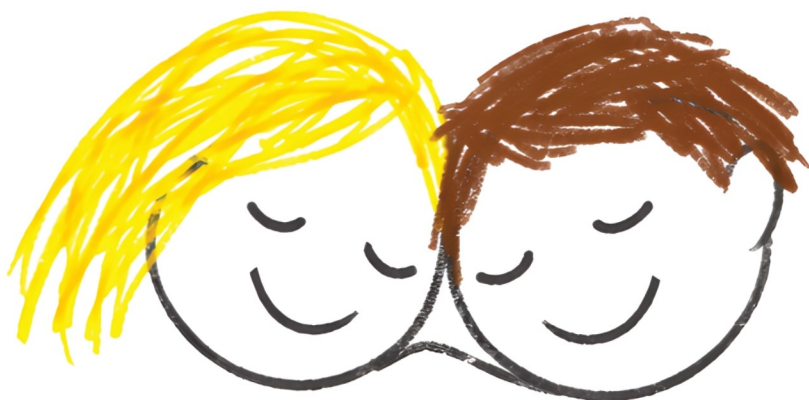


o-okun

HELD IN YOUR HAND

Those who showed me how to exist



Held in Your Hand

Those who showed me how to exist

o-okun

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People often say a story begins at birth.
Others believe it begins the first time we fall in love.
I'd say it begins the day we finally allow ourselves to be seen as we truly are.
That's what this story is about.
And, in its own quiet way... about love, too.

o-okun

Prologue

There are people you notice immediately.

They walk into a room and everyone turns their heads. Their voice carries. Their laughter fills the space. Their presence seems to shift the air itself.

And then there are the others.

The ones who learn very early how to walk without making noise. How to sit at the edge of the tables. How to speak just enough not to bother anyone.

For a long time, I thought the world worked like that.

As if there were two categories of people:

those you notice immediately...

and those who learn to make themselves forgotten.

And for a long time, I believed I belonged to that so-called second group.

Not exactly invisible.

But... transparent.

People saw me. Sometimes they spoke to me.

But I always had this strange feeling of only existing halfway. Like a reflection in a window: present if you look closely, but easy to ignore.

Reflections have always been honest with me.

In bus windows, in automatic doors, in the fogged mirrors of bathrooms... I always found the same young man.

Shoulders slightly hunched. An uncertain gaze.

A smile ready to apologize for existing.

A young man doing his best not to disturb the world.

And that was enough.

It was enough for me.

Because when you take up no space, no one can push you away.

It's a surprisingly effective strategy.

The problem is that when you stay too long at the edge of things... you eventually forget how to truly enter the room.

I thought my life would continue like that.

A few studies. A quiet job. Polite conversations. Days passing without a sound.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing spectacular.

Just a decent existence, a little away from the center.

Until the day someone looked at me.

Not the way you look at a classmate.

Not the way you observe a colleague in an open-plan office.

No.

As if I truly existed.

And I think that's where my story begins.

Not the day I was born.

Not the day I started university.

But the day someone decided to see me.

And I could no longer pretend to be invisible.

Chapter 1

First Day

I arrived too early.

Obviously.

In the university courtyard, groups were forming like little islands refusing to take in a castaway.

I stayed planted there for a few minutes, staring at the campus map as if I actually needed to learn it, even though I had already taken a picture of it.

The air smelled of coffee, asphalt, and new plastic.

I wondered if this year would be different. I ask myself that every new term, the way you wonder if you'll manage to quit sugar while stirring your first cube into your coffee.

This time, I had sworn to myself that I would speak louder, look people in the eye, stop smiling out of reflex.

I caught sight of myself in the reflection of an automatic door: transparent, not very useful... but people appreciate that.

The improvised mirror of the glass closed over a group laughing behind me. I looked away. As usual. As if my own reflection might ask me for a coin when I had nothing to give it.

The main lecture hall was already half full. Bags placed on seats to "save them," whispers and laughter.

I aimed for the back row, near the wall. Strategic spot.

Obviously.

Not for working, at least. But still strategic. I don't even know if I like being up high, or just the possibility of disappearing.

Maybe both.

When I sat down, my heart was beating too fast for someone who had only climbed twenty-three steps.

I took out a notebook, a pen, and my laptop, just to keep my hands busy.

This year will be different, I wrote.

Then the memories started inviting themselves in. My brain had to keep itself occupied somehow.

The girl from second year. What was her name again? The one who had suggested a movie, just the two of us, and then ended up bringing her new boyfriend because "it's more fun as three."

The seminar group where I spoke right after some popular guy's joke, and where my voice fell apart under laughter that wasn't meant for me.

The work-study finance professor last year, who kept repeating:

"Speak louder, Mister Bellamy, we can't hear you!"

And my throat suddenly becoming an empty corridor of air.

Someone put a bag on the seat to my left. I jumped, then pretended I hadn't jumped.

"Hey you, is this free?" she asked.

I turned.

She was wearing a cream sweatshirt, her curly hair tied up quickly, and a smile that didn't need to force itself. Very lively eyes. The kind that scare me a little.

"Yes," I said. "I mean... yes."

She sat down as if she were settling into a living room, comfortable, relaxed. She glanced quickly around the lecture hall, then at me, I think, then at my notebook.

"You're taking notes before class?" she asked, eyebrows raised, half amused, half curious.

"I'm warming up... my pen."

She laughed. Not a mean laugh, a clear laugh, one that said:

"All right, I get the type."

"I'm Aïcha," she added. "And you?"

"Eliott."

"Nice to meet you, Eliott. You don't look like the type who participates in class, do you?"

I looked at her, ready to do the little nervous laugh that saves me from social situations, then I shrugged.

"It's just that... I don't really like participating in this kind of class."

"Oh really? You're the bad boy type, then?"

She was already laughing.

I don't know if it was her voice, her humor, or just the way she sat next to me without hesitating, but my heart slowed down a notch.

I leaned back against the seat, and the seat didn't swallow me. That was something.

The murmur in the lecture hall rose a few decibels. The door slammed, and a group of three came in whispering.

Aïcha pointed with her chin at a girl with a smooth bob and fine earrings.

"You see the brunette over there? That's Nawal! My friend. A legend at the cafeteria. She always brings too much stuff, and no one knows where her pies come from."

"Pies?"

"Pies. Lemon ones. But I don't like lemon... Anyway, who cares, but she'll tell you it's 'nothing,' when she spends forever making them."

I didn't know what to answer, so I nodded.

"And him, that's Youssef. He makes terrible jokes."

Aïcha pointed at a tall guy who was already miming something, I'm not really sure what.

"Still, he's loyal. The kind of guy who walks you to the metro in the rain just to keep you company."

"And you?" I asked, before regretting being too direct. "You're... what legend at the cafeteria?"

She gave me a sideways glance, with a small smile.

"I'm the one who talks too much. But who also listens. Sometimes. When I remember that exists."

I surprised myself by smiling without calculating it. That rarely happens when I'm stressed about the first day. My pen stopped slipping between my fingers.

The professor came in, laptop under his arm, blue shirt.

A silence settled.

Course names, acronyms, credits: the classic presentation and the serious routine.

Aïcha took out her phone to take a picture of the slide.

"Semester Organization"

I did the same, but my black screen sent back quite a reflection: my eyes too wide, and the shadow of the bags under them. I took the picture at an angle, as if I could avoid seeing myself at the same time.

"What's your name again?" Aïcha whispered, hand in front of her mouth, as if that changed anything about her carrying voice.

“Elliott.”

“Okay Elliott, if at some point I sink, you wake me up. I slept two hours. Seriously. I’m a hero.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not joking, okay. I have the face of a functional person, but the brain of an old phone: 12% battery and apps open since 2018.”

I smothered a laugh. In front of us, someone turned around, then went back to taking notes.

The professor had started explaining the assessment methods when Aïcha leaned toward me again.

“Are you more numbers or words?”

“Both scare me,” I said. “But we’re in a CCA¹ master’s, so I did sign up for numbers.”

“Good luck,” she whispered. “I’m here for the vibe. I’m going to fail everything with panache.”

“Vibe? In CCA? I’ll lend you some of my panache, if you want.”

“Deal!”

I hadn’t planned for that kind of lightness.

I felt a small pocket of air in my chest, like when you unbutton a collar that’s too tight. The lecture hall was still a cold machine, but I had found a warm corner.

Time slipped by.

At the break, Aïcha jumped to her feet.

“Come on, come! I’ll introduce you to the others.”

“Huh? What do you mean? To who?”

“These people. You know, those creatures who eat lemon pies.”

I should have said no thanks.

I said:

“...”

Actually... I didn’t have time to answer.

We went down two rows, and she went up to Nawal like a sister.

“Nawal, this is Elliott.”

“Hi Elliott,” Nawal said with a smile. “Do you like lemon?”

“Uh... yes. A lot.”

“Perfect. We’re friends.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a joke. She really seemed to believe friendship could depend on a citrus fruit.

I nodded, a little too fast.

“And him, that’s Youssef. Be careful, he has three jokes in stock and reuses them on loop.”

“False,” Youssef protested. “I have at least four and a half.”

“Go on, try one,” Aïcha said.

“Another time. I save my punchlines for rainy days.”

He shook my hand without crushing my knuckles. I appreciated that detail.

Aïcha followed with another name, Reda, who said to me:

“You seem calm and nice...”

His tone was so neutral I couldn’t tell if it was a joke or a compliment.

¹ CCA (Contrôle, Comptabilité, Audit): a French master’s degree specializing in accounting, auditing and financial control.

Then he added:

“I like that.”

That mentally saved me.

The small social ceremony lasted five minutes, quick, without insisting. No interrogation, no “where are you from?”, no “what do you do?” Just hellos, smiles, the vital minimum required not to feel like an intruder.

Maybe Aïcha sensed where my limit was. Or maybe she does that with everyone. She adjusts.

When we went back up to our seats, I felt warm. Not stressed, no. Just the warmth of blood circulating again.

I dropped back into the seat.

“You okay?” Aïcha asked.

“Yes. I mean... yes.”

“You’re bad at lying.”

“I lie... gently.”

“I like that. It sounds like a tiny promise.”

She looked at me for one second longer, then rummaged through her bag.

“Here. Gift.”

She handed me a candy.

“Strawberry. For friendship.”

“Thanks.”

“Admit it’s better than lemon, though.”

“Yes... I mean, it depends. I like both.”

I slipped it into my pocket. I didn’t feel like chewing something in front of her like a hamster.

The simple fact that she had given me a candy left me with the strange impression that I was already... considered.

It was ridiculous.

The end of the class took its time, a little too much for my taste, as always when you’re watching for freedom.

The professor finally said:

“We’ll stop here for today.”

Chairs scraped, bags snapped shut, and conversations started again, louder, like the sky after a storm.

I dragged my feet a little, just so I wouldn’t end up in the chaotic flow of the corridor. It’s horrible when there are too many people. Corridors are never wide enough.

“What are you doing now?” Aïcha asked as she packed up her things.

The question hit me harder than expected. I felt like I was standing at a tiny crossroads, but a real one.

My schedule was clear: I had planned to do absolutely nothing all afternoon. But I couldn’t tell her I was just going to eat my snack, take a nap, eat again, then sleep.

My stomach looped.

“I... I can’t. I have work this afternoon,” I said, too fast.

I felt a little stupid for lying to her. Except it wasn’t really a lie. Well, yes...

Mostly, it had just come out as an excuse.

“Oh, you’re serious?” she said, impressed. “First day and everything. You’re ready?”

“I have no idea.”

"It'll be fine," she said, without embellishing it. "And if not, you'll pretend until it becomes true. We all do that."

She hesitated for a second, as if she were measuring the exact amount of social sugar needed.

"All right, coffee next week then," she continued. "I'll kidnap you at break. With signed consent."

"Okay," I said.

The answer surprised even me.

It almost sounded like a confession.

I added, because I'm always afraid people might think I'm promising things:

"I mean... if I can."

"Of course you can," she said, as if it were a scientific fact. "Go on, get out of here. You're going to be late, Elliott."

She said my name with an ease that touched me. I waved awkwardly and headed for the exit, bag on my shoulder, candy in my pocket.

In the corridor, the large glass window sent back an image of me that was a little sharper. I stopped for half a second.

The reflection hadn't changed, not really.

It was still me, too pale, too careful.

But there was that stupid detail: the corner of my lips was pulling upward, almost in spite of me.

I lowered my eyes and started walking again.

The hall opened up like a train station. Groups were forming near the terminals, exchanging numbers, pretending to care about the workshop schedules.

I walked around the crowd, as always. I have nothing against crowds, but you would have to be insane to enjoy them.

I passed through the automatic doors. The colder outside air tightened around the back of my neck. I checked the time on my phone.

Then I lit the screen again.

The calendar appeared:

"Company - tomorrow morning"

I had forgotten.

Tomorrow was the first day at the company.

Of course, since we were doing work-study. The professor had reminded us, but it had completely slipped my mind.

First day at university on Thursday, first day at the company on Friday, then the official rhythm would begin: two days at school, three days at work.

Quite an organization, honestly. They could have found something simpler.

Right.

So it was going to be an afternoon spent anticipating tomorrow's life.

Or maybe not.

I wasn't going to ruin this just because I had to go to work the next day.

First: a good shower.

And then, why not a little chocolate fondant for my afternoon snack?

Ah, there's the recipe...

CHOCOLATE FONDANT

A chocolate fondant is one of those simple, irresistible desserts that never fails to please. With its soft, gooey center and rich, chocolatey texture, it can be made in just a few minutes using basic ingredients. Perfect for an impromptu dessert or to enjoy with a cup of coffee.

Prep time

15 minutes

Cooking time

10 to 12 minutes

Ingredients (serves 4)

200 g dark baking chocolate
100 g butter
100 g sugar
3 eggs
50 g flour
1 pinch of salt
1 strong espresso
1 small pinch of fleur de sel

Preparation

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Butter four small ramekins.

Melt the chocolate and butter together in a double boiler or microwave, stirring regularly until the mixture is smooth.

Add the strong espresso to the hot chocolate.

In a mixing bowl, whisk the eggs and sugar until the mixture becomes slightly frothy.

Fold the melted chocolate into the egg-sugar mixture, then add the sifted flour and a pinch of salt. Mix until you have a smooth batter.

Pour the batter into the molds, filling them three-quarters full.

Sprinkle a pinch of fleur de sel over the batter.

Bake for 10 to 12 minutes. The center should remain slightly wobbly to achieve a soft, gooey center.

Let rest for 1 minute. Gently unmold or enjoy directly from the ramekin, being careful not to burn yourself.

Tip

For an even more gooey center, place a square of chocolate in the center of each mold before baking. This chocolate lava cake pairs perfectly with a scoop of ice cream or a dollop of whipped cream.

There was nothing to criticize. Making cakes was so satisfying.

I stayed in the kitchen for a while, watching the dishes cool in the sink. The oven was still warm, and the smell of chocolate floated through the apartment like a silent reward.

I cut a small piece of the fondant, just to check.

The center was still a little runny.

Perfect.

I sat down at the table, with my plate and my phone beside it, screen black.

For a few seconds, I wondered if Aïcha would really remember that coffee. Or if it was one of those light promises people toss into the air to be polite.

I didn't look for the answer too long.

Outside, the late afternoon was sliding gently toward evening. Street noises rose through the half-open window: a car passing, someone talking too loudly, a dog barking in the distance.

Nothing important.

Just life continuing.

I took another bite of fondant.

Tomorrow, there would be the company. New faces, other corridors, other silences to fill. Nothing very different, probably. Maybe a little the same. Maybe a little better.

I didn't know.

But for once, the idea didn't tighten my chest completely.

I looked at the table, the kitchen, the cake still warm in its tin.

Then I thought again of the strawberry candy in the pocket of my bag.

I told myself that, in the end, the day hadn't been so bad.

And sometimes, that is already more than enough.

Chapter 2

Arrival at the Company

I breathed in while counting to four, held until six, then breathed out until eight. Something I'd read somewhere. Apparently, it's pretty useful for sleeping.

I started walking toward the bus stop. It was dark, but not too cold. That was already something good.

I could hear laughter behind me, a name called a little too loudly, a suitcase rolling on the sidewalk. People were already very awake. I wasn't especially tired.

"This year will be different," I repeated mentally.

Not like some huge promise. Just like a thread, thin, that I could keep between my fingers.

I slipped my hand into my pocket.

The strawberry candy.

I hesitated, then unwrapped it. The paper crackled. The taste hit me cleanly, sweet and soft, a small chemical joy. I smiled, alone, like an idiot. Those mini-victories never last very long, but I decided to count them anyway.

The bus arrived in a warm breath. I raised my hand by reflex, even though the driver had already seen me. Inside, the air smelled of disinfectant and seat fatigue. I chose an isolated place, window side.

Always window side.

It's useful for having something to lean on and pretending to think, when really, I just want to look outside.

The engine growled. I took out my earphones before drowning myself in music. Outside, the streets slid past, the shop windows stretched out. My reflection slipped across the glass, transparent between the sky and the buildings.

I wondered what kind of face you give back when you're not smiling.

I had no idea.

But mine mostly looked like the kind of guy you wouldn't bother asking for directions.

A woman in her fifties sat down next to me. There were several other seats available, though. She wore strong perfume, a wide wedding ring, and kept her eyes fixed on her phone. I tucked my elbows in a little. I prefer compressing myself on my own rather than risking surprise physical contact.

She sighed. Not because of me, luckily, just because of life, I think. And that was almost reassuring.

My heart was beating faster again than expected.

First day. New position. New start.

I repeated the words to myself like a personal mantra, but deep down, I had that absurd fear: what if nothing changed? What if I stayed that guy who's too kind, too silent, the one people forget in a room without even realizing it?

The bus braked suddenly. A little girl laughed, her father grumbled, the woman beside me swore softly. I held onto the pole.

I caught sight of my face in the window: my lips were dry, my eyes evasive.

I forced them to stay on their reflection.

One second.

Two.

And I turned my head.

The seat vibrated under my legs. The automatic announcements followed one another.

“Next stop: Business Park - Alpha Building.”

My stop.

I put my bag back on my shoulder, the knot in my stomach pulled tight.

“Excuse me... ma’am,” I said, to ask to get past.

She apologized too, as if we had both committed some serious fault by sharing the same square of bus, then she stood up to let me out. I don’t even know why I stressed.

The door opened onto a puff of warm air. The weather had heated up. In front of me, the building stood there: glass facade, sharp angles, the kind of place where people wear ironed shirts and know what to do with their little hands.

I took my brand-new badge out of my bag. A small plastic rectangle where my name was printed too small.

“Elliott Bellamy - Accounting Work-Study Student”

It almost shone in the sun, like a pride sticker bought too early. Also, the photo was a little bad. But apparently, it’s the same for everyone. A kind of administrative equality.

I walked toward the entrance. The automatic doors opened with that neat hiss belonging to places where you’re supposed to behave properly, while the lobby smelled of coffee, expensive perfumes, and air conditioning.

A receptionist looked up.

“First day?”

“Yes... Hello... Ma’am, uh... Elliott Bellamy, B-E-L-L-A-M-Y. For the accounting department.”

She tapped on her keyboard, with that dry sound of professionalism that reception people probably master from birth.

“Perfect, Mister. Fifth floor. You badge here, then at the elevator.”

I nodded.

In the elevator, I was alone with my reflection, again.

The stainless-steel walls turned my face into a gray mosaic. I wondered what self-confidence looked like, in reflection.

Probably not like that.

The numbers went by: 1... 2... 3...

I remembered an article I’d read somewhere: you only get one chance to make a good impression.

Great.

Really the kind of sentence written to encourage shy people.

I had about twenty seconds left to become someone else. Then I remembered a technique I’d seen on social media: the body influences the brain, or something like that. In theory, if you smile or move like someone confident, the brain follows to maintain some kind of internal coherence.

So, in a burst of genius, I did two small jumps in place while straightening up a little.

Result: no new confidence, but slight shortness of breath.

That was already an experiment...

When the doors opened, a corridor spread out in front of me. Gray floor, white walls, the smell of warm paper. Voices, far away. Muffled laughter too. Heels on the floor, somewhere further down.

I introduced myself at the accounting department reception, a small glass office where a woman with round glasses was sorting folders.

“Hello ma’am, I’m the new work-study student.”

"Ah! Elliott?" she said with a sincere smile. "Welcome! Have a seat, I'll let Pascal know."

I nodded, again, and waited.

Time stretched, heavy. I looked around me. Potted succulents, a water dispenser, a "Go 2026!" sign.

The offices were open, aligned, each one with giant screens and an ergonomic chair that probably had more emotional support than I did.

A man appeared in the doorway. In his fifties, elegant, immaculate white shirt, a gaze that assesses before greeting.

"Elliott Bellamy, is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pascal Delmas, your manager. I've heard about you."

He shook my hand. Firm... but not crushing. It was almost a relief.

"We'll put you on bank reconciliations to start with. You'll see, it's fascinating. Like watching paint dry."

I smiled politely.

"Yes, of course."

"Perfect. Follow me."

We crossed the open space. Faces behind screens. Some looked up, others didn't. The sound of keyboards was like a collective heartbeat.

I felt tiny among those piles of files.

My desk, all the way at the back, was waiting for me: a chair, a computer, an empty pen holder.

Mister Delmas pointed at the screen.

"You'll find everything you need on the shared drive. And if you struggle, ask Clara, the lawyer from the department next door. She's nicer than me."

He paused, then added, lower:

"No, I'm joking. She used to be in the department. She knows your future tasks very well and she's better at explaining things than some people here. Also, she likes newcomers."

"Okay, sir."

He patted my shoulder.

"Welcome to the jungle, Elliott."

And he left.

I sat down.

The screen lit up. Blue wallpaper.

I was crossed by a strange impression: being in an improved version of high school, except with people paid to pretend they liked it.

Clara greeted me as she passed.

"Hey! Hi, little new guy! If you want water, the fountain is on the left. And if you want gossip, I provide that too."

I laughed softly.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

"Careful, I remember promises."

She left again, her skirt swinging with an almost musical rhythm in the corridor. The atmosphere wasn't hostile, in the end.

Just... foreign.

At noon, everyone disappeared all at once. The silence of the office swallowed me.

I hesitated to go out to eat, then preferred to stay. I opened my Tupperware, cold pasta with butter, salted, obviously, and opened an Excel file to pretend I was absorbed.

Outside, the reflection of the bay window sent back my silhouette, tiny, sitting in the middle of an office too big for me. I saw myself, head bent, shoulders hunched.

An image of a man who erases himself well.

I pushed my Tupperware away.

I thought of university, of Aicha's laugh, of the strawberry candy. I imagined she was probably already laughing with others. I was here, calculating numbers that didn't make sense yet.

The afternoon continued in slow motion. Files, numbers, ordinary sentences.

At 5 p.m., I closed my computer. The offices were already emptying.

On the way down, I crossed paths with Clara again.

"You survived your first day?"

"Apparently, yes."

"Perfect. If you need advice, come see me. But not for work, okay. For the vending machine cakes."

"Noted."

I smiled, sincerely this time. Then I went outside.

Out there, the late-afternoon light was falling on the windows. Each facade sent back a piece of sky. I saw myself in them again.

Same posture, same evasive gaze.

But there was this tiny difference: in the reflection, I was moving forward.

Maybe that was enough, for today.

The bus back was almost empty. I took the same seat, window side. The taste of strawberry came back to my mouth, a phantom memory of the candy. The bus rolled through the slanting light. Outside, the shop windows became mirrors.

Every time I passed in front of one, my face split, melted, disappeared.

It was strange, but not painful.

As if I were still a draft.

That evening, in my studio, I turned on the desk lamp. The walls were bare, a little too white.

No snack today. Well, I could have, technically. But I didn't feel like it. And then I was already hungry enough to make myself a real meal.

Today, it will be...

I opened the fridge and stood planted in front of it, staring at its contents as if a brilliant idea might spring out of a plain yogurt.

Spoiler: no.

Actually, my fridge mostly looked like the endgame of culinary Tetris.

Milk, syrup... and leftovers. There was a bowl of old rice left, two eggs, a slightly soft zucchini, and a half-empty bag of grated cheese.

Not exactly the banquet of the century.

But well...

With enough hunger, and a minimum of imagination, you can work miracles with next to nothing.

Today's recipe will be...

CRISPY FRIED RICE WITH EGGS AND ZUCCHINI

A perfect dish for using up leftover cooked rice. Simple, quick, and surprisingly flavorful, this fried rice combines basic ingredients to create a comforting meal, with crispy bits and melted cheese.

Prep time

10 minutes

Cook time

10 minutes

Ingredients (serves 1)

1 bowl of cooked rice (cold)
2 eggs
1 zucchini
1 lemon
1 handful of grated cheese
1 tablespoon of oil or butter
Salt
Pepper

(optional) 1 clove of garlic or a little onion

(optional) a dash of soy sauce or a pinch of paprika

Preparation

Dice the zucchini into small cubes or grate it coarsely.

In a large skillet, heat the oil or butter. Add the zucchini and sauté for 3 to 4 minutes until it begins to soften and release some of its moisture.

Then add the cold rice to the pan. Separate the grains with a spatula and let it cook for a few minutes until it begins to brown.

Make a small space in the center of the pan and crack the eggs into it. Scramble them lightly before mixing them into the rice.

Add the grated cheese and stir. Let it melt and brown slightly in places.

Remove from the heat, add a little lemon zest and a few drops of juice.

Season with salt and pepper and adjust the seasoning.

Tip

For an even better result, let the rice cook for a minute or two without stirring to form a crispy crust at the bottom of the pan.

When my magnificent dish was ready, I sat down without turning on the TV. Just with the lamp, the distant noise of the street, and that slightly empty tiredness that follows days when you tried to be normal as best you could.

It was good.

Really good.

Worthy of a cooking competition.

And for tonight, that was already exceptional.

I took my shower. Hot water ran over my skin, and my shoulders finally relaxed. Then, facing the fogged bathroom mirror, my reflection blurred until it became a small ghost.

I wiped it with the flat of my hand, slowly.

Behind the fog, my face didn't reappear clearly.

It was just still blurry.

Obviously.

As I slipped into bed, I thought back to that week. To the laughter in the lecture hall. To Aïcha's hand placing the candy on the table. To the way she had said to me:

"You're bad at lying."

I remembered her gaze, clear, without judgment. Maybe there were people who didn't try to repair, or hurt.

Just to see.

In the silence, the noise of the city rocked me. Cars, a dog in the distance, footsteps in the hall.

The world kept going, and me with it. Not forward, not yet, but... not completely at the edge anymore.

I closed my eyes.

And I had this tiny thought, a little stupid:

Maybe next time, I could tell her yes.

Chapter 3

Joint Meeting

The email arrived at 9:12 a.m.

“Subject: Interdepartmental Meeting - Concavenator Room”

I read it three times before understanding that I was really invited.

Well... summoned.

The exact word was invited, but when a finance director writes to you, it is never an invitation in the warm sense of the term. It's more like a polite summons.

I looked around me, as if someone was going to raise a hand and say it was a mistake.

No one.

Clara was typing on her keyboard while chewing gum with the concentration of a surgeon. Mister Delmas was talking on the phone behind the glass partition of his office. In the open space, the sound of keyboards was like steady rain.

No one seemed to wonder why a work-study student who didn't even know where the coffee machine was yet had to attend an interdepartmental meeting.

I leaned toward Clara.

“Uh... excuse me.”

She looked up.

“Yes, little new guy?”

“Is it normal that I'm... invited to this?”

I showed her the email.

She narrowed her eyes, then shrugged.

“Yes. Well, I think so. Let's say Pascal likes people to understand how everything works.”

She chewed her gum for two more seconds.

“And it's good experience. You'll see some interesting people, and others much less so.”

I couldn't tell if that was supposed to reassure me.

I went to the meeting room. It had that strange shape that made it feel like you were entering something alive, or at least a place designed for something other than me.

A large rectangular table took up almost the whole length, and the chairs arranged on each side formed two neat, parallel rows.

It was the kind of place where every word seemed like it had to cost something.

When I walked in, I immediately had that familiar sensation: being one too many, as if the room worked perfectly well without me.

I pulled out a chair at the end of the table. The wood creaked louder than expected.

Perfect.

I had just announced my presence to the entire world.

I placed my notebook in front of me so I'd have something to look at if panic decided to come back.

And it didn't take long.

Mister Delmas came in just after.

“Ah, Elliott. Good.”

He settled at the head of the table with the ease of someone who had already done this kind of meeting about a thousand times.

“You okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Perfect.”

He opened his computer.

“Today, we’ll keep it simple. Quick presentation of the quarter’s figures and coordination with the other departments.”

Simple.

Of course.

The words presentation and coordination made me want to evaporate into the floor.

The door opened again. The heels came before the person. A sharp sound, steady, sure of itself.

When I looked up, I understood.

Lyralda.

I didn’t know much about her yet. Just what I had caught from passing her in the corridor: straight posture, direct gaze, and a way of walking that gave the impression she knew exactly where she was going.

Today, she was wearing a dark suit and a light shirt. Her hair was tied in a high ponytail, perfectly smooth.

She stopped near the table.

Her eyes swept the room for one second.

When they passed over me, they stopped for barely a heartbeat.

No more.

“Hello.”

Her voice was calm, clear.

She sat down two seats away.

And suddenly, the room seemed a little smaller.

The third arrival was... different.

“Ooh! We have an audience today?”

The voice was soft, almost amused.

I turned my head.

Jade.

I had seen her once in the corridor, but up close, it was... something else.

Wavy hair, flawless makeup, fitted dress, sweet perfume floating lightly in the air. She sat down across from me with a half-smile that looked like a permanent question.

Then she looked at me. Not meanly.

But as if she were trying to understand what kind of object I was.

“That’s your new work-study student?” she asked Mister Delmas.

“Yes.”

She crossed her arms before fixing her eyes on me.

A little longer than necessary.

Not meanly.

More like she was waiting to see what I was going to do.

The door opened a fourth time.

“So then, who has already decided to ruin my day?”

The man who came in seemed to carry the energy of an entire evening inside a three-piece suit. Tall, elegant, easy smile.

He gave the table a quick look.

“Pascal.”

“Mehdi.”

They shook hands.
Then his gaze landed on me.
“Wow.”
He tilted his head.
“And this? What’s this?”
I straightened up.
“Elliott... Bellamy.”
“Nice to meet you, Elliott!”
He shook my hand with surprising warmth.
“Mehdi Khellaf. Sales director for eight years. Also, the person supposed to explain why salespeople are always doing whatever they want.”
Jade rolled her eyes.
“Is that your official speech now?”
“No, my official speech is much more... dramatic.”
He sat down.
“But I save it for when the numbers are really bad.”
The meeting began. Mister Delmas projected an Excel table onto the screen. Columns. Numbers. Percentages.
I tried to follow.
Really.
But very quickly, the lines started mixing together in my head.
Mister Delmas talked about margins. Mehdi mentioned contracts. Jade commented on certain sales. Lyralda sometimes intervened about legal clauses. Everyone seemed to understand.
I was looking at my notebook as if I hoped the figures would eventually translate themselves into French.
I wrote down words.
“variation”
“budget”
“anomaly”
“failure”
No idea what they meant in that precise context.
I could feel heat rising in my neck. It was exactly the kind of moment where my brain decides to remind me that I am probably an administrative mistake.
And then Jade spoke.
She was looking at the screen.
Then she looked at Mister Delmas.
Then she looked at... me.
Her smile changed slightly.
“Honestly...”
Pause.
“Isn’t it a little early to entrust that to an intern?”
The word fell into the room like a glass dropped on tiles.
Intern? Me??
I froze.
No one spoke for one second.
A very long second.
My first reflex was to look at my notebook, as if I had suddenly become passionate about the word “variation.”
I felt her gaze stay on me.

Not insistent, just... present.

And then another voice spoke.

Calm, but clear.

"Better someone who is learning..."

I looked up.

Lyralda.

She was looking at Jade.

Then, very briefly... me.

As if to check something.

"... than a salesperson who doesn't know how to read."

Ah.

Silence.

Total.

Even the screen fans seemed to have stopped.

Jade blinked.

"Excuse me??"

Lyralda didn't move.

"Last week's contract. You signed it before checking the clauses."

Jade opened her mouth.

"That was..."

"A mistake."

Her voice hadn't changed.

"It happens. But avoid giving lessons while you're still making them."

The tension in the room had become... almost solid.

I thought that if someone put a match on the table, everything could explode.

I looked at my reflection in the window behind Mister Delmas. I looked exactly like someone who wanted to disappear under the table.

And then Mehdi raised his hands.

"Right."

He sighed theatrically.

"If you're already starting, I'm warning you: I'm buying a ticket to Thailand."

Everyone turned toward him.

"Seriously, I'm opening a coconut stand on the beach and sending you postcards."

He turned toward me.

"Eliott, you want to come? We're looking for someone to handle the cash register."

"Uh... I don't like cash registers."

"No problem, given the atmosphere here, it's clearly the healthiest option. We'll have a great time."

A nervous laugh crossed the room.

Even Mister Delmas sketched a smile.

The tension dropped a notch.

I breathed. Just a little.

The silence after Mehdi's joke was more breathable. Not really relaxed, but breathable. Like when a window opens in a room that's too hot.

Jade let out a small laugh.

Not a real laugh. More the laugh of someone deciding to put the conversation back in her pocket.

"Very funny, Mehdi."

She adjusted a strand of hair behind her ear.

"But I stand by it. Entrusting this kind of data to someone who just arrived... it's a bit optimistic."

She tapped the table with the tip of her nail.

"No offense to the... intern."

I focused very hard on my pen.

A pen was fascinating.

Simple object. Doesn't speak. Doesn't make mistakes. Doesn't sweat when people look at it.

I would have liked to be a pen.

Mister Delmas closed his computer with a calm movement.

"Eliott is here to learn."

His voice wasn't harsh.

