

# Still Beside Me



HARLAND MAXWELL

A SAMPLE FROM

# Still Beside Me

Harland Maxwell

*Chapters One to Three*

*Greywick is a mill town with one story about the night at  
Bellweather: two girls went in, and only one came home.*

## Chapter One

# The Girl at the Window

The hospital bracelet scratched beneath Mara's sleeve all the way into Greywick.

Mom had offered to cut it off before they left. Mara had said she wanted to do it at home, which was easier than admitting the plastic band felt like proof. MARA VALE, it said. Sixteen years old. Allergic to amoxicillin. Alive enough to discharge.

Mom drove with both hands fixed at ten and two. Every pothole earned an apology, though the roads had been bad since before Mara was born. She had changed out of her pharmacy scrubs for a navy sweater and pressed black pants, clothes she wore when she needed people to believe she had everything handled.

Mara rested her forehead against the cool window. The doctor had said screens might worsen the headache, so her phone sat facedown in the cup holder. It had been vibrating since they left the hospital.

"You feeling sick?" Mom asked.

"No."

"Dizzy?"

"Only when you ask me if I'm dizzy."

Her mouth tightened. Mara meant it as a joke, mostly.

Greywick gathered around them in damp brick and peeling paint. Rain from that morning shone in the gut-

ters. The old paper mill crouched beside the river with half its windows boarded, while a banner on its fence promised RIVERFRONT RENEWAL in cheerful blue letters.

Someone had taped a flyer over the last word.

WREN CALDER, the flyer said above her school picture. MISSING.



*Wren's school picture stared out from the rain-softened flyer.*

Mara's head lifted too quickly. Pain pressed bright fingers behind her left eye.

The car moved on before she could read the smaller print. Another flyer hung in the laundromat window. One

was stapled to the utility pole outside Gable's Market, its bottom edge dark with rain.

Mom reached toward the radio, then seemed to remember herself and returned her hand to the wheel.

"How long have those been up?" Mara asked.

"A few days."

"I've only been in the hospital three nights."

"I know."

"They made them fast."

"Yes." Her voice went careful. "People wanted to help."

Help meant search parties. It meant strangers pushing through brush near Bellweather Reservoir, calling Wren's name toward water that gave no answer. Mara pinched the bracelet until its edge bit her thumb.

"She'll turn up," she said.

Mom checked the mirror although no one was behind them. "I hope so."

Hope. The word belonged on greeting cards and fundraiser jars. It had no business in that car.

They stopped at the light beside the diner. Two men under its awning turned to look at them. One nudged the other. Mom stared forward, but color climbed above the collar of her sweater.

Mara sank lower in her seat.

Greywick knew she had been found near Bellweather. Greywick knew Wren had been there with her, or thought she had been. By that night, half the town would have improved the story. They went swimming during a storm. They jumped the fence to get drunk. Wren ran away and shoved Mara in before she left.

The light changed.

Mom said, "There's soup at home. You can have toast if your stomach's still touchy."

"I'm not hungry."

"You need something with the medication."

"I know."

“And the nurse said you should sleep, though perhaps wait until after dinner, because if your headache gets worse...”

“I know, Mom.”

She nodded once and drove the rest of the way without speaking.

Their house stood halfway up Alder Street, narrow and gray, with wet leaves plastered to the front steps. Mom parked close to the curb. Mara reached for her overnight bag in the back seat.

“I have it,” Mom said.

“It weighs five pounds.”

“Mara.”

She released the strap. Winning this would require energy she didn’t have.

Inside, the house smelled faintly of lemon cleaner. Mom had scrubbed while Mara was gone. She carried Mara’s bag upstairs, and Mara paused beside the dining table where a pharmacy bag waited with a legal pad covered in her mother’s neat handwriting. Medication times. The number for the concussion clinic. Detective Ortiz’s card lay beside the pad.

Mara turned it over.

Greywick Police Department. The card stock was softened at one corner from Mara worrying it between her fingers the day before in the hospital. Ortiz had sat beside the window while rain traced crooked paths down the glass. She had a quiet voice and sensible shoes. Mara remembered those details more clearly than her face.

Tell me what happened when you reached the spillway.

Mara closed her eyes.

Concrete sloped under her shoes, slick with algae. Water boiled through the channel below. Wren was shouting, though the roar tore her words apart. There was a flash of yellow near the service railing.

Then Mara’s foot slid.

The memory cut out where it always did. Her stomach jerked as though she were falling again, and she gripped the table.

Mom's steps stopped on the stairs. "Mara?"

"I'm fine."

She came down anyway. "Sit."

"I stood up too fast."

"You've been standing."

"Then I stood still too fast."

That almost got a smile. Almost.

Mom pulled out a chair without commenting on the detective's card in Mara's hand. Mara sat because the room had begun to tilt toward the kitchen.

Ortiz had asked the same question six different ways.

Was Wren beside you when you fell?

Did you see anyone on the service road?

When you climbed out, was anyone else in the spillway?

Mara had told her she didn't remember climbing out. Apparently, she had been found on the access road after dark, soaked and barely conscious. No one could tell her how she had gotten from the flooded channel to the road. Ortiz had kept circling that blank space, testing its edges.

Mom set a glass of water near Mara's elbow. "Did she say when she wants to talk again?"

"When I remember something useful."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Tomorrow. Maybe." Mara slid the card across the table. "She thinks I saw somebody."

Mom sat opposite her. Her tired eyes stayed on Mara's face. "Did she say that?"

"She asked whether I saw another person four times."

"Maybe she was making sure."

"Six times, actually."

The refrigerator hummed behind her. Rainwater ticked from the eaves outside.

Mom folded her hands, then separated them. “Do you remember Wren leaving the reservoir?”

The bright pressure behind Mara’s eye spread deeper into her skull.

“No.”

“Do you remember her after you fell?”

“No.”

Mara’s answer came out sharp enough to make her mother lean back. She stared at the water glass. A tiny air bubble clung to the side.

“They haven’t found her,” Mom said.

“She could be hiding.”

“From what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Mara, honey, you were badly hurt.”

“So maybe she was too. Maybe she got scared and went somewhere safe.”

Mom pressed her lips together. From that look, Mara could guess what she might say. Wren would have called. Safe places tended to have people in them.

Instead, she rose and took the soup from the refrigerator. “Crackers or toast?”

“Toast.”

Mara picked up Ortiz’s card again while Mom opened the bread bag. Every question led to the same place: rushing water, Wren’s voice, Mara’s shoe losing its grip. After that came the access road and a stranger’s jacket tucked around her while someone called an ambulance.

Between the spillway and rescue, there was only a locked door inside Mara’s head.

Mom put two slices into the toaster and left the setting low because she knew Mara hated burned edges. Mara watched her measure soup into a saucepan, moving with deliberate care. When she asked Mara to take her pills, Mara swallowed them without arguing and kept the detective’s card beside her plate.

The soup tasted mostly of salt. Mara finished half because Mom watched every spoonful while pretending to read the instructions stapled to her prescription bag.

The borrowed phone buzzed in the cup holder outside. Eli's old phone, wiped clean and resurrected for her use before she left the hospital. Mom had transferred Mara's number to it that morning. Everyone calling thought they were reaching the same Mara they had known last week.

They were getting a blank replacement.

"I'm going upstairs," Mara said.

Mom looked at the clock. "You've been home twenty minutes."

"My room is upstairs."

"I know where your room is." She gathered Mara's bowl. "Leave the door open. If you get dizzy, sit down. Don't try to push through it."

"I'll schedule my collapse somewhere convenient."

"Mara."

"Door open. Sitting down. No heroic collapsing."

