

Ultima Cena

A thriller horror novel

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Chapter One: Ultima Cena

The old man had the corner table by the window, and he had not ordered.

He never did. He sat with his hands folded and a napkin already tucked into his collar, and he watched the door the way a man watches a clock he trusts. When the Hollands came in shaking off the rain, he nodded to them. When the teenagers came in after, he nodded to them, too, a little longer, like a man counting.

Nobody brought him a menu. Nobody brought him water. But everyone who worked in that diner passed his table with their eyes lowered, the way you pass a church.

Walt Holland noticed it because he was looking for anything to look at that was not his own reflection in the window, wet and dark and stretched. Outside, the neon sign had burned down to ULT MA CENA. Jean said it sounded Italian. Petey, who was seven and hungry, said it sounded like a cough.

It was October of 1985, and the wood-paneled station wagon was still ticking as it cooled in the lot. The radio had been nothing but static since the state line.

Inside, the diner was warm and yellow and smelled like a kitchen from before you were born. Chrome stools. A jukebox glowing in the corner. Six booths, and two down from the Hollands, a teenage couple: a girl in a jean jacket covered in pins, and a boy in a Members Only jacket who kept checking his Casio, trying very hard to look like he did not care about her.

The waitress seated the Hollands without a word. She was thin and pale, maybe thirty, and her name tag was pinned crooked: LIVIA. She handed each of them a laminated page.

Jean slid into the booth and squeezed Walt's knee. "You said one more exit, Walter," she said. "You said that forty miles ago."

"And here we are," said Walt. "Food. Warmth. Ambiance."

"Ambiance," said Petey, who did not know the word and liked it.

Then Walt read the top of the menu twice. It sat above everything else in bigger letters, printed in a slanted, old-fashioned hand: INTRA, HOSPES. EXSPECTARIS.

"Is this a joke?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's not in English."

"No," Livia agreed, as if he had complimented her. "It's very old-fashioned here. The owner insists. Please don't worry. I'll help you."

Jean leaned over his shoulder. The words slid past like fish. Pullus. Vitulus. Iecur. A few of them almost meant something, like a song half remembered from the car radio. At the very bottom of the page, in smaller type, ran one last line: PRETIUM: QUOD DAS. Walt took it for the prices, and could not find a single number.

He thought about the payphone he had passed by the door, the kind with a metal cord. Then he thought about the quarter he would need, and the number he wouldn't know to call.

"Pullus is very good," Livia said. "But for a family, I'd suggest the house special. Everyone leaves full."

"What is it?"

"A roast. With vegetables. Any allergies?"

Nobody had any. She nodded as if she had known already. She did not write anything down. Something small and cold turned over in Walt's stomach and was gone.

Walt glanced at the clock over the register, out of road habit. 6:59.

Then the busboy came with the water. He was maybe nineteen, sallow, with his eyes fixed on the tray. He set down four heavy glasses, and Walt saw his left hand. The ring finger was gone at the knuckle. The skin over the stump was pink and shiny and new, and the edge of a stained towel was tucked into his apron like something he had not had time to finish using.

"Rough night?" Walt said, meaning it kindly.

The busboy looked up, startled, as if no one had ever spoken to him. His eyes went to the old man by the window, then back to the tray. "Yes, sir," he said. "Very old kitchen."

He left. Walt drank half his water before he noticed the taste. It was sweet, almost honey, with something metallic underneath, like sucking on a coin. Jean was already drinking hers.

"It's good," she said, and frowned, as if she had not meant to say it.

From two booths down, Walt could hear the teenagers muttering over their menus. The boy sounded cocky, the girl quiet. She kept asking, "Wait, what's that one?" and he kept saying he was not eating anything with a name like that. Livia stayed away from them. She let them look.

The jukebox played something slow. Rain ticked on the glass. Petey drew a rocket on his placemat with one finger. Walt tried to remember the exit they had taken. There had been a ramp, he was sure of it, and a green sign, but when he reached for the number there was nothing there. Only rain, and wipers, and a road that seemed to

have no beginning. He let it go. It did not seem important. And Walt, who had been tired since the interstate, felt a pleasant weight settle into his shoulders, his arms, the backs of his hands.

At 7:14, the kitchen door banged open on its hinges and swung shut.

Then someone screamed.

It was high and wet and went on much too long. There was a crash, a clatter of steel pans on tile, a man's voice shouting a word Walt did not know and did not want to. Jean's hand found his knee. Petey looked up from his rocket.

Nobody else moved. Not the teenagers. Not the fry cook's radio, still hissing out a ball game. And not the old man by the window, who did not flinch or even turn his head. He unfolded his napkin, smoothed it across his lap, and folded it again into a neat triangle, the way you do when a meal is about to arrive.

Livia crossed the floor with a fresh tray, smiling.

"The kitchen is very old," she said. "Please. Drink."

Walt opened his mouth to argue, and found that his tongue felt like it belonged to someone else.

Somewhere behind the door, the screaming stopped as if a hand had been laid over it. Walt glanced at the clock over the register. 7:16. He did not know why he checked. He only knew, in the slow, warm dark of his own body, that he would want to know when the next one came.

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Interlude: Earlier That Day

The Chevette belonged to Ray's brother, and Ray's brother did not know it was missing.

That was the plan, as far as there was one. His brother worked doubles at the tire plant and slept like the dead until noon on Saturdays. If they got to the concert and back by Sunday morning, nobody would ever know. Marcy had told her mother she was sleeping over at Dana's. Ray had told his father nothing, which was how Ray usually handled his father.

They had left right after school, in a drizzle, with a road atlas, forty-one dollars, and a bag of gas station pretzels. The concert was in a college town four hours north, and the band was one that neither of their parents had heard of, which was most of the appeal.

The state line came up a little after four. Ray's radio had been playing something with a lot of synthesizers, and as they crossed it, the music thinned into static. He thumbed the dial up and down and got nothing at all. "Weird," he said. "It'll come back." It didn't. After a while he switched it off, and the only sound was the wipers.

Marcy counted mile markers. She counted things when she was nervous, and she had since she was six: stairs, telephone poles, the rings of a phone. Her mother said it was a phase. It was eleven years long.

"You're doing it again," said Ray.

"Doing what?"

"Moving your lips. Sixty-two. Sixty-three."

"Sixty-four," she said, and he laughed, and the little car shook with it.

He checked his Casio. He always did. He had bought it himself, with lawn-mowing money, and he looked at it about nine hundred times a day. She had teased him about

it for a year. "It's five-thirty," he said. "We're gonna be late."

"We're not late. Doors are at eight."

"We're gonna be late if we run out of gas." The needle had been lying on E for a while. "Next exit."

There was a next exit. There was always a next exit. Ray took it, and the road turned narrow and wet and empty, and somewhere along the way Marcy realized she could not remember the name on the sign. She would try, later. She would find only a green rectangle, and the ramp curving away under the rain.

There was no gas station. There was no anything. There were trees on both sides of the road, black and dripping, and now and then a mailbox with no name on it.

"This is my fault," Ray said at last.

"It's nobody's fault."

"I said I knew a way."

"You said you knew *a* way." She turned the small silver band on her left ring finger, her grandmother's, which she wore everywhere and had never once taken off. "That's not the same as *the* way."

"Your mom's going to kill me."

"She's going to kill *me*."

"I don't want to be the reason you get in trouble."

"You're not the reason," Marcy said. "You're the excuse."

He laughed again, but not for long. He drove for a while with both hands on the wheel. Then, without taking his eyes off the road, he said, "Can I ask you something dumb?"

"You're going to."

"If something goes wrong. Like, actually wrong. Not out-of-gas wrong." He swallowed. "You go. You don't wait for me. Promise."

"Nothing is going to go wrong. It's a concert."

"Promise."

She looked at his profile, the stubborn chin, the Members Only jacket that was a size too small, and she crossed the fingers of her free hand where he couldn't see. "Fine," she said. "I promise."

She would remember that later, and how easily she had done it.

They found the diner at ten to seven, when the rain had settled into a steady fall, and both of them had stopped talking. It appeared around a bend, red and buzzing in the dark, a sign burned down to ULT MA CENA. Someone had left the lights on inside, warm and yellow. A wood-paneled station wagon sat crooked in the lot, its engine still ticking as it cooled.

"It sounds like a sneeze," said Ray.

"It's Latin. Sort of."

"What's it mean?"

"No idea. I only took one year." She looked at the windows. "They'll have a phone, at least."

Her mother had a rule about that, too. *Always carry a dime, in case*. In case of what, Marcy had asked, at six years old, and her mother had said, *In case*. The dime was in her jacket right now, in the little coin pocket, under about forty pins.

Ray parked. He turned off the engine, and the wipers stopped halfway across the glass, and the rain filled the silence. He looked at her, and then at his watch, and

then, gravely, held out his hand.

She took it. She counted his fingers, one by one, the way she always did, and he waited with the solemn face of a boy who knows his part.

"Still all here?" he asked.

"All ten," said Marcy.

They got out into the rain. Ray held the door, and a bell rang over their heads, and the warm air came out to meet them, smelling like a kitchen from before either of them was born.

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Chapter Two: Hospes

Marcy Pruitt had taken one year of Latin, freshman year, because her mother thought it would look good on a transcript. She remembered almost none of it. She remembered Mr. Delacroix's cardigan, and the way he said *amo*, *amas*, *amat* like a man ordering coffee.

At the top of the laminated page, in bigger letters than the rest, ran a line she had read three times without getting anywhere: INTRA, HOSPES. EXSPECTARIS. The middle word snagged on something. The rest slid off like rain.

Livia kept away from their booth until 7:29. She let them stare at the laminated pages for a long time first, the way you let a fish look at a hook. When she finally came, she asked what they wanted, and Marcy, who had given up, put her finger on a line at random.

"The house favorite," said Livia. "Tonight, it's very fresh."

Then she said the words *hospes assus*, and something in the back of Marcy's head lit up and went dark again.

"Hospes," she said slowly. "That's... host? Like, hospitality?"

"Something like that," Livia said. "It's our specialty."

"Roast host," Ray said, and snorted. "Sounds like a hostage situation."