But it had that very particular tone of people who don't negotiate.

"And he'll learn faster by seeing how things work."

Jade lifted one shoulder.

"If you say so."

She leaned back in her chair.

Her gaze slid toward me for one second.

Not hostile.

But... curious?

As if she were testing the solidity of a fragile object.

I suddenly became very aware of my size, of my shoulders too narrow, of my hands resting too obediently on the notebook.

The meeting resumed. The numbers started scrolling across the screen again.

I wrote down pieces. Isolated words. Things I half understood. Lyralda spoke little, but when she spoke, the room reorganized itself around her voice, even though it wasn't louder than anyone else's.

She corrected a phrasing, reminded someone of a clause, asked a simple question that forced everyone to check.

I tried to follow.

Really.

But sometimes, I got lost.

So I looked at my notes, or at the table.

Lyralda barely moved. She stayed straight, hands resting on the table, eyes fixed on whoever was speaking.

She looked... solid.

And I had this strange impression... that she had noticed I wasn't.

I don't know how else to explain it.

Solid, like a person who isn't afraid to exist in a room.

I looked blurry, as if the light didn't quite know what to do with me.

"Eliott?"

I jumped. Everyone was looking at me.

My brain took one second to restart.

"Yes?"

It was Mister Delmas.

"Did you follow the part about reconciliations?"

I felt my heart do a small somersault.

"Obviously."

It wasn't a total lie.

I had followed... the words. Not necessarily their exact meaning. But I had followed.

Mister Delmas nodded.

“Good.”

He turned toward Mehdi.

“So, to summarize...”

The conversation started again.

But the heat in my neck stayed.

Toward the end of the meeting, Jade started again. Not directly. More subtly.

“Anyway, we’ll see.”

She crossed her arms.

“If the intern can handle it.”

She looked at me with that half-smile.

“Accounting isn’t always very... gentle.”

I didn’t know what to answer.

Luckily, someone else spoke before me.

“Jade...”

Lyralda’s voice was calm.

But different from earlier.

“Can you stop for two minutes, please?”

Jade raised an eyebrow.

“Stop what?”

“Testing the new guy.”

Silence.

Mehdi was watching the scene with far too much visible interest to be innocent.

“He’s a work-study student and he just arrived. Not a punching bag. And not an intern.”

Jade held her gaze.

One second.

Two.

Then she sighed.

“Very well, ma’am.”

She raised her hands.

“I’ll be quiet.”

Mehdi murmured, loud enough to be heard:

“Economic miracle.”

I think Mister Delmas almost laughed.

The meeting ended ten minutes later. Computers closed. Chairs slid across the floor. The strange electricity in the room slowly dissipated.

Mehdi stood up.

“Right.”

He looked at the table.

“No one died. That’s already a success.”

He tapped Mister Delmas on the shoulder.

“We’ll have lunch one of these days.”

Then he turned toward me.

“Eliott.”

I looked up.

“If one day you really want to leave accounting to sell coconuts, call me.”

“Okay.”

"I'm very serious."

He winked at me, then left.

Jade stood up in turn, then picked up her phone.

Before leaving, she stopped behind my chair.

"Don't take it badly, Elliott."

Her voice was softer.

She pronounced my first name with a little too much visible care.

"It's just that here... you need to have a bit of character, okay?"

She leaned slightly.

Her perfume was sweet.

"We'll talk again later today, Elliott."

She didn't wait for an answer.

Then she left. Her heels disappeared down the corridor.

Only Mister Delmas, Lyralda, and I were left.

I packed away my notebook slowly, as if that might make me invisible.

Lyralda stood up before throwing one last look at the table.

Then at me.

Her eyes were hard to read.

"Have a good day, Elliott."

The same tone as earlier.

Calm. Clean. Almost too careful.

"Have a good day, Lyralda."

She left.

The door closed behind her.

Mister Delmas waited one second, then sighed.

"Right."

He closed his computer.

"You survived."

I think I smiled.

"Yes."

"First meeting?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"It showed."

He stood up.

"Don't worry too much."

He placed a quick hand on my shoulder.

"They're like cat and dog. It's been going on for five years."

"Are they always like that?"

Mister Delmas thought for a second.

Then he smiled.

"No."

Pause.

"Sometimes it's worse."

I think I laughed.

A real laugh, this time.

"Go on, get back to work."

He opened the door.

"And don't pay too much attention to the jabs."

He looked at me one second longer.

“You’ll see. They both have quite a character.”

Then he left.

I stayed alone in the room for a few seconds before taking out my phone.

I looked at myself.

Still that same face, a little too serious.

But something had changed. Not much. Just a detail.

In the reflection, I looked... a little more anchored than I wanted to admit.

Jade was annoying. Really.

And yet... I wasn’t completely sure I wanted her to stop.

Lyralda was cold. Clear. Almost sharp.

And yet... she was the one I had looked at when the room had become too heavy.

I didn’t really know what that said about me.

But I could already feel it was going to be complicated.

Chapter 4

Group Work

Group work always starts with a very simple sentence.

A sentence that looks like nothing. An administrative sentence, often full of goodwill, and which usually ends up complicating far too many things.

"Today, you're going to do a cross-program exercise. To work on your adaptability."

I already didn't like that word.

Adaptability.

It sounded like an elegant way of saying: you're going to have to talk to people.

He continued:

"You'll be in mixed groups. Two CCA students, and you'll work with one marketing student, one human resources student, and one sales student."

A murmur passed through the lecture hall.

The professor added:

"It's exactly like in a company! You never work only with finance people. You've already started your company induction, haven't you?"

Aïcha turned toward me.

"If we're together, it's going to be funny."

"You're optimistic."

"Always."

She had that smile that makes it feel like everything is going to be fine. Not because the situation is simple, but because she has decided it will be.

The professor started assigning the groups.

When he read our names, Aïcha raised her hand.

"Present!"

Then she looked at me.

"We're together."

I think my heart made a small stupid movement.

"Yes."

She grabbed her bag.

"Come on, let's go."

We changed rooms for the tutorial class. The tables had been pushed together into a rectangle. Groups were forming, chairs sliding, voices tangling together.

Ours was at the back, near a window.

There were already three people.

A boy with an open shirt over a white T-shirt, his hair styled like someone who knows exactly how it's supposed to fall. Next to him, a brunette girl with a very confident smile. And another boy, a little calmer, spinning a pen between his fingers.

Aïcha lit up.

"Ah! You're here."

The brunette girl stood up.

"Aïcha!"

They gave each other a quick little hug.

"It's been so long."

"Three days."

"That's long."

The boy in the shirt laughed.

"She always exaggerates."

Aïcha turned toward me.

“Eliott, this is Sarah.”

Sarah shook my hand.

“Hi Eliott, I’m in HR.”

“Eliott.”

“Finance like Aïcha?”

“Yes.”

The boy in the shirt added:

“Karim. Sales.”

Energetic handshake.

“And that’s Lucas, marketing.”

Lucas raised his hand.

“Hi.”

All of it happened very fast.

Aïcha talked with them as if she saw them every day.

“You’ve been together since the beginning of the semester?”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “We’re surviving.”

Karim pointed at Eliott with his chin.

“And he’s your sidekick?”

Aïcha smiled.

“Yes!”

“You work together often?”

“We try.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a joke.

Karim pulled out a chair.

“Right, sit down.”

I sat down.

The conversation kept going around me, fast, easy, like a radio that had already been on for a long time.

Aïcha was laughing. She was laughing a lot. I hadn’t seen her like that yet.

Not with me.

With me, she laughed too. But more softly.

Here, it was different.

Bigger. Louder. More... natural?

I wondered if I made her calmer. Or if they made her more alive.

The professor handed out the exercise.

“You need to analyze the situation of a fictional company and propose a complete strategy adapted to the difficulties you identify. Finance, marketing, HR, and sales.”

Karim grabbed the sheet.

“Right. We split the roles.”

He looked at Aïcha and me.

“You two, the numbers.”

Aïcha raised her hands.

“We accept this heavy responsibility.”

Karim laughed.

“I hope so.”

Sarah leaned toward me.

“Are you the silent type or is that just today?”

I think I blinked.

“A bit of both.”

Karim added:

“He does talk, though?”

Aïcha gave the table a little elbow nudge.

“Yes, he talks. Sometimes.”

Everyone laughed. Me too. A little.

I didn’t know exactly why.

Lucas was leafing through the pages.

“Okay, we have three hours.”

Karim leaned back.

“Plenty.”

Sarah looked at Aïcha.

“Are you two together?”

The silence lasted one second.

Aïcha laughed.

“What?”

“I’m asking.”

“No, why?”

She pointed toward me.

“He’s my classmate.”

Karim added:

“Ah.”

He looked at me.

I didn’t know why, before trying to answer.

“Yes.”

Then the discussions started again.

Marketing. Budget. Recruitment.

I took notes.

Sometimes, someone spoke very fast.

Sometimes, everyone spoke at the same time.

I felt a little like someone sitting at a table where the game had started before he arrived.

My phone vibrated. A message.

Jade?

She had asked for my number, but I didn’t think she would write to me.

“Jade: So, little finance guy, how’s university? Bored?”

I looked around. No one was paying attention.

“Eliott: Cross-program tutorial class”

“Jade: That explains why you’re answering me, actually no, help them a little”

“Eliott: I am helping them, but it’s not easy”

“Jade: You’re with funny little people? I don’t miss university”

“Eliott: I can’t wait to miss it...”

“Jade: Give me the details”

“Eliott: They talk fast.”

“Jade: Any pretty girls? Flirt, big guy, it’ll keep you busy”

“Eliott: ...”

“Jade: Are you still alive?”

“Eliott: I’m at university to work, and I should get back to it”

“Jade: Good luck Mister Intern, don’t forget to enjoy it, and write down the gossip for me”

I think I smiled.

I looked up. Karim was explaining something to Lucas while drawing a diagram on the sheet. Aïcha was talking with Sarah. She had her elbow on the table. She was laughing again.

I didn't know if I was really part of the conversation.

"Should we take a break?" Karim said after a while.

Sarah agreed.

"Yes."

Aïcha turned toward me.

"Want to go out?"

"Okay."

We crossed the building.

The courtyard was full of students.

The sun had that mid-afternoon light that makes it feel like the day has already lived through something.

"You okay?" Aïcha asked.

"Yes."

"You're lying."

I think I laughed.

"Maybe."

She shrugged.

"They're loud."

"A little."

"But they're nice."

"I don't doubt it."

She looked at me for one second.

"You know, they ask questions to everyone."

"I imagine."

We spotted Nawal and Youssef near a bench.

"Hey!" Aïcha said.

Nawal raised her hand.

"Survivors of the tutorial?"

"Barely."

We talked for a few minutes.

Simple things.

"Who are you with?"

"People we vaguely know."

"Good luck."

Youssef looked at Elliott.

"Are they annoying?"

"No, it's fine, we're trying to finish quickly."

He nodded.

"Good strategy."

Aïcha leaned against the wall beside me.

Very close. Not on purpose. Or maybe a little.

I could feel her shoulder against mine.

"We should get back to work," Nawal said.

"Ah yes... can't wait for the end."

They left.

The silence stayed for a few seconds.

Aïcha looked at me.

"You're very quiet today."

"That's my normal mode."

"If you say so..."

She moved a little closer again.

"But we know each other by now."

That sentence did something strange in my chest.

Then someone shouted in the courtyard.

"Aïcha!"

Karim.

"We're starting again!"

She rolled her eyes.

"We're coming!"

We went back into the room. The group had already returned to the discussions. Karim was talking about sales strategy, Sarah was writing things down, and Lucas was doing marketing calculations.

I dove back into the numbers.

At one point, Karim said:

"Hey, Aïcha, your finance partner still isn't saying anything."

She replied:

"He's thinking."

Karim laughed.

"Intensely?"

"They're numbers, not pretty talk for decoration."

I didn't know if it was a defense or a joke.

Probably both.

The work continued.

Then a second break settled in almost naturally.

Sarah went out to make a phone call. Karim left to get coffee, and Lucas was talking with another group.

Aïcha turned toward me.

"Come."

"Where?"

"Come."

We left the room.

The building was quieter on this side.

Aïcha stopped in front of a vending machine.

She slipped in some coins.

The machine started making that very serious noise of instant drinks, then she handed me the cup.

"Here, gift."

"Thanks."

"It's a social investment."

"I'm honored."

She smiled.

Then the silence came back.

We were alone in the corridor.

The kind of silence that isn't empty.

She leaned against the wall across from me.

"You don't really like this kind of group."

It wasn't a question.

“Not really.”

“I know.”

She looked at her cup.

“They can be a little... a lot.”

“Yes.”

“But they’re not mean.”

“I know.”

She lifted her eyes to mine.

“You know, I’m not making fun of you.”

“I know.”

It was true.

And yet, something had stung a little.

But there, in that quiet corridor, it was easier to forget.

She came one step closer, very simply, very naturally.

“I’m glad you came into my group.”

“We were already in the same one.”

“Not wrong...”

She lifted her cup.

“But still.”

Our hands brushed.

It was stupid. But my heart sped up.

She noticed.

I think.

Because she smiled...

Not the big smile from earlier.

A smaller one. Closer. More intimate.

“You see,” she said.

“What?”

“We’re doing well.”

I looked at my cup.

Then at her.

Then at the corridor.

“Yes.”

And for one second, everything seemed simple.

I told myself that maybe I had imagined some things in the room. That the remarks weren’t so serious. That people were just loud. That maybe I was the problem.

And strangely, that idea didn’t hurt so much.

Because despite all that... with Aïcha, things were going well.

Chapter 5

Office Scenes

The problem with Excel is that it never panics.

I do.

The sheet in front of me was full of perfectly aligned numbers, like a miniature army ready to march on my brain.

Columns, rows, totals, mysterious formulas.

I felt like I was facing a puzzle designed by someone who deeply hated human beings.

I reread the same line for the fifth time.

Still incomprehensible.

I knew the logic existed. The people around me seemed to understand it perfectly well. But in my head, the numbers made a strange noise, like marbles being shaken in a jar.

I tried a formula.

Excel answered me with #VALUE!

I stared at it for a few seconds.

“Okay.”

I don’t know why I spoke to the screen. Maybe because it was the only thing in the room that didn’t risk judging me.

In the open space, keyboards clicked with an almost musical regularity, murmurs passed between desks, and a coffee machine hissed in the distance. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing.

I was stuck between two columns that refused to add up.

I glanced discreetly around me.

Clara was talking to someone near the photocopier. Or maybe to the photocopier itself, I couldn’t really tell.

Mister Delmas was shut inside his office.

The other accountants were working with that calm concentration of people who have already survived several year-end closings.

No one was paying attention to me.

And yet, I felt like an impostor sitting in an ergonomic chair far too comfortable for him.

I dove back into the file.

Maybe if I stared at the numbers long enough, they would eventually turn into words.

Ten minutes later, I still hadn’t understood why one cell stubbornly refused to behave correctly.

I rubbed my eyes before sighing.

Then I tried another formula.

Excel replied with #REF!

“Great.”

I put my hands on the keyboard.

There was probably a video somewhere on the internet. Someone had surely already lived through this exact moment: a work-study student lost in an accounting file far too big for him.

I was starting to type “Excel bank reconciliation error” into the search bar when a voice spoke behind me:

“Are you sure typing random things is going to help?”

I jumped.

Really.

The kind of ridiculous little jump you immediately try to turn into a natural movement.

I turned around.

Lyralda was standing behind my desk.

I hadn't heard her arrive.

Her arms were crossed, and there was a discreet smile, almost mocking, at the corner of her lips. The kind of smile that doesn't really say you're doing nonsense, but thinks it with a certain elegance.

"Uh..."

I looked at my screen.

"I considered it."

She leaned slightly toward the screen. Her hair almost brushed my shoulder, and I immediately became far too aware of the exact distance between us for someone who was supposed to simply be failing an Excel formula.

"What exactly are you doing?"

"I'm... reconciling the entries."

I think it sounded a little like a confession.

She looked at the Excel sheet. Her eyes moved over the columns with unsettling speed.

Then she pointed to a cell.

"There."

I blinked.

"Sorry?"

"Your formula."

She tapped the screen with her finger.

"It's taking the wrong column."

I leaned in too.

Indeed.

Column F.

Not G.

"Ah."

"It's a classic trap."

She straightened up.

"Excel loves that."

I think I smiled despite myself.

"Thank you."

She lifted one shoulder.

"You're welcome, Elliott."

Then she added, with that same half-smile:

"But randomly typing things remains a solid option."

I opened my mouth.

I didn't know what to answer.

She leaned lightly against the edge of the desk, as if she had decided that my morning face still deserved two more minutes of her time.

"Is this your first reconciliation?"

"Yes."

"Normal, then."

She was still looking at the screen.

"Accounting is mostly a lot of small things that seem logical when someone explains them to you."

Pause.

"And completely absurd when you're alone in front of the file."

"That explains a lot of things. You seem to know your way around accounting."

She let out a small breath that almost sounded like a laugh.

"Let's say yes. You know what?"

She leaned in again and changed the formula in two quick clicks.

The cell filled in.

The numbers aligned.

Magic.

"There."

I looked at her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Elliott."

She observed me for one second.

Not like Jade. Not like someone testing an object.

More like someone trying to understand how a strange mechanism works.

"You panic quickly, don't you?"

I straightened up.

"No."

Pause.

"Well... a little."

She raised an eyebrow.

"It showed in the meeting."

The heat immediately rose again in my neck.

"Sorry."

"Why?"

I looked at her.

"I don't know."

She thought for a second.

"Bad habit."

"Probably."

She nodded.

Then she looked back at my screen.

"Keep going like that."

Pause.

"And avoid believing that everyone understands numbers immediately."

"You do."

She gave me an amused look.

"No."

Silence.

"I just learned to pretend faster."

I think it was the first time I had seen her smile openly.

Not enough to change the order of the world, but enough to soften something in her face.

I dove back into the file.

The numbers suddenly seemed a little less hostile.

Maybe because someone had just confirmed that it wasn't only me.

Lyralda was still behind me.

I could feel her presence, calm, attentive.

Not invasive. Just... there.

And it was strange how simply knowing she was still there made everything a little less difficult.

She watched my screen for a few more seconds.

Then she said:

“Right.”

I turned toward her.

“I’ll leave you to it.”

She straightened up.

“Otherwise you’ll never learn.”

“Okay.”

She took a few steps.

Then she stopped.

“Eliott.”

“Yes?”

“If you’re really stuck...”

She pointed to the corridor behind her.

“My office is over there.”

Pause.

“But avoid arriving with a completely broken file.”

I think I laughed.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Perfect.”

She went back to her office.

I watched her walk away, with that stride still so sure of itself.

In the window in front of me, my reflection was still looking at me.

Same shirt. Same posture.

But something had changed.

I looked... a little less lost. And rather pleased.

I dove back into Excel.

For a few minutes, the numbers started making a bit more sense, until my computer made a small ding.

“Subject: RE: reconciliations”

My stomach tightened slightly.

I opened the message.

“Don’t waste my time with this, it’s your job.”

I stayed still.

The cursor blinked in the middle of the screen.

One second.

Two seconds.

I reread it.

Then a second time.

As if, in the meantime, the words would rearrange themselves on their own and become kind.

They did not make that effort.

Don’t waste my time...

The most impressive thing about that kind of sentence is its ability to make noise without producing a sound.

The whole office kept turning normally around me. Keyboards clicked, a chair rolled somewhere, Clara laughed in the distance with someone, a light laugh, without drama, without Excel. Even the water dispenser gurgled as if nothing had happened.

And me, in the middle of all that, I felt like someone had just poured a glass of cold water over my stomach.

I looked at the sender, just in case.

“Jade Delphine”

Right.

The mystery wasn’t going to last very long.

My first reflex was to check the file.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe I really had missed something.

Maybe I had sent an absurd document, with formulas pointing toward another dimension.

I reopened the attachments.

Line by line. Column by column.

My eyes slid over the numbers without really reading them. I could already feel the panic coming back, that fast, stupid rise that makes you believe everything you touch is burning when really there’s only one bad email.

But my brain has never been very good at dosing things.

I clicked on the previous message in the thread.

A simple technical exchange, a question about a difference between two amounts, nothing apocalyptic.

I had asked for clarification. Politely.

With a “hello” and a “thanks in advance,” like someone trying to deserve the oxygen he consumes.

Her reply, clearly, didn’t need politeness to breathe.

I passed a hand over my face.

I lowered my eyes.

Not now. Not for an email.

I tried to type a reply.

“Hello Jade, I simply wanted...”

I deleted it.

Too soft.

I started again.

“Hello, I don’t think I...”

I deleted it again.

Too defensive.

In the end, I let the cursor blink into the void before standing up to get a glass of water.

Sometimes moving gives the impression that you’re acting on the problem. Even when you’re only moving your panicked body toward a water dispenser.

The open space was calm, in that kind of late-morning torpor where people talk less and sigh more. Clara wasn’t there anymore. The corridor toward the legal department was almost empty.

Passing in front of the bay window, I caught sight of my reflection superimposed over the office behind me.

For one second, I looked like I was already in my place. Shirt, badge, glass in hand, silhouette inside a clean setting.

If you looked quickly.

Very quickly.

With a little kindness in your eyes.

Then Jade's email came back to me, and the illusion came apart like badly assembled furniture.

Maybe I should just go ask her, or send her a message.

Well, I don't know.

I went to pour myself some water.

Cold.

Perfect.

It didn't solve much, but at least I avoided answering her message under pressure, which was already a good thing.

When I turned around, Lyralda was there.

Not right behind me, thankfully. I probably would have spilled the glass onto the carpet.

She was coming out of her office with a file in her hand.

She looked at me for one second. Then her eyes slid toward my screen, still lit on my desk, visible from here at an angle, before coming back to me.

"You look like a guy who's just been told his goldfish is asking for a divorce."

I laughed a little despite myself.

"That's precise."

"I observe a lot."

She took a few steps toward the dispenser, her file still against her, before leaning slightly to be at my height.

"What is it, Eliott?"

I hadn't planned to answer honestly. My natural reflex is more: "nothing, everything's fine, I love suffering in silence." But her tone didn't really invite lying. Or rather, it made lying useless.

I hesitated.

"Jade replied to me."

"Ah."

Her ah already contained far too much understanding for such a small sound.

"And?"

I lifted one shoulder.

"Let's say she didn't find my question very enriching on a human level."

Lyralda waited.

I think she knew I was going to talk.

Because people like me, once we start, we often end up saying everything in one block, just so we don't have to start again.

"I asked her for clarification about a discrepancy. I must have phrased it badly. Well, I don't know. Maybe it was obvious. In any case, her reply was a bit..."

I stopped.

"A bit what?"

I looked at her.

"Mean...?"

She almost smiled.

"Mean? That's cute."

I lowered my eyes to my glass.

The worst part is that said like that, in her mouth, I almost sounded like a child complaining that someone had spoken badly to him in the schoolyard.

"I don't want to make a drama out of it."

"Then don't make a drama out of it."

I looked at her again.

It was said simply. Not to minimize it. Just like a fact.

"Is she like that with everyone?" I asked.

Lyralda tilted her head slightly.

"No."

Small silence.

"With some people, she makes an effort."

"Ah."

I don't know why her answer stung. Probably because it meant: so not with me. Which wasn't exactly a surprise, but surprises hurt even when you expect them.

Lyralda saw something pass over my face, I think. She continued, more calmly:

"That doesn't mean the problem comes from you."

I said nothing.

Because when someone says that, part of my brain always answers: that's kind, but statistically, there's still a strong chance.

She adjusted the file against herself.

"What did you send her?"

"A question about a calculation line."

"And she answered as if you had insulted her bloodline?"

I almost smiled.

"No, not quite."

Lyralda sighed. Not loudly. It wasn't a sigh of annoyance at me, more the sigh of a woman watching a show she has already seen.

"Show me."

We went back to my desk.

I sat down a little too fast. She stayed standing behind me, like earlier, except this time it wasn't Excel humiliating me, it was my own inability to handle an email without dissolving internally.

I opened the conversation.

She read.

Her face barely changed. Maybe that's her strength: she doesn't overplay anything.

"Classy," she said.

"Is that ironic?"

"What do you think?"

I looked at my hands.

"What do I reply?"

"First, you're going to stop trembling like that."

I froze.

"I'm not trembling."

"Yes."

Pause.

"A little."

I hated myself for about a second and a half.

Then she leaned in and placed one finger on the screen, just under Jade's email.

The tip of her finger was so close to my hand that it took me an absurd amount of energy to keep breathing normally.

"Simple answer. Professional. No useless apologies, no inner novel."

"I don't do inner novels."

She gave me a sideways look.

"Of course you do."

I closed my mouth. She was right, which was irritating but not surprising.

"Write."

I put my hands on the keyboard.

"What?"

She dictated, in a neutral tone:

"Hello Jade,"

I typed.

"I was simply asking you to confirm the source of the discrepancy so I can correct the file properly."

I typed.

"Thank you for your reply. I'll take care of it."

I reread it.

It was... dry, but not aggressive, solid. The kind of message that stands upright without emotional crutches.

"That's all?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Isn't it a bit cold?"

She lifted one shoulder.

"Why? She didn't send you a poem either."

I gave a brief laugh.

Brief, but real.

"Send it."

"Now?"

"No, in six months, framed in your living room."

I clicked send.

The email left.

I stared at the screen as if an explosion would follow.

Nothing.

The world didn't move. Excel didn't catch fire. Mister Delmas didn't come out of his office screaming. Clara didn't burst out of a cupboard to tell me I had just ruined the fragile balance of the company.

Just... nothing.

It was almost vexing, all that inner cinema for so few special effects.

Lyralda straightened up.

"There."

"There," I repeated.

"You'll survive."

I turned my head slightly toward her.

"You say that as if you're sure."

She crossed her arms.

"I'm a lawyer. I'm paid to imagine the worst."

"That's reassuring."

"And despite that, I'm telling you that you'll survive."

Small silence.

Then she added:

"Besides, Jade barks more than she bites."

I thought of her email.

"I hope she doesn't have access to dogs."

Lyralda really smiled this time. Very slightly, but enough to change her whole face. It was strange, with her, a smile.

Not because it was rare in the dramatic sense of the term.

More because it always seemed to come from somewhere she didn't easily let people see.

And when it appeared, I had the strange impression that I had done something right.

"Go back to your calculation nonsense, Elliott."

I lowered my eyes to the screen.

"Yes, ma'am."

She started to leave, then stopped for one second.

"And by the way."

I looked at her.

"You were right to ask the question."

I felt something move in my chest. Not huge. Just a small displacement. A screw being tightened somewhere in a machine too fragile.

"Thank you."

She nodded and went back to her office.

I reopened the file.

The numbers were still there, of course. True to themselves. A little dry, a little cold, a little convinced they were right.

But I had changed by one millimeter.

Which, on my scale, already represents an administrative revolution.

I got back to work.

Cell G was responding better. The calculation line had found its logic again. The email sent to Jade was floating somewhere in the company network, cold and clean like a hospital corridor, and it made me feel strangely good.

No victory.

Just the absence of collapse.

I'll take it.

After a few minutes, I allowed myself to lift my head.

Lyralda's office was visible from mine, at an angle. Not completely. Just enough to make out part of her silhouette behind the screen, her high ponytail, the sharp movement of her hand when she turned a page.

I went back to work.

Then I looked up a second time.

This time, she was looking at me.

Not insistently. Not as if she had caught me doing something compromising. Just that direct, slightly mocking look she had already had earlier.

When she saw that I had seen her, the corner of her mouth moved slightly.

A half-smile.

Very brief.

The kind of smile that maybe says: yes, I saw you panic.

Or: yes, you are a bit catastrophic.

Or maybe even: keep going, it's almost funny.

I didn't know exactly.

But I knew one thing: she hadn't mocked me to put me down.

That was worse, or better.

I think she was genuinely amused by me.

And the problem is that part of me was starting to find that... bearable.

Maybe even pleasant.

Which wasn't very healthy.

Or maybe it was.

Honestly, at this stage, I didn't have the tools to say.

I lowered my eyes to my screen before my brain started producing embarrassing ideas.

Chapter 6

Seminar Announcement

There are mornings when everything seems normal until the exact moment someone says the word seminar.

Before that, my day was going almost well.

I had managed to open Excel without immediately feeling the need to change my identity. I had even understood, on my own, why a formula refused to cooperate.

The kind of thing you don't dare tell anyone, because you know very well that "I corrected a cell" isn't supposed to overturn a life.

And yet.

Clara had greeted me with:

"So, spreadsheet artist, are we making miracles or damage today?"

I had answered:

"A balanced mix of both."

She had approved as if that were a completely normal answer.

And then the email dropped.

"Interdepartmental Meeting — 11:00 a.m."

Another meeting??

I looked at the screen with the absurd weariness of someone discovering he has to take an oral exam a second time in a subject he didn't choose, because of some ridiculous administrative error.

"Attendance requested."

That kind of wording always feels to me like a threat wrapped in gift paper.

I felt my stomach tighten a little.

Not too much.

Just enough to remind me that my nervous system is a zealous employee who loves anticipating disasters.

At 10:57, I was already in front of the room.

Too early, obviously.

I'm often early to things that scare me. It's a rather stupid way of adding stress time to an already stressful situation, but apparently my brain considers it a very valid strategy.

The room was the same as last time. Glass, light, big table, the atmosphere of a place where people know how to use the word synergy without laughing.

I sat in the same spot, almost out of superstition. My notebook in front of me, my pen between my fingers, my posture of a polite boy ready to disappear if needed.

I must have looked like a student dressed up as an employee.

I wondered after how many days you stop looking like a casting error.

Mister Delmas came in first, with his computer under his arm and that calm energy of people who have already solved three problems before others have even finished their coffee.

"Ah, Elliott, good."

"Hello, sir."

"You all right?"

Trap question.

A routine phrase, you might say. But with him, I always had the impression he expected a real answer.

"Yes."

He nodded.

“Good.”

Then he plugged his computer into the screen without another word.

I think I like that way he has of being both dry and reassuring.

Like an administrative radiator.

Lyralda arrived next.

This time, she was wearing black jeans and a light blue jacket, very simple, very clean, very her. Her hair was tied in a strict bun, which made her look even more inaccessible than usual.

Not cold.

Just... organized.

She looked me straight in the eyes, with a slight smile.

“Hello, Elliott.”

“Hello.”

She sat down.

Mister Delmas looked up from his screen, before smiling at Lyralda with an almost weary expression, as if he already knew she wasn’t going to like what came next.

“Hello, Lyralda.”

“Hello, Pascal.”

There was something in the way they spoke to each other that was too fluid to be new. No demonstrative warmth. No misplaced familiarity. Just that slightly irritating ease of people who have already gone through a lot of meetings together and know exactly what to expect from each other.

Personally, I’ve never managed to be comfortable in silences.

I hear too many things in them, which is a bit... weird, actually.

I was looking at my empty notes as if I already had something intelligent to write when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Lyralda barely raise an eyebrow as she discovered the agenda displayed on the screen.

Not much.

Just a tiny movement.

Mister Delmas, meanwhile, didn’t even try to pretend he hadn’t seen it.

“Yes, I know,” he said without looking up.

Lyralda crossed her arms.

“Obviously.”

“You can complain after.”

“I’m already complaining now.”

He gave a slight smile.

“That’s also why we like you.”

I looked at them one second too long.

Not long. Just enough to tell myself they had clearly already had this conversation, or variations of it, several times. The kind of brief exchange that gives the impression of arriving in the middle of a habit.

Jade arrived five minutes late, looking as if the world was the one that had to adjust to her.

“Sorry, I had a call.”

She didn’t look sorry at all.

She sat across from me again, placed her phone on the table, and fixed her eyes on me, the kind of look that starts like a scan and ends like a silent comment.

“Hi, Elliott.”

I never know what to answer to that kind of sentence. Hi feels too dry. Hello makes me sound like a high school student on a visit.

I ended up doing that fairly pathetic social mixture that consists of smiling slightly while tilting your head.
A kind of wordless hello.
Very practical when you lack vocabulary.
My phone vibrated.
I lowered my eyes discreetly.
Jade.
“You’re already here?”
I looked up.
She was staring ahead as if she had done nothing.
I answered.
“Yes”
Another vibration almost immediately.
“You’re terrifyingly punctual”
I kept my phone near my notebook as if preparing a clandestine operation.
“Elliott: I like arriving early, and you’re the one who’s late”
“Jade: No, you like panicking longer”
I stopped breathing for half a second.
Then I looked up.
She still had that calm expression, as if her phone didn’t exist.
Jade has no problem with space. She has enough presence for two and a half people. She slouched just enough in her chair to look comfortable without seeming careless.
I think some people instinctively know how to occupy space.
Me, even sitting down, I often feel like I should apologize for taking up a whole chair.
Mehdi arrived last.
Like the last time, with the energy of someone who had already lived six lives before noon.
“Hello, children.”
He placed a coffee cup on the table, looked around, then added:
“Ah. No. Wrong room. Here, we’re with people who enjoy suffering in front of PowerPoints.”
He sat down beside Jade, then noticed my closed notebook.
“Elliott! Still alive?”
“Apparently, yes.”
“Excellent news!”
He took a sip of coffee.
“Don’t celebrate too quickly,” Jade said.
“You, let him breathe.”
“I’m only toughening him up.”
“That’s cute, the way you call it that. Are you worried?”
“I’m taking care of the intern.”
“Taking care? Well now, usually you ignore them.”
Mister Delmas looked up.
“Can we start?”
Mehdi raised a hand.
“Always. Chaos awaits me.”
The meeting started more slowly than the previous one.

No numbers immediately crashing onto the screen. First, a few logistical updates, progress points, calendar stories.

Then Mister Delmas displayed a slide with a photo of a hotel, a very blue lake, and people in white polo shirts smiling far too much.

But actually, what have we been talking about all this time?

No one wears that kind of white polo shirt for free.