She let Mara go, though Mara heard her follow as far as the foot of the stairs.

Each step jarred her skull. By the landing, the hallway had narrowed at the edges, and she put her hand against the wall until it settled. Her bedroom door stood open. Mom had left her overnight bag on the bed beside a cloudy plastic sack marked with the hospital's name.

Home should have looked less temporary than this.

She sat at her desk and opened the top drawer. Pens rolled into the space at the front. Her charger was gone from the rubber-banded coil where she kept it. She found it in the drawer below, tangled around an old pair of earbuds.

Mom had cleaned in there too, apparently with the technique of a burglar who hated dust.

Mara plugged in Eli's phone and watched the screen wake. Thirty-two messages. Most were from people she barely spoke to at school. ARE YOU OKAY? CALL ME. DID WREN SAY WHERE SHE WAS GOING?

She turned it facedown.

Her actual phone should have been there. The police had returned everything from the accident through the hospital, according to Mom. Mara pulled the cloudy sack toward her. A paper inventory was taped to the front.

GRAY HOODIE. BLACK JEANS. CANVAS SHOES. PERSONAL EFFECTS.

The last line had no description after it. A strip of red plastic ran through the sack's folded opening, stamped HOSPITAL PROPERTY. Someone had cut it close to the locking tab. Clear tape held the fold shut now.

Mara lifted the tape with her thumbnail.

Her clothes smelled of reservoir mud under the hospital detergent. The hoodie was stiff in places. One shoelace was missing, and both pockets had been turned inside out. She checked them anyway. Then the jeans. Nothing.

The overnight bag Mom had brought to the hospital sat open beside her. Its contents had been rearranged. Toothbrush under pajamas. Socks loose instead of paired. The paperback she had never read was bent backward at the spine.

A floorboard creaked in the hall.

Mom appeared with a glass of water. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for my gray socks." Mara pushed the muddy clothes deeper into the sack.

"They're in your dresser."

"Of course they are."

Mom put the glass on Mara's desk and noticed the open drawers. "I moved a few things when I packed for you."

"A few?"

"I was in a hurry." Her gaze dropped to the property sack. "The paramedics cut some of your clothes. We can throw those out when you're ready."

"They didn't cut these."

"Then wash them. Later, Mara. You need to rest."

The front door opened downstairs, followed by the scrape of heavy boots.

"Anybody home?" Eli called.

"No," Mara called back.

He came up carrying the borrowed phone's box. His maintenance coveralls were damp at the shoulders. "Good. I hate company." He paused at Mara's doorway and studied her face. "You look awful."

"Hospital skin. Very exclusive."

Mom gave him a look. "Don't encourage her."

"I brought the rest of the charger." He set the box beside Mara's water, then saw the property bag. "They give you everything back?"

"I think so." Mom answered before Mara could.

Eli pointed at the borrowed phone. "Then why are you using my fossil?"

"My phone wasn't in the bag," Mara said.

His expression lost its trace of humor. "Police have it?"

"Ortiz didn't mention it."

"Hospital security?" Mom asked. "It may be locked up with valuables."

"It isn't on the inventory." Mara peeled the tape farther from the plastic. The severed seal dangled beneath it. "Was this open when they gave it to you?"

Mom came closer. "I don't remember."

"Who gave it to you?"

"A nurse. Or an aide. I had several bags, and they were explaining your medication." She touched the edge of the sack, then withdrew her hand. "Things were confused after the rescue. Your wet clothes went with the ambulance. Perhaps someone checked the pockets."

“Who packed my overnight bag?”

“I did.”

“Did you put my toothbrush under everything?”

Her forehead creased. “I might have.”

Eli picked up the bent paperback. “You might’ve broken this too?”

“It was three in the morning, Elias.”

He set it down. “Okay. I’m asking.”

Mom looked between them, already blaming herself for failing some impossible test. Mara folded the property sack closed and smoothed the tape back into place.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mara said. “I probably dropped the phone in the water.”

“We can call it,” Eli said.

“Battery’s dead by now.”

“Location history might show its last signal.” He reached toward the borrowed phone, then stopped when Mara covered it with her hand. “Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow,” Mom said firmly. “After she sleeps.”

They left together, arguing quietly about whether Mara needed another blanket. She waited until their footsteps reached the kitchen.

Then she knelt beside the dresser.

The bottom drawer caught halfway. It always caught, but now a corner of her old sketchbook was wedged behind it. She pulled harder. Shirts slumped toward the gap. Someone had lifted the drawer out and replaced it crooked. Mara knew because she hid cash beneath it, folded inside an envelope from her sixteenth birthday.

The envelope lay on top of the shirts. The money was still inside.

She sat back on her heels. A thief would have taken it. Mom would have tucked it where she thought it belonged. Whoever had searched this room cared about something small enough to hide in a pocket, something worth opening a sealed hospital bag and checking beneath a drawer.

Downstairs, Eli asked Mom whether the police had made an evidence log. Mara slid the cut red seal from the bag and tucked it into the sketchbook. Her hands had started shaking, so she pressed her palms flat against the cover until they stopped.

The phone had fallen at Bellweather. Whoever had come through her things might not know where it had landed, or what had survived on it. She closed the dresser carefully, leaving the shirts exactly as she had found them, and carried the glass of water downstairs before Mom came to check whether she had drunk it.

\* \* \*

By eleven, Mom had checked Mara's pupils twice and confiscated the borrowed phone.

"You need sleep," she said from Mara's doorway.

"I need my alarm."

"You have a clock."

The clock was a square plastic relic that glowed radioactive green. Mara pointed at it. "That thing gains nine minutes a day."

"Then you'll wake up early." Mom left the door open four inches. "Call if your headache gets worse."

"I will."

Mara waited through the creak of her mother's bedroom door and the rush of water in the pipes. Eli had left hours ago. The house settled around her, familiar sounds sharpened by several nights away. The furnace clicked beneath the floor. A branch scratched the siding near her closet.

Sleep stayed somewhere beyond reach.

She lay facing the window, watching drops slide through the orange glow from the alley lamp. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the yellow flash by the service railing. Sometimes it became a sleeve. Sometimes a rain

jacket. Her mind kept trying to attach a person to it, but pain clamped behind her left eye before a face appeared.

The window gave a soft tap.

Mara lifted her head.

Another tap came, careful and close.

The branch was on the other wall.

She pushed herself upright too fast. The room tipped, dragging the window sideways. She caught the mattress and waited until the frame returned to its proper place.

Someone stood on the porch roof.

A face hung pale beyond the glass, copper-brown hair stuck to its forehead.

Mara's throat closed.

Wren raised one hand beside her cheek.

For several seconds, Mara could only stare. Wren wore the green jacket from Bellweather. Rain had darkened it across the shoulders, and muddy water stained her black jeans below the knees. Her gray eyes looked huge in the alley light.

Mara stumbled off the bed.

"Mara," Wren said through the glass.

Hearing her voice broke whatever had held Mara still. She reached the window and fumbled the latch. It stuck. She shoved harder, rattling the pane in its frame.



*Mara fought the stubborn latch while Wren waited on the other side of the glass.*

“Quiet,” Wren whispered.

“You’re alive.”

“Open it.”

The latch snapped free. Mara pushed the window up, and cold air spilled across her arms. Wren waited while she dragged the desk chair out of the way. Then Wren ducked through the opening and stepped down beside it.

Mara turned toward the hall. “Mom!”

Wren moved in front of her. “No. Mara, don’t.”

“My mom can call yours. We need Ortiz. Everybody’s been looking for you.”

“I know.”