Marcy laughed, because he wanted her to. But the word stayed with her, turning over like a coin. *Hospes*. There was another meaning, wasn't there? Something Mr. Delacroix had made them memorize. She reached for it, and it slid away, and she found she didn't mind. The booth was warm. The vinyl was soft. Whatever she had been trying to remember was very far off, and very small.

The food came on heavy white plates. Ray took one bite and went quiet, which was rare, and then took another. It was the best thing Marcy had ever eaten. She would

think about that later, and it would be the worst thing she ever thought. The meat was dark and tender and seasoned with something like rosemary and something sweeter underneath. The vegetables were buttered and glossy. Even the bread tasted like it had a history.

"Okay," Ray said, mouth full. "Okay, I take it back. This place is amazing."

"It's so weird, though," Marcy said. "Nobody's talking."

It was true. The Hollands, two booths down, ate in a dreamy hush, the little boy swinging his feet. The old man by the window sat with his hands folded, and still had not been served a thing. Even the jukebox seemed slower than before, each song stretching out like taffy.

Ray wiped his plate with the last of the bread. "Weird's fine. Nobody's even brought a check yet. Maybe the whole thing's free." He grinned. "Maybe that's the catch."

Marcy laughed, and the thought slid away from her like everything else.

Ray checked his Casio. "Seven forty-three."

"Why do you keep looking at that?"

"I don't know." He frowned at it, as if it had told him something. "You heard that scream before, right? At seven-fourteen. It was, like, exactly seven-fourteen."

"So?"

"So I'm just saying. I bet it does it again."

At 7:44, the kitchen door banged open on its hinges and swung shut.

Marcy's fork stopped halfway to her mouth. The scream that followed was longer than the first. It was a man's voice, hoarse and ragged, and behind it she could hear something else, a wet knocking, steady as a heartbeat. Pans crashed on tile, and a man shouted the same strange word as before. She waited for someone to move. A

waiter, a cook, anyone.

At the height of it, the room filled. It happened all at once, like a radio turned up: a dozen conversations, silverware on plates, a child laughing, a chair dragged back somewhere behind her, the whole warm clatter of a dining room on a Friday night. Marcy turned in her seat. There were three tables, with six people at them, eating in a hush. The noise was gone. The jukebox went on, slow and thin, as if nothing had happened.

She decided the drug had done it, and let the thought go, like everything else.

The fry cook's radio hissed on, a ball game, the count still full.

Livia glided past their booth with a water pitcher, smiling at nothing. "The kitchen is very old," she said, and topped off Marcy's water though it had not needed it. "Please. Drink."

Marcy drank. It was sweet, like honey, and she had the strangest feeling that she had tasted it before, a long time ago, in some other booth. She set down the glass, and noticed that her hand took a moment longer to obey her than it should have.

Then she looked up, and the old man by the window was watching her.

He was not looking at Ray. He was not looking at the Hollands. He was looking at Marcy the way you look at a good book you have not opened yet. He inclined his head, just slightly, and Marcy smiled back before she knew she was doing it.

Behind the door, the screaming stopped. Ray went back to his plate.

And Marcy, who was almost certain that she was frightened, could not remember why.

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Chapter Three: The Regular

At 8:00, Petey Holland asked for pie.

He asked the way a seven-year-old asks for anything, loudly and all at once, and Livia bent to write nothing down. "Cherry," she said. "Of course."

By the window, the old man drew a watch from his cardigan pocket.

It was silver, old, the kind with a lid. He opened it with one thumb, looked at it for a moment, and closed it again without a sound. Then he set it on the table beside his folded hands, face up, where he could see it.

He did not look toward the kitchen. He did not look at the boy. He looked at the watch, and he waited.

The busboy came past with a gray tub of dishes, his ruined hand wrapped in a fresh towel. He slowed at the old man's table. He always slowed there. He reached out, and straightened the empty fork by the old man's empty plate, and moved it one inch to the left.

"Thank you, Daniel," said the old man.

It was the first thing he had said all evening. His voice was soft and dry, the voice of someone who had not needed to raise it in a very long time. The busboy flinched as though he had been touched. He nodded, and hurried on.

No one had ever told Daniel that the old man knew his name.

The old man drank no water, because none had been brought. He ate no bread, because none had been served. He had, in front of him, a place setting: a plate, a knife, a fork, a spoon, a napkin folded into a triangle. It was laid as carefully as an altar. Whatever he was waiting for, he was in no hurry to begin.

Now and then, his eyes moved across the room. They rested on the Hollands, who ate their dinner in a slow hush. They rested on the teenage girl, who kept touching her water glass and then looking at her hand. They rested on the boy with the Casio watch, who was, the old man noticed, also counting.

He smiled at that, just slightly. It was not an unkind smile. It was the smile of a man watching a child work out a riddle that he himself had written.

At 8:06, the pie came out. Petey ate three bites and fell quiet, staring at his fork.

At 8:07, the old man closed his eyes.

At 8:09, he opened them, and looked at the watch again.

At 8:11, Livia passed his table and paused, though no one had spoken to her. She stood with her hands folded and her head lowered. The old man said nothing. He lifted two fingers from the table, no more than an inch, and she nodded and walked on.

At 8:14, a chair scraped somewhere behind the kitchen door.

At 8:15, the screaming began.

It was a woman this time. It was a long, thin sound that climbed and climbed. Pans crashed on tile, and a man shouted his one strange word, and under it all, faint and unmistakable, a voice in the kitchen began to sing. A low, steady singing, in a language nobody at the tables could name. The old man turned his head, at last, toward the door. He listened with his eyes half closed and his hands folded in his lap, like a man in a good pew during a familiar hymn.

When the screaming stopped, he closed the watch, and put it away.

Then he took his fork, and moved it one inch back to the right.

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Chapter Four: The Alley

At 8:22, Daniel carried the trash out the back.

Nobody told him to. Nobody ever told him. The bag simply sat by the kitchen's rear door when it was time, black and heavy and knotted at the top, and it was his to carry. He had learned not to ask what was in it. He had learned to keep his eyes on the floor between the walk-in freezer and the back door, and never to let them drift left, to the second door, the one with the steel bar across it.

The rain had thinned to a fine cold mist. The alley smelled of wet cardboard and old grease. Above the dumpster, a single bulb buzzed in a wire cage, and every few seconds, out beyond the end of the building, headlights slid along Route 9.

Daniel stopped to watch them.

A pickup went by. Then a sedan, and after it a long truck with its running lights strung like a necklace. None of them slowed. None of them so much as tapped a brake at the burned-out sign. To the people in those cars, the Ultima Cena was a yellow smudge on the edge of the dark, and they were already thinking about somewhere else.

He held the bag against his chest with his good hand. His other hand ached inside its towel, a dull and constant ache, like a tooth. He was nineteen. He had come here for a dishwashing job, and he had a very clear memory of the day he arrived, and of his hands, and of how many fingers had been on them.

Another set of headlights came up the road. This one seemed to slow, just slightly. Daniel took a step toward the mouth of the alley. His mouth opened.

Then the bag split.

It went all at once, the way wet plastic does, a long tear from the knot to the bottom. Coffee grounds and eggshells and folded napkins spilled across the wet concrete,

and something else rolled out with them and came to rest against his shoe.

It was small, and pale, and almost tidy. It lay on its side with the nail still clean.

Daniel did not scream. He had done a great deal of screaming in his head over the past few weeks, and it had left him with nothing to spend. He crouched, slowly, the way you approach an animal that might still be alive, and he looked at it. There was a thin scar across the knuckle from a bicycle accident when he was ten. He knew that scar. He had looked at it every day of his life.

Behind him, the back door opened.

The old man stood in the doorway with the kitchen's yellow light at his back. Daniel had heard no steps. The old man wore no coat, and the mist seemed not to touch him. He looked at the spilled bag. He looked at what lay by Daniel's shoe. His face showed nothing at all, neither anger nor surprise, only a patient, terrible kindness.

"Daniel," he said. "Come in out of the rain."

Daniel's good hand moved toward the finger. It hovered there, an inch above the concrete, and he felt the old man's eyes on the back of his neck like a warm palm.

"Leave it," the old man said. "It will be seen to."

Daniel let his hand fall. He stood, and left it lying there by the dumpster, small and pale, where the rain did not quite reach. The old man stepped aside to let him pass. The door closed with a soft, careful click, and out in the alley the coffee grounds sat in the light, and the rain began again.

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Chapter Five: The Back Hall

At 8:31, Marcy Pruitt said she had to pee, and was surprised by how long it took to stand up.

"Want me to come?" Ray asked, and laughed at himself, and did not move. He was watching his Casio with the patient face of a boy waiting for a kettle.

The bathroom was down a short hall past the kitchen, and the hall was longer than it looked. The floor was checkered linoleum, cracked at the corners. The walls were the yellow of old teeth. On her left was the swinging kitchen door, and she walked by it with her eyes straight ahead, the way you pass a dog you are not sure about.

In the ladies' room, she ran the tap and splashed cold water on her face.

Then she drank a little from her cupped hand, without thinking. It tasted like nothing. Just water, flat and clean. And in the plain cold of it, something in her head slid a half inch back into place, like a picture straightened on a wall.

Sweet, she thought. The other water is sweet. Why is the other water sweet?

She stared at herself in the mirror. Her pupils were huge. Her jean jacket, with all its pins, looked like it belonged to a much happier girl.

When she came out, the hall was empty. At the far end was a steel door with a push bar, propped an inch open with a folded square of cardboard. Cold air breathed through the gap. It smelled of rain and wet cardboard, and under that, something like a butcher shop.

She knew she should go back to the booth. She went to the door instead.

The alley was narrow and lit by a single caged bulb. A dumpster squatted at the end, and on the concrete in front of it lay a spill of coffee grounds and eggshells and

napkins, half washed toward the drain. Someone had started to clean it up, and had stopped.

At the edge of the light, tucked against the base of the dumpster, something small and pale lay on its side.

She thought it was a candle stub. Then she was crouching over it, and her knees did not seem to belong to her, and she saw the nail.

It was a finger. A young man's, cut clean at the knuckle, the nail bitten short. Across the joint ran a thin old scar, the kind you get from falling off a bike when you are ten. Nobody had bandaged it or wrapped it or buried it. It had simply been left, like something that fell off a plate.

