at the light falling through the window on the floor, that long rectangle of gold that—

That. A conjunction at the end. A phrase that had held her breath and never exhaled again.

He closed the laptop.

Put his hand on it, on the cool metal exterior, and held it there.

In the weeks that followed, he would not open the laptop again. Not out of indifference but from the opposite — because the ninety-two pages and the half

sentence and the three words were something he had to let exist as it was, imperfect and real, proof of a life that would have wanted to be more than it had been given the time to become.

He would later think about what to do with it — maybe let Annelies read it, or Nora, or keep it, or print it, or nothing. Later. There was always later.

No.

He shook his head in the darkness of the bedroom.

There wasn't always later.

That was exactly what he had learned, and it was the most expensive lesson he had ever paid for.

Chapter 8

It rained for the first time in weeks.

He heard it before he woke up — the sound of rain making on a roof window, soft and even, the kind of rain that's not in a hurry, that can last all day. He lay in bed and listened and felt something he hadn't felt in a long time: no pain. No pain yet. That first second of wake, before memory brings back reality.

One second.

Then: Sara.

Like every morning. Every morning that one moment of nothing, and then the return of everything, remembering, losing again that occurs as memory does its job.

But the rain was still there.

He lay down and listened to the rain.

Sara had loved rain. Not from thunderstorms, not from streaky rain, but of exactly this kind — the patient kind, the kind that makes the city grayer but also cleaner, that the sky smells of earth and greenery and wet sidewalk. She had become a different person on rainy days, slightly turned inward but in a good way, the way of someone who has permission to do nothing for a while.

On rainy days she had always read books.

They had read together on rainy days, each in their own corner of the living room — he on the couch, she in the chair, the silence filled with leafing paper and the sound of rain on the windows, and that was one of the things he had thought of when "being at home". Not a place but a state. That state of being together without having to do anything.

Now the chair was empty.

He got up and walked to the living room. The roses on the windowsill had bloomed — he had left them for too long, hadn't bothered to throw them away because throwing them away felt like a decision he didn't want to make. Now the petals had become dry and brown and the stem had become thin. He took the vase, poured the water into the sink, threw the faded roses in the trash.

Stood by the empty vase.

Put it back on the windowsill.

Outside, the rain fell on the sidewalk, on the cars, on the geraniums that he kept forgetting to water but refused to die. The water gushed down the gutter in a thin stream on the ground.

He made coffee. Sat down at the kitchen table. Looked outside.

On rainy days they had also sometimes cooked. Not just cooking — extensive cooking, with a recipe she printed out or had on her phone, something new always, something that took more time than usual but where time didn't matter because it was raining anyway. They had made spaghetti all'amatriciana, and ramen, and a Moroccan tajine that had stewed for three hours and where the whole living room had smelled of cinnamon and cumin.

He opened the closet.

There was pasta. There were cans of tomatoes. There was onion and garlic and dried chili. Ingredients for an amatriciana — almost, not quite, he didn't have guanciale but there was bacon.

He looked at the ingredients.

Looked at the rain.

Started cooking.

Not with a recipe — he knew it by heart, had stood next to her so often that the actions were in his hands. Bake the bacon until crispy. Onion and garlic. Tomato sauce. Pasta in salted water. The sound of the pan, the smell of garlic in hot oil filling his kitchen in a way that filled his chest at the same time with something he couldn't immediately name.

Presence maybe. The presence of a memory that is so strong that it almost becomes physical.

He cooked for one person.

It was the first time he really cooked — not spreading bread, not heating anything — in nine weeks. He did it slowly, without haste, the way she had taught him: give things the time they need. Not everything has to be fast. Not everything has to be ready.

He ate at the kitchen table while the rain fell.

It was good.

Not great, not as it would have been if she had sat next to it and there had been wine and the conversation had been about everything and nothing. Anyway. Tasting like garlic and tomato and something that had just not had enough time, but good enough. Edible. Nourishing.

After dinner, he sat down.

The rain continued.

He hadn't touched her phone all these weeks — he didn't even know where it was, hadn't taken it out of the hospital or maybe but in a plastic bag that was lying somewhere. He didn't want it. But now, with the rain falling and the empty plates on the table and the smell of garlic in the kitchen, he thought of her phone.

He searched.

Found the plastic bag in the closet by the front door, behind a pair of coats, where he had apparently put it down on the day he came home from the hospital without knowing what he was doing. He took out the phone.

The battery was empty.

He charged him.

Waited.

When the screen turned on, her background appeared — a photo of a beach in Zeeland, a day they had been together last summer, gray sea, white waves, and she in the foreground with her eyes closed and her face to the wind, her hair messed up, a smile of the kind that arises when you don't know you're smiling.

He had taken that picture.

She didn't know he was photographing — she had her eyes closed, face to the wind, somewhere else in her head. He had grabbed his phone and shot before the moment was gone.

She had only seen the photo a month later, when he had sent it, and she had said: this is the most beautiful photo ever taken of me. And he said: I know. And she had said: how did you know when to shoot? And he said: I didn't know. But I knew I couldn't miss it.

Now he looked at the photo on her screen and understood what he meant.

There were messages on her phone. Dozens — from friends who didn't know what had happened and then knew and couldn't believe it, from colleagues, from her mother. He didn't read them. He couldn't do it yet. But he held the phone and felt its weight, a small black rectangular thing that contained her last few months — her last photos, her latest posts, her last searches on the internet.