“You know?” Mara’s voice climbed, and Wren pressed a finger to her lips. Mara lowered it to a harsh whisper. “There are flyers everywhere. Your dad has probably called every hospital in the state.”

Wren’s gaze dropped toward the floor. “Please shut the window.”

Mara did it because rain was blowing onto her desk and because Wren had asked, though neither reason came close to the one she needed. When she turned back, Wren stood near the closet, leaving dampness to cling to her clothes instead of Mara’s bedspread.

Mara wanted to grab her. The urge came so suddenly that her hands ached with it. Wren saw her shift and backed up against the closet door.

“Careful,” she said. “Your head.”

“Forget my head.”

“Tempting, considering how you use it.”

The joke came out thin, but it was hers. Mara gripped the edge of her desk instead. If she moved toward Wren, she might start crying. She might also knock them both over.

“Where have you been?”

“Around.”

“That answer should be illegal.”

“I couldn’t come sooner.”

“Why?”

Wren looked toward the open bedroom door. Down the hall, Mom coughed in her sleep.

Wren lowered her voice. “The person at Bellweather followed us.”

A pulse started in the sore place behind Mara’s eye. “You saw them?”

“Pieces.” Wren rubbed her arms without seeming to warm them. “I remember running near the service road. There were lights behind us. You had your phone out.”

“What person?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it a man?”

“I think so. Maybe.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I remember somebody shouting. I remember you slipping.”

The spillway rose behind Mara’s eyes, black water sliding over concrete. Wren’s shout cut through the rain. A yellow shape flashed beside the railing.

Mara’s stomach twisted. She sat on the desk chair before the room could throw her there.

“You were with me when I fell,” she said.

Wren opened her eyes. “Yes.”

“After that?”

“I lost you.” Her voice caught on the last word. “Everything gets confused.”

Mara studied her for injuries. No bandages showed above her collar. No blood, either. Only the same soaked jacket, zipped halfway over a dark shirt. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay.”

“You look frozen.”

“I’ve looked worse.”

“When?”

“Seventh-grade picture day.”

A laugh escaped Mara and turned painful halfway out. She pressed her fingers to her temple. Wren watched from beside the closet, close enough for Mara to count the freckles across her nose.

“You should be in a hospital,” Mara said.

“No hospitals.”

“You’ve been missing for days.”

“I had to stay out of sight.”

“From who?”

“I told you, I don’t know.” Wren’s attention shifted to the dresser, then the hospital property sack near Mara’s bed. “They’re searching.”

The cut red seal rested hidden inside Mara's sketchbook.

Her mouth went dry. "Someone came in here."

Wren looked back at her.

"They opened my hospital bag," Mara continued. "They went through my drawers. My phone is gone."

"I thought it might be."

"How?"

"You had it at the reservoir. They saw."

A car passed in the alley, tires whispering over wet pavement. Its headlights traveled across the ceiling. Wren retreated farther from the window until the light was gone.

"What did I record?" Mara asked.

"I don't remember. You pointed it toward the service gate. Then we ran."

Mara picked up a pen from the desk, needing something solid in her hand. "The person chasing us wants the phone."

"Or whatever is on it."

"And they searched my room because they think I have it."

Wren nodded.

"Then we tell Ortiz."

"No." The word came fast. "You can tell her about the search. You cannot tell her about me."

"That makes no sense."

"If people know I came here, whoever chased us will know too."

"My family won't tell anyone."

"Your mom will call my dad. He'll call the police. By morning, half of Greywick will hear I'm back."

Mara hated that Wren was right. News traveled through town faster than rain through the reservoir fence.

"Your dad thinks you're missing," Mara said.

Wren's face tightened. "I know."

"You can't leave him like that."

“Only until we find the phone.” She glanced toward the hall again. “Until we know who did this.”

Mara rolled the pen between her fingers. Her headache throbbed with each turn. “You’re asking me to lie to everybody.”

“I’m asking you to keep us alive.”

The room seemed colder with the window closed. Mara looked at the water glass on her nightstand, then at the rain shining in Wren’s hair. She must have been hiding outside since Bellweather, sleeping in some shed or empty building, too scared to go home. Greywick had plenty of abandoned places. Mara could find her dry clothes tomorrow. Food, too.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Tonight, nobody knows.”

“Tomorrow either.”

“We’ll argue about tomorrow when I’m less concussed.”

“That could take years.”

“Probably.” Mara opened the sketchbook to a blank page and wrote PHONE at the top. Under it, she added SERVICE GATE and YELLOW.

Wren leaned near enough to read without taking the pen Mara offered by habit. Mara set it down herself.

“We stay together,” Mara said. “No disappearing again. We work out what happened, find my phone, and then we go to Ortiz with something she can use.”

Wren looked at the words on the page. “Together.”

Mara drew a line beneath YELLOW. Down the hall, Mom’s bed creaked, and both of them turned toward the door. Mara closed the sketchbook, switched off her lamp, and moved the desk chair so Wren could sit if she wanted. Wren remained beside the closet while Mara got back under the blankets, and they continued talking in whispers about where to begin when the house woke.

## Chapter Two

# Rules for Hiding

By eight the next morning, Mara had slept for forty-three minutes and lied to Mom twice.

The first lie was that the window had blown open during the night. The second was that she felt better.

Wren stood beside Mara's bed, still wearing her damp green jacket. Mara had offered her sweatpants and an old track hoodie. Wren had said changing would take too long. Apparently, being hunted gave a person strong opinions about borrowing clean clothes.

A cabinet closed downstairs.

"You have to stay here," Mara whispered. "Away from the window. If Mom comes up, get in the closet."

Wren glanced at the narrow closet door. "Comforting."

"I'll bring food."

"And coffee."

"You hate coffee."

"I've had forty-three minutes of sleep too."

Mom called from the kitchen. Mara slipped out, locked the bedroom door, and tested the knob before going downstairs.

Mom stood at the stove while oatmeal thickened in a saucepan. She pressed two fingers under Mara's chin and angled her face toward the kitchen light, studying her pupils.

“Headache?”

“Two out of ten.”

“Honest number.”

“Four.”

Mom’s mouth tightened. “Sit down.”

Mara took her usual chair. The locked bedroom seemed much farther away from the kitchen than it had last night. She pictured Wren listening for footsteps, trapped with the wet jacket and whatever pieces of Bell-weather she could remember.

A bowl landed in front of Mara. Mom put a spoon beside it and watched until Mara picked it up.

“Did you sleep?”

“Some.”

“How much is some?”

“Enough to know I’d like more.”

Mom poured coffee, then left the mug untouched while she checked the time on the microwave. Her shift started at ten. She had already changed into gray slacks and a blue blouse, and her pharmacy badge sat on the counter beside her keys.

“I can call in,” she said.

“You called in yesterday.”

“I can do it again.”

“I’m going to eat oatmeal and sleep. Those are both activities I can fail at without supervision.”

“Your brother will be here.”

Mara’s spoon stopped halfway to the bowl. “Why?”

The back door opened before Mom answered. Eli stepped inside in work boots and faded coveralls, bringing the smell of wet pavement with him. His hair was flattened on one side, and a dark patch stained the shoulder of his jacket.

“Good morning to you too,” he said.

“You have a job.”

“Excellent memory. Recovery’s going great.” He hung his jacket on the peg by the door. “Swapped my morning call with Denny.”

“You didn’t need to.”

Mom carried a second bowl to the table. “He wanted to.”

Eli glanced at her. She glanced at Mara. Their version of secrecy would lose a war in six minutes.

He sat across from Mara and reached for the cinnamon. Upstairs, a floorboard gave a faint creak.

Mara kept her gaze on her oatmeal. The old house made noises all day. Pipes clicked. Boards settled. Nobody else appeared to notice.