No one smiles like that for free.

“Right,” Mister Delmas said. “Next point: next month’s interdepartmental seminar.”

Ah.

Okay.

So that was it.

Obviously.

I only had to read the agenda.

Seminar.

I don’t know why that word scares me so much. Maybe because it never means: you will simply listen to useful information calmly.

No.

A seminar is always the elegant word for activities where you have to create bonds in front of colleagues who, the day before, were answering you curtly by email.

Mister Delmas continued:

“Three days. Departure Wednesday morning, return Friday evening. Attendance requested for all departments. Workshops, cross-functional meetings, team-building activities...”

Then, with an almost satisfied tone:

“I insisted that we keep the residential format. The previous seminars were very useful.”

Mehdi blew into his coffee.

“‘Useful’ is a courageous word.”

Mister Delmas ignored him with experience.

“It allows us to step outside the usual framework, smooth out exchanges, and prevent everyone from staying locked inside their own department.”

“Or force adults to pretend they enjoy group workshops by the water,” Lyralda said.

Mister Delmas turned his head toward her.

“And yet, you always came back.”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“You see.”

Cohesion.

I felt my soul take a small step backward.

On the screen, the photo of the lake shone with the arrogance of landscapes that know perfectly well they’re going to serve as a backdrop for uncomfortable people in sports shoes.

My phone vibrated under the table.

“Is this your first seminar?”

I looked straight ahead.

Mister Delmas was still talking.

I answered:

“Yes”

“Ooh”

Then, almost immediately:
 “peace to your soul”
 I exhaled through my nose despite myself.
 I glanced at Lyralda.
 She barely raised an eyebrow again.
 This time, it was even clearer.
 She didn’t like this.
 I felt immediate and irrational solidarity toward her eyebrow.
 “You’ve done seminars before?” Jade said in a low voice.
 I turned toward her.
 She had leaned slightly toward me, enough to speak without disturbing the whole table, but not enough for her question to stay private.
 I blinked.
 She already knew.
 “Uh... no.”
 She smiled, as if I had just confirmed something very predictable.
 “You’ll see. Between the mandatory activities, the people who want to ‘create bonds,’ and the ones who drink too much starting at seven p.m., it’s very instructive.”
 I looked at her.
 She seemed sincerely entertained by the idea. Or by me. Or by the way my brain was already starting to silently disintegrate.
 At that exact moment, I was imagining one hundred and twenty-three different ways to humiliate myself near a lake.
 Falling into the water.
 Staying alone at the buffet.
 Choking at the buffet.
 Saying something embarrassing during a workshop.
 Being stuck at a table with people far too comfortable.
 Wearing a casual outfit that would not be the right kind of casual.
 Dying socially in a too-white polo shirt.
 The worst thing is that all of that had time to cross my mind while, from the outside, I probably just looked like I was blinking a little slowly.
 “He’s panicking,” Mehdi commented with the cruel lucidity of funny people.
 “I’m not panicking,” I answered.
 “Your face says otherwise.”
 “My face is... expressive.”
 “I love that, really. It’s a lovely way of saying two seconds away from fainting.”
 Jade let out a laugh.
 My phone vibrated again.
 “we’ll find you a matching life jacket”
 I lowered my eyes for one second, incredulous.
 “Very funny”
 “i’m here for that”
 Mister Delmas was still detailing the program, but I couldn’t hear everything very well anymore.
 Words floated toward me.
 Group departure.
 Cooking workshop.
 Supervised free time.
 Collective evening.

Water activity.

There are expressions that seem harmless until you remember they generally involve a life jacket, athletic humiliation, and people shouting "Come on, let go!" when you would rather just go home and eat.

"You're going to love it," Mehdi said.

I looked at him with the distrust of a shelter animal.

He put down his coffee.

"We're doing yoga on paddleboards. And there's no barrier to fall into the lake. And all of it on company expenses!"

The silence that followed was very brief.

Then Jade laughed openly.

Even Mister Delmas had something like a smile.

I felt a form of terror so pure it almost became conceptual.

"Yoga... on paddleboards?" I repeated.

"Yes!"

Mehdi seemed very pleased with himself.

"A perfect metaphor for the modern company."

"Mostly a perfect metaphor for burnout," Lyralda said without looking up from her notes.

Mehdi placed a hand over his heart.

"Thank you. Finally someone understands my suffering."

The meeting resumed, but my brain had stayed stuck somewhere between a lake, a paddleboard, and the idea of being observed by colleagues while I try not to die in a lake.

I know, no one mentioned sportswear.

But fear does not respect available information.

Then my phone vibrated again.

"you can swim at least?"

I looked at the screen for two seconds.

"Yes"

"too bad, I would've taught you"

I closed my hand around the phone to avoid laughing like an idiot in the middle of the meeting.

And in the middle of all that, there was also something else.

That strange, almost annoying feeling of wondering what Lyralda would think of me in that kind of context. If she would mock me. If she would raise an eyebrow seeing me panic in front of a life jacket. If she would find it ridiculous.

Or cute.

No.

Definitely not that word.

I lowered my eyes to my notebook, as if that could stop my thoughts from behaving like unsupervised teenagers.

The end of the meeting stretched out with a particular slowness.

Mister Delmas talked about organization, schedules, room allocation, cross-functional objectives. Mehdi slipped in a comment from time to time, just enough to keep the whole thing from becoming completely deadly. Jade sometimes tapped on her phone before lifting her head again with the look of someone who remained convinced that all of this would, one way or another, end up amusing her.

I had stopped listening at paddleboard.

You have to know your cognitive limits. Mine begin at water activity and end very quickly at mandatory attendance.

"The logistical details will be sent by email," Mister Delmas was saying. "Please plan suitable clothing for outdoor activities."

Suitable clothing.

My God.

The worst thing with that kind of phrase is that it never explains anything.

Suitable clothing for whom? For normal adults, the kind who already own the right clothes by accident?

Or for people like me, who have three sweatshirts, two pairs of jeans, and the permanent impression of having missed a dress code that everyone understands intuitively except them?

I wrote useless words in my notebook, just to keep my hands busy: bus? lake? sport? die discreetly?

Beside them, without realizing it, I drew a small rectangle with a stick figure inside. It looked like a tombstone with an intern.

I closed the notebook.

"Maybe we could avoid putting the lawyers on the water," Lyralda said.

Her voice brought me back into the room. I had not followed what they were talking about.

Mister Delmas looked up.

"Why?"

"I don't want to die."

"False," Mister Delmas said. "You survived the one in Annecy."

Lyralda gave him a flat look.

"Barely."

Mehdi laughed.

"I would pay good money to see you do yoga on a paddleboard."

Lyralda gave him another look, even flatter.

"And I would pay good money to see you shut up for five minutes."

"We all have dreams."

Jade was clearly having fun.

"Honestly, I want to see Pascal in shorts."

"That will be a no."

"What a lack of team spirit."

"Shorts have never strengthened anyone's cohesion."

"That's false," Mehdi said. "Certain summer camps prove it."

I think that, for three seconds, everyone forgot this was a professional meeting.

And it was almost pleasant.

The worst part is that this kind of lightness stressed me too.

Because it makes you want to believe that you can enter the conversation, make a remark, exist a little more than usual. And as soon as that desire appears, I become wary of it.

The meeting eventually ended for real.

Computers closed. Chairs slid. The little adult theater of work began to dismantle itself, everyone collecting their things, their phone, their seriousness, their character.

Mehdi stood up first.

"Right. If I drown, I want them to write on my grave: died in the absurd exercise of cohesion."

"You can swim?" Jade asked.

“Magnificently. But I think it’s important to remain dramatic.”

He turned toward me.

“Elliott, if you fall into the lake, try to do it with elegance. We have to think of the group memories.”

“I’ll try not to fall at all.”

“Now that lacks ambition.”

Jade shook her head.

“He’s going to love it. You can tell.”

I couldn’t tell if it was pure irony or just her way of placing a finger on my panic to see if it reacted.

Her phone vibrated. She looked down, then threw me a glance.

Lyralda put away her papers without commenting.

But I saw the very slight movement of her mouth. Not really a smile, more an internal reaction, discreet. As if my silent terror amused her just enough not to seem entirely ridiculous to her. Which was, in a way, already kinder than many things.

We walked out into the corridor almost at the same time.

The others dispersed quickly. Mehdi joined the elevator, already telling Jade something. Mister Delmas was swallowed by a call.

Before moving away, he said to Lyralda:

“We’ll talk again about workshop allocation.”

“Obviously,” she answered with very well-practiced weariness.

Another sentence that gave the impression they had already prepared this kind of thing together more than once.

In less than ten seconds, only Lyralda and I were left, side by side, walking down that long clean corridor that smelled of cold coffee and paper.

I held my notebook against me with the energy of a student expecting to be questioned.

Lyralda walked calmly, her heels regular on the gray floor.

“You look like you’ve seen your own autopsy,” she said.

I looked at her.

“Is it that visible?”

“Yes.”

“Great.”

“It’s fine.”

I don’t know why her it’s fine affected me more than it should have. Maybe because it wasn’t trying to reassure me with big sentences. Just putting the catastrophe back to its actual size.

“I don’t really like group things,” I admitted.

“Oh really? I’m surprised.”

Her tone was so flat that I immediately understood she was mocking me.

“I hide it well, though.”

“No.”

I lowered my eyes.

“Okay.”

We kept walking for a few more steps.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

Her voice had returned to something more neutral. Less mocking.

“No one dies during those things.”

Small pause.

“Well... almost no one.”

I let out a nervous laugh.

"Thank you, that's very reassuring."

"That's the maximum softness I have to offer before noon."

I think I smiled openly.

She threw me a quick look, as if checking that it had worked, before stopping and leaning slightly toward me.

"I'll fish you out if you fall in the water, don't worry."

Then she continued:

"In general, the worst thing that can happen is ending up stuck with colleagues who want to 'break the ice.'"

"That already seems like a pretty solid worst."

"Yes."

"And you? You hate that too?"

She lifted one shoulder.

"I don't like mandatory activities."

"Because they're mandatory?"

"Because they're ridiculous."

It reassured me in an almost disproportionate way.

Not only that she didn't like it. But that she said it like that, without embarrassment, without trying to look adapted to everything.

I don't know if that was what fascinated me about her, deep down, that way of never apologizing for her reactions.

She stopped in front of her office.

"You'll survive, Elliott."

"You seem very convinced of my survival lately."

"Yes."

She put her hand on the handle.

"Experience."

I looked at her one second too long.

Experience of what, exactly, I wouldn't have been able to say.

Seminars?

Me?

People who panic in silence?

Then she went into her office, leaving me alone in the corridor with my notebook, my badge, and a level of inner disturbance I preferred not to analyze right away.

I went back to my desk.

The open space had resumed its usual rhythm, which was almost vexing. I felt like I had just come back from a small social apocalypse, and around me people were simply continuing to type on keyboards as if nothing had happened.

I sat down. I reopened Excel. The numbers reappeared with their stable coldness, almost comforting. At least they don't suggest doing yoga on a floating object.

I tried to get back to work.

Really.

I read one line.

Then a second.

Then my brain decided to project me, without permission, into every possible version of the seminar.

Me getting off the bus too early.

Me wearing the wrong shoes.

Me not knowing where to put myself at breakfast.

Me smiling stupidly during a group activity.

Me falling into the lake.

I placed my hands on either side of the keyboard.

I breathed in.

Breathed out.

I opened my notes without thinking.

When I panic, writing sometimes helps me store things into little boxes. Even if they still overflow a little.

I typed:

Interdepartmental seminar.

Probability of catastrophe: high.

Probability of humiliating myself by a lake: very high.

Probability that Lyralda sees me ridiculous: unfortunately real.

I stopped there.

Then I deleted the last line.

Immediately.

As if my phone could judge me.

Before putting the device down.

At the back of the open space, behind the glass partition of her office, Lyralda was visible in profile. She was reading something, one elbow on the armrest, looking focused, completely absorbed.

She had nothing reassuring in the classic sense of the word.

Not soft, nor especially warm.

And yet, for the past few days, every time she appeared in my field of vision, I had the strange impression that the room became more readable.

That too, I preferred not to think about too much.

I reopened my file. One cell. Then another.

The work was moving forward, but slowly.

My thoughts, meanwhile, kept circling around the lake like stupid birds around a lamppost.

Chapter 7

Nos étés sous la pluie

The fast-food place next to the university always made the same noise.

Trays sliding. Orders shouted too loudly. Hot oil in the air. And groups of students talking as if they were trying to finish the day before it caught up with them.

We were sitting at the back, near the window.

Aïcha across from me. Nawal beside her. Youssef, Reda and me on the other side.

I had taken a simple menu. As usual. No bad surprises. I'm sure it's good.

Youssef was talking about some professor, I don't even remember which one, with absurd energy.

"No but I swear, he said 'it's very intuitive' while showing a table with fifteen columns."

"That's violent," Nawal said.

"That's a declaration of war, yes," Aïcha added, taking a fry.

She was laughing easily today.

Really easily.

She had tied her hair up quickly, and a few strands were falling around her face. It gave her that look both put together and not very concerned, which is a talent I will probably never possess.

When I try to look relaxed, I mostly look abandoned.

Nawal was looking at her phone.

"Hey, *Nos étés sous la pluie* comes out tonight."

Aïcha looked up suddenly.

"Oh yes!"

"What is that again?" Youssef asked.

Nawal gave a small smile.

"A romance."

Youssef put his hand over his heart.

"Misery of miseries."

"Thank you for that nuanced intervention," Aïcha said. "It's not just any romance!"

Reda shrugged.

"Apparently, it's about a girl who comes back to the same town every summer and always runs into the same sad guy."

"So exactly the kind of movie I like," Aïcha said, with no shame at all.

I think it made me smile.

Because she had this very simple way of owning her tastes. No defensive irony, no trying to make it cool. She liked the things she liked.

It's cute.

"Nawal, come see it with me!" she said.

Nawal grimaced.

"I can't tonight. I promised my cousin I'd stop by."

"Betrayal."

"I know."

Aïcha took a sip of soda.

Then she turned toward me.

Very naturally.

"Eliott. Come with me."

I looked up.

“Huh?”

“The movie. Tonight or tomorrow? Which do you prefer?”

Youssef immediately made a ridiculous noise with his mouth, the kind of socially unbearable little “oooh” that makes you want to disappear into a fizzy drink.

“Let people breathe,” Nawal said, already amused.

Aïcha hadn’t moved.

She was simply looking at me, her chin resting on her hand.

“So? When?” she asked.

I think my brain took two seconds to accept the situation.

“Yes,” I said.

Too fast.

Then I added, because my body never knows how to leave an answer alone:

“I mean... yes, if you want.”

She smiled all at once.

A real big smile.

“Yes, I want.”

Youssef raised a finger.

“I would like to specify that I am witnessing something embarrassing.”

“No one invited you,” Aïcha answered.

“That’s almost a date,” Reda said.

“Oh please,” Aïcha replied.

I immediately focused on my fries with the seriousness of a man facing a state mission.

Aïcha just looked satisfied.

“Elliott, he’s my reliable guy.”

This time, everyone laughed.

Even me, a little.

Nawal looked at her.

“You’re happy, you.”

“Yes. Very.”

She wasn’t even trying to hide it.

Then she added, looking at me one second longer:

“I’m perfectly fine with it being just the two of us.”

I lowered my eyes to my tray.

My heart, meanwhile, was doing whatever it wanted.

Youssef crossed his arms.

“Fine. Very well. We respect that. Actually, it’s not that we don’t like that kind of movie, it’s just that we’ve decided to grant you this peaceful moment.”

“Obviously, liar. But anyway, we’re going to see a movie, and that’s very good. Plus, I’m a fan of the novel and it’s incredible.”

The worst part is that the more she talked like that, the harder it became to breathe normally.

Because she didn’t look like she was half-joking.

She just looked happy.

And that was much more destabilizing than a joke.

The rest of the meal passed in pleasant noise.

Youssef started talking too loudly again.

Nawal told a story about an unbearable neighbor.

Aïcha sometimes threw me a quick look, as if checking that I was still there.

I was there.

Very there.

A little too there, even.

When we left the fast-food place, it was still light out. The late-afternoon light made everything softer than it really was. The famous golden hour. Even the sticky sidewalk and paper bags rolling in the wind looked beautiful.

The group split at the street corner.

"We'll keep each other posted," Nawal said.

"Yes," Aïcha answered.

Then she turned toward me while walking backward for a few seconds.

"I'll text you tonight."

"Okay."

"And answer."

"I always answer."

"That's true. Good. See you later then."

She raised her hand before leaving with Nawal.

"Bye bye, Elliott."

I stayed there for one second like a guy who had maybe just accepted something important without fully understanding the terms of the contract.

Then I went home.

An outing, when you're not used to it, takes up far too much space in your head.

Especially when it starts to look, from a distance, like a date.

I had no official proof that it was one.

No one had used that word.

And yet, it had been floating somewhere around me since the fast-food place like a very cute threat.

I spent part of the evening pretending to be normal.

Then I tidied my studio a little.

Then I untidied what I had just tidied.

Then I took a shower too early.

Then I checked the time six times in ten minutes, which is a very unproductive activity but apparently natural for me.

My phone vibrated.

Aïcha.

"Aïcha: Hey. You okay? Want a summary of the movie?"

"Elliott: Hi, yes, I'd like that"

"Aïcha: The girl comes back every summer to a seaside resort, and her soulmate is always there except they always miss each other. And it rains every time"

"Elliott: How does she know he's her soulmate if they always miss each other?"

"Aïcha: Because she feels it! He's her soulmate, you'll see, you'll like it"

I smiled alone in my kitchen, which is always a little embarrassing when you think about it.

She sent another message almost right away.

"Aïcha: What are you doing after the movie, actually?"

I reread the sentence.

Once.

Twice.

As if the words were suddenly going to change meaning.

"Elliott: I still don't know, why?"

"Aïcha: You don't have anything planned?"

I looked at my empty apartment.

My clean sink.

My half-eaten biscuit on the counter.

The deep silence of my social life.

“Eliott: No”

“Aïcha: Perfect then, the movie ends early and we’ll still have the whole afternoon, we’ll improvise!”

Improvise?

I didn’t like that word much either.

But coming from her, it sounded less like a danger than a promise.

We kept talking a little.

Simple things. A professor who talked too fast. A sweater she had seen in a shop window. A middle school memory about a failed cinema outing because she had “accidentally” spilled her drink on a girl she already kind of hated.

She told her life in small pieces.

Without staging it.

As if it were natural to give me a part of it.

At one point, she wrote:

“Aïcha: Okay, I’m going to sleep, you sleep well too, otherwise you’ll look like an overwatered cactus”

“Eliott: That’s already my general aesthetic. Also, since when do you sleep this early?”

“Aïcha: Stop, that’s not your general aesthetic. And I’m sleeping early to be in shape. See you tomorrow Eliott, sleep well”

“Eliott: See you tomorrow”

I put the phone on my bedside table.

Then I picked it up again five seconds later to reread the conversation.

I went to bed with that very clear feeling of waiting for something. Not only the movie, something else, blurrier, riskier.

I fell asleep thinking that one day, I would really have to learn how to handle simple situations without giving them the size of a natural disaster.

That day was clearly not coming right away.

The next day, I was ready far too early.

Obviously.

I had changed tops three times before choosing one that at least gave me the impression I hadn’t been dressed by sadness itself.

The cinema was in the mall, twenty minutes away by tram.

I arrived twelve minutes early. Which left me exactly enough time to wonder:

Am I too tense?

Should I have taken a different jacket?

And if going to the cinema together officially entered the category of things where you’re supposed to know how to behave?

Aïcha arrived almost on time. With that tiny almost which, with her, looked less like lateness and more like a way of making an entrance.

Light jeans. Off-white sweater. Shiny earrings I had never seen before. And that way of walking as if space had always accepted her presence.

When she saw me, her face lit up.

“You’re here!”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Impressive.”

“I have a reputation to maintain.”

"The guy who arrives before the doors?"

"Among other things."

She stopped in front of me with a smile.

"You're dressed well, I like it."

My brain immediately disconnected for half a second.

"Ah."

She laughed.

"I swear! It's a compliment."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome!"

Small silence.

Not awkward, just... new.

Then she looked at the display.

"Okay. We have time to get food."

"Okay."

I followed her while trying not to be too out of sync. Which isn't always easy when someone has just told you you're dressed well in a tone that could almost count as an event.

She seemed so excited it was hard to keep up.

At the counter, she ordered without any hesitation.

"One large salted popcorn, that pack of candy, a Coke, and..."

She turned toward me.

"What do you want?"

"Uh... same, well no, not same, well..."

"So same, but sweet popcorn please," she concluded very calmly.

"Yes."

"Perfect."

I tried to take out my card.

"Leave it."

"No, I can pay."

"I don't doubt it, but I invited you, so I'm buying you food."

I let her.

She paid for both of us with disarming ease, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Then she handed me my drink.

"Gift."

"Thank you."

"It's a cultural investment."

"I see you're diversifying your portfolio."

"Exactly."

I think it made her laugh more than the joke deserved.

"You can take some of my popcorn if you prefer salty, but that way you have the choice."

The room was already half full. We sat in the middle, not too high, not too low. A seat strategically impossible to choose when you want to be both discreet and close to someone.

The movie started.

And it was exactly as advertised.

A seaside town. Looks held too long. Absurd separations. Far too symbolic rain.

Aicha loved it.

I knew because she reacted to everything. Not loudly. Just enough for her to exist in the movie too.

Sometimes, she breathed out through her nose when a line was too ridiculous.

Sometimes, she leaned slightly toward me to whisper:

“He’s stupid here.”

or

“If she leaves now, I’m leaving the room.”

I whispered too.

Well... mostly I tried to answer normally while she was much too close for someone who was supposed to be following a movie.

Her perfume came in little touches, her sleeve sometimes brushed mine, and each time I had the stupid impression that my body was noting the information somewhere.

At one point, without really thinking, we reached for popcorn at the same time.

Our fingers touched in the bucket.

Nothing spectacular.

Just enough to make me miss the next thirty seconds of the movie.

I pulled my hand back too quickly.

So did she.

Then, a few minutes later, she put the candy pack back between us, closer to me than before, without commenting on anything.

As if she were leaving me a second chance.

I didn’t take it.

There was also a moment when she laughed, softly, at a scene that was a little too dramatic, then turned her head toward me as if to check if I found it ridiculous. I shrugged.

She smiled.

Not at the movie.

At me, I think.

And that helped me concentrate on the movie much less.

Toward the end, there was a scene in the rain where the two characters finally kissed after two hours of circling around their own misery.

Aïcha whispered:

“Oh my God... look, it’s so beautiful.”

I turned my head slightly toward her.

The screen reflected a little light on her face.

Her eyes stayed fixed ahead, but she was smiling, with tears in her eyes.

Not really sad.

Just touched, the way she knows how to be when something pleases her without her trying to protect herself.

And for one second too long, I had the impression that she was even more beautiful like that.

Closer too.

As if the movie had gently reduced the distance between us without asking our opinion.

I wondered what it would be like to kiss her under invented rain.

Then I watched the movie with great application.

When the lights came back on, Aïcha sighed with satisfaction.

“That was very good.”

“That was very rainy.”

"So very good."

She still had that slightly floating smile of people who haven't fully returned to earth.

As she stood up, her arm brushed mine, and this time she didn't move away right away.

Just one second.

Maybe two.

Nothing enough to accuse anyone of anything.

But enough for my heart to start doing whatever it wanted again in the almost-finished darkness of the room.

We left into the cinema corridor with that cottony floating feeling you get after a screening ends. The one where people speak more softly, as if the movie hasn't fully let go of their shoulders yet.

And maybe we hadn't either.

"Right."

"Right?"

"I'm hungry."

"Didn't you already eat at noon?"

"And?"

"That's a solid argument."

"Thank you."

She slipped her hands into her coat pockets.

"Should we go shopping?"

I looked at her.

"Shopping?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like it."

Then she added, with that slightly crooked smile I was starting to know:

"And I need an opinion."

That was false.

Well, maybe not completely.

But Aïcha didn't need me to know if a piece of clothing suited her.

She mostly looked like she had decided the day wasn't over.

And, apparently, neither was I.

"Okay," I said.

"Perfect."

The mall was full of people. Families, couples, groups of teenagers, people walking too fast with bags too big. The kind of place where everyone looks like they know what to do with their Saturday, which remains a fascinating mystery to me.

Aïcha walked ahead toward certain windows, then came back to me.

"Look at that one."

"Which one?"

"The blue sweater."

"It's nice."

"Nice is a terrible opinion."

"It's... very nice?"

"Ah, now we're progressing."

She said that while smiling, as if making me talk a little more had become an activity of its own.

And maybe it had.

In another shop, she disappeared behind a fitting-room curtain before asking me:

“Come on, peek in, you can tell me if it’s too much.”

“Uh... are you sure?”

“Well yes.”

“Too what?”

“Too girl who’s trying.”

I stayed silent for a quarter of a second.

“I’m not sure I know how to recognize that.”

“That’s honest.”

Then she poked her head through the opening of the curtain.

“Tell me. What kind of clothes do you like?”

“I don’t really know...”

“Go on, suggest something. What do you think I should try?”

I looked around me with the absurd seriousness of a man being entrusted with a mission for which he had clearly not been trained.

Then I pointed to a black sweatshirt with a strawberry print.

“That... maybe. It’s simple, but... cute.”

She looked at me one second too long.

“Cute?”

“I mean... yes.”

“Okay.”

She disappeared behind the curtain with a small smile I didn’t completely know how to interpret.

When she came out of the fitting room wearing the sweatshirt, she spread her arms slightly.

“So? You like it?”

I looked up.

Then I had trouble answering right away.

Because she was really beautiful.

Not in the abstract way you say that quickly.

Not to be polite.

Really beautiful.

And there are moments when the truth looks far too much like something you don’t dare say.

The sweatshirt was simple. A little loose. The kind of clothing that should have just made her look cute.

On her, it did worse.

Or better.

It made her look softer, closer, almost intimate. As if she had let me see a version of herself that was less mastered, less public.

“It suits you,” I finally said.

She observed me for one second in the mirror.

“Just suits me?”

“Very well.”

This time, she turned completely toward me.

“Very well how?”

My brain immediately submitted its resignation.

“Very well... on you.”

She smiled.

Not widely.

But enough to make me understand she knew very well what she was doing.

"There," she said softly.

Then she looked at herself in the mirror.

"I'm hesitating."

"Why?"

"Because if I buy it, I'll have to find occasions to wear it. I rarely wear things this casual."

"You can invent occasions."

"That's very bad financial advice."

"I do what I can."

She laughed.

Then she came just close enough to show me a detail on the sleeve of the sweatshirt, as if we needed to be at that distance to talk about cotton.

"And this?"

Her voice was lower.

Her shoulder almost against my arm.

I looked at the seam, because I had to look at something socially acceptable.

"That's good too," I said.

"Good again?"

"I lack vocabulary."

"I don't think so."

Time passed like that.

Simply.

One shop after another.

Stupid comments.

Opinions given with too much seriousness on sweaters, shirts, a dress that was "pretty but not for every day," according to her.

But the more it went on, the more I had the strange impression that she wasn't only looking for an opinion.

She was also looking for a reason to stay there with me.

To stretch the afternoon.

To pull gently on the thread as long as it held.

And the problem was that I was too.

At one point, she grabbed my wrist to pull me toward a window.

Just to show me something.

A brief gesture. Natural.

But my body recorded it as capital information.

I think what troubled me most with Aïcha wasn't only the closeness.

It was the ease of that closeness.

As if she wasn't afraid to let me enter her space.

As if, for a few hours, I was someone simple enough to be chosen.

We had just come out of a clothing store when her hand left my arm all at once.

The movement was light.

But clear.

I felt it immediately.

I turned toward her.

Her gaze had frozen a little farther down the aisle.

And her face had changed.

Not hugely.

Just enough to understand that a problem had entered the scene.

“Aïcha?”

She gave a small start, almost nothing.

“Hm?”

Then she was already looking elsewhere, too quickly.

“Nothing.”

That was when I saw him.

A man was walking toward us with the calm assurance of people who never consider themselves out of place, wherever they are.

Tall, dark jacket, very neat beard, phone in hand. The kind of guy you imagine speaking loudly in a living room and getting people to listen just because he’s there.

When he recognized Aïcha, his face relaxed into a smile.

“Well, look at you, big girl.”

Aïcha straightened a little.

“Sofiane...”

Her voice had changed too.

Not colder.

But more controlled.

He came closer and quickly kissed her forehead.

Then he threw me a look.

Just one.

Quick.

Assessing.

“Hello.”

He turned back to Aïcha.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing, we were just hanging around.”

The we seemed tiny to me.

Sofiane looked around us.

“With who?”

Aïcha answered too quickly.

“Nawal and the others were here, but we split up.”

I think something contracted inside me at that moment.

Not violently.

Just a small discreet thing.

Like when someone closes a door in a room and you understand you maybe weren’t supposed to be there.

Sofiane nodded, not completely convinced.

Then his gaze returned to me.

“And him, he’s a classmate from school?”

Aïcha had a micro-hesitation.

Barely a second.

“This is Elliott. We’re in class together.”

I think, out of context, it was a perfectly ordinary sentence.

But there, in that exact moment, it sounded a little like:

“Don’t worry, this is nothing.”

I held out my hand.

“Hello.”

He shook it.

Not hard. Not too long.

"Sofiane," he said.

Then he looked at me more directly.

"You're in accounting too?"

"In CCA, yes."

"Ah. That's a good program, full of prospects. So you're accompanying her shopping?"

Aïcha answered before me.

"We were just passing through."

"Yes, I saw."

His smile came back.

Smooth.

A little too much.

"That's kind."

I didn't know if that was for me or against me.

Probably both.

He continued, looking at Aïcha:

"So now you need a shopping advisor?"

Aïcha gave a small laugh.

Not very natural.

"Stop it."

"No, I'm asking."

He tilted his head toward me.

"It's not really your thing, is it? Poor guy, having to hang around here."

I didn't know what to answer immediately.

Not because the question was difficult.

Because it was asked in that very precise way where every answer already looks a little false.

"It's fine," I said.

Very powerful.

Very charismatic.

Or not really.

Sofiane nodded as if I had confirmed something interesting.

"Good."

Then he turned toward Aïcha.

"Anyway, don't hang around anyhow. Especially alone. It's getting late and we don't want Dad to worry."

Alone.

While I was literally sixty centimeters away from him.

Aïcha immediately replied:

"But I'm not alone, the others were here."

"Mmh."

He looked at her one second longer.

"Yes."

That yes meant: I don't completely believe you, but we'll talk about it later.

I understood it.

I think she did too.

He put his phone back in his pocket.

"When are you going home?"

"Not too late."

"Okay, I'll tell the parents when I get back."

“Yes.”

Then, as if he suddenly remembered I still existed in the frame, he gave me one last polite smile.

“Good luck with the shopping, Elliott.”

He said it the way others would say good luck with surgery or an absurd punishment.

And then he walked away.

Not hurried.

Like someone who knows he has left exactly the right weight behind him.

The silence stayed between us for a few seconds.

The mall, meanwhile, kept living all around. People passed by, music too loud drifted down from another floor, someone laughed near the escalator.

And in the middle of all that, something had changed.

Aïcha breathed out through her nose.

“Sorry...”

I looked at her.

“Why?”

“My brother, he’s... heavy.”

That was a weak word for someone who had just turned an entire afternoon into slippery ground, but I understood the intention.

“It’s okay,” I said.

Stupid reflex.

Always the same.

She lowered her eyes for one second.

“He’s annoying about that.”

“About what?”

She lifted one shoulder.

“Going out, guys, what people think. Everything.”

I didn’t really know what to say.

Because one part of me understood the sentence.

And the other part stayed stuck on the fact that she had just told her brother we were with Nawal and others, as if being just with me wasn’t a version of reality that could be shown.

Aïcha continued almost right away, a little too fast:

“Anyway. Forget it. He thinks he’s my second father.”

“Okay.”

She observed me.

“Are you mad at me?”

The question surprised me.

Not because it was unfair.

Because it came too soon.

I hadn’t finished understanding what I felt exactly. Embarrassment, yes. A small coldness in my stomach too.

Something that looked like shame, but not clear enough to deserve a real name.

“No,” I said.

Then I added, because I think she deserved a little honesty too:

“I mean... I don’t think so.”

She gave a small smile.

“He’s weird, that’s all. Thank you for being honest.”

That wasn’t really true.

Or not entirely.

What was weird wasn't him. It was the effect he had had on her. That way she had justified herself before he had even asked the right questions. Shrunk the outing, quickly put me in the classmate box.

But I said nothing.

Because I already had the impression I was taking up too much space in the scene. And with me, that kind of feeling almost always ends up becoming:

"Maybe you're the problem again."

Aïcha checked the time on her phone.

"I have to go soon."

"Okay."

"Are you taking the tram?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

We started walking again.

A little less close.

Not visibly, just enough for me to feel it.

We still crossed two shops without really seeing them. She commented on an ugly sweater in a window, I answered something, she laughed.

The sound was the same as earlier, in theory.

But lighter, as if part of her had stayed stuck somewhere else.

Outside, the air was cooler.

We walked to the tram stop without talking much. Not in a hostile silence, a silence of the end of the day, maybe. Or of something neither of us really wanted to open.

When the tram arrived, she turned toward me.

And there, almost miraculously, her smile came back.

Not exactly like before.

But enough to disarm me anyway.

"Thank you for today, Elliott."

"Thank you."

"The movie was so good!"

"Mostly very rainy."

She laughed.

"And you were a very good shopping companion."

"I did my best."

"And it was very good."

Small silence.

Then she stepped forward and hugged me briefly.

Just one second.

Two, maybe.

The exact amount of time needed to erase far too many things without really repairing them.

When she stepped back, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"We'll talk tonight?"