She thought of the busboy with the gray tub and the towel around his hand. She had watched the towel go by twice. She had thought, *Poor kid, some accident*. Now she understood that she had been looking at the wrong half of it. Whatever had taken his finger had not been an accident, and nobody in that kitchen had even bothered to keep the piece.

Behind her, faint through the wall, a man began to cry out.

She turned. She had thought the sound would come from the kitchen, but it did not. It came from lower down, from the far end of the building, where the alley bent around the back and a second door stood in the shadow, a heavy one, with a steel bar dropped across it in two iron brackets. It was not the door she had come out of.

The cry rose. It was a man's voice, high and cracked, and it was not the sound of a person who has just been hurt. It was the sound of a person who has been hurt for a very long time and knows it will not stop. Beneath it, she heard a slow, dragging scrape, like a chair across stone.

And then a word, pulled out of the noise. Only one.

Please.

It was English. It was not a word in a strange language, and it was not the kitchen's. It was a man asking a locked door for mercy, and the door was too thick to answer.

Marcy stood up so fast the alley tilted. She touched nothing. She made no sound. She walked backward to the propped door with her hands in front of her, and slid through the gap, and was in the yellow hall again, with the checkered floor and the smell of a good roast.

"Please," said Livia, from the kitchen door.

Marcy nearly died where she stood.

Livia held a tray with two fresh glasses on it, both filled to the brim. She smiled with her mouth closed. "Drink," she said. "You must be thirsty."

Marcy took the glass. Her hand only shook a little. She lifted it to her lips, and did not swallow, and held the water in her cheek until Livia turned. Then she walked back to the booth, and Ray, and the warm, terrible light.

She sat down. She let the water fall back into the glass, a little at a time, under the table. Ray was smiling at his watch.

"Eight forty-one," he said. "Four more minutes."

Marcy took his hand under the table, and counted his fingers, all five, and then the other hand, and then she counted them again.

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Chapter Six: The Empty Side of the Booth

Jean Holland watched the girl with the pins come back down the hall, and thought, very slowly, that she looked wrong.

She was walking carefully, as if on ice. Her face was the color of candle wax. She passed the Hollands' booth, and Jean heard herself say, from what felt like the bottom of a pool, "Are you okay, babe? You've been gone a while. Do you want some of my water? It's so good."

The girl stopped. Something crossed her face, quick as a bird, and was gone.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just... the bathroom's cold."

"Mm," said Jean, and smiled, and could not have said why. She was a mother. She knew what fine looked like on a teenager, and this was not it. But the thought sat in her head like a stone in a river, and the water simply flowed around it.

The girl went back to her booth. Her boyfriend said something, and she shook her head.

Jean turned back to her own table. Petey had fallen asleep against her arm, his cherry-stained mouth open. Her plate was clean. She could not remember finishing it.

At 8:30, she had asked for a slice of apple pie to split with Walt, and Livia had not written it down. It had not seemed strange then. Nothing had seemed strange for hours.

"Walt," she said. "Walt, that girl..."

Her husband did not answer. He was staring at the tablecloth, and he was sweating. It stood in beads along his hairline, though the diner was no warmer than before. His hand, lying next to his glass, had a fine tremor in it.

"Walt?"

"I'm okay." His voice was thick, as if he were speaking around a mouthful of bread. "I think the roast and I are having a disagreement. I just feel... I don't feel right, Jeanie. My stomach."

"It's the drive, Walt. I told you we should have stopped at that Howard Johnson's."

"Yeah." He wiped his face with his napkin. He looked at the napkin, and then at her, and for one clear second she saw her husband, the real one, frightened behind his own eyes. "I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

He stood. It took him two tries. He held the edge of the table until the room settled, and then he walked toward the hall with one hand trailing along the backs of the booths, like a man walking the corridor of a ship.

"Right back," he said again, without turning.

Jean watched him go. The hall swallowed him. The kitchen door swung once behind him, or perhaps it was only the air.

The jukebox began another song. Petey breathed against her arm.

At 8:45, the kitchen door banged open and shut.

The scream that followed was shorter than the others, and lower. Pans crashed somewhere behind it, and a man shouted his word. Jean listened to it with her head tilted, like someone trying to place a voice on the radio. It might have been anyone. It stopped, and the diner went on, and she was almost sure it had not sounded like him.

Almost.

At 8:52, Walt had not come back.

At 8:58, she noticed the empty side of the booth, and the napkin folded beside his plate, and the way the vinyl still held the shape of him.

At 9:03, Jean made herself lift her arm. It rose like something underwater. She got it high enough that Livia, passing with a tray, saw it. She stopped at once, as if she had been waiting.

"My husband," Jean said. Her tongue was heavy and strange. "He went to the bathroom. He hasn't..."

"Of course," said Livia. "He's being looked after."

She said it so gently, so completely without alarm, that Jean nodded. She actually nodded. It was only when Livia had gone, and the gray fog had folded back over her thoughts, that she understood what she had been told. *Looked after*. Not *He's fine*. Not *He'll be right out*.

Looked after.

She turned her head, slowly, to the window.

The old man sat with his hands folded and his silver watch open on the table. He was looking at her, not unkindly. When their eyes met, he did not look away, and he did not smile. He only lowered his head, very slightly, like a mourner at a stranger's funeral.

Then he closed the watch.

Against her arm, Petey stirred, and mumbled in his sleep, and asked where Daddy was.

Jean opened her mouth to answer. She found that she had no idea what to say.

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Interlude: Ray

Ray was almost sure the booth was breathing.

It rose a little, and it fell. It was warm and soft, and it held him the way his mother used to hold him when he was small and had a fever, and he had no reason to be afraid of it. He told himself that. He told himself several things, slowly, one at a time, and each one slid off like water off wax.

Marcy had gone to the bathroom, and it had been a long time. He tried to look at his Casio to see how long, and the numbers swam and settled. 8:52. That was all right. Eight fifty-two was not a long time. It only felt like a long time because the numbers were so slow to change.

The scream had come at 8:45. He was glad about that, in a distant way. He had been waiting for it, and it had come, and the world was a place where things happened when you said they would. He had said seven-fourteen out loud, in front of Marcy, like a magician, and it had happened, and he still did not know why he had said it. He only knew that he liked knowing. He had always liked knowing what came next. It was why he wore a watch.

Across the diner, Mr. Holland's side of the booth was empty. Ray had watched him go, walking along the backs of the booths with one hand out, like a man on a boat. He had thought, *Poor guy, bad stomach*, and something in his own stomach had gone tight for a second, and then loosened, because it was all right. It was warm. It was such good food.

He tried to remember why that mattered.

He remembered the car. He remembered the car very clearly, which was strange, because he could not have told you the name of the road they were on now. He remembered Marcy turning her grandmother's ring on her finger, the way she did, and saying *You're the excuse*, and how much he had liked that. And he remembered

the window on his side, the dark glass with the rain on it, and in the glass, faint and doubled, her right hand in her lap with two fingers crossed.

He had seen it. He had let it go. He had asked her to promise because he needed to hear her say it, and he had not needed to believe it. That was something he understood about himself, sitting here: he would rather be lied to by her than told the truth by anyone else. It did not seem like a bad thing to know.

The old man by the window was looking at him.

Ray had noticed that a while ago, and decided it did not matter. The old man had a napkin in his collar and a silver watch on the table, and he watched the room like a man minding a stove. When Ray's eyes met his, he inclined his head, slightly, as if approving. Ray nodded back before he knew he was doing it. It felt polite. It felt like something his father would have wanted him to do, and he almost laughed.

Why did I do that?

The thought was like a coin dropped down a well. He listened for it to land. It took a very long time.

"More water?" said Livia.

She was at his elbow with a tray. She never made a sound, he had noticed. You only knew she was there because the light changed. She poured before he could answer. It was sweet, and he drank it, and something small and cold in the back of his mind said *no*, and the rest of him said *it's good*, and the rest of him was much bigger.

"Can I get pie?" he heard himself say. It was 8:59. "The kid over there had pie. Cherry. And, uh, one for Marcy."

"Of course," said Livia. She did not write it down. "Fifteen minutes."

She said it so lightly. She went away. Ray sat with the words. *Fifteen minutes*. It felt like the answer to a question he had not finished asking. He looked at the Casio and did the math slowly, carrying each number like a full glass across a room. 9:14.

Nine-fourteen.

He knew that. He knew it in his bones. It had a shape, the shape of the last one, and the one before that, and the one before *that*. Every scream came fifteen minutes after somebody ordered a new plate. He had seen it. He had *counted*. He had known it since the first one, and he had been so pleased with himself.

I ordered pie.

The thought stood up in the fog, and turned around, and looked at him. Ray felt his heart do something odd, a single slow beat like a fist against a door. He tried to sit forward. His arms said *no*. His arms said *it's warm*. His arms were somewhere else, far down a long hall.

Marcy, he thought. Go. Go, go. I told you.

But she was not there. She was in the bathroom, and she had been gone a long time, and he was here, with the booth breathing under him. He did the one thing he could still do.

He said her name.

It came out thick and slow. "Marcy?" And then, louder, because the room had gone quiet and the jukebox was stretching a song across the air like a rubber band, "Marcy, where'd you go?"

He watched the hall. Nothing moved. The kitchen door hung still on its hinges. Somewhere behind it, someone was breathing, and would soon be screaming, and

would stop.

Ray looked at his watch. 9:04. Ten more minutes. He had ordered them himself.

He kept his eyes on the hall until she came.

• • •

Chapter Seven: Marginalia

The bathroom floor was cold, and Marcy loved it.

She had barely made it to the stall. The room had tilted, the yellow walls had swum, and then her whole body had folded over the toilet and let go of everything. The roast. The bread. The sweet dinner she had thought was the best thing she had ever eaten. It came up in waves, and with each one the fog in her head thinned, like a window being wiped from the inside.

When it was over, she stayed. She sat on the tile with her back against the stall and her wet face against her knees, and breathed. Her hands had stopped feeling like gloves. For the first time in two hours, her thoughts were her own.

Sweet, she thought. Everything here is sweet.

She stayed ten minutes. She counted them on the tiles. She had heard the eight-forty-five scream begin as she stumbled toward the stall, and she had listened to the rest of it through the door, and this time she did not wonder whose voice it was. She only listened to the pattern of it, the way you learn a song you hate.

When she stood, her legs held. She rinsed her mouth with cold water and did not drink.