Mom opened the medicine bottle. The rattle filled the kitchen. “Mara, eat six more bites.”

“That is weirdly specific.”

“Seven, then.”

Mara managed four. Every swallow took too long. She needed to get upstairs before Mom decided to change the sheets, open a window, or perform one of the small household tasks that had become dangerous overnight.

Eli watched her scrape the spoon around the bowl. “You in a hurry?”

“I’m tired.”

“You keep checking the clock.”

“I’m fascinated by appliances.”

“The microwave’s been wrong since March.”

“Then I’m waiting to see if it improves.”

His spoon lowered. He had always gone quiet when he was scared, as though fear were a machine he could diagnose by listening for the bad bearing.

“What are you hiding?” he asked.

Mom set down her coffee. “Eli.”

“I’m asking.” His gaze stayed on Mara. “Since you came home, you’ve been locking your door. You said the window blew open, but you won’t let anyone near your room.

Now you're rushing through breakfast so you can get back upstairs."

The sore place behind Mara's eye pulsed. She pressed her thumb against the table edge. "I have a concussion."

"Is this about the accident?"

Her fingers curled against the wood. Wren was one floor above them, officially missing, soaked in reservoir water, with no safe explanation for where she had been. Mara could feel the lie gathering behind her teeth.

"What would I be hiding about it?"

"That's what I'm asking."

Mom sat beside him. "She needs rest, not an interrogation."

"I know." Eli rubbed a hand over his flattened hair. "Mara, Ortiz keeps asking whether someone else was there. Your phone's gone. Your stuff was pulled apart. If you remembered something, or if somebody told you to keep quiet..."

"No one told me anything."

The answer came too quickly. Eli's attention sharpened.

Mara lifted a hand to her temple and shut her eyes. The pain required no acting. "I slept for maybe an hour. My head is worse, and both of you are staring at me like I brought the reservoir home in my pocket."

Mom reached for her wrist. "Worse than a four?"

"Five now."

"You said four."

"It got worse during the family cross-examination."

Eli leaned back, though he did not return to breakfast. "You're sure there isn't something you want to tell us?"

"I'm sure I want to lie down."

Mom slid the medicine toward her with the water. Mara swallowed the pills, then forced down two more bites under supervision. The oatmeal tasted like warm wallpaper paste with cinnamon.

Mom left for work twenty minutes later after writing her number on the pad where it had been written for years. She made Eli promise to wake Mara at noon, then made Mara promise to admit if the headache reached a six.

When the front door closed, Eli picked up both bowls and carried them to the sink. Mara started toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To sleep."

"I'll be in the living room."

"Thrilling."

"Keep your door open."

Mara stopped with one hand on the rail. "The hall light bothers my head."

"I can turn it off."

"I sleep better with the door shut."

His sleeves were pushed to his elbows, and his hands rested in the dishwater, but he was watching her reflection in the dark window over the sink.

"I thought you slept better with the window open," he said.

"Today is full of discoveries."

She climbed without hurrying. Eli kept the faucet running behind her. At the landing, she resisted the urge to glance back and went straight to her room. The lock clicked louder than she wanted.

Wren waited beside the bed. "What happened?"



*Wren was waiting beside the bed when Mara locked the room behind her.*

“Eli thinks I’m hiding something about Bellweather.” Mara crossed to the window and checked the porch roof before drawing the curtain. “I told him I was exhausted and my headache was worse.”

“Did he believe you?”

“He believed the headache.”

Footsteps sounded below, then paused near the foot of the stairs. Mara held a finger to her lips. Neither of them moved until the living-room floor creaked and the television came on at low volume.

She sank onto the edge of the bed. Keeping Wren hidden had seemed manageable in the dark, when the house was asleep. Daylight required locked doors and separate rooms. Every trip upstairs needed a reason, and Eli had already started counting them.

"I couldn't bring breakfast," Mara said quietly. "He's watching the stairs."

Wren returned to her place near the bed. "Then we wait."

Mara listened to the television murmur below while Eli moved around the living room, never far from the staircase.

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Mara did not sleep. She lay on top of the blankets while Wren paced between the closet and the window, counting possible places along the reservoir road where a phone might survive three days of rain.

At eleven twenty, the doorbell rang.

Eli had been in the shower for six minutes. Mara knew because the pipes knocked whenever he used too much hot water, and the knocking had become a kind of countdown.

Wren stopped beside the desk. "Were we expecting someone?"

"No."

The bell rang again.

Mara pushed herself upright. Pain tightened behind her left eye, and the room tipped just enough to make her catch the bedpost.

"Stay here," she said. "Don't answer unless I knock three times."

Wren looked toward the hallway. "Whoever it is, get rid of them."

Mara stepped out, pulled the bedroom door shut, and locked it with the old brass key she kept on top of the frame. She slipped the key into her hoodie pocket before heading downstairs.

She made it down with one hand sliding along the wall. Through the narrow glass beside the front door, she saw a woman in a dark weatherproof jacket. Black hair, low braid. Detective Ortiz stood one step back from the porch, looking toward the empty mills at the end of the street.

The shower shut off upstairs.

Mara opened the door before Eli could come down. Cool air found the sweat at the back of her neck.

Ortiz's gaze traveled over her face. "Mara. I'm Lena Ortiz. We spoke at the hospital."

"I remember."

"Good. May I ask you a few things?"

"My brother's about to appear with a towel on his head and the social skills of a guard dog. Can we do this outside?"

Ortiz glanced into the hall. "If you're steady enough."

"I'm excellent at standing near chairs."

There were two wicker ones at the far end of the porch. Mara lowered herself into one, and Ortiz took the other.

From here, Greywick looked rinsed and watchful. Water shone in cracks along the street. Across the road, Mrs. Dwyer moved a curtain back into place a second too late.

Ortiz noticed. "We can go inside."

"This is practically private by local standards."

The detective rested a small notebook on her knee but did not open it. "Your mother said you've had brief flashes of memory."

Mara's fingers tightened around the chair arm. Eli must have called Mom, or Mom had called Ortiz before leaving. In this family, information traveled faster when everyone claimed they were protecting her.

"Images," Mara said. "They don't connect."

“What images?”

“The service railing. Water. Yellow near the gate.”

Ortiz studied her without seeming to stare. “At the hospital, you described a flash of yellow beside the railing. Today you said near the gate.”

The damp boards appeared to tilt beneath Mara’s shoes. “Aren’t they near each other?”

“Close enough that you may mean the same place. I’m checking your exact wording.”

“Right.”

“Was the yellow moving?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did it seem worn by someone?”

A picture pressed against the inside of Mara’s skull: rain stippling the phone screen, a yellow shape beyond it, Wren’s voice telling her to run. Pain pinched hard behind her eye.

Ortiz leaned forward. “What happened?”

“Headache.” Mara shut her eyes until the porch settled. “Four. Maybe five.”

“Do you want me to get your brother?”

“No.”

“All right.” Ortiz waited without reaching for her. “You said another person might have been there.”

“I said I saw yellow.”

“You told the hospital nurse, ‘They were behind us.’ Do you remember saying that?”

Mara opened her eyes. The upstairs window remained beyond her line of sight. Wren was alone behind the locked bedroom door, trusting Mara to keep her hidden.

The detective opened her notebook. “I’m asking whether ‘they’ meant more than one person, or one person whose identity you didn’t know.”

“I was barely conscious.”

“Yes.” Ortiz’s voice remained level. “That makes the statement less reliable as evidence. It does not make it worthless.”