"Yes."

"Cool."

Then she got on the tram with that same little wave she sometimes gave me at university.

The door closed.

I watched her leave behind the glass until the tram turned farther down.

And for a few seconds, everything looked almost normal.

Almost.

I stayed alone at the stop with my hands in my pockets and that very vague impression that I had maybe missed something without knowing what.

Or that I had understood something I preferred not to name right away.

But she had suggested the movie.

She had wanted it to last.

She had bought me a drink, dragged me into shops, hugged me before leaving.

So maybe I was imagining things again.

Maybe her brother was just like that.

Maybe the problem came from somewhere else.

Maybe there wasn't one.

I lowered my eyes.

Then I took out my phone.

And despite that small coldness still somewhere under my ribs, I could see a smile.

Like an idiot, probably.

But an idiot who had still just spent a good day with Aïcha.

Chapter 8

Departure for the Seminar

The bus had been there for twenty minutes.

And so had I.

Predictable.

When something stresses me out, my brain always decides that the best strategy is to arrive far too early, as if I could negotiate with disaster by showing up a little ahead of time.

The company parking lot was almost empty. The large white bus was parked in the middle like an administrative whale come to swallow us one by one.

I checked the time on my phone.

7:11 a.m.

Scheduled departure: 7:30.

Great.

Nineteen minutes to imagine everything that could go wrong during this seminar.

I approached the bus with my bag over my shoulder. The driver was smoking a cigarette near the open door, with the calm look of someone who has seen enough groups of anxious adults pass through to no longer be surprised by anything.

“Good morning, sir,” I said.

He nodded.

“Good morning.”

I got on.

Inside, it smelled like that strange mix of heated fabric and disinfectant all buses have. The blue seats were perfectly aligned, empty, silent, one row after another, like a series of social decisions to make.

Front? Too visible.

Back? Too suspicious.

Middle? Potentially strategic.

I stopped for a few seconds in the aisle like someone analyzing a military map.

Then I chose a window seat, roughly in the middle. Discreet enough to disappear if necessary, but not isolated enough to look like a guy fleeing humanity.

I sat down.

In the bus window, my reflection looked back at me.

Simple shirt. Black bag. Slightly too serious expression for someone leaving to spend three days by a lake.

I wondered if people saw the panic as easily as I did.

Probably.

The first colleagues arrived gradually.

Voices in the aisle, bags being put down, greetings still half asleep.

I tried to look out the window as if the parking lot were a fascinating show.

Then a familiar voice crossed the bus.

Jade.

I saw her come up the aisle with the same quiet confidence she had at the office. Fitted jeans, light jacket, sunglasses in her hair, coffee in hand.

She looked at the seats.

Not like someone looking for a place.

More like someone assessing territory.

There was something irritating in that way she had of entering somewhere as if she already belonged there.

And something else, more discreet, that I had never really taken the time to analyze.

Something that made you want to look at her a little longer than necessary.

Her eyes moved along the aisle.

Front.

Middle.

Back.

Then they stopped on me.

Bad news.

“Ooh.”

She smiled.

Not meanly.

But with that little amused glint I had already seen. The one that usually announces she has found something to entertain herself with.

She came closer.

“Well, well.”

She placed her bag on the seat beside me.

“You got here before everyone.”

“Yes.”

“Impressive.”

She sat down, then turned her face slightly toward me.

That was probably the problem.

She was comfortable.

And I was suddenly far too aware that she was there.

“Did you bring your bag in case you throw up from bus sickness?”

I looked at her.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“I forgot mine. If I get sick, I’m aiming for HR.”

I think I smiled despite myself.

“That’s strategic.”

“Always.”

She settled comfortably into her seat, legs crossed, perfectly at ease. As if sitting next to me in a half-empty bus were a completely neutral decision.

I was trying not to look like a guy suddenly far too aware of the exact distance between his elbow and his colleague’s.

A silhouette appeared in the aisle.

“Ah.”

Mehdi’s voice.

“There’s my favorite duo.”

He stopped near our row.

“Jade, leave the kid alone.”

He looked at me with a very satisfied smile.

“He looks fragile.”

Jade rolled her eyes.

“He is fragile.”

“I love fragile people.”

He turned toward me.

“Fragile people are always the kindest and most interesting.”

I didn't know what to answer.
 Mehdi tapped the headrest in front of him.
 "Plus, they're the ones who survive absurd activities."
 "That's very reassuring," I said.
 "That's my goal in life."
 He winked at me.
 "Have a good trip, children."
 Then he went to sit two rows farther back.
 The bus kept filling up.
 The conversations slowly rose.
 Jade was looking at her phone.
 I was looking out the window.
 The parking lot had become livelier, but my eyes were looking for something else.
 And then I saw her.
 Lyralda.
 She was walking toward the bus with a simple bag over her shoulder and that same calm walk as usual. Not hurried, not slow. Just... assured.
 She got on.
 The driver closed the door behind her.
 For one second, her gaze moved through the inside of the bus.
 She saw Mehdi.
 Then Jade.
 Then me.
 Her eyes stopped very briefly.
 No smile.
 No sign.
 Just that direct, clear look, giving the impression that she was observing something precisely.
 Then she continued down the aisle and sat one row behind us.
 I don't know why it made me even more aware of my own body.
 The bus started a few minutes later.
 The engine vibrated softly under the floor.
 The parking lot slid behind the window.
 The city began to pass by.
 Beside me, Jade had already put down her coffee and stretched her legs.
 "Three hours on the road."
 "Yes."
 "I hope you slept."
 "A lot."
 "Bad strategy."
 She adjusted her seat.
 "I always sleep in transport."
 She closed her eyes.
 "Wake me up if we fall into a lake."
 "Okay."
 I think I thought she was joking.
 But a few minutes later, her breathing had slowed.
 She was really sleeping.
 The bus rolled quietly along the highway. The conversations around us had calmed, replaced by the constant sound of the engine and tires.

I was watching the road pass by when I felt a movement.
Very light.
Jade's head tilted.
Then she leaned against my shoulder.
My body froze immediately.
Not dramatically.
Just... completely still.
As if moving might trigger a diplomatic catastrophe.
I could feel the warmth of her head against my arm.
Her hair brushed my shoulder.
Her perfume was discreet, sweet.
And far too pleasant for the situation.
The kind of detail my brain should have ignored...
but decided to record with suspicious precision.
Breathe normally.
Do not move.
Do not think about the situation.
Above all, do not think about the fact that someone is literally pressed against you
in a bus full of colleagues.
Complicated mission.
Very complicated.
Too complicated.
What didn't help was that she hadn't simply fallen asleep next to me.
No.
She had settled against me with almost vexing ease, as if my shoulder had become
a perfectly acceptable option. As if it cost her nothing. As if it went without saying.
I stared stubbornly at the window.
In the reflection, we looked like a perfectly normal couple.
And the worst part is that, for one second, it didn't seem completely absurd to me.
Problematic.
Very problematic.
Because in my head, it was chaos.
Not just because of the situation.
But because I was starting to wonder since when, exactly, being that close to her
had that effect on me.
I could feel my heart beating a little too fast.
I focused on the road, the trees, the signs, anything to avoid analyzing what was
happening thirty centimeters from my brain.
Then I looked up.
In the reflection of the bus, behind us, I caught sight of Lyralda.
She wasn't looking at her phone.
She was looking ahead.
And for a fraction of a second, I had the impression she was observing exactly the
situation.
Her face expressed nothing.
But her gaze seemed very attentive.
I looked away immediately.
Because suddenly, the heat in my chest wasn't only because of Jade.
It was also realizing that maybe it hadn't gone unnoticed.
That maybe I wasn't the only one seeing what was happening.

And I wasn't sure I wanted to understand why.

The bus had been driving for a while when the driver announced a break.

"Vallée rest area in ten minutes."

I hadn't moved for... how long? An hour? Maybe a little less. But in my head, it felt like an eternity spent pretending to be perfectly comfortable with someone asleep on my shoulder.

Jade was still sleeping.

Or pretending.

Honestly, I didn't know.

Her head rested against me with very calm trust, as if I were an official pillow for the sales department. Her hair slid a little over my sleeve with every vibration of the bus.

I didn't dare move.

Because moving would mean either waking her up, or making the situation worse.

So I had stayed still.

Administrative statue.

The problem is that a human body kept still for too long starts to feel very stupid things. A shoulder heating up. An arm tingling. A brain becoming too aware of another person's closeness.

And another problem, even more embarrassing: my brain had decided to imagine things it was better to ignore in a bus full of colleagues.

So I looked at the road.

Very intensely.

As if the highway had something philosophical to teach me.

The bus slowed down.

The rest area parking lot appeared.

And that was when Jade straightened up suddenly.

"Are we there?"

I think my heart missed a small step.

"Uh... no, break."

She blinked, still a little sleepy, looking me straight in the eyes, then looked around her.

"Ah!"

She stretched as if nothing particular had happened.

As if she hadn't spent the last hour leaning against me.

Or as if she knew very well that she had, precisely.

"How long did I sleep?"

"A while."

"Good."

She smiled.

"You survived."

I think I nodded.

"Apparently."

"You didn't try to push me away?"

"No."

"That's kind."

She stood up and grabbed her bag.

Then she added while heading down the aisle:

"You make a good pillow. Nice and soft."

Great.

The fresh air outside did me good.

A lot of good.

The highway rest area was full of buses and cars.

People walked in every direction with coffees, croissants, faces still half asleep.

I stretched discreetly.

My shoulder protested slightly.

Mehdi appeared beside me.

“So?”

“So what?”

“The ride.”

He looked at me with a sideways smile.

“You look like you lived through something.”

“No.”

“Liar.”

He looked toward the bus.

“Jade slept on you for an hour.”

I froze.

“How...”

“The whole bus saw it.”

Of course.

Obviously.

As if that kind of thing could stay discreet.

“Relax.”

He patted my shoulder.

“It’s a compliment.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I am.”

He got a coffee from the machine.

“And Jade never sleeps against people.”

Small pause.

“It was very cute.”

This information did absolutely nothing to help my nervous system.

Several of us were waiting near the automatic door of the station when Jade came back with a sandwich and a coffee.

There were several looks turning toward her without really hiding it.

Not heavy. Not insistent.

Just... present.

And I didn’t know why that annoyed me a little.

She looked at me.

“You ran away.”

“I needed air.”

“Bad excuse.”

She bit into her sandwich.

“Are you afraid I’ll bother you?”

I didn’t answer.

Because the honest answer was far too embarrassing to be pronounced at a highway rest area at eight in the morning.

She smiled.

“Does it really bother you?”

A calm voice slipped into the conversation.

"He's mostly afraid of dying from embarrassment."

I turned around.

Lyralda.

She was holding a coffee in one hand, looking perfectly awake despite the hour. Her eyes settled on me for one second, as if she were evaluating my exact level of stress.

Jade raised an eyebrow.

"Are you supervising interns now?"

"I supervise disasters."

"Is he one?"

"Potentially. You too."

I think I let out a small nervous laugh.

Jade looked from one of us to the other.

"That's fascinating."

"What?"

"The way you talk about him as if he isn't here."

Lyralda took a sip of coffee.

"He is here."

Then she looked at me.

"And he's panicking."

I defended myself.

"I'm not panicking."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

Jade raised her hands.

"Okay, stop. You sound like two parents discussing a fragile child."

Mehdi, who had just joined us with three cups of coffee, burst out laughing.

"That's exactly it."

He handed me a cup.

"Here."

"Thanks."

"Drink."

"Why?"

"Because in two hours, you'll be in a hotel full of colleagues in team-building mode."

He took a sip.

"And believe me, coffee helps."

The bus left again a few minutes later.

This time, Jade didn't fall back asleep immediately. She was looking at the road, her legs slightly turned toward me, as if the space between our seats had naturally become shared.

I was paying very close attention to my movements.

Very.

"You're still stressed."

"No."

"Yes."

"That's a baseless accusation."

"Your face betrays you."

She placed her elbow on the armrest.

“What exactly are you afraid of?”

I didn’t answer right away.

Because the real answer was a little too honest for a conversation on a bus.

Finally, I said:

“Doing something ridiculous.”

She thought about it.

“You will.”

“Thank you.”

“Everyone does.”

She shrugged.

“The difference is that some people pretend not to notice.”

I wasn’t expecting that answer.

I think it calmed me a little.

She turned her head toward me.

“Seriously.”

Her tone had changed.

Barely.

Less mocking. Simpler.

“You won’t be the only one embarrassed. Just the only one who looks honest when it happens.”

I looked at her.

She held my gaze with that irritating ease of people who don’t need to look away to survive.

It was unfairly easy for her.

And far too difficult for me to pretend it did nothing to me.

Then she gave a small smile.

“And worst case, I’ll mock you discreetly.”

“Ah, that’s reassuring.”

“I help however I can.”

I think it calmed me more than it should have.

The rest of the ride went faster.

Conversations started again around us. Mehdi was telling some story two rows behind. Someone was laughing too loudly at the front. The landscape became greener as we left the city behind.

And then the bus slowed.

The lake appeared.

Large.

Calm.

Surrounded by trees.

And right beside it, the hotel.

It was beautiful.

A large modern building with wooden terraces looking directly out over the water. The kind of place where people take pictures of their breakfast.

The bus stopped in the parking lot.

“There we are,” Mehdi said behind us.

“The jungle.”

Jade grabbed her bag.

Then she turned toward me.

“Ready?”

“Not really.”

She smiled.
A real smile, this time.
Not just amused.
“Perfect.”
As if my answer suited her exactly.
She got off the bus.
I stayed seated one second longer.
In the window, my reflection was still looking at me.
Same face.
Same worry.
But behind me, the lake shone in the morning light.
And somewhere in that setting, I had the very clear impression that something was going to change.
I didn’t know what yet.
But I could feel that this seminar was going to be much more complicated than yoga on a paddleboard.
And maybe much more dangerous too.
Not for my life.
Just for everything else.

Chapter 9

Team Building

The bus stopped in front of the hotel with a small mechanical sigh.

No one applauded, which is always a good sign.

I got off among the last ones, bag over my shoulder, legs slightly numb from three hours spent trying to look normal beside a saleswoman who sleeps on you as if you were official company furniture.

The air was different here.

More humid.

Calmer too.

The lake stretched out just behind the hotel, huge and perfectly smooth, like a large sheet of glass placed between the hills. The morning sun slid over it with that soft light that gives places the look of a tourist brochure.

The hotel had clearly been designed for this kind of event. Light wood, large bay windows, terraces opening onto the water. The kind of place where everything is both very simple and very expensive.

Mehdi whistled softly.

“Not bad.”

Jade stopped beside him.

“I could get used to this.”

“Me too.”

They exchanged that complicit look of people perfectly comfortable in places where I always start by checking whether I’m going to break something.

Behind me, I heard Lyralda’s voice.

“If we could avoid falling into the lake before check-in, that would be ideal.”

I turned around.

She was looking at the building with a neutral expression, but her eyes seemed to be analyzing the place as if she expected a deadly trap to appear behind every terrace.

“Are you afraid of water?” Jade asked.

“No.”

“Then?”

“I’m afraid of absurd activities organized near water.”

Mehdi burst out laughing.

“You see, Elliott?”

He tapped my shoulder.

“We’re not alone.”

I think that reassured me more than I wanted to admit.

The hotel lobby was even more impressive than the outside.

Light wood.

Green plants.

A large stone counter behind which two employees smiled with the professional perfection of people trained to handle corporate groups.

The colleagues were already spreading out through the room. Some were talking, others taking pictures of the lake behind the bay windows.

I stayed a little behind.

Watching people in moments like this is almost easier than participating. You see the roles appear very quickly: the natural leaders, the talkers, the people who settle everywhere as if they already belong there.

I was in the category polite person waiting to be told where to go.

Mister Delmas approached the counter.

“Good morning, Primeval Corps group.”

The employee nodded.

“Welcome. We’ve prepared the keys.”

She took out a small stack of envelopes.

“Individual rooms for everyone.”

A small wave of satisfaction passed through the group.

Me included.

Three days of seminar is already enough of a social challenge. If they had announced that I had to share a room with an unknown colleague, I think I would have started seriously considering open-water swimming.

A few minutes later, I found myself in the elevator with Mehdi and two other colleagues.

“So, Eliott,” Mehdi said.

“Yes?”

“First time in a company hotel?”

“Yes.”

“Enjoy it. It’s free.”

The doors opened.

“These are the only places where people drink wine while talking about synergy.”

My room was on the third floor.

I opened the door with that strange little excitement you always feel in a hotel, even when you know you’re going to spend half the time stressing in a meeting room.

The room was... perfect.

Large bed.

Light wood.

Huge window looking directly onto the lake.

A small terrace with two chairs.

I stayed for one second looking at the water.

Calm.

Silent.

Very beautiful.

And probably very cold if you fell into it.

I remembered Mehdi and the paddleboard.

My brain immediately decided to ignore the landscape.

An hour later, everyone was gathered in a large glass room at the back of the hotel.

The lake was right there, behind us.

And in the center of the room, several worktables had been set up.

With... cutting boards?

Bowls.

Flour.

And knives.

A man in a white jacket clapped his hands with almost worrying energy.

“Good morning, everyone!”

Chef.

Clearly.

And visibly very enthusiastic.

"Welcome to our collaborative cooking workshop!"

Mehdi murmured behind me:

"It begins."

The chef continued:

"Today, you'll be working in teams to prepare a full meal!"

I looked at the ingredients on the table.

Dough.

Vegetables.

Herbs.

I could feel something familiar slowly rising in my brain.

Something much less frightening than meetings.

The chef was clapping his hands.

"Cooking, my friends, is like business!"

Mehdi whispered:

"False."

"You need coordination, creativity, and trust!"

"Still false."

"And above all... passion!"

"Oh my..."

There, I almost smiled.

The groups were formed quickly.

Obviously.

I ended up with:

Lyralda.

Jade.

And Mehdi.

I don't know if it was chance or a bad joke.

The chef came by our table.

"Perfect!"

He pointed at the ingredients.

"Your team will prepare homemade ravioli!"

Jade raised an eyebrow.

"Homemade?"

"Yes!"

"But we're not at home."

"Fresh pasta, filling, cooking, sauce!"

The chef was delighted with himself.

He placed his hands on the table.

"It's simple."

The ravioli, yes.

Not the rest.

Lyralda was looking at the knife in front of her as if someone had entrusted her with a very sensitive diplomatic object.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

Jade burst out laughing.

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"You've never cooked?"

"No."

"Never?"

"I know how to open a fridge."

Mehdi leaned toward me.

"I think we've found our weak point."

Jade crossed her arms.

"You don't have to be afraid of dough, you know."

Lyralda looked at her.

"I'm not afraid of dough."

"Then?"

"I just don't see why we would do this when restaurants exist."

I think that was the most honest answer in the whole room.

The chef came back toward our table.

"So?"

He looked at our ingredients.

"Shall we start?"

No one was really moving.

Lyralda was still holding her knife the way a lawyer holds a criminal problem.

Jade was watching the scene with obvious amusement.

Mehdi was waiting for the show.

I looked at the dough.

Then the ingredients.

Then the worktop.

And without really thinking, I rolled up my sleeves.

"We'll start with the filling."

Everyone looked at me.

I don't know why I did that.

Probably because cooking is the only place where my brain stops doubting.

I took a knife.

Cut the vegetables.

Added the herbs.

Mixed the filling.

My hands worked almost on their own.

Like at home.

Like when I cook to forget the rest of the world exists.

For a few seconds, the room, the colleagues, the seminar disappeared.

There was only the board, the knife, the smell of fresh herbs.

Then I looked up.

And everyone was looking at me.

Even the chef.

Even Jade.

And especially...

Lyralda.

Her expression had changed.

Not just a little.

As if something had shifted behind her eyes.

"You cook like that often?"

Her voice was different. Lower. More... attentive.

As if she wasn't only looking for an answer.

I felt myself blush slightly.

"Yes."

Small silence.

Mehdi started laughing.

A real fit of laughter.

“Wait...”

He pointed at the dough.

“The fragile accountant is saving us with homemade ravioli.”

Jade was shaking her head.

“That’s not fair.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought we were going to starve.”

I think it was the first time I saw Lyralda smile openly.

And, strangely, that was almost worth every team-building activity in the world.

“You hide your game well,” Jade added, moving closer to the table.

Her tone was light.

But her gaze... lingered a little too long to be completely harmless.

Not insistent.

Just precise.

“I thought you only knew how to panic in front of Excel.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said very calmly.

One second.

Then, with a very slight smile:

“It’s a compliment.”

I don’t know why... but I had the impression she was talking about something else.

Mehdi leaned over the filling.

“Right. What do we do now, Chef Elliott?”

The chef embarrassed me.

And pleased me.

Which is an emotionally inconvenient combination.

“You can roll out the dough.”

“Oh no,” Jade said. “I’m taking that.”

She had already grabbed the rolling pin.

“I’ve always dreamed of exercising power over flour.”

“Worrying sentence,” Mehdi commented.

Lyralda was still looking at the ingredients with that applied distrust of intelligent people suddenly placed on ground where their usual intelligence is no longer the right one.

I showed her a bowl.

“You can mix this?”

She lowered her eyes toward the bowl.

Then toward me.

A brief moment.

“Is that a real task or are you keeping me busy to avoid a disaster?”

“Both,” I said.

A silence.

Then that slight movement at the corner of her mouth.

Barely visible.

But enough to look like approval.

“Okay.”

She started mixing very seriously, as if the company’s cohesion really depended on a properly homogeneous filling.

It was a little funny.

And a little charming.

Jade was rolling out the dough with far too much energy for someone who claimed to be here only to mock.

"Is it normal if it looks like a floury crime scene?" she asked.

"Yes," Mehdi said.

"No," I said at the same time.

She looked at me.

"We're going to have to choose an authority in this group."

"That'll be me," Mehdi said.

"Certainly not," Lyralda said without looking up from her bowl.

"You see?" Jade whispered. "She discovered a culinary instinct."

"I mostly have a survival instinct," Lyralda replied.

The chef passed by again, looked at the table, then pointed at me with his chin.

"Ah! Here's someone who knows what he's doing."

I immediately felt far too visible.

"A little," I said.

"Not a little," Jade replied. "He's been discreetly humiliating us for ten minutes."

"That's true," Mehdi added. "And with fresh herbs, too."

I think I laughed.

A little.

Not a defensive laugh.

A real laugh.

The chef left us to continue.

I showed Jade how to cut clean circles in the dough.

She leaned a little too close.

Just enough for me to feel her presence before even seeing it.

"Like this?"

"Almost."

"Almost is vexing."

"There, that's better."

"Ah. So I'm coachable."

"That's already good."

She looked up at me.

A small smile.

But not completely light.

"You're coachable too after all, Elliott."

I couldn't tell if she was talking about the ravioli or the rest.

Probably both.

Meanwhile, Lyralda was carefully filling the dough circles.

Very focused.

Very straight.

Very serious.

"You're doing that like you're preparing a litigation file," I said before thinking.

The silence lasted half a second.

Then Mehdi burst out laughing.

Jade too.

And Lyralda looked at me.

Not offended.

Just... surprised.

Then she lowered her eyes to the ravioli.
 "It's roughly the same level of responsibility."
 "False," Mehdi said. "No one cries in front of ravioli."
 "You'd be surprised," Lyralda replied.
 The worst part is that the joke had escaped me on its own.
 That doesn't happen to me so often.
 And the fact that it made everyone laugh left me with a strange feeling.
 Almost light.
 Jade was watching me with a new expression.
 Or maybe I imagined it.
 "So he does have comebacks after all."
 "By accident," I said.
 "The best ones are like that."
 What followed went much better than expected.
 Which is already, in my life, an event.
 Jade turned out to be surprisingly diligent once it involved doing something with her hands, provided she complained a little beforehand. Mehdi commented on everything like a cooking show host on caffeine. Lyralda followed the instructions with almost worrying seriousness, as if she refused to be bad in a field simply because it wasn't hers.
 And me, in the middle, I guided.
 I corrected a shape.
 I tasted a filling.
 I showed how to close the pasta without making everything explode.
 At one point, Jade tried to close one, failed, and the filling overflowed onto her fingers.
 "Look," she said. "It's terrible."
 "It's salvageable."
 "Are you saying that to reassure me?"
 "No. To save the ravioli."
 She gave a small laugh and, without thinking, held her hand out toward me.
 "Fine. Repair it."
 She held out her hand.
 I took it.
 Just to show her.
 Just for the dough.
 But her fingers were still warm.
 And the contact lasted a fraction of a second too long.
 My brain completely lost the thread.
 "There..." I said.
 A little slower than expected.
 "Ah."
 She was watching me do it.
 Not the ravioli.
 Me.
 "That's very domestic," she murmured.
 "What?"
 "Nothing."
 Then she smiled, as if she had just kept something to herself again.

When the ravioli were finally aligned on the tray, the chef returned to inspect them.

“Very good! Very, very good, even.”

He looked at our table with more enthusiasm than any human being should feel in front of raw pasta.

“Beautiful coordination!”

Mehdi placed a hand over his heart.

“Thank you, Chef. We have grown a lot.”

“Especially him,” Jade said, pointing at me.

“Yes,” Mehdi added. “We were mostly here to create a favorable emotional environment.”

“Which means nothing,” Lyralda clarified.

“And yet it’s a very HR sentence,” Jade replied.

“That’s exactly what worries me.”

The chef left for another team.

I wiped my hands on a towel, and for one second, I felt... good.

Not brilliant.

Not transformed.

Just in my place.

Which, honestly, was already huge.

Jade moved closer to the table and observed the ravioli as if she had discovered something slightly annoying.

“This is irritating.”

“What?” Mehdi asked.

“He’s competent. It breaks my character.”

“Your character of what?” Lyralda asked.

“Of a contemptuous woman judging interns from afar.”

“You’re still managing very well,” Mehdi said.

“Thank you.”

Then Jade turned her head toward me.

“Honestly, Elliott... you’re full of surprises.”

The tone was light.

But the look less so.

I think that’s what unsettled me most with her. You never knew exactly when she was completely joking, and when she was letting just a tiny bit more truth pass through.

The class continued in this strangely pleasant atmosphere.

We tasted, corrected, plated, waited. Other teams produced results that were more or less convincing. Mehdi criticized a sauce with the seriousness of a television competition. Mister Delmas came to see where we were, observed our table and then the ravioli, before looking at Lyralda.

“You didn’t injure anyone, that’s already a success.”

“For now,” she replied.

He had that small discreet smile he sometimes had with her. Not intimate. But too easy to be recent. The kind of smile that says: yes, I know exactly how you function.

I don’t know why that caught on me.

Maybe because they seemed to share a language I didn’t understand.

Maybe because I immediately chose the most useless and unpleasant interpretation for myself.

I looked at them for one second.

Then I looked away as if I had just caught something I wasn't supposed to see.

Ridiculous.

And probably false.

But my brain loves making little humiliating scenarios out of almost nothing.

When the meal was finished, the chef finally declared the workshop over. Some of the colleagues went off toward their rooms. Others went straight out onto the terrace overlooking the lake.

The sun had started to go down a little. The light was more golden, less sharp.

I found myself outside with the others, a glass of water in hand, in that strange in-between space between mandatory activity and supervised free time.

Mehdi was already talking with two colleagues from the sales department as if he had known them for fifteen years. Mister Delmas was exchanging a few words with the hotel organizer. Lyralda had placed herself a little apart from the railing, straight, calm, looking like someone who accepted the landscape but not the general principle of the seminar.

Jade had disappeared for a minute.

Then she came back.

And stopped beside me.

A little more than necessary.

"So, Chef."

"Please, no."

"Yes. That's your name now."

"That's awful."

"I find it endearing."

I looked at her.

She was drinking something through a straw, very calmly, as if she hadn't just dropped the word endearing into the air without warning.

As if it had done nothing.

"You're saying a lot of worrying things today."

"And you're not saying enough."

I didn't answer.

The lake was reflecting the light right in front of us. Reflections moved softly near the pontoons. In the distance, we could hear voices, the sound of dishes being put away, a laugh rising from the terrace.

Jade followed my gaze.

"It's pretty."

"Yes."

"You look surprised."

"No."

"Yes."

I sighed.

"I just thought it would be more... ugly."

"That's a beautiful anxious-person compliment."

I think I gave a small laugh.

She turned toward me, slightly.

"There's a little path that goes down to the shore."

"Ah."

"Mm-hmm," she made.

I knew that mm-hmm.

The one that meant she had just decided something.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Small smile.

“Just that you look like you need to see the lake from a little closer to be sure it really intends to kill you.”

“That’s possible.”

“You’ll like it, it’s rather pleasant.”

She lowered her drink, then leaned toward me just enough for her voice to lower too.

“Come with me later.”

My brain immediately ceased all higher activity.

“Sorry?”

“Before dinner.”

She vaguely indicated the water’s edge with a movement of her chin.

“We’ll go see if you’re compatible with nature.”

“Why me?”

“Because I feel like it.”

I stared at her for one second.

She looked serious.

Well... serious in her way. Which is already a very particular category.

“Okay,” I said.

Too fast, obviously.

She had that satisfied smile of people who get exactly what they wanted.

Then she took another sip of her drink as if she hadn’t just asked me to go walk alone with her by a lake at sunset.

Mehdi joined us at that moment.

“Are you plotting?”

“Always,” Jade said.

“I demand to be included.”

“No.”

“That hurts.”

Jade didn’t even bother looking at him.

“You’ll survive.”

I don’t know why, but I felt something stir in my chest at that exact moment.

Not huge.

Just that very clear impression that the end of the afternoon had shifted slightly.

As if something had opened.

Or prepared itself.

I turned toward the lake.

The light slid slowly over the water. Shadows were lengthening near the shore. And somewhere in that ridiculously pretty scene, there was now a later.

With Jade.

Alone.

Chapter 10

By the Water

“See you later.”

I didn’t think it would stay in my head that much.

Especially since Jade was the one who had said it.

I pretended to be normal for a good part of the afternoon. Which, for me, mostly consists of not talking more than necessary, pretending to look at something else, and hoping my face doesn’t give the impression that I’m thinking far too hard about a five-word sentence.

“Come with me later.”

It wasn’t a declaration.

It wasn’t even really a clear invitation, if you wanted to be rigorous.

But there had been something in the way she said it to me, something simple and direct enough for my brain to completely refuse to be reasonable.

The others had ended up scattering a little. Some had gone back up to their rooms, others were still hanging around on the terrace.

Mehdi was talking to three different people at the same time, with that obscene ease of people who could probably start a party in an elevator, while Mister Delmas and Lyralda had disappeared a few minutes earlier.

I had stayed near the railing with an almost empty glass of water in my hand.

The lake reflected the evening light with quiet insolence.

“You look like you’re watching a crime scene,” Jade said behind me.

I turned around.

She had kept her light jacket on, but opened her collar. Her hair moved a little in the cooler late-afternoon air. She wasn’t holding anything, which gave me the impression she had come just for me.

Which was probably false.

Maybe.

“I’m looking at the water,” I said.

“With far too much gravity for someone just looking at water.”

“I’m mentally preparing myself to fall into it.”

“Well then.”

She stood beside me.

“This is serious.”

We stayed a few seconds without talking.

The lake was more beautiful at that hour. Darker too. The light was sliding toward something more golden, softer. The hotel behind us made a faint, distant noise.

Jade finally pointed to the path that went down toward the shore.

“Come.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“And if someone looks for us?”

She turned her head toward me.

“Eliott.”

“Yes?”

“We’re just going to walk fifty meters.”

“Okay.”

“You say that as if I’m taking you to commit a crime.”

“I’m protecting myself from the unknown.”

"That's a very cute way to put it."

I looked at her.

"You're unbearable."

"And yet, you're following me."

I didn't answer.

Because she was right, which was becoming a tiring habit.

We took the small wooden path that went down toward the shore. It ran alongside tall grasses and led to a little pontoon lower down, almost at water level. As we moved away from the terrace, the noises from the hotel became less present.

And very quickly, we found ourselves in a strange bubble.

Not silent.

But more private.

The lake barely moved. Mostly, we could hear the water against the edge, the wood under our steps, and sometimes the wind in the branches behind us.

Jade walked ahead of me without hurrying.

She stopped at the end of the pontoon and looked at the water.

"There."

"There what?"

"I got you off the terrace."

"Thank you, I suppose."

"You're welcome."

She turned halfway toward me, then lowered her eyes to the surface of the lake.

"Honestly, it's pretty."

"Yes."

"You can say something other than yes sometimes."

"I know."

"Show me."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

I looked at the water, then at her.

"It's... very calm."

"Better."

"And it looks less hostile from here."

"Ah, there we go, progress."

She laughed softly.

Not the laugh she has with Mehdi or at the office when she throws a jab and waits for the effect. A smaller laugh, closer. The kind that gives the impression she is really amused, without an audience.

I moved forward to the edge of the pontoon.

The water was very clear near the planks. You could still make out the stones under the surface, a few reflections, tiny ripples.

Jade came closer too.

Very close.

Not pressed against me.

But enough for me to smell that light, sweet perfume again, and for my body to decide to react to that information.

"Right," she said.

"What?"

"Take off your shoes."

I turned toward her.

“Sorry?”

“Your shoes.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to dip your feet in?”

I looked at the lake.

Then at her.

Then at the lake again.

“No.”

“No?”

I knew that tone. The one that meant she wasn’t giving up, that she had, on the contrary, just decided the situation was interesting.

“Why no?”

“Because, first, it’s cold, well, a little. Then, it’s weird. And finally, there are potentially people who could see us.”

“That’s your main argument? People?”

“It’s a very valid argument.”

“I find it sad.”

“Thank you.”

She crossed her arms.

“You know that sometimes, in life, you just have to do something stupid without thinking.”

“That’s usually how my bad memories begin.”

She smiled.

“Then I’ll help you create a better one.”

The sentence caught me off guard.

Not completely romantic.