The hall was empty again. As she passed the kitchen door, she saw that a second door, farther down, stood open. It was narrow, with a frosted window and a brass plate she had not noticed before: OFFICE. Inside, a green desk lamp lit a wooden table, and on the table lay a single book.

She had no plan. She simply went in.

It was heavy, bound in something dark and cracked, with no title on the cover. A ribbon marked a page. A pencil lay across the gutter.

"Marcy?"

Ray's voice, thin and slurred, from the dining room. "Marcy, where'd you go?"

She meant only to look at it for a second and put it back. But the hall was so quiet, and Ray sounded so much like a boy going under, that she just walked. She held the book against her chest, under her jacket, and slid into the booth as if nothing had happened.

"You were gone forever," Ray mumbled. His eyes were half shut. His plate was clean. "I got us pie. Livia said fifteen minutes." He lifted his wrist. "Nine-oh-seven. Almost time."

"Yeah," she said. "Almost."

She glanced at the window. The old man had not moved. His watch lay open by his hand, and his eyes rested on her, mild as milk. She looked down, opened the book in her lap, and pretended to fix her shoe.

The first pages were Latin, in tight black type, with drawings in the margins that she did not look at for long. But the margins were also full of English. It was small, slanted pencil, and whoever wrote it had been afraid. She could tell from the pressure. In places, the point had gone through the paper.

The pages were thin and slightly tacky. She wet her thumb to turn them, and found the ribbon, and a menu.

Not the laminated one. An older one, the same words in the same order, and across the top, the same big line: INTRA, HOSPES. EXSPECTARIS. It was the only line on the page with nothing written beside it, as if whoever held the pencil had not dared. Below it were the dishes. *Pullus. Vitulus. Iecur.* And beside each one, in that slanted pencil: *chicken. veal. liver.* She almost laughed. Those were real, at least. That was the cruelest part. Half the menu was real food.

Her finger moved down the page and stopped.

Hospes assus.

Beside it, someone had written one word, and pressed so hard that the letters were grooved into the paper.

GUEST.

Under it, smaller: *not host. Both. It means both. It has always meant both.*

Mr. Delacroix's voice came back to her, dry and bored, from a classroom a year and a half and a lifetime ago. *Hospes. Host, guest, stranger. A word for someone you feed.* She had known it. She had known it the whole time, sitting in this booth, and the drug had held her mind in its warm hand and said, *Never mind.*

Roast guest.

She turned the page. She did not want to, and she could not stop. There were columns. There were dates going back decades, with tick marks beside them, and in the margin someone had written, over and over, in handwriting that grew less steady as the pages went on: *Don't drink it. Don't eat. Don't drink it.* Then, on the last written page, a smear, and nothing else.

In the corner of that page, in the neat hand of someone who wasn't afraid at all, was a note in ink.

Fresh is best. The stock is kept until called.

Tonight, it's very fresh.

Marcy went cold. She had heard those exact words, in that same voice, at her own table.

For the first time all night, her mind did what the drug had never allowed. It laid things side by side. The screams, fifteen minutes after every new meal ordered. The man in the alley saying *please* in English, to a door. Walt Holland's empty side of the booth. The screams had never come from the kitchen. They came from the steel door at the end of the alley. They were the people being made ready, while the last ones were still on the plates. The staff never had accidents. The customers had always been the screams.

She looked up. Across the diner, Jean Holland was staring at the window, her little boy asleep on her arm. Her husband's side of the booth was empty. The napkin was still folded beside his plate.

He's being looked after.

Marcy felt the last of the fog burn off, and behind it was not panic but something colder and quieter. She looked at Ray, at his empty plate and his lazy, trusting eyes and his fingers curled around a Casio watch. She looked at her own clean plate, the one she couldn't remember finishing.

At 9:14, the kitchen door banged open and swung shut.

Beside her, Ray began to smile.

And in the corner, the old man closed his silver watch, folded his hands, and lowered his head, the way you do before you eat.

• • •

Interlude: Walt

Walt made it as far as the hall before his legs stopped agreeing with him.

He put a hand on the wall. The yellow paint was cool and slightly sticky, and the checkered floor tilted like the deck of a ship. Behind him, the jukebox slowed a song to a crawl. Ahead, past the kitchen door, was the bathroom, and he wanted very much to reach it, and could not remember what he would do when he got there.

"This way, sir."

It was the busboy. He had appeared at Walt's elbow the way the water had, without a sound, his ruined hand wrapped in its towel and the good one held out, palm up, like a man offering a coin. His eyes were on the floor.

"Sorry about your hand," said Walt. He did not know why he said it. It seemed important.

"Yes, sir," said Daniel. "Very old kitchen. This way."

They did not go to the bathroom. They went past it, to the steel door at the end with the cardboard wedged in its jamb, and out into the alley, and the rain hit Walt's face like cold hands. It cleared his head for the length of one breath. He saw the caged bulb, and the dumpster, and the wet black bricks, and around the bend of the building a second door with a bar across it. He opened his mouth to say something sensible.

Then the busboy's hand tightened, and the door was open, and the fog came back like a blanket drawn up to his chin.

There was a smell. He noted it, and put it away. The room was long and low, lit by bulbs on a wire, and along one wall ran iron bars, and behind the bars lay the shapes of people. It looked like a hospital ward in a film. It looked like a place where someone would take care of him.

"You'll feel better lying down," said a soft voice. Livia had come from somewhere, with a folded blanket over one arm. "Please don't worry. I'll help you."

He lay down. The mat was thin and the floor was cold, but the water was still in him, sweet, and it told him everything was fine. The gate closed with a small clean sound, and he found that he did not mind.

He lay for a while, listening. Somewhere near, a man was crying, quietly and steadily, with the tired rhythm of someone who has been crying for a long time. Somewhere else, a woman whispered to herself like someone praying. Water dripped. And at 8:45, from the middle of the room, came the sound he had heard in the diner, high and wet and going on much too long.

It was much closer now. He heard, under it, the wet knocking he had taken for pipes. He thought: *That's not pipes*. The thought was clear as a bell for one second. Then it dissolved, and he thought instead of Jeanie, and how she had said, forty miles ago, that he had promised one more exit.

He tried to remember the exit. There had been a ramp, and a green sign, and he reached for the number and found nothing there. Only the wipers, and rain, and a road that had no beginning.

"Are you awake?" said the whisper from the next alcove. It was a woman. "You have to stay awake."

"I'm awake," said Walt.

"Don't drink anything else."

"I had some water," he said, apologetic. "It was very good."

She was quiet for a long time. When she answered, her voice had gone flat and kind. "I know," she said. "It's all right. They keep it very nice."

He drifted. He was in the station wagon, and the radio was playing, and Petey was in the back seat drawing a rocket on the fogged glass. He was in the diner, and the jukebox was playing something slow. He was in bed, and Jean's back was warm against his arm, and someone was ringing the front doorbell, on and on, and he could not make himself get up to answer it.

"Is it morning?" he asked, into the dark.

"Almost," said Livia, from somewhere near.

At 9:13, the gate opened.

At first he understood none of it. There were hands, and they were gentle, and they helped him sit up. There was a voice saying, quite clearly, that someone in the diner had ordered pie, and that it was time. He was helped to his feet. He was walked, very carefully, across the tile.

The bulbs over the steel table were very bright, and he saw his own reflection in the pans on the tray, and he thought, with a small, clear, astonished courtesy, that this must be a mistake.

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Chapter Eight: The Ledger

Marcy kept the book open in her lap and her face empty, and turned the page.

The paper was thin and slightly tacky, and she wet her thumb to separate the leaves. The Latin told her nothing. But the neat ink hand had left English in the margins, in short flat fragments, the kind of notes a man leaves for himself and no one else, never expecting a stranger to need the rest of the sentence.

Ultima Cena. Last supper. Every meal, someone's.

Hospes. Guest, host — one word. One, eventually.

Her stomach tried to turn again, and she held it still. There were no other sentences. Only these short, flat lines, spaced out down the page like a man counting on his fingers, sure that whoever read this next would already understand the rest.

Stock kept below. Called by order, not by water. Fifteen minutes. Kept awake for it.

She read *kept awake for it* three times, trying not to let it mean anything, and it meant something anyway.

Awake. She thought of the man in the alley, and the one word he had managed. He had said it in English because he had been awake for all of it.

She kept reading, faster now, the way you keep walking past something on the side of the road instead of stopping to look at it. Two lines about the salting. A word she didn't let herself hold onto, next to a word she did. *The busboy's missing finger wasn't an accident*, she thought, and let the rest of that page go by unread, on

purpose, a kindness to herself the book was not offering. It was a payment. For what, and to whom, she would let herself find out later, or never. That question had a page torn out of it anyway, and only a ragged edge remained, as if someone else had made the same choice before her, with a knife instead of her eyes.

Then the neat hand stopped explaining and began keeping records. She turned the pages faster, and the tick marks she had seen in the columns turned out to be small entries, dated, each a few lines long, in ink that never once shook.

October 1962.

Guest: a salesman in ladies' hosiery. Alone. Arrived 6:42, wet through, sample case in one hand. Could not read the menu and did not try. Pointed. *Hospes assus*. Took the water gladly and asked for more. Twice he asked after a telephone. Livia said it was out of order. It was not, quite. It reached only us.

7:14. The door. He looked up at the sound, and then, to his credit, back down at his plate.

Choice offered at ten. Refused. Refused again. Wept, and asked for a priest, and was told there had been one, once, and that he had been very good. The table chose.

Noted: he thanked Livia at the end. They often do.

Livia. Marcy's thumb stopped on the page. It was a common enough name. It had to be. She told herself that.

A plate touched the table beside her elbow.

Marcy closed the book on her finger and looked up. Livia stood there with a tray, smiling with her mouth closed. She set down two slices of cherry pie, one in front of Ray and one in front of Marcy, and laid a fork beside each, exactly parallel. "Your pie," she said. "Please, while it's warm."

Marcy kept the book below the edge of the table. "I'm full," she said.

"Of course," said Livia. She did not go. She stood there for the length of three slow breaths, and Marcy did not touch the fork, and then Ray picked up his own with a hand that seemed to belong to someone across the room.

"Marce, this is so..." He put the bite in his mouth. The rest of the sentence slid out of him like something poured, *good* or *good-bye*, she could not tell, and his head tipped against the vinyl.