Mara looked through the porch railing at the muddy strip of yard. The cut hospital seal was upstairs inside her sketchbook. She could tell Ortiz about the turned pockets and missing phone. Then Ortiz would call Mom, search the house, and ask why Mara had hidden it. A search could take them straight to Wren.

“I don’t remember saying it.”

The lie came quietly.

Ortiz wrote a single line. “Has anyone contacted you about Bellweather since you came home?”

“People from school.”

“Anyone you didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Has anyone entered the house without permission or disturbed your belongings?”

Mara felt the porch chair pressing a woven pattern into her palm. “No.”

This time Ortiz looked up at once. Mara held her gaze until a truck groaned past the corner and gave her somewhere else to look.

“All right,” Ortiz said. She closed the notebook. “Memory after a head injury can return in fragments. A smell, a sound, the feel of wet metal. Sometimes a fragment makes no sense until another one joins it. Don’t force it, and don’t discard it because it seems small.”

She took a card from her jacket and placed it on the empty chair arm between them, closer to Mara. “If you remember another person at Bellweather, call me immediately. Day or night.”

Mara picked it up. Ortiz had written a second number beneath the printed one.

“Would you believe me?” Mara asked.

“I would listen carefully. Belief comes after I know what you’re telling me.”

It was an irritating answer, precise enough to sound true.

The front door opened. Eli appeared in clean jeans, rubbing a towel over his wet hair. His gaze moved from Ortiz to Mara and sharpened.

“We’re finished,” Ortiz said, rising. “Make sure she rests.”

“I’ve been attempting that.”

“Poorly,” Mara said.

Ortiz stepped off the porch. At the walk, she turned back. “Keep the card somewhere safe.”

Mara slipped it into her hoodie pocket.

Eli dropped the towel around his shoulders. “What did she want?”

“To ask the same things six different ways.” Mara pushed herself out of the chair and waited for the dizziness to ease. “I need water.”

He followed her into the kitchen and watched while she filled a glass. “You’ve been distracted all morning. You keep locking your room, dodging questions, and slipping upstairs whenever I look away.”

Her hand tightened around the glass. “I have a head injury. I’m tired.”

“Sure.” Eli leaned against the counter. “Then why did you race me to the door?”

“I saved Ortiz from the towel.”

He did not smile. Mara drank half the water, left him watching her, and climbed the stairs without hurrying. She passed the bathroom, waited until Eli’s footsteps moved toward the living room, then knocked three times on her bedroom door.

No one called from downstairs. Mara took the brass key from her pocket, unlocked the door, and slipped inside. Wren stood near the desk, well back from the doorway.

Mara checked the hall herself before closing and locking the door from the inside.

“Well?” Wren asked.

Mara took out Ortiz’s card and set it inside the open sketchbook. “She knows I said someone was behind us. She asked whether anyone contacted me, and whether my things had been disturbed.”

Wren remained beside the desk. “What did you tell her?”

“That I didn’t remember. No one contacted me. Nothing was searched.”

“You lied about all of it.”

“Yes.” Mara lowered herself onto the bed. “She gave me her private number. She said to call if I remember another person.”

Wren looked down at the card. “Do you trust her?”

“Maybe. Enough to keep this.” Mara slid the card beneath the sketchbook’s back cover. “If I tell her now, police come into this room. Mom comes home. Eli stops pretending he believes me. You don’t stay hidden through any of that.”

Wren glanced at the dried mud along her jacket cuff. “So we wait.”

“We find the phone or something Ortiz can use. Until then, you stay in here whenever they’re home, and I lie downstairs.” Mara eased back against the pillows as the pain behind her eye sharpened. “Apparently that’s the arrangement.”

\* \* \*

By one, Eli had accepted that fresh air might improve Mara’s headache. He had accepted it with conditions: ten minutes, no farther than the overlook, and a text before she turned around.

Mara agreed and left alone.

Wren had gone ahead by the porch roof while Eli was downstairs. They had chosen the old maintenance path below the Bellweather Civic Overlook, a strip screened from the road by dense laurel and a corrugated equipment shed. Wren would wait behind the locked service fence, well away from anyone who might recognize the missing girl on the flyers.

The walk lacked the familiar ease Mara had wanted. She kept thinking of what Wren would say about Mrs. Dwyer watching from behind her curtains, then remembering she would have to wait until they were hidden to say it aloud.

Temporary banners hung along the overlook terrace. BELLWEATHER RENEWAL: GREYWICK'S NEXT CHAPTER, announced the largest, with a rendering of bright walking paths above the dam. The artist had removed the rust and any weather more threatening than a decorative cloud.

A dozen people stood around the redevelopment display. Workers in yellow waterproof jackets adjusted a small stage near the parking area. Mara stopped at the color.

Her vision tightened. She fixed on a crack in the pavement until the terrace widened again, then continued past the display without looking toward the crowd.

At the far end of the overlook, she slipped through a gap between two sections of temporary fencing. The maintenance path dropped behind the equipment shed and curved beneath overgrown laurel. Wet leaves brushed her shoulders. From the road, anyone watching would see only foliage and the top of the fence.

Wren waited near the bend, tucked behind a concrete utility housing.

"Mrs. Dwyer saw you leave," Wren whispered.

"Of course she did. Curtain espionage is her civic duty."

For a few seconds, it felt easy again. Then Mara noticed how carefully Wren had placed herself in the deepest cover.

Through the chain-link fence, they could see the terrace from the side. A scale model of Bellweather sat beneath clear plastic, its reservoir made from glossy dark resin. A placard promised public access by spring.

"They fixed everything with blue paint," Wren said.

Mara crouched beside her. "You said we ran near the service road. From which direction?"

"The gate, I think. There were headlights behind us."

"Whose?"

"I never saw the vehicle."

Footsteps scraped on gravel above them. Wren moved behind the utility housing, and Mara turned toward the fence as an employee passed along the terrace carrying a coil of cable. She waited until the footsteps faded.

"You heard someone shouting," Mara said.

"Yes. A man."

"And after I fell?"

Wren's expression closed. "I lost you."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's what I remember."

"Where did you go for three days, Ren?"

"Places."

"Great. I'll put that in the notebook. Under useful facts."

"I was scared."

"You were hurt. You must have slept somewhere." Mara looked at the mud darkening Wren's boots. "You must have eaten."

Wren's gaze moved past her shoulder. The humor left her face.

A microphone crackled on the terrace.

"Sorry to interrupt," a man said, his amplified voice carrying through the fence. "We'll begin the press remarks in about twenty minutes."

He stood beside the redevelopment banner, silver at his temples, wearing a spotless yellow shell over expensive hiking clothes. Mara recognized him from campaign signs and local news clips. Councilman Adrian Rusk smiled at the workers as if they had come to celebrate him personally.

Wren backed deeper behind the concrete housing.

"What is it?" Mara whispered.

"That voice."

Rusk thanked the crew for helping Greywick reclaim a neglected public resource. His voice came through the speakers smooth and warm.

"He was there," Wren said.

"At Bellweather?"

"He shouted at us near the gate."

Mara watched him through a screen of leaves. "Are you sure?"

"I know his voice."

"Why would a councilman chase two kids through a closed reservoir?"

"I don't know."

"You keep saying that."

Wren turned toward her. "Because there are pieces missing. I remember running. I remember you falling. Everything after that gets tangled when I try to put it in order."

Her face had gone pale beneath her freckles. Mara reached toward her hand, then stopped when voices approached from the path entrance.

Wren ducked behind the housing. Mara stood alone near the fence and pretended to read a faded maintenance notice while two workers checked the temporary barrier. Neither looked behind the concrete structure. Once they returned to the terrace, Wren edged back into view.

Rusk laughed at something near the stage. She flinched.

Mara's temporary phone buzzed. Eli had sent two words.