Not completely neutral either.

Just enough to stay somewhere very uncomfortable for my nervous system.

She bent down, removed her heels without hesitation, and rolled up the bottom of her jeans a little.

Then she put one foot in the water.

“Oh fuck, it’s cold,” she said immediately.

I laughed despite myself.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Your face talks far too much for once.”

She put the other foot in the water and closed her eyes for half a second.

“It’s horrible.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“For the experience.”

She opened her eyes again and looked at me.

“And because I want to watch you hesitate a little longer.”

“That’s mean.”

“Yes.”

She owned it with an almost elegant sincerity.

Jade took two steps into the water, just enough for it to cover her ankles, then turned completely toward me.

The evening light slid over her in a very particular way.

Her hair barely moved in the wind. Her arms were slightly spread to keep her balance. And she was smiling that precise smile, the one she has when she knows very well what she's doing.

I had a very simple thought.

She is beautiful.

Not like an abstract idea.

Not like a practical formula to sum up attraction.

Beautiful in a precise, living, irritating way.

Beautiful enough to make my answers less effective.

"So?" she asked.

"So what?"

"Are you coming or are you going to keep looking at me like I'm a risky social experiment?"

I froze for one second.

"I wasn't looking at you like that."

"Liar."

She was right.

Again.

I crouched down to take off my shoes with the relative dignity of a man who is very aware that he is willingly entering a scene whose tone he absolutely does not control.

"If I slip, I officially blame the sales department."

"That seems fair."

I rolled up my trousers a little, then stopped in front of the water.

"Come here."

Jade took my hands before gently pulling me toward her.

I put one foot in the water and immediately regretted the existence of every lake in the world.

"It's cold!"

"Yes," Jade said with satisfaction. "Welcome to nature."

"I already hate this experience."

"That's false."

"Yes."

"You just hate admitting that you're doing something a little stupid and still somehow alive."

I took two steps forward.

The water bit my ankles with unbearable honesty.

Jade moved closer.

Still with that physical ease that, with her, had something deeply destabilizing. As if my personal space were a flexible notion to her, negotiable, even decorative.

"You see?" she murmured.

"I mostly see that I've lost all feeling in my feet."

"That's normal."

"That's not reassuring."

She laughed.

Then, without warning, she pushed a little water toward me with the tip of her foot.

I looked at her, incredulous.

"You just attacked me, madam!"

"Yes."

"That's very immature."

"Thank you."

I hesitated for one second.

Then I did the same.

Not hard.

Just enough to send a little water back at her.

She jumped.

"Ah!"

"Balance of power."

"Ooh. He rebels?"

"Very slightly."

"I like that."

The sentence fell between us simply.

I didn't answer right away.

Because my brain was busy trying to determine whether she was talking about the water, my gesture, me, or some very irritating mix of all three.

She had moved closer again.

We were at the same height now, feet in the water, almost face to face, in that late-day light that makes everything softer and much more favorable to bad decisions.

"What exactly do you like?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Hearing you ask that like you're on the edge of a crisis."

"Answer anyway."

She tilted her head slightly.

"When you stop pretending to be smoother than you are."

I looked at her.

The lake moved softly around our legs. We could barely hear the hotel anymore. Everything seemed farther away. Even my usual reflexes were having a little trouble catching up with me.

"I don't pretend to be smooth."

"Of course you do."

"No."

"Yes."

"Is contradicting me an obsession for you?"

"It's a public service activity."

I think I smiled.

So did she.

Then the silence came back.

Not an empty silence.

Something denser.

She was really looking at me. No phone, no colleague beside her, no parallel conversation. Just me.

And it was harder to bear than her jabs.

"You're cute when you think too much," she said.

I thought I had misheard.

"Sorry?"

She lifted one shoulder, as if she had just commented on the weather.

"I said you're cute when you think too much."

I think my heart missed something important.

"Ah."

Dazzling.

"Ah?" she repeated.

"I... okay."

"That's a very weak answer."

"I hadn't prepared anything."

She let out a brief laugh.

Then she moved a tiny bit closer.

Not enough for us to really touch.

Just enough for the idea to settle.

"You don't need to prepare much with me, Elliott."

Said like that, my name in her mouth had something far too calm to be honest.

"That's not really reassuring," I murmured.

"Why?"

"Because I feel like you see everything."

She lowered her eyes for one second toward the water.

Then she lifted her head again.

"I don't see everything. I just decide to give my attention."

I was no longer very sure what to do with my hands, my feet, or the rest.

So I looked at the water.

Very bad idea.

Because it made me even more aware of the fact that we were both standing there like a couple from a novel, a little too obvious to be real. At the edge of a lake, half wet, talking too close, in absurd light.

"Do you often say that kind of thing to your colleagues?" I asked.

She smiled immediately.

"Mm-hmm..."

"What?"

"You're jealous of an imaginary group."

"Not at all."

"Yes."

"No."

"A little."

I ran a hand through my hair, already annoyed by my own inability to look normal.

"I'm just asking."

"No. You're checking."

She was right again.

I hated that.

And liked that she saw it.

Jade moved a little in the water, then looked at the sky beginning to change color.

"To answer your question... no."

I turned toward her.

"No what?"

"No, I don't say that to just anyone."

The problem with honesty is that it doesn't leave much room to flee.

I looked at her without saying anything.

She no longer looked like she was half-joking.

Her tone had stayed light, yes.

But not empty.

She took another half-step toward me.

This time, our arms brushed.
Nothing huge.
Nothing I could officially accuse.
But enough for me to feel a clear warmth pass through everything in me still trying to pretend this was an ordinary conversation.
“And you...”
She was smiling again.
“What about me?”
I breathed in.
Very bad plan.
“Do you like me, or is this just a seminar activity?”
She looked at me with an expression I had never seen on her before.
Still amused, yes.
But softer too. More direct.
“The two are compatible,” she said.
I lowered my eyes for half a second.
It didn’t help.
“That’s an answer...”
“It’s a real answer.”
Small silence.
Then she added, much more simply:
“Yes, I like you.”
The lake kept moving as if nothing had happened.
So did the wind.
Someone laughed very far behind us, toward the hotel.
And I had the impression that part of the setting had just shifted by one centimeter.
Not a catastrophe.
Not fireworks.
Just something clear enough to make going back to the previous state impossible.
“Ah,” I said.
She burst out laughing.
“That’s even worse than earlier.”
“You caught me off guard.”
“Good.”
“Why?”
“Because otherwise you would have answered something careful. Polite. Very Elliott-compatible.”
I think I smiled despite myself.
“That’s not false.”
“I know.”
She lowered her eyes toward the water.
“And you?”
Simple question.
Absolutely unbearable.
“Me what?”
“Do I really have to do all the work?”
“Apparently.”
She rolled her eyes, but without losing her smile.
“Do you like me?”

I looked at her.

Really looked.

Her hair. Her face. Her mouth a little too close. The light on her skin. The way she had of holding the moment without breaking it, without looking away, as if she handled the truth very well when it presented itself.

And I was there trying to keep functioning while she was simply asking me to say something obvious.

“Yes,” I said.

She didn’t move.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I like you.”

It came out lower than expected.

But it came out.

Jade had a different smile.

Not wide.

Not triumphant.

Something smaller.

And, for once, almost shy.

“Good,” she murmured.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to be the only one finding this situation weirdly romantic.”

I think my brain briefly left the conversation.

“Ah.”

“You say ah a lot today.”

“I have limited vocabulary under pressure.”

“That’s endearing. I like it when you panic a little.”

“That’s cruel.”

“A little.”

She had said it softly.

Then she turned her head slightly toward the hotel.

The light on the terrace had changed. Dinner wouldn’t be long.

Jade took one step back in the water.

“Right.”

“Right?”

“We should maybe go back up before they send a rescue team.”

“That would be embarrassing.”

“Very.”

We got out of the water in silence.

Not an awkward silence.

We put our shoes back on the pontoon. My hands were a little clumsy, which felt coherent with the fact that the last ten minutes had just made a lot of things more complicated.

Or simpler.

I didn’t know yet.

As we walked back up the path, Jade slowed a little to walk beside me.

“Elliott?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t make that face at dinner.”

“What face?”

“The face of a guy who’s just discovered a girl likes him and it’s mutual.”

“I don’t have that face.”

She laughed.

Then, just before we really reached the terrace again, she briefly caught my wrist.

Just to stop me for one second.

I turned toward her.

She moved closer, very slightly, as if she were going to tell me something important.

“And in case you start doubting by then...”

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t teasing you for nothing from the start.”

Then she let go of my wrist as if it were nothing.

As if she hadn’t left that sentence exactly where she knew it would stay.

And she started walking again.

I followed her, with the very clear impression that I had left something by the water.

Or found something there.

When we came back near the hotel, the voices seemed closer.

So did the evening.

And I already knew I was probably going to think back to that scene far too many times.

What I didn’t know yet, however, was that it takes almost nothing to damage a moment you had barely started to believe was real.

Chapter 11

Evening

The hotel restaurant looked exactly like what I imagine when someone says the words “company dinner.”

Large bay windows opening onto the lake. Warm lights hanging from the ceiling. Round tables covered with white tablecloths, each surrounded by eight perfectly aligned chairs.

Everything was very beautiful.

And slightly intimidating.

Colleagues were arriving in small groups, still a little excited from the cooking workshop. Conversations filled the room with a pleasant hum, the kind made by people who have already had a drink and are starting to relax their shoulders.

I stopped at the entrance for a few seconds.

Observe first. Always observe.

It's a habit I've had for a long time. In a room full of people, watching how groups form is often easier than trying to join one immediately.

What had happened just before, by the water, was still turning in my head with frankly unhelpful persistence.

“Yes, I like you.”

I still didn't know what to do with that sentence.

Or with mine. Or with everything else.

Mehdi spotted me.

“Elliott!”

He was waving from a table already half full.

“Come here! Come here!”

I walked over.

Around the table, there was already Jade, two colleagues from marketing, and a guy from IT whose name I always forgot.

Jade looked up at me.

And smiled immediately.

Not the social smile she easily served people.

Another one.

Smaller. More direct. Almost complicit.

“Elliott!”

She tapped the chair beside her.

“Your official seat.”

Official seat?

No one had told me there was a seating plan.

And yet, said like that, with that tone, it almost sounded like she had saved me a place on purpose.

Which was probably the case.

I sat down.

Very calmly.

Very carefully.

Like someone trying not to look as if he has noticed he may have been expected.

The dinner started quietly.

Fast servers, glasses filling up, baskets of bread circulating.

Mehdi was telling a story about an old seminar that had ended in a karaoke battle between management and HR.

"And I swear," he continued, "Pascal sang Haru Haru."

"No."

"Yes."

"Impossible."

"Ask him."

Laughter moved around the table.

I felt... almost relaxed.

Almost.

Jade leaned slightly toward me.

"You're making that face again."

"What face?"

"The face of a guy trying to look normal with almost academic application."

I looked at her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Then she added, much lower:

"Breathe."

My heart did something very unhelpful.

And then she placed her hand on my thigh.

Just like that. Naturally.

As if it were the most logical place in the world.

I froze immediately.

Not visibly.

Just inside.

She kept talking with someone from marketing, completely absorbed in the conversation.

"No but seriously, you should see the clients we sometimes have..."

Her hand stayed there.

Warm. Lightly placed. Not heavy. Not accidental either.

As if it had always been in that spot.

As if she were testing the distance she could take with me without the world collapsing around us.

I looked at my glass.

Breathe normally.

Above all, don't say anything.

Above all, don't draw attention to the situation.

My brain oscillated between two opposite thoughts:

Don't move.

and

Why aren't you moving?

The worst part was that she didn't seem to notice.

Or else she was perfectly aware.

I couldn't decide which was more destabilizing.

"Elliott?"

I looked up.

A colleague from marketing was looking at me.

"What exactly are you working on right now?"

"Bank reconciliations."

"Ah."

He made a respectful grimace.

“Good luck.”

Jade removed her hand to grab her glass.

My body relaxed immediately.

I hadn’t even realized how tense I was.

She took a sip, then turned her head slightly toward me.

“You’re all red.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“The lighting.”

“Of course.”

The main course arrived. Conversations multiplied. So did the alcohol. The room was becoming louder, more alive.

Jade leaned toward me.

“Are you having fun?”

“Yes.”

“You’re bad at lying.”

“I’m practicing.”

She smiled.

Then her gaze slid behind me.

Her face changed by one millimeter.

Not enough to alarm anyone.

Enough for me to see it.

“Ah.”

She put down her glass.

I turned slightly.

A guy from the sales department had just entered the room.

Tall. Very sure of himself. The kind of person who seems perfectly in his place everywhere.

And unfortunately, the kind of person who, even from a distance, already gives the impression of having had positive results far too often by simply being tall and sure of himself.

Jade sighed very slightly.

So slightly I almost thought I imagined it.

“Will you excuse me for two seconds...?”

“Yes.”

She stood up.

But before leaving, she briefly placed her hand on my shoulder.

A short gesture.

Almost discreet.

Then she leaned a little closer to me, just enough that only I could hear:

“Don’t move.”

My brain ceased all useful activity.

“Sorry?”

“I’ll be back.”

And she left.

I watched her join the guy.

They started talking immediately.

Then a second man came over. Then a colleague. Then someone else.

Very quickly, it looked like the kind of social circle Jade enters easily, even when she doesn’t seem particularly thrilled about it.

She smiled.

Answered.

Made a remark.

But something in her seemed a little tenser than usual. As if she was doing the minimum social work. As if she sometimes looked toward our side before remembering she was still stuck there.

Of course, my brain retained absolutely none of that nuance.

I looked away.

Mehdi was watching me.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t make that face.”

“What face?”

“The face of a guy interpreting everything.”

I didn’t answer.

He raised his glass.

“People are complicated.”

“I know.”

“But that’s what makes life interesting.”

“I’m not convinced yet.”

“You will be.”

He smiled.

“Maybe not tonight.”

The dinner continued.

But something had changed.

Jade was now laughing with the sales guy at the other end of the room. Or pretending well enough that the difference was inaccessible to me. Other men had attached themselves to the conversation like very pleased satellites.

And I had that familiar sensation.

Becoming a little transparent.

As if the room was moving forward without me.

As if I had simply misread a parenthesis that wasn’t really meant for me.

I looked at my phone.

A notification.

Aïcha.

I frowned. The message was short.

“I think we should talk less.”

Huh?

But why?

I stayed for a few seconds staring at the screen.

I didn’t even know what to answer.

I put the phone down.

The noise around me suddenly seemed much louder.

I looked one last time in Jade’s direction.

She was still talking with the others.

At one point, she turned her head as if looking for me.

I lowered my eyes too quickly.

Perfect.

I now had the emotional elegance of a damp curtain.

I stood up.

"I'll be back."
Mehdi raised an eyebrow.
"Everything okay?"
"Yes."
"Liar."
I smiled.
"Just need some air."
The terrace behind the restaurant was almost empty.
Night had fallen over the lake. The black water reflected the hotel lights, like little
trembling stars.
The air was cold.
It was cold.
The wind was cold.
I placed my hands on the railing.
Breathe. Again. Always.
I ran a hand through my hair.
My phone vibrated in my pocket.
I didn't take it out.
I stayed there for a few seconds.
Maybe a minute.
I didn't know.
Then a voice behind me said:
"What are you doing out here?"
I turned around.
Lyralda.
She closed the glass door behind her.
"You're going to catch cold, Elliott."
I shrugged.
"Too bad, that's life."
She looked at me for a few seconds.
Silent.
Then she came closer.
"You have the face of a guy trying not to think."
I looked away toward the lake.
"I'm fine."
"Yes."
Pause.
"Of course."
I could feel her gaze on me.
I didn't want to talk.
Didn't want to explain.
Didn't want to admit that something was touching me more than it should.
So I simply said:
"It's nothing."
She stayed there.
The wind moved the lake water slightly.
And I knew she wasn't the type to believe the word nothing.
The lake was almost black now.
The light from the restaurant behind us drew a warm strip across the terrace, but
a few meters farther, everything became calm, cold, silent again.

I looked at the water.

It was easier than looking at Lyralda.

She had stopped beside me, arms crossed, as if she were observing the same thing as me. But I could feel very well that she wasn't really looking at the lake.

She was looking at me.

"So?"

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

"So what?"

"Are you going to keep pretending everything is fine?"

I sighed softly.

"I'm not pretending."

"Yes."

Her voice stayed calm.

Not accusatory.

Just... certain.

"You left the table."

"I needed air."

"And you have the face of a guy who wants to disappear."

I let out a small laugh without humor.

"That's my normal face."

"No."

I turned my head toward her.

"Are you always this direct?"

"Yes."

"That must be practical."

"It avoids wasting time."

I looked back at the water.

The wind made the restaurant reflections tremble on the lake's surface.

"It's nothing," I repeated.

She didn't answer right away.

Then she leaned against the railing beside me.

"You know what I like about you?"

I frowned slightly.

"What?"

"You're a very bad liar."

I didn't know if that was a compliment.

The silence lasted a few seconds.

Not an awkward silence.

More the kind that appears when someone is waiting for you to speak without pushing too hard.

I passed a hand over my forehead.

"It's stupid."

"Often."

"Thank you."

"Continue."

I breathed out through my nose.

"Jade."

She nodded slightly.

"Yes."

"She was... I don't know."

I was searching for my words.

"Close."

"And?"

"And now she's talking with someone else as if I were... nothing."

I regretted the sentence immediately.

Because saying that kind of thing out loud always gives the impression of being much more fragile than you would like to admit.

Lyralda didn't react right away.

She was still looking at the lake.

Then she simply said:

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

I turned toward her.

"You could at least pretend to cheer me up."

"Why?"

"Because that's what people normally do."

She finally looked at me.

"What do you want me to say?"

I shrugged.

"That it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter."

"There."

"There?"

I shook my head slightly.

"You're terrible."

"I'm honest."

She placed her elbows on the railing.

"She's like that."

"Thank you."

"It's the truth."

"I suspected."

She paused, then added in a more precise tone:

"Well... not exactly like that."

I looked at her.

"Sorry?"

"She likes pleasing people. She likes attracting people. She likes seeing what she provokes."

Small silence.

"But tonight, she was mostly trying to manage annoying people without looking like she was sending them off to die."

I stared at her for one second.

"Ah."

"Yes."

"And she could have just come back to the table."

"Yes."

"But she didn't."

Lyralda observed me.

“No.”

The answer stung anyway.
Because it was too simple to be comforting.
I turned toward the water.

“Okay.”

“Do you want me to lie to you a little here?”

“Maybe.”

She almost smiled.

“No.”

I let out a breath through my nose.

“Great.”

“I prefer being useful.”

“That’s debatable.”

She turned her head slightly toward me.

“She’s interested in you.”

I froze.

“What?”

“You heard me perfectly well.”

“And you’re saying that now?”

“Yes.”

“Is that supposed to help?”

“Not necessarily. But it’s true.”

I no longer knew where to look.
The lake. The railing. My hands.
Anywhere except her.

“Then why...”

“Because she’s like that.”

“Meaning?”

“Loud. Disorderly. Very social. Very playful. Sometimes sincere and contradictory in the same minute.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“It’s tiring, but not always false.”

I stayed silent.

Because all of that sounded far too much like Jade to ignore.

Then Lyralda continued:

“And you make the opposite mistake.”

“Which one?”

“You take everything as if it were definitive.”

The wind blew between us.

I lowered my eyes.

Because deep down, she was right. Again.

“Aïcha sent me a message earlier.”

“The girl from your class?”

I looked at her.

“You have a worrying memory.”

“It’s my job.”

“She told me we should talk less.”

“She’s probably right.”

“Why?”

"I don't know, but we all have a life we don't want to talk about. Or rather, one we can't."

I sighed.

"Great."

"Why does that annoy you?"

"Because I just want to be normal with normal relationships."

"No."

"No?"

"You're trying to be accepted."

The sentence fell softly.

But it landed exactly where it should.

I lowered my eyes.

"That's not a crime."

"No."

"Then?"

She lifted one shoulder slightly.

"But it rarely works."

I stayed silent.

Because deep down... I already knew it.

The wind was getting a little colder.

Lyralda shivered slightly.

"We should go back inside."

I didn't move.

"In a minute."

She stayed.

Silent.

Then she said:

"You know what annoys me?"

"What?"

"People who feel invisible when they aren't."

I looked up at her.

"That's very specific."

"Yes."

"Why?"

She hesitated.

Just an instant.

Then she answered:

"Because I saw you today."

I frowned slightly.

"When?"

"Today."

"The workshop?"

"Yes."

She straightened a little.

"You were completely different."

"Different how?"

"Present."

I wasn't expecting that.

She continued:

“You weren’t looking at the floor. You weren’t thinking about what others thought. You were just doing something you knew how to do.”

I stayed silent.

“It was... good.”

Small pause.

“And cute.”

The compliment was simple.

But coming from her, it had a strange weight.

I didn’t know what to say.

So I looked back at the lake.

The glass door of the restaurant opened behind us.

Laughter spilled into the night. Music too.

The evening continued inside.

Lyralda looked at the light for a few seconds.

Then she turned toward me, before holding out her hand.

“Coming?”

“Yes.”

I took her hand, before staying one last second on the terrace.

Then she added, almost like a thought:

“And for what it’s worth...”

I looked at her.

“What?”

“I understand why you like her.”

I think my heart missed a movement.

“Sorry?”

She was still looking ahead.

Not at me.

The lake.

The lights.

Anything except me, exactly.

“Jade,” she said. “I understand.”

Her voice was calm.

Too calm.

“She’s brilliant. Funny. Very beautiful when she wants something.”

I had absolutely no idea what to do with that sentence.

And before I could answer, she added:

“But you should be careful not to confuse someone looking at you with someone seeing you.”

The silence that followed didn’t have quite the same texture anymore.

I turned my head toward her.

This time, she was looking at me.

Really.

And for one second, I had the absurd impression that she was no longer only talking about Jade.

The wind lifted a strand of hair near her face. She pushed it behind her ear with a simple, precise gesture, and I caught myself thinking that she was beautiful too.

Not in the same way.

Not like Jade.

Harder to notice.

Harder to forget.

“Do you often say that kind of thing to people when they’re not doing well?”
She almost smiled.
“Never.”
I didn’t know if that was good news.
Or bad.
Just something that stayed there, between us, with far too much space to be ignored.
The restaurant door opened again behind us. A burst of voices. A laugh. Glasses being moved.
Lyralda let one second pass, then reached toward me.
Not much.
Just the tips of her fingers very briefly catching my sleeve, at the wrist.
A tiny gesture.
Almost nothing.
But enough to completely stop my breathing for half a second.
“Come on,” she said.
She had already let go of the fabric.
As if that contact had never existed.
As if it were just a way to get me moving again.
I followed her.
The warmth of the restaurant wrapped around us immediately.
The noise, the conversations, the clinking glasses.
The evening resumed.
I lifted my eyes almost by reflex.
Jade was still farther away in the room, still stuck in her small social circle. And at that same moment, she saw me come back.
Her gaze stopped on me.
Then on Lyralda right beside me.
Just one second.
No more.
But enough for something to pass over her face.
Very discreet.
Almost invisible.
I didn’t have time to understand what.
Lyralda had already resumed that quiet way of moving as if nothing had ever trembled.
But something had changed.
I didn’t know exactly what.
Maybe just the fact that, for the first time since the beginning of the seminar...
I no longer felt completely alone in the room.
And maybe also that the lake wasn’t the only place where I had left something behind that evening.

Chapter 12

First Scene

The warmth of the restaurant took hold of me again all at once.

The noise too.

The conversations. The glasses. The cutlery. The small social theater of the seminar, still in progress, as if no one had gone out onto a terrace to be told things far too precise for the end of an evening.

Lyralda took her place back in the room with that strange ease some adults have for putting their exact face back in the right place, at the right time. I felt more like I had come back with an entire lake in my chest.

Jade was still at the other end of the room.

She was laughing with the others. The sales guy, a girl from HR, two people from marketing. The kind of circle where people speak loudly to show they're having a good time, then eventually start believing it.

When she saw us come back, her gaze stopped on me.

Then on Lyralda.

Then back on me.

Very brief.

Not enough to call it a scene.

Just enough for me to become immediately too aware of my arms, my legs, my head, everything.

She sketched a smile. Maybe hurt.

Something hard to read. As if she were already filing something away in a mental folder titled: fine, okay.

Then someone spoke to her again and she turned her head.

It was over. Well, no.

Nothing was over.

That was exactly the problem.

Mehdi saw us come back and immediately raised his glass.

"Ah! The runaway. And he even brought back a lady."

"We were getting some air," Lyralda said, sitting down again.

"Of course," Mehdi answered, with that very clear tone of people who do not believe a single word of what they have just heard, but decide to respect the lie out of elegance.

I sat down too.

Very carefully. Very calmly.

As if I still knew how to sit normally at a table after wanting to kiss too many people in front of a lake.

Dinner resumed.

Or rather, it continued without me for a few minutes.

I answered when people spoke to me. I drank water. I pretended to follow an anecdote about an old client who had tried to pass off a budget mistake as "a creative adjustment."

Mehdi commented on everything. The IT guy laughed loudly. The marketing colleagues had started leaning toward one another with that artificially relaxed closeness of people who have passed the first glass.

Jade eventually came back to the table.

Not beside me.

Across from me, slightly at an angle.

And that was worse, in a way. Because I could see her very easily.

She still spoke to me. Still teased me. But something had changed. Not coldness. Not a clear distance.

More like... a decision.

As if she were leaving me alone.

As if she had chosen not to put her finger exactly where things could start becoming ambiguous again.

I wasn't sure I wanted to understand that in the moment.

At one point, Mehdi was telling another absurd story, and Jade said:

"Honestly, at this rate, tomorrow Eliott is going to end up as the official mascot of the seminar."

"No thank you," I said.

"Too late," Mehdi replied. "You already have the profile."

"What profile?"

"The profile of someone people want to protect a little and bother a lot."

Jade smiled into her glass.

Lyralda, beside me, said nothing.

But I felt her gaze slide for one second too long over my hand resting near the fork.

Or maybe I imagined it.

Which, with me, always remains a serious possibility.

When dessert arrived, the room had become louder. People were circulating more freely between tables. A small group had already moved toward the improvised bar in the corner of the room.

Mister Delmas was talking with two managers near the bay windows.

Lyralda was drinking her coffee.

Jade was talking with the girl from marketing, and I could see very clearly that she was only half listening. Her gaze sometimes came back toward our table. Then left. Then came back again.

That should not have reassured me.

And yet.

The real problem came later.

Not spectacular.

Not dramatic.

Just stupid.

We were slowly getting up from the table, the groups reforming into small circles. People were speaking more freely, louder.

The kind of moment where everyone pretends the company part of the evening is over, when really it just continues differently.

I had ended up standing near a column with my glass of juice in my hand, observing, again.

And that was when an HR manager I had barely heard all trip came over to talk to me. A man in his forties, very polite, very smooth, with that smile of people who ask professional questions even outside the office.

"Hello! Or rather, good evening! You're Eliott, Pascal's work-study student? He told me about you."

"Hello, sir, yes, nice to meet you."

"Is your work-study going well? Don't hesitate to come see me if you run into any problem, that's my job after all."

Then, before I had time to answer, he asked me what I wanted to do “later,” with that very adult, very serious tone, as if I was supposed to have a plan.
As if people my age all had a well-organized inner document titled “life project.”
I think that was when I started to disconnect.
Not visibly. Internally.
The seminar.
Jade.
Aicha.
The message.
Lyralda on the terrace.
The people around.
Everything started making a little too much noise in my head again.
When the HR guy left, I wanted to get out of my own skin.
I went to the bar to get a drink.
Very bad idea.
Not because I was dead drunk two minutes later.
Not at all.
I was probably still very sober on the scale of a company seminar.
But just tired enough, shaken enough, scattered enough for my brain to start considering certain impulses plausible.
Lyralda found me near the indoor terrace.
“Running away again?” she asked.
“I’m moving around.”
“Weak nuance.”
I looked at her.
She had taken off her jacket. Her shirt was a little less strict than at the beginning of the evening. A strand of hair had escaped near her temple. She still had that calm way of standing, but I could feel a more human tiredness in her. More visible.
“Can I ask you a question?” I asked.
“You can always try.”
“How do you do it?”
“Do what?”
“To... be like that.”
She frowned slightly.
“Like... that?”
I gestured vaguely at her entire being, which was not a very brilliant rhetorical strategy.
“Stable.”
She looked at me for two seconds.
Then she let out a small breath.
Not a laugh. More like an amused observation.
“I’m not stable, Elliott.”
“Yes, you are.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“You know me very badly.”
That was probably true.
And yet.
I think that was exactly what bothered me.

The fact that I knew her so little and still wanted to move toward her as if she represented something more solid than the rest.

We stayed for a while in the corridor leading to the rooms.

Away from the noise, but not completely isolated either.

Just that strange in-between hotels have at night: thick carpet, dim light, and calm silence.

Lyralda leaned against the wall.

“Did you drink too much?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Elliott.”

“Yes?”

“You answer yes very quickly to things that suit you.”

I lowered my eyes.

“I’m fine.”

“No.”

I think that was when I truly started making nonsense happen.

Not by falling.

Not by saying scandalous things.

No.

Much more subtly.

I said:

“Can I sleep with you?”

Silence.

A real one.

Long.

The kind of silence where you can distinctly hear your own future collapsing into several very neat pieces.

Lyralda looked at me.

Not shocked.

Not outraged.

Just... very attentive.

“Sorry?” she said calmly.

I closed my eyes for one second.

“There. That was a horrible idea. Forget it.”

“Wait.”

That word froze me in place.

She straightened away from the wall.

“What exactly do you mean?”

Very good question.

I should have thought about it before.

“Nothing... I mean...”

I ran a hand through my hair.

“I don’t want to be alone,” I finally said.

The truth, when it comes out, sometimes tastes much more stupid than expected.

I hated myself for about three and a half seconds.

Lyralda did not mock me.

She just leaned toward me.

"You should maybe avoid making that kind of decision when you've been drinking."

"I barely drank anything."

"You say that like someone who could still be at 0.6."

"That's very precise."

"I'm used to people lying to themselves a little at night."

I think I gave a small nervous laugh.

"I assure you, it's not like we can know for sure."

"Of course we can. You just blow into a breathalyzer."

"You're really going to make me blow into..."

"Yes, yes."

"You have that in your room?"

"Obviously."

I looked at her.

"You're terrifying."

"I'm organized."

And the worst part was that she didn't even look like she was completely joking.

We ended up in her room anyway.

Because she said, very calmly:

"Come on. First we'll check if you can stand upright."

Which was neither a no, nor really a yes, but a very... her answer.

Her room looked like mine, with the same light tones, the same bay window, the same lake behind it.

Except she, obviously, had already managed to bring something more orderly into it. Her jacket folded over a chair. Her things put away. No orphan socks near the bed, no half-empty water bottle in a corner.

She placed a small white device on the desk.

I blinked.

"You really had a breathalyzer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a responsible adult surrounded by irresponsible people."

"I feel targeted."

"That's normal."

She handed it to me.

"Blow."

I did.

Very dignified. Very sober.

The number appeared.

She looked at it.

"0.18."

"You see!"

"What I see is mostly that you drank when you were already a little emotionally off your feet."

"That's a very aggressive sentence. Admit you were wrong!"

"No. And it's a very accurate sentence."

Then she put the device back on the table.

"Right."

"Right?"

"You're clearly not drunk."

"Thank you for this victory."

"But you still look like a boy who is going to think far too much if he goes back to his room alone."

I said nothing.

Because it was true.

Obviously.

She sighed softly.

"Okay."

I looked at her.

"Okay what?"

"You can stay a little."

The sentence warmed me far more than it should have.

"A little?"

"Don't take advantage."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking very loudly."

That wasn't false.

We settled on the bed.

Not against the headboard, not in some ridiculous romantic-movie position. Just sitting, side by side, with a still reasonable distance between us.

At first, we talked about almost nothing.

The cooking chef. Mehdi, who would probably wake the whole floor if he decided to tell another anecdote at one in the morning. Mister Delmas, who was surely sleeping with a schedule under his pillow.

Jade too, very briefly.

"She seems less... sharp tonight," I said.

"She understood something."

"What?"

Lyralda gave me a sideways look.

"Think a little."

I didn't insist.

Because part of me was starting to understand, and the other part did not want to look at the information too directly.

The silence came back. Not bad. Just full.

I looked at my hands. The bed. The edge of the duvet. Anything except her, which was an increasingly absurd effort considering we were both in a hotel room at what was probably an unreasonable hour, after an already far too heavy evening.

"Eliott."

"Yes?"

"Look at me."

Very bad sentence for my stability.

I did anyway.

She was turned toward me, one arm folded on the bed, still looking calm.

But less closed than usual.

More readable, maybe.

"You're still panicking," she said.

"A little."

"Why?"

I wondered which answer lied the least.

I found one.

"Because I'm doing nonsense."

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"But not only that."

She took a second.

"Mostly, you do things without knowing what to do with them afterward."

I lowered my eyes.

That was unpleasantly accurate.

Then I felt her hand on my wrist.

Simple.

Light.

Nothing spectacular.

But enough to make me raise my head.

"Here, for example," she said.

"What?"

"You're already thinking about tomorrow when you're not even capable of staying in now."

I didn't know what to answer.

So I did what I often do when I have no clean answer left.

I told the truth a little crookedly.

"Would you kiss me, now?"

The silence fell again.

Again.

At this point, I should have been banned from speaking after 10 p.m.

Lyralda did not remove her hand.

She simply looked at me.

"You ask very stupid questions tonight."

"Sorry."

"Why do you apologize all the time?"

"It's a reflex."

"A bad reflex."

Then she moved closer.

Not fast.

Not like in a movie.

Not with that dramatic urgency of scenes written to make the music rise.

Just... naturally.