"Good boy," Livia said, and went away.

Somewhere behind the kitchen, something heavy was dragged across concrete, and stopped. The silence after it felt arranged. Marcy waited until her hands were steady, and turned the leaf.

October 1971.

Guests: newlyweds, Dennis and Carol, on their way to a lake. She had studied at a conservatory and sang under her breath in the booth, in tune, without knowing she was doing it. He was a machinist. He wanted to leave at 7:14. He said so, loudly, and wished afterward that he had not.

Choice offered at ten. He refused for both of them. She did not. She took the shears, and looked at her husband, and asked him, quite politely, to forgive her, and he did.

Noted: she learned the old hymns from the ledger within a month. I allow her to sing during the preparation. Some nights the guests say they hear a woman in the kitchen singing something beautiful, and they take it for ghosts.

Marcy had heard that singing at 8:15. A woman's voice behind the kitchen door, low and steady, in a language nobody at the tables could name. She had taken it for a radio. Now she knew what language it was, and what the singing was for.

October 1979.

Guests: a couple in their seventies, Harold and Edna, on their way home from a wedding. They read nothing, ordered nothing, and ate very little. They held hands under the table the entire time. They had been married fifty-one years, Edna said, and had discussed this once, in bed, in the dark, as everyone eventually does: which of them would go first.

7:14. The door. They did not look up. They looked at each other.

Choice offered at ten. They refused, together, and did not ask for anything, and neither of them wept. The table chose no one. There was no one left to choose. They were placed in the same alcove, side by side.

Noted: the only ones I have ever let hold hands. It cost me nothing. Kindness is cheap, and it feeds the stock.

Marcy's hand found Ray's under the table before she knew she had moved it. She counted his fingers, one, two, three, four, five, and then the other hand. All ten. He smiled at nothing and squeezed hers back, and it undid her more than anything in the book.

At 9:20, a chair scraped by the window.

Marcy stayed still. She heard slow steps and the tick of a cane she had not noticed before, and then a shadow lay across the table and stayed there. She kept her eyes on the page and felt the old man standing over her, mild and patient, like weather.

Ray smiled at nothing. His head had drifted against the vinyl.

"You read," the old man said.

It was the softest voice she had ever heard, and it did not need to be any louder. She made herself lift her eyes. He was looking at the book, not at her. There was no anger in him at all, only a kind of tender approval, the look of a teacher whose student has finally turned to the right chapter.

"Everyone reads," he said. "Sooner or later."

Her mouth was dry. "Then why do you leave it out?"

He smiled, and it was the worst thing she had seen all night.

"So they will know," he said. "Knowing is the last course."

He laid two fingers on the corner of the book, lightly, almost fondly, and did not take it. Then he turned and walked back to his table, and sat, and unfolded his napkin. He set his silver watch face up beside his plate.

Marcy looked down. The book was still in her hands. He had let her keep it. She understood, slowly, that this was not mercy. It was the house's manners.

She turned to the last written page. Something was different about it. The final few leaves had been stuck together with wax, thick and yellowed, and pressed flat as if they had been waiting a long time. Across the seal, in that same neat ink, was a single line.

Not yet. That is the part for the end.

Across the room, Livia bent to Jean Holland and set down a fresh glass. Jean, dazed, reached for it.

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Chapter Nine: The Dime

Marcy waited until the old man had settled at his table and spread his napkin over his lap. Then she counted to sixty, because her hands were too unsteady to trust, and slid the ledger under the seat.

She could not carry Ray. She had already tried, in her head, twice. He weighed more than she did, and he was smiling at his watch like a child at a birthday party. But she did not have to carry him to get help.

She had a dime.

It lived in the coin pocket of her jean jacket, because her mother had a rule about always carrying a dime for the payphone. Marcy had rolled her eyes at that rule for eleven years. A dime would not buy a call anymore, not in 1985, but zero was free. Now she held the coin in her fist so hard it left a mark.

She stood up. The floor went soft for a second, then came back, and she told herself it was only nerves. She walked toward the front as if she had left something in the car. Livia stood beside the register with her hands folded and her mouth closed. She watched Marcy go by. She said nothing. It was worse than if she had.

The payphone hung on the wall beside the coat hooks, the kind with a metal cord and a scratched steel plate. Marcy lifted the receiver. It was heavy and cold. The dial tone hummed in her ear, long and steady, the sweetest sound she had ever heard.

She dropped in the dime out of habit and dialed zero.

It clicked, and rang once.

Across the diner, behind the register, the telephone on the counter began to ring.

Livia looked down at it. She did not pick it up. It rang a second time, and a third, and in Marcy's ear the ringing came in the same rhythm, from two places at once, like a sound coming back across a canyon. Then the ringing stopped in the receiver, and a

voice, soft and unhurried, said:

"Please don't worry. I'll help you."

Marcy turned her head. Livia stood at the register with her hands folded and her mouth closed. She was smiling. The voice went on in Marcy's ear, patient and kind. "Tell me what you'd like, and I'll tell you what it is."

Marcy hung up. The dime dropped into the return slot with a small bright sound. She took it out and closed her fist over it, and did not look at Livia again.

The front door was not locked. That was the strangest thing. It swung open at her touch, and the bell over it chimed, and the rain came in.

She had expected it to be harder. She had expected chains, or bars, or a shape in the doorway. There was only the wet lot, and the buzzing sign, and the Hollands' station wagon parked crooked beneath it, and beside it Ray's borrowed Chevette, dark and dripping. She put her hand on the hood as she passed. It was warm. It should have been cold for hours. It ticked softly under her palm, like something still cooling.

Ray's keys were in his jacket, back in the booth. She thought of going back for them, and did not. She ran for the road.

Route 9 was black and slick and empty in both directions, until it wasn't. Headlights came out of the rain, and she stepped onto the shoulder and put both arms over her head and waved. A sedan went by. It did not slow. A truck went by, its running lights strung like a necklace, and the driver looked straight ahead. She screamed until her throat hurt. The rain took the sound and gave nothing back. Nobody so much as tapped a brake.

Walk, she told herself. There's a house. There's a gas station. There has to be.

She walked. She counted her steps, because counting was what she had. Fifty. A hundred. The neon glow shrank behind her until it was a smear in the wet air. The

rain drummed on her shoulders, and her legs began to feel strangely heavy, as if she had run a mile instead of walking one. She did not think about the pages, or how many she had turned. She kept counting. Two hundred. Three hundred. Not one driveway. Not one mailbox. Not one side road. The trees crowded close on both sides, black and dripping, and the road ran straight between them like a line ruled across a page.

Then, at three hundred and forty, the road bent left, and there in front of her, red and buzzing in the rain, stood the sign.

ULT MA CENA.

It was exactly as far away as it had been when she left. The lot. The station wagon. The yellow windows. She had walked away from it in a straight line, and she had arrived at it.

Marcy sat down on the wet gravel. She was not crying. She was only sitting, like something whose strings had been cut. A pair of headlights slid past, close enough to spray her knees, and she watched them go, and then the next ones, and the next.

She could sit here until morning. Someone might come. Someone might not. She thought about that, honestly, for as long as it took one more car to pass.

Then she thought of Ray in the booth with his watch, smiling at nothing. She thought of a little boy with cherry on his mouth, asleep on his mother's arm, and a glass of water on its way to her lips.

She got up.

It was 9:33 by the Casio on Ray's wrist when she came back through the door. The bell rang over her head. Nobody looked up. Livia was still at the register.

"Welcome back," Livia said. "Did you get some air? It helps."

Marcy said nothing. She crossed the floor, and each step had to be argued into. She sat down across from Ray, and took his face in her hands, and said his name. She said it again. Her fingertips were cold and wet. His eyes rolled toward her, big and trusting and far away.

"Marce," he said. "It's okay."

It was the kindest thing anyone said all night, and it was not true.

She tried to lift him. His arm slid off her shoulder like a coat off a hook. She tried again, and the booth went round, and she had to sit. Only then, from the corner of her eye, did she see the Hollands' table. Livia was bending over Jean with another fresh glass, and Jean's hand was already closing around it.

• • •

Chapter Ten: Too Late

Marcy stood up, and the diner leaned.

She had turned the pages of the ledger for a long time, wetting her thumb each time to separate the thin, stiff paper. Only now, with her mouth dry and her tongue thick, did she taste it. It was faint, and it had been there the whole time. Honey, and something metallic underneath, like sucking on a coin.

The book, she thought. He let me keep the book.

She left it under the seat and pushed off toward the Hollands' booth. Ray said something behind her, a soft, slurred, happy sound, and she did not answer. Six steps. She counted them, because counting was all she had left. The floor went soft under her sneakers, like walking on a mattress.

Jean sat with her hand around a fresh glass of water, and the glass was already tilted toward her mouth.

"Don't," Marcy said. It came out as a whisper. "Mrs. Holland. Don't drink that."

Jean looked up slowly. Her eyes were wide and wet and far away. Petey slept against her arm, his mouth stained red from the cherry pie.

"Your husband," Marcy said. "He's not in the bathroom. They took him. Something's behind the alley door, and it's..."

"Oh, honey," said Jean.

Marcy stopped. There was no fear in her voice. It was the calm of someone hearing that it might rain.

"He's being looked after," Jean said. She smiled a little, as at a child trying to be kind. "Petey's so tired, honey. He's been up since five. Could you help me carry him?"

My arms feel like somebody else's."

Marcy stared at the glass. It was empty now. She had no memory of Jean drinking it.

Too late.

She reached for the woman's sleeve and missed it. Her hand passed through the air where the sleeve had been, and the diner spun, once, slowly, like a carousel starting up. She caught the edge of the table and slid down the side of the booth to the floor.

The linoleum was cold against her cheek. She could see the underside of the tables, the chewing gum, the chrome legs. She could see her own hand, palm up, and it did not look like it belonged to anyone.

Get up, she told it. Get up. Get up.

Somewhere near, a hand closed around hers. It moved over her fingers one at a time, and she knew that touch, even from the bottom of the dark.

The jukebox began a slow song. From the corner of her eye she saw a pair of brown shoes, old and polished, walking across the floor. They stopped near her head, and stayed there a moment, patient.

She waited for a scream. None came. It was the first silence all night, and it lay over the diner like a lid.