TURN AROUND.

She typed, On my way, and slipped the phone into her pocket.

"We find out why Rusk was there," she said. "Property records and reopening contracts. Anything connecting him to the service gate. Then we look for my phone."

"And Ortiz?"

"When we have evidence she can use." Mara watched Rusk pose beside the shining model, one hand spread above the miniature dam. "Until then, nobody knows you're back. We only meet in my locked room or somewhere like this, where no one could reasonably see you."

Wren nodded, though she kept watching him.

Mara left first. She climbed to the road alone and started home before Eli escalated from capital letters to a search party. At the corner, she glanced back at the banners snapping over the terrace and saw Rusk looking across the road. She maintained the same measured pace while her phone buzzed again in her pocket.

\* \* \*

By evening, rain had covered Mara's window in crooked silver tracks. Once Eli went downstairs, she locked her bedroom door and opened the window for Wren. Now Mara sat cross-legged on the floor with her sketchbook open and every desk drawer emptied around her. Wren crouched opposite, studying the mess.

"We need a map," Mara said. "A real one. The redevelopment model left out anything inconvenient, like fences."

"Or decay."

"That would ruin the blue paint."

She wrote RUSK beneath her earlier notes, then added contracts and service gate. Her headache sharpened when she bent over, so she worked slowly.

“What else?” Wren asked.

“Who had keys. Why he was there during a storm.” Mara paused. “Whether anyone else heard him.”

“And your phone.”

Mara underlined that twice. “Accessible perimeter tomorrow. Daylight and public roads.”

“You’ve become very responsible since lunch.”

“I sustained a brain injury. It changed me.”

She pulled a folder from beneath a heap of old assignments. Several envelopes slid free, followed by a glossy brochure showing brick buildings under orange trees.

Wren leaned closer. “North Coast?”

Mara snatched up the brochure and flipped it face-down.

“That’s six hours away.”

“It’s unsolicited mail. Colleges send it to everyone with a pulse and a mediocre algebra grade.”

“It has your name printed on the letter.”

“They’re advanced.” Mara shoved it under a chemistry workbook. Heat climbed her neck. She had requested the information in August, then hidden every envelope before Wren came over. There had always been time to explain later.

Wren sat back on her heels. “You never mentioned applying there.”

“I’m not applying. I looked at a website.”

“Okay.”

The word came softly. Wren turned toward the rain-dark window, her face giving Mara nothing to answer.

At the bottom of the folder, Mara found the folded county cycling map. “Here. Bellweather’s maintenance road meets the old river path on the east side. We can stay outside the fence and see the gate.”

Wren looked down again. "Tomorrow morning?"

"If Eli goes to work. We photograph the locks and cameras, anything showing who uses the place." Mara drew a careful circle around the eastern boundary. "Then we check public records at the library."

"Very responsible," Wren said.

The teasing had gone from her voice. Mara kept the chemistry book over the brochure and traced the river path with her pen. Rain tapped the glass, and downstairs a cabinet closed. Neither of them spoke until the house settled again.

## Chapter Three

# What the Rain Left

By nine the next morning, the rain had stopped, though water still dropped from the trees along the old river path. It had been two full days since Wren appeared outside Mara's bedroom window. Mara had slept less than four hours between them. She blamed poor planning and refused to consider the medical implications.

Eli had left for work after extracting a promise that she would stay home until lunch. Mara waited until his truck turned off their street, packed Ortiz's card and the temporary phone, then walked east with Wren beside her.

"This counts as staying near home," Mara said.

"You crossed the river."

"Home is a flexible concept."

The paved path ended behind a shuttered bait shop. Beyond it, flattened weeds showed where other people had ignored the PRIVATE SERVICE ACCESS sign. Mara photographed the sign anyway. A newer notice had been bolted underneath, its white surface clean against the rusted post.

BELLWEATHER RENEWAL PROJECT. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

At the bottom sat a city seal and a contact line for the Council Redevelopment Office. ADRIAN RUSK, PROJECT LIAISON.

Mara took three pictures, including one wide enough to show the reservoir fence behind it.

“That puts him in charge of access,” she said.

“Officially.” Wren watched the trees instead of the sign. “He was here before the banners went up.”

“And during a closure. Better question for the library.”

The path narrowed into wet gravel. Brambles leaned across it at shoulder height, shining with rain. Wren stopped short of them.

“Can you get those?” she asked.

Mara caught a thorny stem with the sleeve of her hoodie and pulled it aside. “The fearless Wren Calder, defeated by vegetation.”

“My jacket snags.”

“Your jacket survived Bellweather. I think it can handle a blackberry bush.”

“Please reserve your judgment until you’ve owned a good jacket.”

Wren waited while Mara ducked under, then followed. Mara released the branch once they were clear. It snapped back, scattering drops across the path.

The ground sloped toward the reservoir perimeter. Mud filled the low places between broken slabs of concrete, and Mara’s shoes sank at each step. Her balance kept tipping half a second behind her body. She used saplings when they were close enough and pretended Wren did not notice.

“Left here,” Wren said.

There was barely a route, only pale stones through waist-high grass.

“You remember this?”

“I remember going toward the fence.”

“Last night you thought we came from the gate.”

“I said things get scrambled.” Wren moved onto the stones. “There’s less mud this way.”

Mara followed, placing each foot where the rock looked flat. The stones curved around a washout littered with branches. Wren paused again and nodded toward a fallen limb.

“You first.”

“You’re being weirdly polite today.”

“You’re the one with the phone. If you fall, I need to know where it lands.”

“Comforting.”

Mara stepped over the limb and shoved aside a curtain of wet fern. Behind it, the route opened into a strip of bare earth climbing toward the fence.

“Uphill,” Wren said. “There’s rubble along the edge.”

Mara looked through the grass. Chunks of concrete made an uneven line beside the washout, half hidden under moss. From below, she would have mistaken them for loose debris.

“You remember that clearly.”

Wren rubbed her thumb along the cuff of her jacket. “Only pieces.”

Mara lifted the phone and photographed the route. Wren’s certainty bothered her, though the broken concrete offered the safest way across. Mara stepped onto the first chunk and kept moving.

A mechanical rush rose beyond the trees.

The spillway came into view through a gap in the brush, a long gray slope streaked with runoff. Water poured through the lower channel, brown from the storm. Mara’s right foot slid sideways though the ground beneath it had not moved.

Rain pecked at a black phone screen. Yellow flared near the railing. Wren shouted so close that her voice broke.

Mara gripped a sapling. Bark pressed ridges into her palm.

“Look down,” Wren said. “Just at the path.”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re leaning on a tree.”

“I support local forestry.”

Wren stood between her and the spillway until Mara could unclench her fingers. Ahead, chain-link fence sagged away from a square concrete building. A service road ran behind it toward the powerhouse. Fresh tire grooves cut through the gravel.

The gate itself was chained, but ten yards downhill a drainage wash had eaten out the soil beneath the fence. Someone had bent the wire upward, leaving a gap wide enough to crawl through. Flattened grass led to it from Mara’s side.

Wren stared at the opening. “That was there.”

“The storm night?”

“I think so.”

“You led us through here?”

Her mouth tightened. “You went first.”

Mara crouched beside the gap, careful to keep her shoes on gravel. A strip of yellow plastic was caught around the bent wire. Black print remained on one torn end: RUSK FOR GREYWICK.

She photographed it without touching it. The strip might have blown downhill from a hundred campaign signs. It might also have marked the place where somebody had tied back the fence.

Wren watched the dark service road beyond the opening. “We can still go to the library.”