As if, since we had already come this far, stepping back would have been more absurd than anything else.

And she kissed me.

It wasn't a big overwhelming kiss.

Not something wild.

Not something that overturned everything.

It was better.

Something simple, soft, very real.

The kind of kiss that doesn't need to do too much to shift exactly what it needs to.

When she pulled back, she stayed very close.

I think I had stopped breathing normally.

"There," she murmured.

"There?"

"Yes."

“What is that an answer to?”

She smiled.

“To your very stupid question.”

I think I gave a tiny laugh.

And then I kissed her back.

This time a little less clumsily.

At least, I hope.

My internal evaluation criteria were no longer very reliable.

After that, something loosened.

Not completely.

But enough for the rest to become simpler.

We lay down again.

Not on top of each other.

Not in a very adult novel sequence.

Just closer. Under the duvet. In that hotel-room warmth that makes gestures smaller, voices lower, questions less urgent.

At one point, I found myself with her arm around me.

Or the other way around.

I don't really remember.

I only know we barely spoke anymore.

That her breathing was calm.

That my head had settled somewhere against her without either of us commenting on it.

And that, for the first time in a long while, my brain had finally slowed a little.

“You see,” she murmured in the dark.

“What?”

“You didn't need to complicate it that much.”

I closed my eyes.

“I know.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“You don't know.”

Her hand moved very slightly on my back.

A slow gesture.

Almost absent.

But enough to give me the strange impression of being kept somewhere.

“Sleep,” she said.

And this time, I obeyed.

Because I was tired.

Because I felt good.

Because thinking any more would probably have broken something.

I fell asleep like that.

Chapter 13

Breakfast

When I woke up, morning light was already filling the room.

A soft, slightly pale light, passing through the large bay window and drawing a clear band across the wooden floor.

For a few seconds, I stayed still.

Just breathing.

Listening to the silence of the room.

Then I remembered.

The previous evening.

The corridor.

The bed.

The kiss.

The way she had told me to sleep as if it were a perfectly reasonable instruction, and not the most troubling thing anyone had said to me in a long time.

My heart made a small strange movement in my chest.

I turned my head slightly.

The bed beside me was empty.

For one second, I thought she had left.

Then I heard the television.

Low volume.

A documentary voice.

I sat up.

Lyralda was sitting at the end of the bed, wrapped in the duvet, her legs folded under her. She was watching the television with almost comic concentration.

She hadn't seen me move yet.

On the screen, a gray animal was moving in slow motion through a tree.

A sloth.

“In the depths of the forests of Central and South America, the sloth leads a life suspended between sky and earth.

Its metabolism is so slow that it can spend hours, sometimes days, barely moving.

This slowness is not a weakness: it is a survival strategy. By moving as little as possible and blending in with the moss and algae growing on its fur, the sloth becomes almost invisible to predators.

In this world where everything seems to go too fast, the sloth reminds us that surviving can simply mean taking your time.”

Lyralda grabbed the remote.

“Look at that.”

Her voice was still a little hoarse.

She turned her head toward me.

“Look.”

I blinked.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Elliott.”

She pointed at the screen.

“There's a documentary about sloths.”

I looked at the animal. It was moving so slowly I had the impression the television had frozen.

“That's fascinating.”

I let out a small laugh at her comment.

“That’s your first reaction this morning?”

“Yes.”

She looked back at the screen.

“Do you see the speed?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to live like that.”

I ran a hand through my hair.

“Suspended from a tree?”

“Without obligations.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“Without meetings too.”

“That holds up.”

The sloth kept moving with an almost philosophical slowness.

Lyralda commented calmly.

“Look at its claws.”

“Yes.”

“That’s practical.”

I was looking at her. The duvet had slipped a little over her shoulder. Her hair was slightly messy. She looked incredibly normal.

And that thought suddenly made me nervous.

Because the previous evening had not been some absurd accident or some blurry moment we could easily file under: well, we’d been drinking, it was the seminar, let’s not talk about it.

It was worse than that. It was simple.

I got up.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting coffee.”

She didn’t even look away from the screen.

“Good idea.”

The small capsule machine was waiting on the desk like a scientific device designed solely to save mornings that are too short.

Two capsules. Perfect.

I started two coffees.

While the machine ran, I opened the bag of croissants on the table. They were slightly warm.

I should be able to do something with them anyway.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“What is there?”

“Croissants.”

“Then yes.”

There were little packets of butter, jam, honey, and sugar.

Right, here we go, breakfast will be simple...

HOTEL-STYLE FILLED CROISSANTS

An impromptu breakfast made with what you'll find in almost any hotel room: croissants, a few pats of butter and some jam, and a good cup of coffee. Simple, quick, and surprisingly satisfying when you have neither a kitchen nor the patience to cook.

Prepare time

3 minutes

Cook time

0 minutes

Ingredients (serves 2)

2 croissants
2 portions of butter
2 small jars of jam
2 cups of coffee
(optional) a little honey or sugar

Preparation

ut the croissants in half lengthwise.

Spread the butter while they're still slightly warm. It should start to melt immediately; if it doesn't, you've waited too long.

Add a layer of jam. Don't be afraid to be generous: this is the only time of day when no one judges your food choices.

Gently close the croissant and press just enough so the filling spreads out.

Serve with a freshly brewed cup of coffee.

Tip

If the croissant is a little dry, place it near the still-warm coffee maker for a few seconds. It's not an oven, but it's often enough to restore some of its dignity.

“Breakfast is ready.”

Lyralda was still watching the sloth.

“That animal lives twenty years.”

“Impressive.”

“Without ever hurrying.”

I placed the cups on the small table near the bed.

Then the croissants.

When I turned around, she was looking at me.

Not the television.

Me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She grabbed a cup.

“It’s strange.”

“What?”

“You.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, at a distance I hoped was normal and which, because of that, did not feel normal at all.

“Thank you.”

She took a sip.

“Strange is good.”

I frowned.

“Explain.”

She looked at me for a few seconds.

Then she simply said:

“You make me all nervous.”

I stayed silent.

The coffee was warm in my hand. The documentary continued quietly. The sloth still looked like it had chosen the smartest option when facing existence.

“Sorry,” I finally said.

She shook her head.

“No.”

A small smile appeared.

“That’s good.”

I looked at her.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

She put down her cup.

“You make me nervous too.”

Silence fell between us again.

A light silence. Almost comfortable.

We ate croissants while watching the documentary.

The sloth had changed trees.

Or maybe it was another sloth.

I didn’t know.

I was mostly looking at Lyralda.

She probably knew.

“Look.”

“What?”

“It sleeps fifteen hours a day.”

“A life model.”
“Exactly.”
I smiled.
And for a few seconds...
everything seemed simple.
Almost too simple.
Then someone knocked on the door.
Three quick knocks.
We both froze.
I immediately felt my stomach knot.
Lyralda raised an eyebrow, then whispered to me:
“Are you expecting someone?”
“No.”
Another knock.
A voice behind the door.
“Hey, Lyralda!”
Jade.
“The seminar is still going on, you know?!”
Pause.
“Are you dead or what?”
My heart dropped straight into my stomach.
I stood up too quickly.
“Shit.”
Lyralda was looking at me.
“Calm down.”
But I could already feel the panic coming back.
That familiar sensation.
The shame.
The embarrassment.
Everything that had disappeared for a few hours came back brutally.
“I’m coming!” I called out, far too fast.
I grabbed my things at random.
Lyralda watched the scene.
Silent.
I opened the door.
Jade was standing in the corridor, a coffee in hand.
She looked at me.
Froze for half a second.
Then quickly looked into the room behind me.
Her smile stretched slightly.
Not hurt.
Not broken.
More the kind of smile that says: ah, okay, I see.
“Oh... fuck, you absolute lunatic,” she said, looking over my shoulder.
I turned halfway around.
Lyralda hadn’t moved. Still sitting in bed. Still wrapped in the duvet. Still perfectly calm.
Jade took another sip of coffee, then turned her attention back to me.
“Hi, handsome.”
“Hi.”

"This isn't your room, is it?"

I shrugged with the elegance of a man caught existing...

"Uh..."

"You disappeared yesterday."

Her gaze slid once more behind me, then came back to me.

Then she smiled a little more frankly, but this time, that smile wasn't really for me.

It was for Lyralda.

"The activity starts in twenty minutes."

"Okay."

"You'd better come. The other one too."

Still that casual little tone. Still that coffee in hand. Still that calm face.

But I could see very well that she had understood far more things than I had.

And that she was already reorganizing her position in the story.

"Otherwise Mehdi's going to think I killed you..."

I tried to laugh.

"I'm coming."

She pretended to leave, then turned back for one second.

Her gaze moved from me to Lyralda.

And there, for the first time, her expression let something truer pass through. No resentment. No anger.

Just a small regret, a little vexed.

Like someone inwardly admitting she should have played with fire less and said things more honestly earlier.

"It's okay, Elliott," she said.

Then she left.

I closed the door again.

When I turned around, Lyralda was looking at me.

Still sitting in bed.

Still calm.

But I could feel that something had changed.

The simplicity from earlier had cracked.

I ran a hand through my hair.

"I should go."

She nodded.

"Yes. You need to get ready."

I picked up my things.

My brain was already spinning too fast.

What had I done?

Why had I done it?

Why had everything seemed normal this morning?

And above all...

what did it mean?

I could already feel my stomach tightening.

A mistake.

A huge mistake.

I looked at Lyralda one last time.

She was still there.

Calm.

But I had already started closing myself off.

And I knew exactly what my brain was going to do now.

Convince me, slowly, methodically, that I had made a monumental mistake.

I changed quickly.

Too quickly.

As if staying one more minute in that room might make the situation even more complicated.

Lyralda hadn't moved.

She was still sitting in bed, the coffee cup in her hands, her eyes resting on me with that hard-to-read expression she sometimes had.

Not cold.

Not really soft.

Just attentive.

"You're panicking."

I was buttoning my shirt.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

She put the cup on the table.

"Eliott."

I looked up.

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what again?"

She tilted her head slightly.

"Locking yourself inside your head."

I sighed.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're running away."

"I'm just going to the seminar."

"You're still running away."

I picked up my bag.

"It's just... complicated."

She stayed silent for a few seconds.

Then she said calmly:

"No."

I looked up.

"No?"

"It's not complicated."

"Yes, it is."

"No."

She looked me straight in the eyes.

"You complicate everything."

I let out a small nervous laugh.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She finally stood up.

The duvet slipped onto the bed.

I looked away one second too late, with that slight embarrassed floating feeling of someone realizing he has missed an obvious detail from the beginning.

"We spent the night together."

She spoke as if stating an administrative fact.

"Yes."

"This morning, you made me coffee."

"Yes."

"We watched a fascinating documentary."

"Yes."

She lifted one shoulder.

"There."

I stayed silent.

Because presented like that... it seemed almost ordinary.

Too ordinary.

And that was exactly what scared me.

She came closer.

Not too close.

Just enough for me to feel her presence.

"What exactly are you worried about?"

I looked at my shoes.

"Everything."

She sighed softly.

"Very precise."

"It was a bad idea."

"What?"

"Last night."

She stayed still.

Then:

"Why?"

I shrugged.

"Because."

"Bad answer."

I passed a hand over my face.

"Because it complicates things."

"What things?"

"Work, the seminar, people."

She thought for a few seconds.

Then she said:

"Jade."

I didn't answer.

That was answer enough.

Lyralda crossed her arms.

"So."

"So what?"

"You think sleeping with me was a mistake?"

I tensed.

"That's not it."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

I breathed out.

"You love being right."

"Yes."

"It's annoying."

"Thank you."

She moved one step closer.

“Eliott.”

I looked up.

“It wasn’t a mistake, and nothing happened.”

I shook my head.

“You’re saying that now.”

“I’m saying it now.”

“And tomorrow?”

She lifted one shoulder.

“Tomorrow, we’ll see.”

That answer disarmed me completely.

“You’re incredible.”

“I know.”

I let out a laugh despite myself.

The tension dropped slightly.

But only on the surface.

Deep inside, the machine was already still turning.

The scenarios.

The judgments.

The colleagues’ looks.

Jade.

The seminar.

The return to the office.

Everything was suddenly becoming too real.

“I should go.”

“Yes.”

She didn’t try to stop me.

Not this time.

I picked up my bag.

I walked past her.

My hand brushed the door handle.

Then her voice caught up with me.

“Eliott.”

I turned around.

She was still in the middle of the room.

Calm.

“Stop believing everything you touch is bound to break.”

I stayed still.

“Because it’s not true.”

I didn’t answer.

Because I wasn’t sure I believed it.

The hotel corridor was silent.

I walked fast.

Too fast.

As if putting physical distance between us would solve something.

At the end of the corridor, colleagues’ voices were already rising.

The day was starting again.

The activities.

The jokes.

The social dynamics.

Everything my brain knew perfectly how to turn into a minefield.
And in the middle of all that...
there was now something else.
Something I didn't know how to handle.
Lyralda.
The night.
The morning.
The sloth documentary.
And that strange feeling that, for a few hours, I had been someone different.
Someone simple.
Present.
Normal.
I went down the stairs toward the seminar room.
And now, I had to repair things.
Even if repairing simply meant...
pretending nothing had happened for the rest of the seminar.
And that, I was very good at.

Chapter 14

Back to the Office

That morning, the office had exactly the same smell as usual.

Coffee. Air conditioning. Warm paper. Screens switched on far too early.

It was almost insulting.

I had spent the whole weekend trying not to think too much about the seminar, which, obviously, had led me to think about it almost professionally.

On the bus back, I had already started reorganizing the memories into little mental boxes: the cooking, the dinner, the terrace, the lake, the room, the morning, the documentary about sloths.

And the more I put them away, the more something bothered me.

The office had not moved.

Same gray open space.

Same sound of keyboards.

Same tired plants near the bay window.

I settled at my desk.

My computer turned on with the obscene calm of machines that know nothing about human dramas.

I put down my bag.

Took out my notebook.

Breathed once.

Then twice.

In the window in front of me, my reflection had that strange face I sometimes have after a weekend too full: not really tired, not really rested, just slightly displaced.

As if my face had come back to work before the rest of me.

I wondered if it showed.

I hoped it didn't.

I feared it did.

Clara arrived a few minutes later with a coffee far too large to be reasonable.

"So?"

I looked up.

"So what?"

"The seminar, obviously."

She half sat on the corner of my desk.

"You came back alive, so already, congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Were there scandals? Tears? Unlikely couples? A symbolic drowning?"

I focused on my screen.

"No."

"Liar."

"Why does everyone tell me that?"

"Because you lie badly."

I didn't answer.

She observed me for two more seconds.

Then she smiled.

"Right."

She tapped my desk with her fingertips.

"If you ever want to tell me useless but juicy things, I'm here."

"Noted."

“Do that.”

She left with her coffee.

I watched her walk away.

I would have liked to have her level of lightness.

The kind of lightness of people who consider that a story remains a story as long as it has not decided to settle inside your rib cage.

I hadn't even opened my first file when a voice fell behind me.

“So.”

I froze.

Lyralda.

I turned around.

She was there, standing near my desk, a file under her arm, exactly as if nothing in the world had changed since Friday.

Dark suit.

Hair tied back.

Clear gaze.

Perfectly professional.

Perfectly calm.

“Good morning, Lyralda,” I said.

“Good morning, Elliott.”

She tilted her head slightly.

Then, with that almost invisible half-smile:

“Was the morning good?”

I think my heart missed a beat.

“What?”

“The morning.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“This morning.”

Pause.

“Did you have a good breakfast?”

Her voice was neutral.

Almost light.

As if she were talking about some ordinary logistical detail.

As if the morning in her room had only been a practical parenthesis.

I could feel a strange heat rising in my neck.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She tapped the file once against her hip.

“Glad to hear it.”

Then she added, very lightly:

“Sloths are a good influence.”

I looked at her.

She wasn't smiling anymore.

She had already recovered her professional face.

“See you later, Elliott.”

And she left.

Just like that.

Without slowing down.

Without turning back.

I stayed there, sitting in front of my screen, with the very clear impression that I had just been run through by a very polite train.
The worst part was that her tone had nothing mean in it.
Nothing.
That was exactly the problem.
No embarrassment.
No tension.
No sign that last week had left any particular trace.
And suddenly, everything I had managed to keep at a distance for a few hours came back all at once.
Of course.
Obviously.
For her, it was simple.
A moment.
A night.
A breakfast.
End of story.
I looked at my screen without seeing it.
In the window in front of me, my reflection had changed again. It now looked like someone who had just received unpleasant information about his own market value.
I lowered my eyes.
It was ridiculous.
And yet, my brain was already drawing conclusions.
Around ten, my phone vibrated.
A message.
Jade.
“You survived the return?”
I stayed for one second looking at the screen.
Then I answered:
“Yes...”
Three little dots appeared almost immediately.
“Exploit.”
I smiled despite myself.
A new message arrived.
“My back still hurts because of the bus. Your fault, you weren’t soft enough.”
I let out a small breath through my nose.
“Sorry for not being a premium seat.”
Her reply came.
“Work on that.”
I put the phone down.
It was stupid.
Light.
Almost nothing.
And yet, it did me good.
Maybe because with Jade, at least, I knew what to expect: play, jabs, sentences that advanced masked, but not too much.
It was tiring, yes.
But readable.
Lyralda had suddenly become much harder to understand.
Or maybe she had always been clear and I had invented the rest.

Around noon, Jade passed near my desk.

She slowed down.

“Lunch break?”

I looked up.

“Uh...”

“That was an invitation, not a tax audit.”

I straightened up.

“Yes, okay.”

“Perfect.”

She pointed toward the elevator.

“Five minutes, not one more, I’m hungry.”

Then she left.

I watched her walk away.

In the open space, everything seemed ordinary.

Clara was talking with someone near the printer. Or with the printer, I still don’t know.

Mister Delmas was coming out of a call in the glass corridor of the legal department.

Lyralda was right beside him.

They were speaking in low voices.

Mister Delmas had that slightly leaning posture he sometimes took when he was explaining something complicated.

Lyralda was listening.

Very focused.

He said something.

She smiled briefly.

Very briefly.

Then they separated.

Nothing abnormal.

Absolutely nothing.

And yet, my brain immediately decided that this scene probably contained several tragic subtexts.

I looked away first.

Lunch happened in the cafeteria, almost empty at that hour.

Jade placed her tray across from mine.

“I’m already done with this week.”

“It’s Monday.”

“Exactly.”

She took a sip of her soda.

“It’s always the worst day to have emotions.”

I looked up.

“That’s very specific.”

“I’m very specific.”

She grabbed a fry.

“Did you have a good weekend?”

The question seemed ordinary.

But her gaze wasn’t completely.

“Yes.”

“You’re still lying badly.”

“It’s become a tradition.”

She smiled.
Then her expression changed slightly.
“My father called me on Sunday.”
I blinked.
I wasn’t expecting that.
“Ah.”
“Yeah.”
She lifted one shoulder.
“It had been six months.”
I didn’t know what to say.
So I chose honesty.
“That’s... good?”
She gave a small laugh.
“No idea.”
She looked at her plate.
“He calls when he feels guilty.”
I stayed silent.
This time, I didn’t feel tested.
Just... witness.
“And you?” she asked. “Do your parents call you often?”
I lowered my eyes to my tray.
“Not really.”
“Healthy atmosphere.”
“We do what we can.”
She looked at me for a few seconds.
Then nodded, as if that answer was enough for her.
The silence that followed wasn’t awkward.
Simply strange.
Softer than usual.
On the way back up, I caught myself thinking that Jade might be simpler than
Lyralda.
Not kinder.
Not healthier.
But simpler to read.
With her, everything at least seemed to exist on the surface.
Even her jabs.
Even her little games.
Even what she chose to show of her fragile side.
Lyralda, on the contrary, gave the impression that she could look straight at you
and let nothing out of what truly mattered.
And I, obviously, was only attracted to things I did not understand well.
Very bad reflex.
Very old reflex.
The afternoon resumed.
I worked.
Well, I tried.
My phone sometimes vibrated with a brief message from Jade.
“You surviving?”
“Not asleep?”
“If Pascal buries you under Excel, blink twice.”

I always answered.

And each time, something loosened slightly in my chest.

No tension.

No expectation.

Just... a conversation.

Deep inside me, a thought was starting to take shape.

Small.

Embarrassing.

Maybe Jade was easier.

Maybe with her, there wasn't all that blur.

Not that feeling of falling into something deeper without knowing if the other person is really there with you.

I hated that thought as soon as it appeared.

But it stayed.

And I did not yet realize that what I truly liked in those messages probably had nothing to do with a relationship.

Just with the fact that, for once... someone was talking to me without making me feel like I had to guess the rest.

Chapter 15

Second Scene

The mistake was stupid.

Really stupid.

The kind of mistake that, in the real world, probably wouldn't have changed the Earth's rotation, but which, in an Excel file shared by three different departments, suddenly took on the size of an administrative catastrophe.

I stared at the screen.

The cell was blinking.

And the number was wrong.

Very wrong.

And, above all, very visible.

I knew exactly what had happened.

One shifted row.

A copy-paste done too quickly.

A mental check only half done.

"Eliott."

I looked up.

Jade was standing beside my desk, a file in her hand.

Her expression wasn't mean.

But clearly annoyed.

"Tell me you're not the one who sent this."

I already knew it was me.

"It's me."

She put the file on the desk with a small, sharp sound.

"You shifted the whole row."

I looked at the table.

She was right.

"Ah."

She stared at me.

"Ah?"

"..."

"Eliott."

She ran a hand through her hair.

"We checked this yesterday."

"Yes."

"So why did you modify it?"

I stayed silent for one second.

Because the honest answer was very simple.

I had no reason.

"I reread it badly."

She sighed.

Not violently.

Just tired.

"Right."

She placed her hands on the desk and leaned toward the screen.

"We'll fix it."

Her fingers began moving on the keyboard.

Fast.

Very fast.

"There."

Click.

"And there."

Click.

"There."

She straightened.

"Be careful, Elliott, please."

Her voice was softer now.

"We can't keep this kind of thing, especially on this kind of shared file."

"I know."

"I'm not telling you this to be mean."

"I know."

She finished the correction.

Then straightened.

"There."

She looked at me for a few seconds.

Her eyes lingered on my face.

"You look exhausted."

"Maybe."

"Do you sleep?"

"Sometimes."

She shrugged.

"Try more often."

Then she added:

"Sleep is pretty effective."

I blinked.

She picked up her file.

"Focus."

Then she walked away.

I stayed in front of the screen.

The correction was done.

But the unpleasant feeling stayed.

That impression of being slightly out of sync with everything.

As if my brain were moving half a second behind the rest of the world.

"You know you can breathe."

I turned around.

Lyralda.

She was leaning against the glass partition of the legal department.

Arms crossed.

I didn't know how long she had been there.

"I'm breathing."

"Barely."

She looked at the screen.

"Big mistake?"

"Medium."

"Jade was very kind."

I looked up.

"You were listening?"

"Everyone listens in an open space."

She lifted one shoulder.
“That’s the rule.”
I passed a hand over my face.
“My head is somewhere else.”
“Yes.”
Silence.
Then she said calmly:
“You have two options.”
I looked up.
“Which ones?”
“Either you stay here hating yourself over an Excel cell.”
“Tempting.”
“Or you come let off steam.”
I frowned.
“Let off steam?”
She grabbed her bag from a chair.
“Yes.”
“Where?”
“At my place.”
I blinked.
“Direct.”
“Obviously.”
She looked at the time.
“I’m leaving in twenty minutes.”
“And if I don’t come?”
She shrugged.
“You’ll stay here staring at Excel as if it’s the source of all your problems.”
She had already started walking away.
Then added over her shoulder:
“Don’t think too much.”
Small pause.
“It has never helped you.”
I thought anyway.
For about ten minutes.
Then five more.
Then I corrected two files that hadn’t asked for anything.
Then I stayed sitting, looking at the screen as if a revelation was going to come out of an Excel cell.
Finally, I shut down the computer.
When I passed Jade’s desk on my way out of the open space, she looked up.
“Running away?”
“I’m leaving.”
“With me?”
“Let’s say yes.”
I went downstairs with her, before getting into her car.
Lyralda’s car was... like her.
Simple.
Clean.
Nothing lying around.

The dashboard shone slightly under the light of the underground parking lot, and there was that discreet smell of something fresh.
Not a strong perfume.
Just clean.
I fastened my seat belt.
She started the car.
I watched the street pass by.
Red lights.
Shop windows.
People going home.
I caught myself thinking about something completely unrelated.
The driving license.
I had never taken the time to get it.
Always something else to do.
Always a reason to postpone it.
“By the way.”
I turned my head.
“Do you have your license?”
I blinked.
“No.”
She looked at me briefly before returning her eyes to the road.
“Seriously?”
“Seriously.”
“Eliott.”
I could already hear the tone coming.
“Yes...?”
“You should maybe do that one day.”
“Probably.”
“It’s useful.”
“I imagine.”
She took a turn calmly.
Then added:
“It keeps you from depending on others.”
I shrugged slightly.
“I’m pretty good at depending on others.”
She gave a small smile.
“That doesn’t surprise me.”
Silence.
The light turned green.
The car started moving again.
“Then again...”
Small pause.
“I don’t mind.”
I turned my head toward her.
“What?”
“Driving.”
She lifted one shoulder.
“If you want to go somewhere.”
A brief glance toward me.
“I can take you.”

I didn't answer.
But the offer stayed in the air.
Lyralda's apartment was calm.
Very calm.
Late-afternoon light entered through the large living-room windows and drew pale rectangles on the wooden floor.
Everything was orderly.
No mess.
No useless objects.
The kind of place that gives the impression every thing was chosen for a reason.
I stayed near the door.
Lyralda put her keys in a small bowl.
"You can take off your shoes."
"Okay."
I removed them.
She placed her bag on the table.
Then she looked at me.
For a long time.
"Right."
"Right?"
"We're going to start with a simple question."
She came closer.
Not too close.
Just enough.
"What's going on in your head?"
I shrugged.
"Nothing."
She sighed.
"Bad answer."
"It's the only one I have."
She placed a hand on my arm.
"Elliott."
I looked up.
"You are always apologizing for existing."
I let out a small nervous laugh.
"It's a skill."
"It's a problem."
Silence.
Then she added more softly:
"Come here."
I came closer.
She kissed me.
The kiss was not abrupt.
Not rushed.
Just slow.
Warm.
As if she wanted to bring me back into the present.
My shoulders relaxed almost immediately.
She pulled back slightly.
"There."

“What?”

“You’re breathing better.”

“That’s your method?”

“Yes.”

“Very scientific.”

“Very effective.”

She kissed me again.

Longer.

And for a while, the world simply came down to the warmth of her skin and the silence of the apartment.

Later, we lay on the sofa.

My heart was still beating fast.

But differently.

Less like an alarm.

More like something alive.

Lyralda was against me.

Her fingers traced absent circles on my arm.

“Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Do you think being kind means being weak?”

I frowned.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She lifted her eyes to mine.

“Because you behave as if it does.”

I stayed silent.

She continued softly:

“The problem isn’t that you’re kind.”

Pause.

“The problem is that you erase yourself.”

I looked at the ceiling.

“It’s complicated.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

She smiled slightly.

“You see?”

“What?”

“You’re doing it again.”

I sighed.

Then, without really realizing it, I started talking.

About school.

About silences.

About that constant feeling of being too calm, too discreet, too easy to ignore.

She listened.

Without interrupting me.

Without correcting me.

Just there.

At one point, she gently ran her hand through my hair.

“You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“You think you’re invisible.”

I turned my head toward her.

“And?”

“Everyone sees you.”

Pause.

“They just don’t always know what to do with you.”

I didn’t know if that was reassuring.

But it hurt less than I expected.

I don’t know exactly when I fell asleep.

I only remember feeling her hand in my hair.

And placing my head against her shoulder.

The rest of the world had gently moved away.

And for a few minutes...

there was no office, no Excel, no fear of saying the wrong thing.

Just the warmth of the sofa.

Her steady breathing.

And that strange, fragile, almost new feeling.

Peace.

Chapter 16

Confidence

The next day, around noon, Jade poked her head over my screen.

“Lunch break?”

I looked up.

She had a coffee in her hand and that slightly amused expression she wore almost all the time, as if the world around her were a joke only she truly understood.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She made a small gesture toward the elevator.

“I’ll wait for you.”

I closed my Excel file.

My brain protested a little, not because of the work, but because of what this lunch might mean.

Then I stood up anyway.

We settled in a small restaurant two streets away from the office.

Nothing very fancy. Wooden tables. Menu written in chalk. The noise of cutlery and mixed conversations. A white light a little too direct, and the kind of servers who have seen far too many lunch breaks pass by to still believe in people.

Jade immediately seemed at ease.

She sat across from me, placed her sunglasses on the table, and grabbed the menu.

“So.”

“So what?”

“You’re making that face again.”

“What face?”

She narrowed her eyes slightly.

“The guy who analyzes everything.”

I sighed.

“It’s a professional flaw.”

“No.”

She picked up her glass of water.

“It’s a personal flaw.”

I smiled despite myself.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

We ordered quickly. When the waiter walked away, Jade placed her elbows on the table.

“I’m going to tell you something.”

“That sounds serious.”

“No.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“Just honest.”

I watched her.

She seemed a little different today.

Less provocative.

Or rather: provocative in a less automatic way.

As if she had chosen to lower the volume a little without stopping being herself.

“I’ve had quite a few stories with guys,” she said.

I didn’t know what to answer.

So I simply said:

“Okay.”

She gave a small smile.

“You see?”

“See what?”

“Others would already have asked how many.”

I shrugged.

“That’s not really my problem.”

“Exactly.”

She took a piece of bread.

“And you know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“They all go crazy when you say no.”

I frowned slightly.

“Ah. What do you mean?”

“Men.”

She made a small vague gesture with her hand.

“At first they play it cool. Then they want more. Then they get angry when you refuse.”

She bit into the bread.

“Classic.”

I stayed silent.

She looked at me.

“Does that shock you?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“Because... I don’t see the point.”

She smiled softly.

“Exactly.”

The waiter brought our plates.

For a few seconds, we ate in silence.

Then Jade looked up.

“You know why I like you?”

I stopped.

“No.”

“Because you’re not like other guys.”

I let out a small laugh.

“That’s a dangerous sentence.”

“Why?”

“Because it rarely ends well.”

She shook her head.

“No.”

She really looked at me this time.

“You have a heart.”

The sentence fell softly between us.

I felt a strange warmth rise in my chest.

“Everyone has one.”

“No.”

She smiled slightly.

“Not really.”

I lowered my eyes to my plate.

I never knew what to do with that kind of compliment.

When I looked up again, she was still watching me.

Her expression was different.

Softer.

Almost fragile.

"You know you're too kind?"

"I hear that often."

"It's not a reproach."

"It sounds like one, though."

She shook her head.

"Because you always try to turn things into reproaches."

I frowned slightly.

"That's not true."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

She took a fry, then vaguely pointed it at me.

"Look at yourself."

"That's complicated without a mirror."

"You're exhausting."

I smiled a little.

So did she.

Then she continued, more calmly:

"Being kind isn't the problem."

I looked up.

"Ah."

"The problem is that you give before you even know who to."

I stayed silent.

Because the sentence had touched something very close to the truth, and I didn't like that much.

Jade continued:

"You want people to be okay. You want them to think you're decent. You want to avoid bothering anyone."

She lifted one shoulder.

"As a result, you let them take up far too much space before checking whether they deserve it."

I lowered my eyes to my plate.

"That's a slightly violent analysis for noon."

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Then she added, lower:

"It's not against you."

"It kind of sounds like it."

"Because you're sensitive when someone touches the right thing."

I didn't answer.

She was probably right.

Again.

Jade put down her fork.

Then, very naturally, she reached her hand toward me.

Her fingers brushed my neck.

Just behind my ear.

The gesture was slow.

Very light.

I froze immediately.

Not out of rejection.

Out of surprise.

She kept looking at me while she gently stroked the back of my neck with her fingertips.

“You see?”

“What?”

“You tense up immediately.”

I smiled nervously.

“I’m not very used to it.”

“I know.”

Her hand stayed one more second.

Then slid lightly over my neck.

A soft gesture.

But precise.

As if she knew exactly the effect it produced.

“Relax, Elliott.”

Her voice was low.

Almost reassuring.

And yet, something in that touch also had a... measured side.

Not pure seduction.

More like a way of checking.

Of observing.

As if she were making sure once again that, with me, there was no dirty game and no sudden demand in return. That I wouldn’t take that gesture as a debt, or as a promise, or as permission.

She finally removed her hand.

“There.”

I breathed again without realizing it.

She smiled.

“You see?”

“What?”

“You really are different.”

I didn’t know if it was a compliment.

But I had already started wanting to believe it.

We stayed a little longer in the restaurant.

The conversation continued more softly, without big topics.

Jade spoke in fragments, small anecdotes, ordinary things that still seemed slightly more personal than usual.

Her first roommate who stole her shower products.

An old relationship that had ended because “he was in love with himself, which already made too many people in the relationship.”

Her mother, who still sent her three-minute voice messages to complain.

Then, almost without warning:

“I hate silence at home.”

I looked up.

“Ah.”

“I always sleep with background noise.”

“A show?”

“Anything.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“TV, music, podcast, white noise, whatever. I don’t like it when it’s too empty.”

I didn’t know why she was telling me that.

Or rather, I did.

She was giving me little pieces.

Not huge revelations.

Just real things.

Habits. Tiny cracks. Details that, put together, make someone.

“And you?” she asked.

“Me what?”

“How do you sleep?”

I thought about it.

“Badly?”

“That’s not a method.”

“I know.”

She gave a small smile.

“You always look like a guy who thinks even while sleeping.”

“That’s probably true.”

“Exhausting.”

“Yes.”

She looked at me for a few seconds.

“Have you ever lived with someone?”

I shook my head.