And then, above her, somebody laughed.

It was very quiet. She had never known he could make such a sound. It was the laugh of an old man at a joke he had been saving for years, low and delighted, and it went on and on. It did not stop when she closed her eyes. It seemed to come from inside the room, and inside the floor, and inside her own slowing heart.

She was still holding on to one thing, a thin bright wire of a thought. *He wanted me to read it. He wanted me to know.*

Then the wire went slack, and Marcy Pruitt slept, and the laughing followed her down.

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Interlude: Ray, on the Floor

Ray watched Marcy fall.

He had seen her stand. He had seen her lean over Mrs. Holland's table and say something, and he had seen her face go the color of paper. He could not hear the words. Then the whole diner tilted like a plate, and Marcy slid down the side of the booth to the floor, and something in Ray's chest rang like a bell.

He had been floating. He had been warm for so long that he had stopped noticing it. Half a slice of cherry pie sat in front of him, and he had eaten it without deciding to, the way you swallow before you have chosen to swallow. But the bell rang once, hard, in the middle of all that warmth, and for the first time in two hours a single thought stood up straight and stayed.

Marcy.

He told his legs to move. They ignored him. He told his hands, and the left one obeyed, slowly, like a hand underwater. It slid off the table. He used it like a rope. The booth spun, and he pulled, and then he was on the floor with a thud he felt only as a kind of pressure, and the linoleum was cold against his cheek.

There was gum under the table. There was a sneaker. It was hers.

He crawled. He counted, because that was what she would have done. *Eleven feet. Ten. Nine.* His arms were made of sand. Every inch was a decision. Somewhere above him the jukebox dragged out a slow song, and somewhere beyond it Mrs. Holland was saying something in a peaceful voice about being so tired.

Six. Five.

He reached her hand. It lay palm up on the floor, small and cold. He took it. He turned it over and did what she always did, one finger at a time, with the solemn face of a boy who knows his part. Five. Then the other, five. All ten. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing. He felt the faint pulse in her wrist against his thumb.

"Still all here," he whispered.

It was the best thing he had ever done. It was the only thing.

Then a pair of brown shoes, old and polished, stopped beside his face.

Ray looked up. It was a very long way. The old man stood over them with his hands folded, and the look on his face was one Ray would have known anywhere. It was the look his grandfather used to wear at the end of a card game, when the boy finally worked out how the trick was done. It was pride. It was delight.

The old man began, very quietly, to laugh.

It was the kindest sound Ray had ever heard, and it went through him like cold water. *Please*, he tried to say. It came out as a breath. He tightened his grip on Marcy's hand.

The old man said nothing. He only lifted two fingers, an inch, and hands came from behind.

They were gentle. They slid under his arms and lifted him, and his fingers came loose from hers one by one, as if unfastened. He fought. He thought he fought. He was fairly sure that in his own head he was throwing punches and kicking, and that what actually happened was that his head lolled sideways and his mouth made a noise like a lock turning.

"Easy, son," said someone. "Easy."

He saw Livia go past, upside down, bending over Marcy with her hands out, as if to a child. He saw the green glow of his own watch, 9:38, and he got out one word,

thick and wet and very clear.

"Go."

Nobody heard it, and she was asleep. But he said it anyway. He said it all the way across the floor, and down the hall, and out into the rain. *Go. Go. You promised.* It was the last thing he said that anyone remembered, though he said it a great many more times, to a ceiling, alone.

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Interlude: The Cook

The cook had not seen the dining room in twenty years.

He knew it by ear. He knew the jukebox by its skip on the seventh song, and the front door by the bell, and the weight of a family by the way the plates came back to the pass. He had never once wanted to look. A man who wants to look wants to know, and the cook had decided a long time ago that he would rather have a radio.

It sat on the shelf above the grill, a small brown thing with a bent antenna, and it played a ball game. It was always the bottom of the ninth. Two outs, the tying run on second, a full count. The announcer's voice would crest and hold, *here's the pitch*, and then the static would come up like a wave over a rock, and when it cleared, the announcer was saying, in the same voice, that the count was full. The cook had listened to that pitch more times than he could number. He had never heard the outcome. He liked it that way. He suspected that when the game ended, something else would end with it.

At 6:59 he lit the burners. He salted the roast. He did not look at what he salted, and had not in years, and he seasoned it with rosemary and, from a jar without a label, something sweeter. His hands knew the work. They were very good hands.

At 7:14, he set down the ladle and kicked the swinging door open with his heel, and let it fall back on its hinges. Bang. It was a signal, of a kind, though no one had ever told him who it was for.

And behind the back wall, past the alley, in the long low room he had never entered, someone screamed.

That was the real one. His work was only the noise that went with it. There were two steel pans on the edge of the counter, stacked, kept there for the purpose. He lifted them and let them go. They hit the tile with a clatter that rang off the walls, and he threw his head back and shouted the word he had been taught. It was Latin. He had

never learned what it meant. It meant, he supposed, something like *Behold*.

A scream alone was a scream, and a guest who heard a scream alone would stand up and go to the door. But a scream with a crash and a shout and a swinging door became a story, and a guest could carry a story back to a table and make it safe. *Pipes. Old building.* A haunted house was a house you could stay in. A cook was paid, in his way, to make sure of that.

He did it again at 7:44. He did it at 8:15, with Carol singing at the stove beside him, in her soft Latin, the hymns rolling up under the noise like a tide under a wharf. He did it at 8:45, and at 9:14. Each time the radio hissed, and the pitch was thrown, and never landed.

Only once did the night leave its schedule. At 8:38, when the trash was long since out and the next cue was still seven minutes away, the knob of the back door began to turn. It turned slowly, the way a hand turns a knob when it does not want to be heard. The cook watched it over the grill. The bolt held. The knob turned back. Nothing knocked, and nothing spoke. He stood with the spatula in his hand for a long time after, and when he went back to the pan he found that he had salted it twice. In twenty years, nothing had ever tried to come in.

Somewhere in there, the busboy came through with the trash and stopped at the back door a little longer than he should have, and the cook said nothing, and lowered his eyes. Somewhere in there, a girl in a jean jacket walked past the kitchen door toward the bathroom, and he heard her sneakers on the tile, and did not look up. He heard them again, later, coming back. He did not look up then, either.

At 9:29, he stood by the door with his boot ready, out of habit, though no one had called.

Nothing came. The clock over the stove ticked past the half hour and stood there, and the cook, who had listened to that pitch for twenty years without ever hearing it land, discovered that silence has a sound too. It was lower than the radio. It was like the sound of a held breath, and it was not his own.

He put his boot down.

At 9:41, through the small round window in the swinging door, he saw the waitress go by in the hall with a girl in her arms. The girl was asleep, or something like it. Her jean jacket was covered in pins, and her arm hung down with a ring on the finger. The waitress did not look at him. He did not look at her. He lowered his eyes, the way you pass a church, and let them go by.

The radio said, *Here's the pitch*, and the static came up, and the cook turned back to the stove and salted what needed salting, and did not think about what came next.

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Interlude: Livia

Livia was not her name. It was the name she had been given, and she wore it the way she wore the tag on her uniform, a little crooked, because that was how the old man had pinned it on the first night. He had said *Leave it*, and she had.

She could not remember the name she'd had before. She remembered the taste of the water. She remembered the tile, and the cold of it, and a man on a steel table who had been crying so hard that she had wanted to tell him it was all right. She remembered that she had told him. That was the last thing she remembered of the woman she used to be: that she had been kind.

It was still her whole trade.

She carried the girl at 9:41, and the girl was very light. Marcy Pruitt, the house told her, without her asking, the way a hand knows the shape of a doorknob. The girl's cheek lay against her collarbone, and her hair smelled like rain and cheap shampoo, and one arm hung down with a silver ring on the finger. Livia shifted her weight and tucked the arm against the girl's ribs, as you would with a sleeping child, so it would not knock the wall.

Behind her, the diner went on. The jukebox played its slow song. The Hollands' little boy slept against his mother. The old man sat by the window and did not look up. But when Livia passed the last booth, he lifted two fingers, an inch, and she nodded, and that was all the instruction she needed. She had never needed more.

Twenty minutes earlier, the girl had dialed zero at the front door, and the house had answered in Livia's own voice. She had stood at the register with her hands folded, and listened to herself say the words she said to everyone, and she had not lifted the phone. She had not needed to. It always did that when somebody dialed. She had stopped finding it strange a long time ago. She had stopped finding anything strange. That was one of the gifts.

The back hall was long. It had always been long. At the end of it a door stood open onto the alley, and the rain came down on both of them, cold and steady, as she carried the girl around the bend to the second door, the one with the steel bar in its iron brackets. She lifted the bar with one hand. She was not strong. The door was simply always ready for her.

"Please don't worry," she said to the girl in her arms. "I'll help you."

It was true. That was the thing no guest ever understood. She meant it. She had always meant it. The house did not need her to lie. It needed her to be kind, the sort of kind that makes people take a second bite. *A smile with teeth is a promise*, the old man had told her once. *A smile with the mouth closed is a kindness*. So she smiled that way, and everyone believed her, and she had never once been unkind.

Beyond the door there was the smell, which she had stopped noticing years ago. The tile. The bulbs on their wire. The alcoves in a row, each one shifting a little as she passed, like a sleeping animal turning over when the light changes. She spoke to them, low. *Not yet. Not yet. You'll be called*. A hand came through the bars and closed around her wrist. She let it stay. She had learned that a hand held for a moment cost nothing, and gave the house something to feed on. But this hand did not let go when it should have, and a voice, cracked with disuse, said a name. It was not *Livia*. It was a short, plain name that meant nothing to her, and it went through her like a key through a lock she had thought was welded shut. Somewhere far down, something turned over once. She thought of the old man's two fingers, lifting an inch, and the hand let go.

In the middle of the room lay a man on a steel table, and she did not look at him. That was a rule she had made for herself. There had been many tables, and she had looked at all of them, once.

She laid Marcy down on the concrete with the care you would give a bride. She turned the girl's face to the side so she would not choke. She smoothed her hair.

Then she stood, and straightened her name tag, and left it crooked.

The old man would come down in a little while, with the ledger. There would be a choice offered, and she would offer it so gently. She would stand with her hands folded and say the words she always said, and the girl would look at her, and in a moment of clear, terrible understanding, would see that Livia's eyes were kind.