Mara put the phone away and lowered herself onto one knee. The powerhouse waited past the fence, its narrow windows filmed with dirt, while runoff ticked steadily through the culvert below.

“After this,” she said, and began working her shoulders through the gap.

\* \* \*

The wire caught Mara across the back of her hoodie. She flattened herself into the gravel and wriggled forward until it released with a metallic twang.

Wren ducked through after her. She kept well clear of the bent edge, protecting the miraculous jacket again. Mara stood slowly and brushed grit from her palms.

“You know,” Wren said, “we could still claim this was an accident.”

“Absolutely. I tripped under a fence.”

The service road curved between the spillway and the powerhouse. Recent tire marks had churned its gravel into gray paste. Mara photographed them, though any maintenance vehicle could have made them. At the building, a steel door stood crooked in its frame. Rust streaked the concrete beneath the hinges, and a city notice warned that the structure was closed pending rehabilitation.

“Very reassuring,” Mara said.

She put her shoulder against the door. It resisted, then scraped inward with a noise that seemed to travel through the entire building.

Cold air met her face. The smell inside held damp concrete and a bitter burned edge.

Wren stopped at the threshold. Beyond her, the service road lay empty beneath dripping trees.

“You wanted the library,” Mara said.

“I’ve recently developed a passion for quiet public buildings.”

“Five minutes.”

“That is a lie people say before spending forty minutes somewhere terrible.”

Mara switched on the phone’s flashlight and stepped inside. After a moment, Wren followed.

The narrow entry opened onto the turbine hall. Daylight filtered through windows near the roof, too weak to reach the floor. Huge rounded housings rose from the dark like buried machinery pushing up through stone. A

mezzanine ran along the far wall, its railing eaten orange with rust. Somewhere below, water rushed through a channel with a steady force that Mara felt in her ribs.

Her light passed over flaking safety stripes and an overturned chair.

She stopped.

“What?” Wren asked.

“I thought the chair moved.”

“It’s on its side.”

“I can see that now.”

The concussion had apparently added hostile furniture to her list of symptoms. Mara held the phone with both hands until the beam steadied.

A directory beside the entry showed the records office on the mezzanine. The stairs began near the eastern wall, past a row of dead control cabinets. Their black windows caught the phone light and gave back warped scraps of her face. Wren walked outside the beam, visible whenever Mara glanced over, her green jacket muted to charcoal.

“Stay close,” Mara said.

“I am close.”

“Closer than that.”

Wren moved beside her. Their pace fell into its old rhythm, except Mara had to watch every step. Water dripped inside one of the control cabinets. The tapping came and went beneath the deeper roar, always seeming to restart behind her.

At the stairs, a chain had been looped through the railing. Its padlock hung open.

Mara took pictures from several angles. The metal around the keyway looked clean compared with the rusted chain.

“Someone has a key,” she said.

“Project liaison, maybe.”

“Or fifty city employees.”

“Your optimism is exhausting.”

The steps rang under Mara's shoes. Wren climbed without sound beside her, careful in the way people were careful when they knew a place might collapse. The rush below swelled as they reached the mezzanine. Mara's vision tightened. For half a second the railing seemed waist-high, slick with rain, and yellow flashed at its far end.

She seized the handrail.

Rust came away against her palm.

"Mara." Wren stood one step above her. "Sit down."

"I'm fine."

"You're orange."

"That sounds medically serious."

She lowered herself onto a step anyway. The turbine hall stretched beneath her through the bars. Dark floor. Silent housings. No rain. She pressed her thumb into the rough tread until the present stayed where she put it.

Wren crouched nearby without resting on the step. "We should leave."

"The records office is right there."

"It will still be there when your brain isn't trying to throw you down stairs."

Mara rose with the rail in one hand. "Four minutes."

"You used one already."

The records office door had no lock, only a swollen wooden edge. Mara pushed until it lurched open. A toppled filing cabinet blocked part of the room. Papers lay in soggy clumps beneath a broken window, their ink bled to blue shadows.

Fire had blackened the back corner.

A metal waste bin sat under a blistered patch of wall. Its sides had buckled from heat. Burned folders surrounded it, some reduced to curled black layers, others merely browned along their edges. The storm had blown rain through the window and soaked the mess before the fire consumed everything.

Mara lifted the phone to photograph the room.

“Hurried,” Wren said.

“How can you tell?”

“They missed the bin.” She nodded toward the folders scattered around it. “Somebody threw too much in at once.”

Mara approached. The bitter smell strengthened, wet ash under old smoke. Her stomach tightened before she understood why.

The office vanished behind rain.

Paper flared inside the bin, bright enough to sharpen a man into silhouette. Yellow covered his shoulders. One hand fed folders into the flames while water thundered through the powerhouse. Mara held up her phone. Its screen shone between her fingers.

The man turned.

A voice struck through the roar. “Give me that.”

Mara stumbled into the filing cabinet. Metal slammed against metal, and the office returned around her.

Wren was in front of her, pale and rigid. “What did you see?”

Mara’s hip burned where it had hit the cabinet. She tried to answer, but wet ash filled her nose with each breath.

“Rusk.”

“Here?” Wren looked toward the doorway.

“Before. During the storm.” Mara raised the phone, casting its light into the empty hall. “He was burning papers. I recorded him.”

The missing phone had stopped being a possibility she could file under panic. Rusk had seen it and demanded it. Beyond that, the memory broke apart. She still had no clear image of who followed them once they ran.

Wren watched her carefully. “Do you remember what the papers were?”

“No. There were folders. The water was loud.” Mara touched the tender place behind her ear. “He turned toward me, and then it cuts off.”

“We have to go.”

“We need something physical.”

“We have your memory.”

“Ortiz can’t arrest him because wet garbage gave me a headache.”

Mara crouched beside the burned pile. She pulled the sleeve of her hoodie over her fingers before lifting anything. The top sheets collapsed at a touch, leaving black flakes on the fabric. Beneath them, water had pasted several pages to the floor.

“Careful,” Wren said.

“That had never occurred to me.”

Mara worked at one edge. A half-burned sheet peeled free, its center gone and one corner protected by a soaked folder. Most of the surviving print had blurred. She could make out a table with dates, the word PRESSURE, and part of a line reading EAST OUTLET INSPEC. Along the margin, someone had marked three entries in red.

She photographed it where it lay.

“That’s something,” Wren said.

“It’s half a something.”

Under the page, a plastic strap showed through the ash. Mara eased it free. A laminated card hung from it, scorched along one side. The city seal remained visible above a photograph of Adrian Rusk. Below his name, block letters read BELLWEATHER RENEWAL PROJECT. TEMPORARY FACILITY ACCESS.

The printed expiration date was the end of the month.

Mara stared at it long enough for the phone light to dim. She tapped the screen and took a picture of the card in place.

Wren leaned closer. “He was here.”

“Legally, maybe.”

“During a closure, burning inspection records?”

“I need to prove that part.” Mara slid the scorched sheet into the back of her sketchbook, keeping the burned surface away from the other pages. The access card followed into the outer pocket without Wren offering to carry either one. “This proves his badge ended up in the room where somebody burned records. Combined with the notice outside...”

A clang rose from the turbine hall.

Both of them turned.

The sound echoed once from the high ceiling, followed by the rush of water. Mara killed the flashlight. Gray window light outlined the office door.

“Was that downstairs?” Wren whispered.

“Yes.”

A second metallic knock came from below, quieter than the first. Water could have shifted debris. An old panel might have slipped loose. Mara pictured the fresh tire grooves outside and Rusk’s face sharpening above a bin of flames.

Wren moved toward the doorway, stopping short of its frame. “The east stairs go down to the spillway access. There might be another way out.”

“You remember that?”