“No.”

“Never ever?”

“No.”

“Interesting.”

“Why?”

“I’m trying to imagine it.”

“And?”

She took a sip of water.

“I think you’d be the type to make coffee, tidy up too many things, apologize when you’re hungry, and sleep on the edge of the bed.”

I stared at her.

“That’s weirdly precise. Have we already slept together?”

“I’m very observant.”

I let out a small laugh.

“That’s a little vexing.”

“No.”

She had a more discreet smile.

“It’s almost endearing.”

The word made me look up at her a little too quickly.

She noticed.

Obviously.

But she didn’t point it out.

Not this time.

We paid the bill later than expected.

When we left the restaurant, the sun was still high enough to give the street a clear light.

Jade walked beside me.

“Thanks for lunch.”

“It was your idea.”

“I know.”

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

“But it was nice anyway.”

I nodded.

“Yes.”

A few steps passed.

Then she said:

“You know what I like about you?”

I sighed lightly.

“I’m afraid of the answer.”

“You don’t play.”

I turned my head toward her.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t try to impress.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“You’re just... there.”

I smiled.

“That’s not very spectacular.”

“Really not.”

She looked at me.

“But I like it.”

We arrived in front of the office building entrance.

The glass doors reflected the street behind us.

For one second, I saw our silhouettes side by side in the reflection.

Then Jade placed a hand on my arm.

“Wait.”

I turned toward her.

She moved slightly closer.

Not enough for it to be obvious to people around us.

But enough for me to smell her perfume.

“You know...”

She hesitated for one second.

“I have trouble trusting people.”

I stayed silent.

“Most people want something.”

“Attention.”

“Sex.”

“Or just to win.”

She shrugged.

“With you, I don’t get that feeling.”

I felt something tighten gently in my chest.

“That’s good.”

“Very.”

She looked at me for a few more seconds.
Then her hand slid once again toward my neck.
The same gesture.
Slow.
Controlled.
Her fingers traced a small line behind my ear.
I immediately felt my body react.
She noticed.
Obviously.
Her smile stretched slightly.
But this time that smile had nothing triumphant in it.
More like a calm confirmation.
As if she were thinking, yes, he reacts, but he doesn't take.
"You see?" she said.
"What?"
"You're easy to read."
I let out a small laugh.
"Great."
"It's not a flaw."
She removed her hand.
Then pushed the door open.
"Come on."
The open space was a little livelier than at noon.
People were coming back from break.
Conversations were starting again.
I returned to my desk while Jade went back toward the sales department.
I felt... strange.
Not bad.
Not worried.
Just a little troubled.
As if something had shifted in my perception of her.
Jade was complicated.
Yes.
But at least, she seemed to want something from me.
Or maybe simply my presence.
And that idea was reassuring.
Around three, I stood up to get a glass of water.
The dispenser was near the corridor leading to the legal department.
I was filling my glass when a voice sounded behind me.
"You're hydrating, that's good."
I turned around.
Lyralda.
She held a file under her arm.
Same posture as usual. Same calm gaze.
"Yes."
"Keep going."
She came closer to the dispenser.
Filled her own glass.
Then looked at me briefly.
"Good lunch?"

“Yes.”

“With Jade?”

I felt my stomach contract slightly.

“Yes.”

She nodded.

“That’s good.”

Her reaction was so neutral it almost became suspicious.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

She took a sip of water.

Then put the glass down.

“She’s a good friend.”

I didn’t know what to add.

Neither did she.

The silence lasted a few seconds.

Then a movement in the corridor caught my eye.

Mister Delmas had just come out of his glass office. He had a printed sheet in his hand.

“Lyralda, do you have two minutes?”

She turned her head.

“Yes, Pascal.”

He came closer, handed her the document, then leaned slightly to show her something in the margin. She moved closer too, just enough to read.

Nothing strange.

Nothing intimate.

Nothing.

And yet, seen from there, in the white light of the corridor, they had that silent ease of people who have already worked together a thousand times. There was no visible tension. Just habit. Fluidity. A language that no longer needed explaining.

And as usual, my brain took that perfectly ordinary information and immediately made a far too stupid hypothesis out of it.

Jade appeared at the end of the corridor at that moment.

She was walking toward us with a file in hand.

When she saw us, she slowed slightly.

Her gaze moved from me to Lyralda.

Then to Mister Delmas.

Then she smiled.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Lyralda said.

“Perfect.”

Jade stopped near us.

Very close.

“Eliott, I forgot to tell you...”

She placed a quick hand on my shoulder.

Just one second.

But the gesture was visible.

Clear.

“Thanks for lunch.”

She looked at me.

“It was really nice.”

Then she turned toward Lyralda.

“We should do that more often between colleagues.”

Mister Delmas briefly looked up from his paper. His gaze slid over us, then returned to Lyralda with that calm he always had.

“As long as it doesn’t delay my closings, do whatever you want.”

Jade gave a small smile.

“Always a romantic, Pascal.”

Lyralda barely reacted.

Almost.

Just that very slight movement of the mouth which, with her, sometimes stood in for an entire smile.

“That’s his great flaw,” she said.

Mister Delmas returned to his document without commenting.

Just an ordinary sentence.

And yet, there again, there was that little something too fluid between them.

Jade broke the moment first.

“Right.”

She took one step back.

“I’m going back to work. I have responsibilities, unlike some people.”

She gave me a small smile.

“See you later, Eliott.”

Then she went back toward her desk.

I stayed near the water dispenser with Lyralda.

Mister Delmas had already returned to his office.

Lyralda was still watching the corridor where Jade had disappeared.

Then she turned toward me.

“Be careful.”

I frowned slightly.

“Of what?”

She lifted one shoulder.

“Yourself.”

I didn’t understand right away.

And when I looked up, she was already heading back to her office.

Chapter 17

Return

The university building had the same smell as usual.

A mix of overheated coffee, plastic chairs, and old paper. Nothing had changed.

And yet, something felt slightly out of place.

I crossed the courtyard, looking at the groups of students already settled on the benches. The same little circles. The same conversations started before the first class had even begun.

I spotted Nawal near the concrete tables.

Aïcha was with her.

My stomach tightened a little.

I walked over.

“Hi.”

Nawal immediately looked up.

“Eliott!”

She smiled.

“You survived the weekend?”

“Apparently, yes.”

Aïcha looked up at me.

“Hi.”

Her voice was neutral.

Not cold.

But not really warm either.

I sat down with them.

“So, what’s new?”

“Nothing,” Nawal said. “We were just talking about the law professor who thinks we actually read the cases.”

“He has a lot of hope.”

“Way too much.”

Nawal laughed.

Aïcha was looking at her phone.

I didn’t really know what to do with that.

Before, she always participated in conversations.

Always.

Now, she stayed slightly withdrawn.

I tried anyway.

“Did you understand yesterday’s finance exercise?”

She looked up.

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

“It wasn’t complicated.”

“No, it was fine.”

Silence.

Nawal looked from one of our faces to the other.

“Right, I’m going to get coffee.”

She stood up.

“Do you want anything?”

“No, thanks.”

“I’m good.”

She left.

And the silence immediately fell back.

Aïcha was scrolling through something on her phone.

I took a breath.

“Your message, the other day...”

She looked up.

“Yes?”

“I don’t really understand.”

She held my gaze for one second.

Then lifted her shoulders slightly.

“It’s nothing.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No.”

She put her phone on the table.

“Just... it’s better this way.”

I frowned.

“Better how?”

“Talking less.”

“Why?”

She sighed lightly.

“Elliott.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

The way she said that bothered me.

As if she were closing something before I’d even had time to understand.

“Okay.”

She nodded.

“There.”

Nawal came back with three coffees.

“I got some for you anyway.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks.”

She looked at our faces.

“Ooh.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She smiled.

“Continue your super joyful conversation.”

Aïcha grabbed her coffee.

“We had nothing to say.”

“You could tell.”

Class started a few minutes later.

We went into the lecture hall.

This time, I sat next to Nawal.

Aïcha took the seat beside her.

But she barely spoke to me.

She answered when I asked her a question.

Politely.

But briefly.

And sometimes, she dropped small sentences that seemed slightly... sharp.
“You didn’t do the reading?”
“I skimmed it.”
“That explains things.”
Or:
“You could pay attention.”
“To what?”
“To what the professor is saying.”
It wasn’t mean.
Not really.
But it felt like someone trying to create a little distance, sentence after sentence.
I didn’t understand why.
During the break, I went out into the corridor.
I took out my phone.
A message appeared almost immediately.
Jade.
“Jade: so university is still that depressing?”
I smiled.
“Eliott: yes”
Three little dots appeared.
“Jade: courage”
“Eliott: I survived marketing all morning”
“Jade: heroic”
“Eliott: I deserve a medal”
“Jade: you’ll get a croissant”
...
“Eliott: I have a friend who isn’t talking to me anymore and I don’t understand why”
The answer came quickly.
“Jade: AH”
“Jade: you should try to find out why”
I looked up at the corridor ceiling.
“Eliott: thanks for the advice”
“Jade: you’re welcome”
“Jade: did you do something?”
“Eliott: not that I know of”
“Jade: then you probably didn’t do anything”
I frowned slightly.
“Eliott: that’s logical”
“Jade: people are weird”
I let out a small breath.
“Eliott: yes”
She sent:
“Jade: good luck, student”
“Jade: think of your glorious future”
“Jade: accountant”
“Jade: sorry, I meant assistant accountant”
“Eliott: Stop!”
“Jade: never!”
I put the phone away.

The conversation had been short.
But it had made me smile.
The next class passed more slowly.
When we finally came out of the building, the sky was already gray.
People were scattering through the courtyard.
Nawal went to talk with other students.
Aicha gathered her things.
“Right.”
“You’re leaving?”
“Yes.”
“See you tomorrow?”
She hesitated.
Just one second.
“Yes.”
Then she added:
“Have a good evening.”
And she walked away.
I stayed there for a few seconds.
With that strange sensation of having missed something.
Something I couldn’t even name.
I took out my phone.
I hesitated for a moment.
Then I wrote to Lyralda.
“Eliott: What are you doing?”
The answer came a few minutes later.
“Lyralda: Meeting”
Then:
“Lyralda: why?”
I thought for a bit.
“Eliott: nothing”
“Eliott: bad day”
The three little dots appeared.
“Lyralda: what happened?”
I looked at the university courtyard.
The groups.
The laughter.
Aicha already moving away at the end of the path.
“Eliott: a friend of mine is acting weird”
“Eliott: I don’t really understand”
Her answer came after a few seconds.
“Lyralda: it happens”
“Lyralda: do you want to talk about it?”
I lifted my shoulders slightly.
Even though she couldn’t see it.
“Eliott: I think it’s okay”
“Eliott: just tired”
Pause.
“Lyralda: I’m finishing late”
“Lyralda: but if you want to come by or call, you can”
I looked at the screen.

The idea crossed my mind for one second.
Go see her.
Talk.
Stay a little.
But something in me hesitated.
Not out of fear.
More out of tiredness.
“Eliott: thanks”
“Eliott: but I’ll be fine”
“Eliott: I’m going home”
Her reply came almost immediately.
“Lyralda: okay”
Then:
“Lyralda: rest well Eliott”
I put the phone away.
The university courtyard had already emptied a little.
I left the campus and headed toward the metro.
People walked quickly around me.
Conversations, laughter, phone calls.
The city was moving normally.
And I was simply walking.
With that strange sensation of having lost something.
Or maybe simply not understanding what had just changed.
But for the first time in several days, I did not try to solve the problem.
I went home.
And I let the day end on its own.

Chapter 18

Aïcha

The following Monday began the way all Mondays have the bad habit of beginning.
Same room.

Same light, far too white for such an unfair hour.

Same rows of tables aligned as if someone had sincerely believed a little geometry could save students before nine in the morning.

The board was still covered with formulas left by the previous class, black and blue marker traces that made it feel like the day had started without us.

I sat down beside Nawal. She placed her coffee cup on the table with the gravity of a surgeon at the end of a shift.

"I'm dead."

"It's nine."

"Exactly."

She took a sip with her eyes closed, as if she truly hoped to find a reason to continue in it.

"Monday shouldn't exist. We could very well go from Sunday to Tuesday. No one would lose anything."

"But then Tuesday would become Monday..."

She turned her head toward me with sincere concern.

"I refuse to live in that world."

Reda arrived a few seconds later and collapsed onto the chair behind us with the noise of a bag, a jacket, and accumulated fatigue.

"If anyone talks to me about finance before ten, I'm leaving university."

Nawal raised a finger.

"Serious promise?"

"Absolutely."

"Can we test you?"

"No. Because I also need this degree."

Youssef arrived next with a backpack visibly too full for someone who was clearly not only carrying university stuff. He let it drop to the floor with a great theatrical sigh, then spread his arms while looking around the room.

"The weak are talking a lot this morning."

"The strong are still sleeping," Reda answered.

"Geniuses still come anyway."

"Geniuses first remove the pastry crumbs from their sweater," Nawal said.

Youssef looked down at his sweatshirt, blew on it as if that would solve the problem, then sat down with all the dignity possible in a situation that allowed none.

I smiled slightly.

This kind of morning would have exhausted me a few months earlier. I would have listened, laughed a little too late, waited for the right moment to speak before letting it pass.

Now, I was there, in the middle of them, without really having seen the passage open. There had been no big shift. Just a series of tiny nothings. Coffees, breaks, repeated jokes, habits settling in.

Before, I often stayed at the edge of conversations like someone waiting to be told he had the right to enter.

Now, I found myself inside before even asking the question.

Aïcha arrived a few minutes later.

Her hair tied up quickly, with that face of mornings where she had probably slept too little while deciding to behave as if she had the situation perfectly under control.

She slid her bag against her chair and sat down beside Nawal.

“Hi everyone.”

“Hi,” Nawal answered.

“You look alive,” Youssef observed.

“Barely. But I’m creating the illusion.”

Then she threw me a look.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Her voice was calm.

Neither cold nor really close.

For several days, our relationship had looked like that.

Perfectly normal moments, almost easy, then, without warning, a small invisible distance. As if something stepped back the moment I felt like I was finding it again.

It was never clear enough for me to reproach her for anything.

Just enough for me to feel it.

The professor entered the room with his stack of documents under his arm and the satisfied air of a man who was clearly happy to exist at nine in the morning.

The conversations gradually stopped.

Class began.

One hour. Then two.

Columns of figures, reasoning, methods.

The sound of pens, laptops discreetly opened for something else, class files.

Reda yawned at least six times, or seven. Youssef wrote something on his sheet that clearly had nothing to do with accounting, since Nawal smothered a laugh while reading it.

At the end, the professor placed his marker on the desk and turned toward us with that small suspended moment that announces either a catastrophe, or vaguely exciting information.

“Before you leave, I have an important announcement.”

Immediately, the room lifted its head.

Even Reda, who had looked like he had physically left his body for half an hour, returned among us.

“Next week, we are organizing an educational trip.”

A murmur moved through the lecture hall.

“You’ll be leaving for three days.”

This time, the murmur changed nature. There was something livelier in it, younger, almost joyful.

“Several companies will welcome us for visits. There will also be conferences and workshops.”

Small pause.

“And you will be staying on site, at a hotel.”

The noise exploded all at once.

“Ooooh!”

“Where is it?”

“We’re sleeping at a hotel?”

“Three real days?”

“With the other programs too?”

The professor raised a hand, uselessly.

"Calm down."

No one calmed down.

"The details will be sent to you by email," he continued. "Departure Monday morning. Return Wednesday late afternoon. I'm counting on your seriousness."

That sentence made several people laugh, as if it already contained its own contradiction.

Then he packed up his things.

"Have a good weekend."

The room exploded a second time, even more freely.

Chairs scraped, bags snapped shut, phones were already out to check emails that, obviously, had not arrived yet.

"Three days!" someone shouted at the back.

"It's going to be chaos!"

"We're never going to sleep."

Reda turned toward us with the expression of a man who had just learned he was being offered the legal right to do anything within an academic framework.

"Guys."

"Yes?" Nawal said.

"We're going to do incredible things."

"We're mostly going to try not to get kicked out."

"No promises."

Youssef placed a hand over his heart.

"I officially announce that this trip will mark the history of this class."

"Especially if you forget your charger and become unbearable after six hours," Nawal said.

I looked at Aïcha.

She was smiling slightly.

A real smile. Not huge, not loud. Just real.

And for one second, everything seemed to become simple again.

As if nothing had slipped between us lately.

As if this trip were only one more piece of good news in an ordinary day.

Then the second passed.

The following Monday, the bus was waiting in front of the university.

A large white bus, slightly too clean to transport a group of students who had all, in one way or another, underestimated the concept of three days away from home.

Bags were piling up in the luggage compartment, some reasonable, others visibly packed for a survival expedition.

The morning air was cool. Not exactly pleasant, but sharp enough to keep people standing.

"I hope we're not sleeping four to a room."

"I don't want to sleep with Reda."

"Why?"

"You snore."

"That's false."

"It's scientific."

"You have no proof."

"I survived an integration weekend with you. That's already an expert report."

I got on the bus with Nawal and Youssef.

Inside, it smelled of warm fabric, air conditioning not yet turned on, and biscuits already opened too early.

We found several seats together, roughly in the middle. Reda settled just in front of us and immediately declared that he now controlled the zone.

Aïcha got on a few seconds later.

She stayed for a short moment in the aisle, long enough to look at the available seats, the people already settled, the bags placed anywhere, the social geography of the bus.

Then she sat beside Nawal.

“We’re good here.”

Youssef immediately turned around.

“Excellent choice. This is the elite section of the vehicle.”

“It’s mostly the loudest section,” Nawal said.

“So the best,” he concluded.

The bus started in a mix of poorly coordinated movements, seat belts fastened at the last moment, and laughter for no real reason.

For the first few minutes, everyone kept that excitement that comes at the beginning of a trip. We hadn’t been gone long enough to get bored yet. We were no longer quite in everyday life, and not yet arrived somewhere else.

Someone put music on a little too loudly at the back. Others pulled out bags of chips as if supplies were a major logistical necessity.

A smell of coffee, perfume, and sweet biscuits began to mix in the bus air.

After an hour, the atmosphere already looked less like an educational trip than a summer camp run by people who had abandoned every attempt at discipline.

Youssef turned around in his seat with the dangerous look of someone who had just had an idea.

“Right then.”

I immediately became suspicious.

“This is starting badly.”

“Serious question.”

“I never believe you when you say that.”

“Big mistake. If you had to choose a dish to seduce someone, what would you make?”

The bus, or at least our corner of the bus, suddenly became very attentive.

Reda turned around.

Nawal put down her phone.

Aïcha looked up.

I took time to think about it.

Not because I wanted to give a brilliant answer. Just because my brain often refuses to cooperate when several people are waiting for something from me at the same time.

Then I answered:

“Lasagna.”

Small silence.

“Lasagna?” Youssef repeated, visibly scandalized, as if I had just confessed to a crime.

“Yes.”

“Why lasagna?”

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

“Because it takes a long time to make. So the person knows you really made an effort.”

One second of floating, then laughter burst out.

"But that's terrifyingly logical!" Nawal exclaimed.

"A strategist," Youssef said, striking the top of the seat. "A real one."

Reda applauded.

"Respect. Truly. It's romantic and organizational."

"Plus, it's good," Nawal added. "I approve."

"Thank you," I said.

Aïcha looked up at me.

A smile appeared.

"That's not stupid," she said.

I looked back at her.

For a few seconds, we exchanged that complicit look we often had before. That small space where there was no need to add much. Just a sentence, a smile, and the quiet feeling of being on the same line.

Then she looked away.

And the distance returned.

Not brutally. Not enough for the others to see.

Just like a door closing softly.

The first two days went by quickly.

Too quickly, even.

The days were so full they erased the notion of time.

Early departures. Companies with glass lobbies. Conferences in overheated rooms. Very self-assured speakers talking to us about trajectory, adaptability, corporate culture, and operational excellence with the same tone people use to explain a religion.

There were also the rides, the waits in front of buildings, the groups naturally forming again, coffee breaks too short, the walks too long between one visit and the next.

But above all, there was a lot of time together.

Meals eaten too quickly or too slowly depending on the mood. Jokes that came back from one moment to another as if they refused to die. Evenings at the hotel, where everyone suddenly rediscovered that a group of students, even tired, remains a group of students as soon as it is released outside its usual frame.

The first evening, the whole group ended up in the hotel lobby.

The place had that impersonal decor all mid-range hotel lobbies have: neutral-colored armchairs, lamps that were too well-behaved, a polite reception desk, and a background silence that was immediately destroyed by our class.

Reda had discovered a foosball table at the back of the room.

"It's war!"

"No," Nawal said.

"Yes."

"No," she repeated. "It's never just foosball with you, it's a diplomatic issue."

Teams formed anyway.

So did the laughter.

Youssef was incredibly bad.

"This is impossible."

"You just shot against your own goal," Reda said.

"It was strategic."

"No."

"Yes. I'm confusing the opponent."

"You're mostly confusing yourself," Nawal concluded.

I caught myself laughing often.

Much more than usual.

Not that small careful laugh I sometimes serve to make sure I don't seem too out of place.

A real laugh, coming out without prior validation.

Something had changed in the class.

Or maybe simply in me.

Conversations were becoming natural. Silences too. No one was forcing me to be more than I was, and yet I was more there than before.

I was no longer only the discreet guy. No longer only the one people included because Aïcha had done it first.

I was just there. A member of the group.

Aïcha participated too. She laughed, talked, commented on matches with an energy that made everything around her feel more alive. And sometimes, for a few minutes, everything became exactly like before again.

"Eliott, pass!"

"I'm trying!"

"You play like a child!"

"That's very offensive."

"Own it."

"You're the one shouting like a toxic coach."

She had laughed at that, her head thrown slightly back, and for one second I had found something very simple again. Something I missed more than I admitted.

Then, as often, she closed off slightly.

For no visible reason.

A more neutral tone. A half-step of distance. An attention that slid elsewhere.

And I never knew why.

The second evening, we all ate together in a small restaurant near the hotel.

A room a little too narrow, with tables close together, noise everywhere, and that smell of hot food that eventually makes you hungry even when you already snacked on whatever an hour earlier.

The waiter looked overwhelmed at the idea of handling so many students at once.

The table was loud.

"If anyone orders a salad, I'm leaving the table," Reda declared.

"That's very radical," Nawal said.

"It's a principle."

"A stupid principle," Youssef clarified.

Nawal raised her glass, juice, obviously.

"To stupid principles."

"To stupid principles," we repeated.

The glasses clinked in a joyful little disorder.

Then there was a long absurd discussion about the most respectable dessert, a discussion Reda took far too seriously.

At one point, I said something about chocolate mousse that made Aïcha laugh longer than the sentence deserved.

I looked at the table.

Nawal was laughing, one hand against her cheek.

Youssef was telling an incomprehensible story with an enormous amount of gestures.

Reda was trying to convince the waiter that two desserts for one person was a completely respectable life choice.

And Aïcha...

She was looking at me.

Just one second.

A soft look.

A sad one too.

Not sad like when someone is doing badly, not exactly. More like she was thinking about something she didn't want to let fully enter the evening.

Then she looked away, grabbed her glass, answered something Nawal said, and the conversation continued as if I had seen nothing.

The trip had found its rhythm.

Wake-ups too early. Breakfasts too loud. Industrial orange juice. Toast eaten half standing. Students still rumpled with sleep.

Then the buses, visits, too-clean corridors, badges around our necks, jokes moving from one building to another like an invisible thread.

The group worked well.

Very well, even.

Small habits appeared.

Reda always complained about the schedule.

Youssef always found a way to divert a serious conversation toward something absurd.

Nawal commented on everything with that mix of lucidity and irony that made her very difficult to contradict.

And I was there.

Really there.

On the last morning, we arrived at a large consulting firm.

A modern building, far too glassy, with the kind of huge lobby that gives you the impression everyone must automatically walk straight and speak quietly.

The floor shone a little too much. The receptionists had impeccable smiles. Screens displayed numbers, logos, reassuring slogans about innovation and strategic support.

We were given visitor badges.

Then the group split up.

"You may move around freely during the visit," the speaker explained. "Just try to stay in small groups."

The students immediately began scattering.

Reda instantly grabbed Youssef.

"Come on, we're going to see the trading room."

"There's a trading room?"

"Surely."

"Is that a lie?"

"Maybe."

Nawal rolled her eyes.

"I'll let you die."

She left with two other students.

I looked around me.

Aïcha was still there.

"The others left," she said.

"Yes."

She lifted her shoulders slightly.

“Should we do the visit anyway?”

“Yes.”

We started walking through the corridors.

The company was silent. Rows of offices behind glass, meeting rooms with perfect furniture, screens everywhere, focused people sometimes lifting their eyes toward our badges before diving back into their files as if we were a weather phenomenon of little interest.

For a few minutes, we barely spoke.

Our steps echoed faintly on the floor.

I read the door plaques to keep myself occupied.

Then Aïcha said:

“It’s weird.”

“What?”

“The offices.”

“Why?”

She looked around.

“Everything is too quiet. It feels like no one has the right to have a personality here.”

I smiled.

“That’s work.”

“Sad.”

“A little.”

She gave a small laugh.

We continued.

We commented on meeting rooms far too large for three people, gigantic screens, green plants visibly placed there to prove the company still vaguely respected the idea of living things.

Then we found ourselves in front of a coffee machine whose interface looked like that of a small spaceship.

Aïcha stopped dead.

“Look at that.”

“It’s a cappuccino machine.”

“No.”

She stepped closer to read the buttons.

“It’s a happiness machine!”

“You’re easily impressed.”

“Yes, and I own it. Look, it does hot chocolate, latte, mocha, cappuccino, hazelnut... At our university, the machine just makes sad coffee and fake cocoa without cocoa, without milk, and without sugar.”

“That’s true.”

“Here, maybe I’d have a future.”

I smiled again.

And for a few minutes, the visit continued like that.

Simple. Almost normal.

Even soft, in a way.

We pointed out stupid details to each other. A small nap room that Aïcha immediately declared suspicious. A large relaxation room with a foosball table she found unfairly more beautiful than the one at the hotel. An immense bay window in front of which she stayed for a few seconds, just to look at the city.

And for a moment, I truly had the impression that the distance of the last few days had disappeared. As if it had dissolved in the fatigue, in the trip, in the strangeness of those places where no one knew us. As if we were simply finding again what we had been before.

Two people talking.

Understanding each other.

Not needing to monitor the exact place of their gestures.

Then, without warning, the silence returned.

Not the quiet silence from before.

Another one.

More tense. More aware.

I immediately felt that something was still stuck between us, still there, even when we pretended otherwise.

The visit ended.

The group gathered in front of the building.

The bus was waiting a little farther away, parked along the sidewalk. The other students were already talking about the ride back, about how tired they were, about how they were going to sleep the whole way, about what they would order that evening once they got home.

"We still have an hour before departure," someone announced.

"We're going to get coffee," Reda said, raising an arm as if leading a military operation.

"Obviously," Nawal replied.

Everyone started moving.

I stayed a little behind.

So did Aïcha.

Without really deciding it, we walked into a small street behind the building. The noise of the avenue moved away a little. There was a park, a few benches, trees casting a bit of shade despite the season, and that relative calm you sometimes find between two busier streets.

We sat down.

The bench was cold.

The silence lasted a few seconds.

I looked ahead. A stroller was moving slowly along the path. Farther away, two employees were smoking near a barrier, speaking too low for us to make anything out. The world continued with perfect indifference.

Then I took a breath.

"Aïcha."

She was looking at her hands. Her fingers were playing with the sleeve of her sweater, which she sometimes does when she's thinking or when she's already looking for how to leave a conversation before it really begins.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

She breathed out lightly through her nose. Not pure annoyance. More that weariness of people who knew the moment would eventually come.

"Eliott..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"Seriously."

She finally looked up at me. I saw immediately that she understood very well what this was about.

“I don’t understand what’s going on.”

She stayed silent.

“I mean, yes, I understand that something is going on. But not what. And I’m starting to get tired of pretending it’s normal.”

Her gaze slid toward the park, then returned to me.

“We were close.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“And now, you act as if...”

I searched for my words. It was always the worst moment. The one where the feeling is clear, but the sentences stay approximate.

“As if you have to be careful with me. As if, all of a sudden, there are moments when I become too much. Or embarrassing. Or I don’t know what.”

She looked away.

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

Still no answer.

I could feel frustration rising, but underneath it, there was mostly something else. Something more stupid, more vulnerable. The very simple need to know whether I had imagined everything else.

“If I did something, say it.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“Then why are you pulling away?”

She took time to breathe in. A long time. As if she were looking for a bearable version of the truth.

“Because it’s simpler.”

I let out a small nervous laugh.

“For who?”

This time, she did not answer right away.

I saw her throat move slightly before she spoke.

“For everyone.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“I know.”

“Äicha...”

I lowered my eyes for a moment before continuing, lower.

“I’m not asking for a big speech. Just the real reason.”

The wind passed through the branches above us. Someone laughed farther away in the park. The kind of insignificant detail that becomes almost violent when you’re trying to say something important.

Then she finally said:

“I don’t have a choice.”

I frowned.

“Of course you do.”

She gently shook her head.

“No.”

“We always have a choice.”

“That’s false.”

Her voice wasn't hard. She wasn't trying to contradict me to win. She said it like someone who had already had this discussion alone, several times, and knew perfectly well where it ended.

I looked at her without answering.

Then she continued, more softly:

"My family doesn't like it."

The word stayed there for one second before really entering my head.

"What?"

"They don't like me talking with other boys."

"But we're not..."

I stopped.

"We're just friends."

"Yes..."

"So what?"

She made an almost imperceptible movement of her shoulder.

"That doesn't change anything in my house."

I looked at her, unable to know whether what was rising in me was anger, incomprehension, or simply a very clear form of sadness.

"And you accept that?"

She kept her eyes fixed ahead.

"No."

"I know it's not simple, but..."

I stopped for one second.

I didn't want to sound like someone judging a world he didn't know. But I also couldn't pretend all of this seemed normal to me.

"But you talk to me, you go out with me, you spend time with me. And then you step back as if we're doing something wrong."

She closed her eyes for one very short second.

"I know."

"And what am I supposed to understand in all that?"

Her breathing trembled a little, almost nothing.

"You can understand whatever you want."

That sentence cut me more than I would have thought.

Small pause.

"Did they say something to you?"

She hesitated.

"Let's say no..."

I very quickly saw again the mall, her brother, his gaze, his way of keeping me at a distance while staying polite, and the way Aïcha had shrunk in the scene.

I looked at the ground.

"So you just prefer to move away."

She took a few seconds to answer.

"I prefer to avoid making it worse."

"For you?"

"Yes, for me."

I turned my head toward her.

She was looking straight ahead, very still, as if moving one centimeter might make something fall.

"Aïcha..."

She continued, faster now, as if once she started she must absolutely not stop.

"You don't understand how it works. If I start arguing with them about this, it takes up enormous space. It doesn't stay a discussion."

I said nothing.

"And I'm tired, Elliott," she continued. "I don't want every outing, every message, every simple moment to become a problem to manage afterward."

She finally turned toward me.

Her eyes weren't full of tears, not really. But there was that fatigue inside them that you don't act.

"So yes, I stepped back. Because you disturb me. Because it doesn't suit me, but I can't do anything about it. Because it tires me. Because I'm sick of all this."

Something in me calmed and tightened at the same time.

"A classmate," I said.

She lowered her eyes.

"Yes."

The word hurt in an almost ridiculous way. Because it was ordinary. Because it was true, technically. And because it had also been used to reduce us.

"It was awful," she added immediately. "I know it was awful."

I stayed silent.

"But you do it."

"Yes."

Her honesty, there, disarmed me more than any excuse.

I passed a hand over my face, not to hide anything, just to gain one second.

"And when were you planning to tell me?"

She gave a small sad smile.

"I don't know. I was maybe hoping it would pass. Or that you wouldn't feel it that much."

I let out a breath.

"That failed."

"Yes."

The silence fell again.

Less opaque this time. More painful, but clearer.

I looked at the trees in front of us, the shadows on the ground, the park that had no idea what it was being used to contain.

Then I asked, without thinking enough to stop it:

"And me, in all that?"

She looked up at me.

I felt the question after saying it. A question that probably had no place here.

"You matter," she said.

I looked at her.

And maybe that was the saddest part. Because it wasn't a clear rejection. Not something you can file away into a simple, clean pain. It was worse. Real affection, caught in something bigger and more important than itself.

"Then why do I feel like I'm the one removed first when things get complicated?"

She lowered her head.

For a long time.

When she spoke again, her voice was very low.

"You're not the one I removed first."

I stayed still.

She had said it simply. And that was exactly why the sentence hurt so much.

I felt something hollow out in my chest. Not a brutal shock. More a sad obviousness finally taking up all the space.

“Okay.”

I didn’t know what else to say.

She looked at me with discreet worry, as if she were trying to measure the exact place where her truth had just fallen inside me.

“I’m sorry.”

I shook my head slightly.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Not completely,” she said.

I turned my eyes toward her.

“You could have told me earlier.”

“I know.”

“You could have stopped letting me think I was inventing everything.”

She briefly closed her eyes.

“I know.”

This time, there was nothing to add.

She was no longer trying to defend herself.

And I no longer really wanted to know more.

The wind passed through the trees of the park. Far away, students were laughing too loudly. The city continued, perfectly intact, while something between us changed shape.

“It makes me sad,” she said after a while. “Really.”

I looked at her.

“Me too.”

A small sad laugh escaped her.

“We’re really bad at this.”

“Yes.”

“And the worst part is, I liked it when it was simple.”

“Me too.”

We stayed a little longer on the bench without talking.

But that silence was no longer the same. There was no mystery in it anymore. Just a not very pretty truth, placed between us with enough softness not to completely break what remained, and enough clarity to prevent going back.

Then someone shouted in the distance:

“The bus!”