That would be the worst of it. She had never learned how to be anything else.

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Interlude: Petey

Somebody was carrying Petey, and it was not his dad.

He knew because his dad's arms were big, and smelled like the car and the inside of a coat. These arms were thin. They smelled of soap and grease. One hand held his back, and the other one was funny: it held him, too, but it had a towel wrapped around it, and it did not have all its fingers.

Petey knew that hand. It was the one that had brought the water.

"Hi," he said, from the bottom of a warm, slow pool.

"Hi," said the busboy. He was walking fast, but carefully, and the boy in his arms hardly bounced. "Go back to sleep, okay?"

"Does it hurt?"

The busboy's step hitched. "What?"

"Your hand."

"Not anymore," the busboy said. His voice did something in the middle. "Not really."

Petey thought about that. He was very tired, and everything had a soft edge, like a picture in a book left out in the rain. He could see the back of the busboy's neck. He could see, beyond it, a wet black wall and a light in a wire cage, and drops of rain slanting through the light like scratches on a film. His mother walked behind them. He could hear her feet. She was holding on to the busboy's sleeve, the way you hold a rail on a bus, and she was smiling at nothing.

"I drew a rocket," said Petey.

"I bet it was a good rocket."

"It had three stages."

"That's the best kind," said the busboy, and Petey felt, against his cheek, the boy's breath catch.

"Where's Daddy?"

For a long moment the busboy said nothing at all. The rain ticked on the towel around his hand. Behind them, his mother said, in her happy, dreamy voice, "He's being looked after, baby." She said it like something she had learned from a song.

"Oh," said Petey. It sounded all right. It sounded like the answer to a question grown-ups asked each other.

The busboy said, very low, so low that Petey almost thought he'd dreamed it, "I'm sorry." And then, lower: "Please don't look."

Petey did not look. He put his head on the busboy's shoulder, which was bony and warm, and he watched the rain come down. He heard a bar lift, and a heavy door swing. A smell came out, and he did not like it, but he was too sleepy to say so. It was long and low in there, and the light was yellow, and somewhere far off a woman was singing, very quietly, in no language he knew.

"Are we going home?" he asked.

"Go to sleep," said the busboy.

So he did. He was sure that when he opened his eyes, he would be in the back seat, with the rain on the roof and the wipers going, and his dad would be saying, *One more exit, buddy*, and his mother would be laughing, and there would be a pie somewhere down the road.

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Chapter Eleven: The Room Behind the Door

The first thing she knew was the smell.

It came in before her eyes did, thick and sweet and wrong: rotting meat, old mold, and something under both like a butcher's drain that had never once been cleaned. Marcy tried to turn her face from it and found her cheek pressed against cold concrete. Her mouth tasted like a coin.

She lay still and counted her fingers against the floor. Ten. Then she looked.

The room was long and low and lit by bare bulbs strung on a wire. The walls were tile, once white, now the color of tea. A steel drain ran down the middle of the floor. Along one side stood a row of iron-barred alcoves, each one dark, each one holding something that shifted when she looked at it. Breathing. Somewhere in the dark, a soft wet cough. Along the other wall, someone had scratched tally marks into the grout, hundreds of them, in rows, in groups of five, going back further than her light could reach.

The stock is kept below until called.

She sat up slowly. Her hands were not tied. That was the horror of it. She could walk, and there was nowhere to go.

Then she saw the table at the center, and what lay on it.

It had been a man. She knew the corduroy jacket, and the cheap watch on the wrist. Walt Holland lay on his back under the bulb, opened from throat to hip, and the opening was empty in places where it should not have been. Steel pans sat beside the table, covered with clean white cloths. The cloths were not entirely white anymore. Blood had run off the table's edge and found the drain, and it lay in a long dark stripe across the tile, and had dried at the sides into something like varnish.

His eyes were open. They were looking at the ceiling with an expression she would remember for the rest of her life, which she understood would not be long. It was not pain. It was surprise. He had trusted the water.

She turned her head and was sick again, quietly, onto the concrete. There was almost nothing left to bring up.

That's what the roast was, something in her said, calm and distant. Not this one. Not yet. The ones before. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve. This one is for tomorrow's guests.

A door opened at the far end, and she stopped thinking.

Livia came in first, with her hands folded. Behind her came Daniel, holding a metal tray with something under a cloth. He did not look at Marcy. His ruined hand shook against the steel. Then two men in white aprons wheeled in a second table, and on it, strapped at the wrists and ankles, lay Ray.

He was awake. His eyes were huge and wet and swimming, and they found her at once. His mouth moved. Nothing came out but a small dry click, and his Casio watch, still on his wrist, blinked 10:04 in green.

The old man walked in last, slowly, his cane ticking on the tile.

He stopped between the two tables. He looked at Marcy the way he had looked at her across the diner, mild and unhurried. Then he nodded to Livia, and Livia spoke, in the soft voice, as if reading a menu.

"Every guest is offered a choice," she said. "Two, actually. You have been very good, and so we are kind."

Daniel lifted the cloth from the tray. A cleaver. A bone saw. A pair of shears, and a folded clean towel.

"The first is to serve," said Livia. "You take the knife, and you prepare your friend for the ones who come after. You will not be asked to do anything twice. You give one finger, so that you remember. Then you stay, and you eat, and you are family."

She turned her open hand toward the second table.

"The second is to be served."

Ray made a sound in his throat. Marcy could not look at him. She looked at the old man instead, and he lifted his chin a fraction, as if to say that he had heard every reason she was about to give, and had heard them all before.

"You may take a few minutes," he said.

His voice was very quiet. Those were the only words he spoke, for now. He said them as kindly as a doctor.

Marcy stood. Her legs held. She looked at the cleaver on the tray and at Daniel's eyes above it, which met hers for a single second and then dropped, and in that second she saw a boy who had stood exactly where she stood, and had made his choice, and had been carrying it ever since.

Fifteen minutes, she thought. Every new meal calls one.

Then, from the other side of the room, something screamed.

It was not a man's scream. It was thin and high and stopped almost at once, as if a hand had been closed over it. Before it stopped, she heard one word, in a small voice she had listened to all evening asking for cherry pie.

Mommy?

And then there was nothing. There was a wet, heavy sound, and a metal clatter, and then, in the dark beyond the alcoves, someone began to cry.

It was a woman. It was low, and terrible, and it did not sound like grief. It sounded like a person trying to breathe underwater.

Marcy stood very still. The old man watched her face, and she saw him see the moment she understood.

He's being looked after, Jean had said. She had said it so gently.

She had made her choice. She had been offered the same two doors, and she had walked through one, and she had done it with a mother's hands. And now the whole room was waiting to see which one Marcy would pick.

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Chapter Twelve: Refuse

Marcy set the shears back on the tray.

"No," she said.

It was a small word, and her voice did not shake, which surprised her. She said it again, louder, to the old man. "No. Either of them. I won't."

She had expected rage. She had braced for it, like a swimmer before a wave. There was none. The old man only tilted his head, curious and pleased, the way you look at a rare bird that has landed on your hand.

"That is a third answer," he said. "It is also served."

Livia sighed, the sigh of a waitress who has seen this too. "Most refuse the first time."

"Please," Marcy said. She was crying now, and did not know when it had started. She turned to Daniel, the only one who could not meet her eyes. "Please. You don't have to. You know you don't have to."

Daniel was shaking. A tear ran down the side of his nose and dropped onto the tray, and he said, in a whisper, "I'm sorry. I said that too."

The old man lifted two fingers an inch, and the men in aprons took hold of her.

They did not hurt her. That was how she knew it was bad. They held her arms carefully, almost respectfully, and turned her to face the far end of the room, where the alcoves stood in the dark. "A refusal makes the choice for the table," the old man said. "It always has. The table chooses the one who has already chosen."

From the dark came a soft, wet, shuffling step.

Jean Holland came into the light in a gray dress that was no longer gray. She walked as if through deep water, with the cleaver held down and away like a thing she had forgotten she was carrying. Her face was clean. Someone had washed it. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman who has left the building and is standing outside it.

"Honey," she said to Marcy. "I'm so sorry. You'll have to forgive me."

Ray began to scream then, and this time the drug did not stop him. He screamed her name. Then, just once, clear as glass, he screamed the other thing. "You promised! You said you'd go!"

She had said it. She had crossed her fingers when she said it.

Marcy was made to stand with her eyes open, held upright by two pairs of gentle hands. The water had been waiting for her too, in a heavy glass at Livia's elbow, and she drank it because there was a hand behind her head. It kept her clear and awake. It kept her feeling everything.

She did not look away. She could not. Ray's Casio blinked 10:10, and 10:11. Somewhere in the middle of it, he stopped calling her name, and the watch went on blinking.

After a time, they took her to the alcoves. They did not lock her in. There was no need. She sat against the bars in the cold, with the drug moving through her like slow honey, and saw, through the grating, tally marks scratched into the grout by hands that had held nothing sharper than a fingernail.

She held up her hands and counted her fingers, out of habit. All ten. There was no one left to ask if she was still all here.

She still had her jean jacket. She unpinned one of the pins, the little enamel one shaped like a star, and pressed the point to the wall. She had meant to scratch a tally. Instead, her hand wrote, letter by shaking letter:

DON'T DRINK IT.

Through the wall, faint and far, a bell rang over the diner door. She heard footsteps, and a child's voice, happy and hungry. She heard Livia say, in the soft voice, *Please don't worry. I'll help you.*

Marcy put the pin down, and began to count.

Fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes.

Somewhere in the dark, the first scream of the night was waiting to be made. This time she knew whose it would be.

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Chapter Thirteen: Intra, Hospes

The bell rang over the diner door, and Marcy began to count.

She had counted eleven minutes when she noticed that the room had gone quiet. The breathing in the other alcoves had stopped. Even the wet cough in the dark had held its breath, the way a congregation does before a priest walks in.

There was no cane this time. There was only the sound of shoes, old and polished, coming down the length of the tile.

The old man stopped outside her bars. Under his arm he carried a heavy book bound in something dark and cracked. She knew it. She had left it in a booth and had not seen it since.

He set an upturned crate in front of the alcove and sat, slowly, like a man settling in for a long visit. He laid the ledger across his knees.

"Marcy," he said.