“I remember stairs.”

Mara looked at the dark mezzanine, then at the open route they had used. Whoever entered through the service door would reach that route first.

She zipped the phone and sketchbook inside her hoodie. “Show me.”

Wren went ahead, and Mara followed with one hand near the wall. Behind them, the wet records office held its smoke smell, while the powerhouse carried each careful step down into the noise below.

The east stairs were narrower than the first set. Damp grit coated the treads, and Mara tested each one before

trusting it. Halfway down, another clang sounded beneath them. She froze with her hand clamped around the rail.

Wren peered over the landing. "I don't see anyone."

"That doesn't mean no one's there."

"No. It means I don't see anyone."

The stairs ended in a passage beside the water channel. A loose metal sign swung from one bolt on the wall. Each draft pushed its lower edge against a pipe with the same hollow knock.

Mara watched it strike once more. Her knees weakened with relief, though the fresh tire marks outside still crowded her thoughts.

"Hostile furniture and murderous signs," Wren murmured. "This building has range."

"Keep moving."

A steel door waited at the far end of the passage, its push bar furred with rust. Mara pressed it. Nothing happened.

"Again," Wren said.

Mara braced one foot against the concrete and shoved harder. Pain tightened behind her ear. The door gave a fraction, admitting a blade of daylight and cold air. She pushed until the swollen bottom edge scraped over the floor.

They emerged behind the powerhouse near the spillway fence. Mara stumbled onto wet gravel and caught herself against the concrete wall. The roar of water sounded smaller outdoors. No engine idled on the service road, and no figure moved among the trees.

Wren came out beside her and scanned the slope. "Can you walk?"

"I crawled under a fence to get here. I'm walking out."

Mara kept the powerhouse between them and the service road until they reached the fence opening. She lowered herself onto the gravel, slid through on her stomach, then checked the front of her hoodie as soon as she stood.

The zipper remained closed. Inside, the sketchbook was dry, and the access card still rested in its outer pocket.

Wren ducked through and waited while Mara took one more photograph of the powerhouse from the public side of the fence.

“Rusk was in there,” Mara said. “And whatever I forgot, it starts with those records.”

“We should make copies before he finds out we have them.”

Mara slipped the phone back into her pocket. “Library.”

Wren glanced at her mud-streaked hoodie. “They’re going to love us.”

They followed the service road toward town, keeping to the gravel where the ground was firmer. Mara held the sketchbook against her ribs beneath the hoodie and checked twice that the zipper had stayed shut.

\* \* \*

By the time Mara reached home, the access card was tucked inside an old geometry workbook beneath her bed. The burned inspection sheet stayed in her sketchbook, wrapped in two pieces of printer paper so the damp ash would not smear. She slid the book behind a row of board games on her closet shelf.

Wren stood by the desk, watching her choose hiding places.

“We should put the card somewhere else,” she said. “If Rusk already searched this room...”

“He searched before I had it.” Mara shut the closet. “And if Mom finds it in the freezer or taped beneath the toilet tank, I get questions.”

“Your family has no respect for traditional evidence storage.”

Mara sat on the carpet. The walk back had driven a pulse behind her right eye. She pressed two fingers there until colored sparks appeared.

"Start again," she said. "You heard him shout. Then what?"

Wren lowered herself beside the bed without leaning against it. "We ran from the office. You had your phone out. I remember the stairs being slippery."

"Which stairs?"

"I don't know. Metal ones."

The office returned in a flash of wet smoke. Rusk's hand pushed a folder into the fire. His yellow shoulder turned, and the phone shook between Mara's hands.

"He said, 'Give me that.'" Her voice came out louder than she intended. "You pulled me toward the hall, and I..."

"Mara?"

Mom stood in the open doorway, one hand still on the knob. Her pharmacy badge hung from her scrub top. Her gaze moved across the room and passed directly over Wren.

Mara got to her feet too fast. The floor tipped, then steadied. "I was recording notes."

"Who were you talking to?"

"My phone." She picked it up from the desk, showing the blank screen before she realized that proved very little. "Voice notes. For the memory stuff."

Mom's fingers tightened around the doorknob. "Did you hear someone answer?"

Behind her, Wren went still.

"What? No."

"Your headache. Is it worse than this morning?"

"It's fine."

"That wasn't what I asked." Mom stepped inside. "Any confusion or sounds other people don't hear?"

Mara had prepared herself for suspicion, for questions about mud on her jeans and where she had spent the after-

noon. This was worse. Mom looked tired and frightened, studying Mara's face as if one wrong word might send them back to the hospital.

"I'm rehearsing," Mara said, softer. "Like I told Eli. I remembered Rusk telling me to give him my phone, so I was trying to keep the details straight."

"You remembered Councilman Rusk?"

"Maybe. It was quick."

Mom glanced at the phone. "You need to tell Detective Ortiz."

"I will when I'm sure."

"Mara, I can sit with you while you call."

"No. I need ten minutes without everybody monitoring my pupils."

The words landed hard. Mom looked down and smoothed the edge of her badge between her fingers.

"All right," she said. "Ten minutes. Then come eat something, please. You missed lunch."

She pulled the door nearly closed behind her.

Mara listened to her footsteps descend the stairs. A cupboard opened in the kitchen, followed by the ordinary clink of a plate on the counter.

Wren remained beside the bed. "You could tell her about Rusk."

"And explain how I got into the powerhouse?" Mara crossed to the closet and checked that the board games still hid the sketchbook. "We make copies first. Then Ortiz."

She kept her hand on the closet door for a moment before going downstairs to eat whatever her mother had set out.

\* \* \*

Late that night, rain ticked against Mara's window while the rest of the house settled around them. Pipes clicked in-

side the wall. Eli crossed the hallway once, paused outside her door, then continued toward his room.

Mara lay beneath the quilt with an ice pack pressed to her temple. Wren sat on the floor near the radiator, her damp jacket dark in the glow from the desk lamp.

"Mom thinks my brain invented you," Mara whispered.

"Your brain could do better. I'm wearing tragic amounts of green."

Mara smiled despite the ache behind her eye. "Remember the winter concert?"

Wren groaned. "No."

"You wore that tinsel halo."

"It was a crown."

"It slid over your face during the solo. Mrs. Kline kept conducting while you sang through six feet of silver plastic."

"She respected the arts."

Mara tucked the ice pack beneath her chin to smother a laugh. Wren had finished the song glaring through the tinsel, then bowed so hard the halo fell into the front row. They had hidden behind the gym afterward, breathless with laughter and splitting a packet of stale crackers from Mara's backpack.

"We should go back there when this is done," Mara said. "Break into the costume cupboard. Rescue your crown."

Wren's smile thinned. Her gaze went to the rain-dark glass.

"Or we could burn it," Mara added. "Public service."

"Let's get through tomorrow first."

"And after we give Ortiz the copies?"

"We find your phone."

"Then Rusk gets arrested, you stop hiding, and my mother feeds you until graduation." Mara shifted the ice pack back to her forehead. "You'll need a plan."

Wren drew one knee toward her chest. "I'm here now."

The answer left a small cold space beneath Mara's ribs. She could press for the missing days or ask why every road beyond Rusk seemed to vanish when Wren spoke. Downstairs, the refrigerator motor started, and the familiar hum softened the edges of the room.

"Tomorrow," Mara said, "we copy everything. Then we call Ortiz together."

"Together," Wren agreed.

Mara switched off the lamp. Wren remained beside the radiator, a dim shape against the wall, and began describing Mrs. Kline's furious face when the tinsel landed in her handbag. Mara listened until her headache eased enough to close her eyes.

*This excerpt ends here. The novel continues.*