He would open it once.

Not now.

He put the phone on the table, next to his empty plate, and looked at the rain that was still falling.

On rainy days she read books.

He walked to the living room and picked up her book from the coffee table. Page one hundred and forty-three. The page she had stopped on.

He continued to read where she had left off.

Not to know the story — he didn't even know what the story was, what book it was, who the characters were. But he read, following her words with his eyes, the path her eyes had followed for him, and the rain fell outside and it still smelled of garlic in the kitchen and he read until the light outside changed from gray to darker gray and he realized that night had fallen without him noticing.

He put the book down.

One hundred and sixty-nine now.

He was further than her.

That felt wrong. As if he had overtaken her on a road that was in front of her. As if he was doing something that was not his right.

But he had done it.

And tomorrow he might read another page.

Or not.

But the rain had carried him through this day, and that was more than he had expected

Chapter 9

They arrived on a Friday night, unannounced but not unexpected — three of Sara's friends who had been asking for weeks if they could come by and whom he had repeatedly postponed with apologies that were true but still excuses. They didn't ask today. They had sent a message: We will be with you at seven o'clock. You don't have to do anything. We bring food.

He hadn't said no.

They came with bags full — Thai takeaways, wine that he didn't want but gratefully took, a cake that looked too festive for the occasion but that they had brought anyway because Maud had said that cake was never inappropriate and the others had not contradicted her.

Maud, Roos and Laila.

Three women Sara knew from before Luca — from college, from the years Sara had lived a life that was only hers, before they had made it together. He knew them well, had celebrated Christmas with them, had gone to birthdays, had sat at tables while they were four women talking the way people talk when they really know each other — over and through and around, phrases that don't have to start because the other already knows where they are going.

Now they were sitting at his kitchen table and it was too quiet for four people.

"We don't know what to say," Laila said. She was the most direct of the three, always though — a woman who thought honesty was a form of respect, which Luca had always appreciated. "We don't know if we should talk about her or not, whether that's better or harder."

"Talk about her," said Luca.

They looked at him.

"Please," he said. "Everyone walks on eggs. No one calls her name unless I do. It drives me crazy."

Rose nodded — a quick nod, the nod of someone who had thought this and was glad it was said. "Okay," she said. "Then I'll tell you something you probably don't know."

"Tell me."

"She once had — this was years ago, for you — a date with a man who took her to a movie and fell asleep halfway through. Not a little. Really snoring. And instead of waking him up or leaving, she whispered the end of the movie in his ear so he wouldn't miss it."

Silence.

Then Luca laughed — a short, real laugh that surprised him.

"That sounds exactly like her."

"He never called her again," Roos said. "And she was fine with that because who falls asleep on a date."

"She never told me."

"She was a little embarrassed. Not for himself — for the fact that she had still whispered his end."

They ate. The Thai meals were good and warm and the table smelled of lemongrass and coconut and it was the first time in nine weeks that he sat at the table with people and did not count how long it would take.

Maud told about a holiday they had made together, three years ago, Spain, a house in the mountains that had not brought what the photos promised but where it had made it better — too hot, no air conditioning, an owner who came by every morning with unnecessary advice on the best route. Sara had waited for him at the door on the third day and told him, in her best mixture of Dutch and broken Spanish, that they already knew the route themselves and appreciated his visits but could come a little less early tomorrow. The man had looked at her for a second and then laughed and said: buena mujer, good woman, and had never come early again.

"She wasn't afraid," Maud said. "Not for inconvenience. Most of us avoid discomfort. She just walked on it."

"Yes," said Luca. "She did."

He thought of the first time they had quarreled — real quarrel, not the kind of superficial irritation that every couple knows but something bigger, something about a decision he had made without consulting her, something about trust and space and the way two lives merge. They both said things that were too harsh. He had tended to leave, get out of the room, the house maybe, wait for it to be slippery.

She had stopped.

"We're solving this now," she said. Not angry — resolute. "I'm not going to sleep with this in between."

They had solved it. It had taken another two hours and they had both been exhausted but it was solved, really solved, not buried.

Later he had asked her how she did that — walking towards the discomfort instead of walking away from it.

"I've seen enough of what happens when you keep walking around it," she had said. "Things grow if you don't tackle them. Then they become bigger than they are."

He couldn't always follow it. But he had tried.

Laila asked, at about ten o'clock, after the second bottle of wine that Luca had barely touched: "How is it really, Luca? Not the answer you give to everyone. The real thing."

He looked at her.

Thought after.

"I don't know who I am without her," he said. Not as a complaint. As a fact. "Not in a dependent way — I was myself for her too. But I've been someone else for four years, someone who was better because of her, and now I don't know how to hold that version of myself without her being there to make it."

Silence at the table.

"She loved the version you were without her too," Maud said.

"I know. But the version I was with her was more beautiful."

No one spoke to him.

They left at half past eleven. At the door they hugged him, one by one, real and long, the way of women who are not afraid of touch. Maud whispered something — he didn't get it right, something about Sara being happy, something about pride — and he nodded and was grateful for it even though he didn't fully believe in it.

After they left, he stood in the hallway.

Her coat on the coat rack.

Her shoes at the door.