It was the first time he had used her name. It sounded like something he had owned for a long time.

She had nothing left to ask him. She asked anyway. "Why did you leave the finger?"

He smiled, and he did not answer. He turned to the last written page, the one sealed with yellow wax. He set his thumbnail under the edge and pressed.

The wax broke like ice on a pond.

Behind the seal was one page, and it was covered in names. They were written in the neat ink, in columns, in rows, on and on down the leaf. *Walter Holland. Jean Holland. Daniel Reyes.* Beside every name stood the same date, the same night, October 1985, written thousands of times. Daniel believed it had been weeks. The book said one evening. She understood that both were true.

At the bottom, the ink was still wet. *Marcy Pruitt.*

Not every line beside her name matched. Some said *Served: Raymond*, in the old man's hand, over and over, so many times the ink had worn a groove into the page. Others said nothing at all — just her name, and the date, and a blank space where an outcome should have been, as if even the ledger did not always know how to describe a refusal.

The nearest *Served* line pulled at her the way a hand closes around a wrist.

She was standing at a tray with shears in it. She was crying and doing it anyway. Ray was in front of her, strapped down, his Casio blinking numbers she didn't have to read to know. She counted his fingers first, out of habit — ten, all ten — and could not make herself count her own hand, wrapped now in Daniel's towel, because there was one fewer.

Still all here? he asked her, and his mouth almost smiled.

All ten, she heard herself say, and her voice broke on it, and somewhere underneath the words he told her he had seen her cross her fingers in the car window, months and years and no time at all ago, and he forgave her anyway, because he was seventeen and already so good at forgiving her. It's okay. Just don't look. Look at the watch.

She saw herself, later, in a white apron, wiping down a counter that never got any cleaner, a stranger's watch too big on her wrist, greeting a family she had greeted a thousand times before, under a sign with a letter missing. *Welcome*, she heard her own voice say, from somewhere she was not standing. *Please don't worry. I'll help you.*

Then the page was only a page again, and she was on the cold concrete of the alcove, both hands whole, both counting, and the ink beside her real name — the one still wet — had not decided yet what it would say.

Then the room began to change, and it did not burn or break. It only grew.

The bare bulbs on their wire went on and on, out past where the light should have failed. Now she saw what the tally marks in the grout really were. They ran in rows, in groups of five, past the end of the wall, and past the end of the room, and no one had ever counted them to the end, because there was no end. The alcoves ran with them, alcove after alcove after alcove, in a line that never turned, each one holding a shape that sat against its bars and counted fifteen minutes. The air stayed cold. The smell was the same as ever, the tile, the drain, the old damp, and it went on for as far as the room did.

Through the wall, faint as a reflection in a window, she saw the neon glowing. ULT MA CENA. She had thought a letter had burned out. She had been wrong. It had been taken. The missing letter was the *I*, and there was no *I* left here.

Nobody stopped, she thought. *Not one car in the whole night*. The station wagon was still ticking as it cooled, and it had been cooling for hours. She tried to remember the drive here, any drive at all, and found only the bell over the door.

And she remembered the line at the top of the menu, the one she had read three times without getting anywhere. She could read it now. *Intra, hospes. Exspectaris*. Enter, guest. You are expected.

The old man stood. He did not change. That was the horror of it. He was still an old man in a gray cardigan, with the ledger under his arm, and he stood no taller than he ever had. His face was still kind. It was still the face of an old man who had waited all evening for a good meal and was pleased with the company.

"You asked me why I leave the book out," he said.

His voice did not rise. It never had to.

"So they will know. Knowing is the last course."

He closed the ledger, and the wax on its edge flowed back together on its own, over her name. Somewhere beyond the wall, a child's voice said, delightedly, *Ambiance*, and Livia said, *Please don't worry*. Marcy heard the kitchen door bang open, far away, and the first scream start, and she knew whose it was. She had heard it once already, on the other side of a locked door.

She realized then that it was hers. It was the first order of a night that had not happened yet.

The old man leaned toward the bars. He laid two fingers against her forehead, gently, like a blessing.

"Hospes," he said. "Guest. Host."

Then, almost tenderly, he said the last thing she would hear before the bar lifted.

"Welcome home."

The bell rang over the door.

She was standing on the welcome mat with the rain still on her jacket, and a warm hand in hers, and the smell of a kitchen from before either of them was born. Ray was holding the door. In the corner, an old man in a gray cardigan nodded, a little longer than he had to, like a man counting.

"Still all here?" Ray asked, and held out his fingers, solemn, the way he always did.

She counted them, one by one. Her voice caught on the last. "All ten."

"You okay?"

"We're leaving," said Marcy. "Right now. Please."

"We just got here." He laughed, and then he saw her face, and stopped. "Marce. What's wrong?"

She could not tell him. She had told him a hundred times, and a thousand. Sometimes he believed her, and sometimes he laughed. Once he had run for the door with her, and they had stood in the empty lot in the rain, and watched the road bend around and bring the sign to meet them.

He had asked her for one thing, in a car, a long time ago. *You go. You don't wait for me.* She tried to keep it. On the nights when he could not be moved, she went alone, out into the rain and down the road, as fast as she could run, and every time the road bent, and the sign was in front of her, red and buzzing, and she was walking up to the door. She could not go. She had never been able to go. It was the promise she had crossed her fingers over, and no version of the night would let her keep it.

So she stayed, and tried everything the night had in it, and every night ended the same way: in the long low room, with Ray screaming that she had promised, and Marcy in the dark behind the bars, counting her fingers out of habit. All ten. There was no one left to ask if she was still all here.

She tried, in the endless middle of it, to remember what it felt like to keep a promise. She found that she could not. She could remember only the car, and the rain, and how easily she had said it.

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Interlude: What Daniel Chose

Daniel Reyes came to the Ultima Cena because of a sign in the window.

It was hand-lettered on a torn piece of cardboard, taped to the inside of the glass: DISHWASHER WANTED. INQUIRE WITHIN. He was nineteen years old, eleven dollars from broke, and soaked to the skin, with a duffel bag over one shoulder and a thin white scar across the knuckle of his left ring finger, from a bicycle accident when he was ten.

The woman at the door said, of course, they were hiring. But first, everyone ate.

He was starving. He sat in a booth by the wall and did not read the menu, because he could not, and the waitress told him what was good. It was the best thing he had ever eaten. He remembered the water, which was sweet, and the old man in the corner nodding, once, the way you nod to a boy you are about to hire.

He woke on cold concrete, in a room with tile walls, and there was a man on a steel table.

The man was a trucker, maybe fifty, with a gray mustache and a wedding ring, and he was awake. Daniel knew because the man's eyes followed his hands. There were shears on a tray, and a cleaver, and a folded towel. The waitress named Livia stood beside them with her hands together, and said what she said to everyone.

"Every guest is offered a choice. Two, actually."

Daniel said, "You don't have to do this."

He said it to her, and to the old man, who had come in behind her with a cane. He said it again, louder, and his voice cracked, and he said it a third time to the walls. *You don't have to. Please. You don't have to.* Nobody answered. Livia's face did not change. "Most refuse the first time," she said.

He could not have said how long he stood there. The man on the table did not beg, and did not curse. He only looked at Daniel, and that was the worst of it. At the very end, he said quietly, "It's all right, son."

Daniel picked up the shears.

He did the finger first. Livia had said that was the price, and the price came before everything else. He looked at his left hand, at the small scar across the knuckle, and was surprised to find he had time to think how much he liked it. The sound was worse than the pain. Then the pain came and the room rang, and someone pressed a towel into his good hand, and someone said *good boy*, softly.

He did the rest with his eyes shut. That was the thing he was most ashamed of afterward. He had not been able to keep them open.

Afterward they gave him an apron and a mop, and told him the trash went out at 8:22. It was a good position, the old man said, and Daniel thought he heard something like pride in it.

The first time he carried the bag to the alley, it split, and the finger rolled out with the coffee grounds and came to rest against his shoe. The old man stood in the back doorway with his hands folded.

"Leave it," he said. "It will be seen to."

It was seen to, and every night it was there again. Daniel never understood. He believed it had been weeks, and that some evening soon someone would ask, and he would say yes, and be allowed to go home. He did not know the old man had already written the date beside his name, and that it was always the same date.

He knew only what he saw. Every night, a family or a couple or a stranger came in out of the rain. Every night, one of them wandered down the back hall, and found a small pale thing lying beside the dumpster, and looked at it. And every night Daniel, at the sink, dried his hands and thought, without a sound, the way you pray to a God you no longer believe in:

Please. Don't look. Go home.

But there was no home.

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Epilogue: The Bell

The rain had been falling on Route 9 for an hour when the Hollands pulled into the lot.

The neon sign had burned down to ULT MA CENA. Jean said it sounded Italian. Petey, who was seven and hungry, said it sounded like a cough. The wood-paneled station wagon ticked as it cooled, and the radio, when Walt switched it off, made no sound at all.

Inside, the diner was warm and yellow and smelled like a kitchen from before you were born. An old man in a gray cardigan sat at the corner table with a napkin already tucked in his collar. He nodded to the family. He nodded to the teenagers who came in after, a little longer, like a man counting.

Walt read the top line of the menu twice. INTRA, HOSPES. EXSPECTARIS. He did not know why it made his skin crawl.

At 8:22, out the back, Daniel carried the trash to the alley, and the bag split, and something small and pale rolled out against his shoe. "Leave it," said the old man from the doorway, and Daniel let his hand fall, and went in.

Later, when the kitchen door had banged for the last time that night, Livia stood at the old man's elbow. She held the ledger, and she spoke in the soft voice, the one meant for menus.

"You could have ended that one on the spot. Why leave the finger, every night, where the girl will find it?"

The old man looked at his silver watch, and then at the window, where a girl in a jean jacket was staring out at the rain, and smiled.

"Because a guest who is only fed has given nothing," he said. "She has only been dinner. I need her to look. I need her to open the door herself, and read, and

understand, and choose. A choice made in the dark is not a choice, and I do not want what is taken. I want what is given."

He closed the watch.

"The finger was never left to be found. It was left to be looked at."

He folded his napkin into a triangle, the way you do when a meal is about to arrive.

Out in the lot, headlights slowed on Route 9, and a bell rang over the door, and someone shook off the rain.

The End.