I stood up.

So did she.

We walked together toward the group.

Not pressed together. Not far either. At a strange distance, almost precise, as if our bodies had understood before us that we now had to be careful with something new.

The ride back was much quieter.

Many students were finally sleeping, exhausted by the three days. The bus had lost its first euphoria. All that remained were necks falling at odd angles, badly adjusted earphones, low conversations, and windows crossed by late-afternoon light that made everything a little blurrier.

Reda was snoring with no shame at all.

Youssef was watching a show on his phone with absurd concentration.

Nawal was reading something in silence.

I watched the road pass by through the window.

Aïcha was sitting a few rows ahead.

She was looking outside too.

We didn't speak again.

But for the first time in several days, I at least understood what had happened. I understood the distance, the hesitations, the unexplained steps back, the looks that turned tender again only to close right away.

And even if that didn't make anything easier, even if part of me still hurt from this story...

It was something else now.

Chapter 19

Responsibility

Monday morning at the office felt calmer than usual.

Maybe it was me.

Or maybe it was simply the effect of coming back from a study trip.

Everything seemed more stable, more predictable.

The screens, the keyboards, the stacked files. Even the smell of coffee in the open space felt almost reassuring.

Numbers, at least, judged no one.

I had barely opened my computer when Clara passed behind me.

“So?”

I looked up.

“So what?”

“The school trip!”

“Ah...”

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

“It was... instructive.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Translation: emotional catastrophe.”

I smiled weakly.

“Yeah...”

“Ah, young people.”

She placed a coffee cup on my desk.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Survival gift.”

I took a sip.

The coffee was far too hot.

“Careful,” she added. “Pascal is looking for you.”

I straightened slightly.

“Pascal?”

“Yes.”

She made a small dramatic gesture with her hands.

“And when the CFO is looking for someone at nine in the morning, it’s rarely to talk about the weather.”

My stomach tightened slightly.

“Great.”

“Good luck,” she said with a smile.

Mister Delmas’s office was at the end of the corridor.

The door was ajar.

I knocked.

“Come in.”

Mister Delmas was sitting behind his desk, surrounded by files and a gigantic screen full of Excel tables. The kind of setup that gives the impression one wrong move could trigger an entire accounting close.

He looked up.

“Ah, Elliott.”

“Good morning.”

“Sit down.”

I sat.

My brain was already preparing three different disaster scenarios.

Accounting error. Wrong file sent. Reputation ruined.

Mister Delmas clasped his hands on the desk.

"How was your study trip?"

I blinked.

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yes."

"You lie badly."

I let out a small nervous laugh.

"I hear that often."

He nodded.

"Good sign."

I didn't know why.

"Why?"

"People who lie well become dangerous."

He slid a file toward me.

"On the contrary, I more easily trust people who lie badly."

I looked at the file.

"I have something for you."

"A project?"

"Yes."

I looked up at him.

"A big project."

I stayed silent.

He opened the file himself and slid a few pages toward me.

"Internal control on the group's bank reconciliations."

I lowered my eyes to the tables.

Then lifted my head again.

"The group?"

"Yes."

"I mean... the whole group?"

"Not all entities. Three subsidiaries to start with."

I blinked.

"Three?"

"Yes."

"That's... a lot."

"Exactly."

I felt my heart speed up.

"Why me?"

He looked at me calmly.

No smile. No effect. Nothing theatrical.

"Because you're talented, Elliott."

The sentence fell simply.

Without emphasis.

Without excessive kindness.

Just like an observation.

I stayed still.

"And because," he continued, "you do something few people do here."

“What?”

“You think.”

Small pause.

“And with your brain, which helps.”

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

“That’s not always useful.”

“Yes, it is.”

He leaned slightly forward.

“The problem, Elliott...”

He paused.

“Is that you think it bothers people that you work differently.”

I felt a warmth rise in my chest.

“Sometimes, yes.”

“That’s false.”

He shrugged.

“Most of the time, people don’t care.”

“And the ones who do?”

He gave a small smile.

“Those are usually the least interesting.”

I lowered my eyes to the file.

The columns were dense. So were the amounts. It all already looked huge.

And yet, under the fear, something else was starting to appear.

Not confidence yet.

But maybe a form of place.

The door opened without a knock.

Lyralda poked her head in.

“Hi Pascal, I need...”

She stopped when she saw me.

“Ah. Sorry.”

“No, come in,” Mister Delmas said.

She entered the office.

Her gaze passed briefly over me.

Then over the open file in front of me.

And something changed in her expression. Very slightly. Not total surprise. Not real worry. More that way she sometimes had of understanding a scene before it was even finished.

“You already put him on group control?” she asked.

“Yes,” Delmas answered.

She sighed lightly.

“You could let him breathe for two minutes before throwing him at three subsidiaries.”

“He’s breathing,” Mister Delmas said.

She tilted her head a little toward me.

“Are you breathing?”

I nodded.

“Yes, yes.”

“Barely, liar.”

Mister Delmas had that small discreet smile I had already seen on him, the one he reserved for certain very short, very fluid exchanges with her.

“He’ll survive.”

"Maybe," she answered.

She came closer to the desk, placed two fingers on a page, and quickly scanned it.

"You're giving him the consolidated statements for May and June, right?"

"Yes."

"Good."

The tone between them was calm. Well-practiced. No extra words. No unnecessary explanation.

The kind of professional ease that my brain, already tired by its own existence, immediately began watching with far too much attention.

Lyralda straightened.

Then looked directly at me.

"Right."

She tapped the edge of the file once.

"Continue."

And she left as quickly as she had entered.

Mister Delmas followed her with his eyes for half a second before returning to me.

Then he smiled slightly.

"If Lyralda worries about you..."

He lifted one shoulder.

"It means you have something."

I didn't know what to answer.

So I simply looked at the file in front of me.

The if Lyralda worries about you stayed stuck somewhere in my head.

Not like good news.

Not completely.

More like one more detail in something I didn't understand well.

I left Mister Delmas's office with the file held against me.

The corridor seemed calmer than usual.

Or maybe it was just my brain needing a few seconds to understand what had just happened.

A big project.

Mine.

I walked slowly back to the open space.

Each step felt a little strange, as if the floor had slightly changed its slope.

I sat at my desk.

The file stayed in front of me.

I opened it.

Tables. Columns. Bank statements. Three subsidiaries.

A lot of numbers. Far too many numbers.

I stayed there looking at the pages for a few seconds.

Then I let out a small nervous laugh.

"Great."

Clara lifted her head from her screen.

"That's the face that worries me."

"What face?"

"The face of a guy who has just received either a promotion or a sentence."

I turned the file slightly toward her.

"Group internal control."

"Wow!"

She whistled softly.

“Pascal likes you!”
“Or he’s testing me.”
“Or both!”
She leaned in to look at the pages.
“Three subsidiaries?”
“Yes.”
“Well then.”
She straightened.
“Welcome to real life!”
I sighed.
“Thank you.”
She took a sip of coffee.
“Are you scared?”
“Yes.”
“Perfect.”
I frowned.
“Why perfect?”
“Because people who aren’t scared often make mistakes.”
She shrugged.
“You’ll check three times.”
I smiled slightly.
“Probably.”
“There you go.”
She returned to her screen.
“So it’ll be fine.”
I dove into the documents.
At first, everything seemed confused.
Numbers. Dates. Lines repeating themselves.
But little by little, my brain did what it knows how to do best: look for patterns.
Anomalies. Gaps. Things that don’t land exactly where they should.
One hour passed without me realizing it.
Then two.
At one point, I felt someone stop behind me.
I looked up.
Lyralda.
She was looking at my screen.
“Still breathing?”
“Yes.”
“That’s a good sign.”
She leaned slightly to look at the tables. Her hair slipped near my shoulder.
“Pascal really likes you.”
I let out a small breath.
“Or he wants to kill me.”
She smiled.
“He only kills useless people.”
“Reassuring.”
“We only have three subsidiaries, you know.”
I turned toward her, trying to understand what she was implying.
I turned the screen slightly toward her.
“I may have found something.”

"Show me."

I pointed to a line.

"There."

"There's a two-day gap between the statements and the entries."

She watched for a few seconds.

Then nodded.

"Good work, Elliott."

I felt a small warmth in my chest.

"Thank you."

She crossed her arms.

"You see?"

"What?"

"You're good."

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

"It's just numbers."

"No."

She looked at me.

"It's attention."

The silence settled for a few seconds.

Then she added:

"And that is rare."

She stayed behind me a little longer. Without speaking. Just watching the screen.

And, strangely, her presence didn't put pressure on me.

Quite the opposite.

But at the same time, there was something else behind that calm: the memory of her entering Mister Delmas's office without knocking, their way of talking to each other, the way he let her finish her thought as if it had already been ongoing for a long time.

My brain didn't need much more to build an entire hypothesis.

Lyralda finally placed a very light hand on my shoulder.

A brief gesture.

Almost professional.

"Keep going. You're on the right track."

Then she straightened.

"And Elliott?"

I looked up.

"Yes?"

She gave a small smile.

"Try not to believe everything people say about you."

Then she went back toward the legal department corridor.

I followed her with my eyes without really realizing it.

That was when I saw Mister Delmas appear at the back, coming out of his office with two sheets in his hand, stopping her with a flick of his wrist.

She stopped immediately. He handed her the documents. She took them. They spoke in low voices. She frowned slightly, he answered something that seemed to amuse her, very little, just enough to move the corner of her mouth.

Then they each went their separate ways.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Just two colleagues who had been working together for a long time.

And yet, from where I was, with my already well-established ability to invent stories out of almost nothing, the scene looked like it belonged to a continuity that completely surpassed me.

I stayed still for a few seconds.

Then I looked back at the screen.

In the window behind the desks, my reflection appeared vaguely.

It was not the same face.

Still the same guy, a little too calm.

But something had slightly changed.

The reflection no longer seemed only... displaced.

It looked busy. Focused.

Maybe even...

useful.

I straightened, picked the file back up, and for the first time in a long while, I caught myself thinking something strange.

Maybe I wasn't only the guy who was too kind.

Maybe I was also...

someone competent.

And that was almost good news.

Almost.

Chapter 20

Break

The decision did not come from a great moment of clarity.

No sudden revelation.

No brilliant sentence that put everything back in place.

No sleepless night at the end of which you finally understand something about yourself with the dignity of a well-written character.

It was more ordinary than that.

An accumulation.

The small sentences. The looks. The half-gestures. The things you think you see.

The ones you maybe imagine.

People who want you a little, but never completely. Or not in the way you want them.

One evening, coming home, I simply thought: "That's enough."

The words stayed in my head.

Simple.

Tired.

Almost clean.

That was enough.

The next morning, I found her in the office corridor.

Lyralda.

She was leaning against the coffee machine, a mug in her hand. She was talking with Clara, who was already laughing too loudly for a Tuesday morning.

When she saw me arrive, her gaze slid toward me.

No surprise.

No embarrassment.

Just that calm look she always had, as if everything was happening exactly where it was supposed to.

Clara gave me a small wave.

"Hi, survivor."

"Hi Clara."

I took a cup.

The coffee flowed slowly.

Clara looked from one of us to the other, with that very specific sixth sense of people who like living among implications.

"Right..."

She tapped the machine with her fingertips.

"I have a meeting. Or something that looks like one."

Then, as she passed me:

"Try not to die before noon, it would be bad for the atmosphere."

She walked away down the corridor.

And suddenly, only the two of us were left.

The coffee kept flowing.

I stared at the black liquid in the cup as if it were a complicated question.

"You're working too much," Lyralda said.

I didn't look up.

"Possibly possible."

"And you're thinking too much."

"Probably probable."

Silence.

I took the cup.

Then I turned toward her.

“We need to talk.”

She nodded slightly.

“Okay.”

We stayed there.

In the corridor.

Between the coffee machine and the bay window.

Not really a place for big conversations.

But apparently, it was enough for me.

I breathed in.

And I said, far too fast:

“I think we should stop.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“Stop... what?”

I took a shorter breath this time.

“This.”

She was still looking at me.

Calm.

Attentive.

“Us,” I added.

The word floated for one second.

Then she placed her mug on the machine.

Her arms crossed slowly.

I expected something.

Irony.

A cutting sentence.

A defense.

Even a look.

But no.

“Okay, Elliott,” she said.

I blinked.

That was it?

Just that?

I immediately felt my momentum break a little on the spot, which was vexing because it was my own momentum and I would have liked to at least find it convincing until the end.

“Okay...?” I repeated.

“Yes. Okay.”

Her voice was still calm.

“If that’s what you want.”

I no longer really knew what to do with the rest of my sentence, so I let out the one that had been stuck at the back of my throat for several days.

“I’m not an optional plan B.”

She barely moved.

But something passed over her face.

Very light.

Very quick.

The kind of movement you only notice when you look at someone far too much.

"I never thought that," she said.
I lifted my shoulders slightly.
"Maybe you did."
"No."
Small silence.
"Never."
That should have calmed me.
Obviously, it did not calm me at all.
Because when you have decided to experience something badly, you become creative enough to ignore every sentence that could improve the situation.
"Doesn't matter," I said.
She looked at me for another second.
Then nodded, very slightly.
"As you wish."
I tightened my grip on the cup.
"That's all?"
"What more do you want?"
The question wasn't aggressive.
That was worse.
It was sincere. Truly sincere.
I lowered my eyes.
"I don't know."
"I do."
She picked up her mug again.
"I'm not going to chase after you."
I lifted my head.
"What?"
"If you want distance, take it."
She lifted one shoulder.
"You're an adult, Elliott."
Her voice had not trembled.
No anger.
No reproach.
No "you're hurting me" that would at least have given me the feeling of clearly existing in the story.
Then she added:
"I'm not moving."
The sentence stayed there.
Strange.
Not a protest.
Not an acceptance.
Just a fact.
As if she were saying: I will be in the same place, with the same truth, even if you decide to walk around the block with your anxieties.
I didn't know what to answer.
So I nodded.
"Very well."
I took my coffee.
And I left toward the open space.
The following days were strange.

Not dramatic.

Not loud.

Just... empty.

I did my work.

I continued the internal control.

The figures moved forward.

The columns filled up.

But everything else seemed slightly switched off.

I crossed paths with Lyralda several times in the corridors.

She greeted me.

Politely.

Like any colleague.

“Good morning, Elliott.”

“Good morning.”

“Have a good day, Elliott.”

“Have a good day.”

And it was almost worse.

Because she was respecting exactly what I had asked for.

No insistence.

No attempt.

No drama.

Just space.

And now that I had it, I no longer knew what to do with it.

On Tuesday, Mehdi stopped near my desk late in the morning with a coffee in hand and the look of a man who had very clearly decided not to pretend he saw nothing.

“Serious question.”

I looked up.

“This starts well.”

“Always.”

He placed a hand on the edge of my desk.

“Are you two sulking or what?”

I stayed still.

“Who?”

He looked at me the way you look at someone who has just tried to hide a lamp under a towel.

“You and Lyralda.”

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

“We’re working.”

“Mm-hmm.”

He took a sip of coffee, still not taking his eyes off me.

“And I’m a ballet dancer at night.”

I let out a small laugh.

“There’s nothing.”

“Of course.”

He tilted his head.

“You look like a guy sorting his emotions by color code in a compressed folder.”

“That’s very specific.”

“I’m very specific.”

He glanced toward the back of the open space, where Lyralda was in fact talking with Mister Delmas in front of the glass office.

They were standing near each other. Not pressed together, obviously. Just close enough to read the same document. Mister Delmas was saying something while pointing at a line. Lyralda nodded. And the whole thing had that adult, silent, already settled fluidity I had started hating with a very unhealthy regularity.

Mehdi looked at the scene, then at me.

“Ah.”

“What?”

“So that’s it.”

“I don’t see what you’re talking about.”

“Liar.”

He smiled.

“If you need a professional mediator, I charge ninety euros a session.”

“We don’t need a mediator.”

“Too bad.”

He tapped my desk.

Then left just like that, leaving me alone with my screen and a very strong desire to never cross paths with another human being until retirement.

Clara adopted a less subtle method.

On Wednesday morning, she outright sat on the edge of my desk with her coffee and her total lack of respect for other people’s emotional distance.

“Serious question.”

“Everyone starts their sentences like that this week.”

“Because you have a face that provokes serious questions.”

I looked up at her.

“Yes?”

“Are you having a discreet burnout or is this just a new personality?”

I let out a small breath.

“I’m working.”

“Obviously. You’re paid to do that.”

She looked at my screen.

“You’re working a lot.”

I shrugged.

“It’s the project.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She tilted her head.

“You’re not talking to anyone anymore.”

“That’s false.”

“Oh really?”

“I talk to Excel. And to you.”

She smiled.

“Bad company.”

Then she leaned a little toward me.

“Did you have a fight with someone?”

“Absolutely not at all, really not.”

She made a small grimace.

“That sentence contains far too many adverbs to be innocent.”

I lowered my eyes to the table.

“It’s nothing.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She followed my gaze, then looked toward the legal office.

Lyralda was coming out of Mister Delmas’s office with a file under her arm. He said something behind her. She turned her head slightly, answered one word I didn’t hear, and he had that calm half-smile I now knew far too well.

Clara came back to me.

“Ah.”

“What now?”

“Nothing.”

Then, with a softness far too well measured to be entirely disinterested:

“Statistically, the next one will be better.”

I frowned.

“The next what?”

“Existential crisis. Breakup. Whatever you’re going through there.”

She tapped my desk.

“When you become human again, come warn me.”

Then she left.

I smiled weakly.

But I didn’t move.

Jade tried a first approach by message.

“you surviving?”

I took almost ten minutes to answer.

“yes”

She replied immediately.

“very ugly and extremely bad lie”

I stared at the screen for a few seconds.

Then I put the phone face down on the desk.

In the afternoon, she moved straight to a more frontal strategy.

She arrived with two coffees, placed one on my desk, then pulled the free chair beside me and sat down without asking anyone’s permission, which suited her perfectly.

“Okay.”

I looked up.

“Okay?”

“We’re going to keep this simple.”

She crossed her arms.

“Simple?”

“Are you sulking at everyone?”

“Sulking at everyone?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

She stared at me for a few seconds.

Then sighed.

“You’re exhausting.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She pushed the coffee slightly toward me.

“Drink.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like a guy who is about to turn into a human spreadsheet.”

I took the cup.
 She looked at me a little longer.
 Then her tone shifted down a notch.
 Less sharp.
 “Did I maybe say something wrong the other day?”
 I blinked.
 “No.”
 “Maybe?”
 “No.”
 She frowned slightly.
 “You’re impossible.”
 “Probably.”
 She ran a hand through her hair.
 “Right.”
 Silence.
 Then she continued:
 “I’m going to tell you something humiliating about myself, so you’ll feel like the world is more balanced.”
 I looked up a little.
 “That’s a strange strategy.”
 “Yes, but it works.”
 She placed her elbow on my desk.
 “In my first year of BTS², I flirted with a guy for two months. I thought we were a couple before realizing he was just trying to be nice, then he went out with one of my friends because he simply wasn’t interested in women.”
 I looked at her.
 She lifted one shoulder.
 “There. Shame exists for everyone.”
 I let out a small breath through my nose.
 A real laugh.
 She noticed immediately.
 “Ah!”
 “What?”
 “I saw it!”
 “Saw what?”
 “A micro-sign of life.”
 “Unbearable.”
 “I know.”
 She straightened a little.
 “More seriously.”
 The word almost worried me.
 “What?”
 “You know this isn’t healthy, right?”
 “What?”
 “Disappearing like this.”
 I looked at my screen.

² BTS (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur): a two-year French vocational higher education diploma.

"I'm not disappearing."

"No. You're imitating a dehydrated houseplant."

She placed two fingers on the edge of the screen to symbolically stop me from hiding behind it.

"You look like someone trying to become an old carpet to turn invisible."

I didn't answer.

Because the sentence displeased me mainly because of its precision.

She waited.

Then finally stood up.

"Right."

She tapped my screen once.

"Keep talking to your tables."

She took two steps, then turned back halfway.

"And tonight, answer my messages."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise I'm coming to your place to check if you've merged with your sofa."

I looked at her.

"Is that a threat?"

"It's friendly after-sales service."

Then she left for real.

I watched her move away between the desks.

And for the first time in several days, something loosened slightly in my chest.

That evening, the apartment seemed quieter than usual.

I was cooking again.

It had become a habit.

Cutting.

Mixing.

Watching the cooking.

Simple gestures helped quiet the noise in my head a little.

But even that didn't always work.

Sometimes I just stood in the kitchen, spoon in hand, not really knowing why I had started cooking.

My phone vibrated.

Jade.

"Jade: you alive?"

I answered.

"Eliott: yes"

"Jade: proof"

I looked at my pan.

Then I sent a photo of the pasta.

Her reply arrived immediately.

"Jade: that's sad"

"Eliott: it's pasta"

"Jade: exactly"

"Jade: do you want to complain or do you just want me to bother you?"

I stayed looking at the screen for a moment.

Then I wrote:

"Eliott: both I think"

Her answer came.

“Jade: good news”
“Jade: I can do both”
I caught myself smiling.
A real smile, this time.
Small. Tired. But real.
We exchanged a few more messages.
Nothing spectacular.
She told me a client had called her “little one” on the phone and that she had wanted to cross through the line to elegantly strangle him.
I told her a statement line had decided to ruin my evening.
She replied that I really had sad enemies...
It was light.
Natural.
No tension to guess.
No subtext to dissect.
No impression of risking something with every sentence.
And I could feel very well that this was what was doing me good, deep down.
Not her as a possibility.
Her as a presence.
The fact that she kept coming back to me without asking me to be simpler, brighter, more sure of myself than I was.
When the conversation stopped, the apartment became calm again.
But a little less empty.
The following days took on a strange shape.
Not slow.
Not fast either.
More like a series of almost identical moments.
Morning.
Office.
Numbers.
Evening.
Silence.
I continued the control.
Three subsidiaries, hundreds of lines, dates aligning, gaps to check.
Numbers had logic.
When something was wrong, there was always a reason.
A human error.
A date gap.
A forgotten entry.
Nothing mysterious.
Nothing blurred.
Unlike the rest.
I crossed paths with Lyralda every day.
Sometimes in the corridor.
Sometimes near the coffee machine.
Sometimes simply in the open space.
She changed nothing in her behavior.
“Good morning, Elliott.”
“Good morning.”
“Have a good day, Elliott.”

“Have a good day.”

Professional.

Clean.

As if everything had always been this way.

And that was probably the hardest part.

Because it gave the impression I had been fighting against something that maybe only existed in my head.

One morning, Mehdi stopped near my desk with a coffee and an already half-eaten croissant.

“I have a theory.”

I looked up.

“That worries me.”

“Wrongly. It’s excellent.”

He bit into his croissant.

“You’re in love, sad, or an actual accountant?”

“All three can exist at the same time.”

“Ah...”

He took that with far too much seriousness to be honest.

“Bad combination. Really.”

I let out a small laugh.

He lowered his voice a little.

“You know, people who make radical decisions on impulse rarely look as proud as you.”

I frowned slightly.

“I don’t look proud.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at me for two seconds.

Then his gaze slid toward Lyralda, at the back, talking with Mister Delmas in front of a glass partition. They were consulting a document. Mister Delmas was saying something. She nodded. And from far away, they once again looked like that kind of perfectly functional adult duo my brain loved turning into a personal problem.

Mehdi came back to me.

“She looks calm...”

“Who?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the entire legal department.”

I said nothing.

He smiled.

“Mm-hmm.”

Then he tapped my desk.

“When you want to become a social mammal again, we’ll do that.”

“That’s very kind.”

“I know.”

And he left.

At noon, I went downstairs to eat alone.

The cafeteria was almost empty.

I sat at a small table near the window.

My Tupperware in front of me.

Pasta.

Again.

With butter, salted, obviously.
I ate slowly.
Around me, groups were talking. Colleagues were laughing. Ordinary conversations. The normal life of the office.
Sometimes I looked at people without really seeing them.
And one thought kept coming back to the same place.
Why is it so easy for them?
Relationships.
Jokes.
Simple discussions.
Why did I always have to think about every gesture as if it were an equation too complicated?
I put down my fork.
And, for the first time in a long while, a harsher question appeared in my head.
Do I really deserve to be loved?
The thought stayed there.
Heavy.
I pushed it away immediately.
But it did not disappear.
Jade arrived without warning, placed her tray across from mine, and sat down.
“No.”
I looked up.
“What?”
“I refuse to let you become a man who eats pasta alone in front of a window with the face of an old flat tire someone threw into the forest.”
I looked at her.
“That’s very precise.”
“I’m very precise.”
She opened her can.
“And besides, I’m right. Always.”
I lowered my eyes to my meal.
“Maybe.”
“Ooh.”
She leaned a little on her elbows.
“We have a maybe.”
I let out a small smile.
“You all watch me far too much.”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because you have the energy of a sad puppy left too long under the rain.”
I stared at her.
“That’s an atrocious image.”
“I know.”
She ate a fry, then added more softly:
“You don’t need to be easy for people to stay.”
I lifted my eyes.
She no longer looked like she was joking at all.
“You always think that if people pull away, it’s because something is missing in you.”
I didn’t answer.

Because I didn't like that she formulated it so clearly.

She lifted one shoulder.

"Sometimes people pull away just because they're cowardly, lost, tired, or stupid."

"That's very optimistic."

"That's very true."

She took a sip.

"And sometimes also because they're afraid of what they want. Or of what they don't know how to handle."

I looked at her, not really knowing whether she was talking about me, someone else, or several people at once.

Then she became lighter again, almost immediately.

"Anyway."

She pointed at my box.

"Still, make an effort with the pasta."

"I cook other things sometimes."

"Proof?"

"You're obsessed with proof."

"Occupational hazard."

"You're in sales."

"Exactly."

I smiled.

And this time, it required no effort.

The afternoon passed slowly.

Very slowly.

I spoke little.

I answered technical questions.

I worked.

Again.

Always.

Around four, Clara passed behind me.

"Have you seen the sun today?"

"I don't know."

"Look away from your screen a bit."

"Maybe later."

She sighed.

"You have officially become an accounting hermit."

I smiled weakly.

"Is that a promotion?"

"A bad promotion."

She placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Take care of yourself."

Then she left.

I stayed in front of my screen a little longer.

But the numbers were mixing slightly, not much.

Just enough for my brain to slow down.

And the thought came back.

Maybe I'm just too weird for people.

Not mean.

Just... incompatible.

I passed a hand over my face.

Then I returned to work.
 Because working remained the only thing that never rejected me.
 The end of the day arrived without me really noticing.
 The numbers kept scrolling on my screen, but my brain was slowly slowing down,
 like an engine running for too long.
 In the open space, people were starting to put away their things. Chairs scraped
 the floor. Bags closed. Conversations resumed.
 I saved my file.
 One last check.
 By reflex.
 Then I closed the computer.
 The silence in my head was not really restful.
 More... empty.
 I put the documents in my bag.
 When I looked up, Clara was passing near my desk.
 "You're leaving already?"
 "Yes."
 "Miracle."
 She tilted her head.
 "You ate, at least?"
 "Yes."
 "Alone?"
 "No."
 She sighed.
 "Good."
 She placed a quick hand on my desk.
 "Try to do something nice tonight."
 "Like what?"
 "I don't know."
 She thought for one second.
 "Talk to a human."
 I smiled weakly.
 "I'll think about it."
 "Do it, that's an order from great Clara."
 Then she left.
 I stood up.
 The open space was almost empty now.
 Evening light entered through the large windows, giving the room a slightly softer
 color.
 I passed several desks.
 Some already switched off.
 Others still occupied.
 I knew exactly where not to look.
 So, obviously, my gaze drifted anyway.
 Toward the back of the room.
 Toward the legal office.
 Lyralda was still there.
 Her screen lit her face.
 She was reading a document.
 Focused.

Calm.
I slowed almost despite myself.
She looked up.
Our eyes met.
Just one second.
Like in the morning.
Her expression did not change.
No smile.
No sadness.
Just that usual calm.
“Have a good evening, Elliott.”
Her voice was composed.
Professional.
I nodded slightly.
“Have a good evening.”
And I continued toward the exit.
The corridor leading to the elevators was almost empty.
The noise of the office moved away behind me.
I scanned my badge.
The glass door opened.
The air in the lobby was cooler.
I walked slowly toward the elevators.
And a strange sensation was gently rising in my chest.
Not a crisis.
Not a drama.
Just a quiet weight.
As if something had settled inside.
In the elevator, my reflection appeared in the metal walls.
Distorted.
Fragmented.
Several versions of my face side by side.
I looked at myself.
Tired.
Calm.

Chapter 21

At Rock Bottom

In the morning, everything already had the wrong color.

Not literally.

The sky was gray, yes, but mostly I was the one seeing everything through a layer of dust.

The office, the metro, the faces, even the coffee in my cardboard cup. Everything seemed a little too far away.

As if the world were moving normally and I was following half a day behind.

I arrived at the company on time.

That was already an effort.

In the elevator, my reflection in the stainless steel looked paler than usual. A little blurry too. As if I had been badly printed.

I looked away before I started hating myself over details.

The open space was already awake. Keyboards. Small hellos. The sharp noise of the printer.

Clara was talking with someone near the bay window. Jade was at her desk, farther away, eyes on her screen. Mehdi was crossing the corridor with a coffee and an energy I found, that morning, almost offensive.

No one seemed to be living through the slightest inner tragedy.

I sat down.

My computer turned on with that obscene tranquility of machines that are never ashamed of anything.

I opened my files, my emails, my tables.

My fingers moved.

My brain took time to follow.

I reread each line three times. I checked a formula, then another, then another again. And despite that, I had the impression something was escaping me everywhere.

Like when you try to hold water in your hands and only feel the cold slipping between your fingers.

Around ten, Mister Delmas sent me an email.

“Meeting at 11:00 - Concavenator room. Attendance required.”

I looked at the screen a few seconds too long.

My stomach immediately tightened.

Meeting. Attendance required.

Two simple words that, in my body, always translate into the same thing: heat rising in my neck, then the impression that my organs have started discussing among themselves the best way to ruin my day.

I forced myself to breathe.

It was surely only a progress point. A follow-up. Nothing exceptional.

And yet, an absurd certainty settled almost immediately.

Something was going to go wrong.

I don't know how else to explain it. It wasn't intuition, not really. More like an old fatigue that already knows the rest before the scene even begins.

The confidential file had been open on my screen for twenty minutes when everything slipped.

A consolidated table. Statements. Lines to correct.

Nothing extraordinary.

The previous day, I had received an additional document to integrate before the morning meeting. A simple update. Well, simple on paper.

In reality, you had to pay attention to the tabs, the filters, the restricted access, the working version, and the secure version.

I knew.

I knew all that.

It was precisely that kind of vigilance that had made them entrust me with the control.

And yet...

my brain latched onto the wrong file.

Or rather: the right file, in the wrong place.

I copied the data. Pasted the lines. Saved.

Then sent the version to the internal mailing list prepared for the meeting.

The gesture was almost automatic. A click. A breath.

And then that little floating feeling in my chest, half a second later. The kind of sensation you get when you close a door while vaguely knowing you forgot something behind it.

I reopened the email.

Reread the subject.

Opened the attachment.

My blood went cold all at once.

It wasn't the meeting version.

It was the confidential version.

The one containing the internal comments, annotations, control remarks, elements that should never have left the raw file.

I stayed frozen.

My eyes slid over the screen without really reading.

Then I clicked recall message.

Error.

Too late.

The email had already been read by several recipients.

I could feel my heart hitting everywhere.

In my throat.

In my temples.

In my fingers.

Oh shit.

I sent a correction immediately.

Clean attachment. Brief message. Too brief.

I reread it three times before pressing send, as if careful grammar could make up for the substance.

It changed nothing.

Obviously.

The mistake already existed.

Solid.

Irreversible.

Gone into the world like a small stupid object I could no longer retrieve.

"Eliott?"

I lifted my head.

Jade was standing beside my desk.

This time, she looked worried.

“Tell me you didn’t send the wrong version...”

I think I tried to speak.

No sound came out.

Her gaze slid over the screen.

Then over the correction I had just sent.

Then over me.

“And shit.”

The word fell in a low voice. Even more violent like that.

I half stood.

“I corrected it, I...”

“After.”

Her voice was flat.

“You corrected it after.”

She closed her eyes for one second.

When she opened them again, there was no ambiguity left in her expression. Just cold. Not cruelty. Just that professional sharpness which, with her, hurt much more than her jabs.

“It’s a confidential file.”

“I know.”

I felt shame pass through me like a dry current.

Around us, the open space kept breathing. But I knew very well that two or three people had already looked up. The kind of peripheral attention you feel without even seeing it.

Jade leaned toward me.

Her voice lowered even more.

“You’re going to have to handle this with your boss.”

She straightened.

Then added, without taking her eyes off me:

“And this time, don’t mess it up.”

She left.

I stayed standing for one more second.

Then I sat down again.

My hands were trembling slightly. Not enough for it to be spectacular. Just enough to make every click more difficult than it should be.

I spent the next twenty minutes trying to repair the irreparable.

Checking who had opened the document.

Preparing the right version.

Rereading everything. Again.

My brain was spinning too fast and not well enough at the same time. A performance I unfortunately master very well.

I would have liked to disappear into the file.

Or slip between two cells before clicking “hide column.”

Or be anything other than a human being forced to sit in a glass meeting room in a few minutes.

At 10:59, I closed my computer.

I stood up.

My legs felt a little foreign.

The corridor to the room was not long. Still, I crossed it like one walks down a hospital hallway. With that artificial calm you adopt when you know panicking now would no longer serve any purpose.

Passing in front of the legal department, I caught sight of Lyralda behind the partition.

She was reading something, bent over a file.

She looked up at the moment I passed.

Our eyes met.

One second.

I don't know what she saw on my face.

But her expression changed, barely.

A tiny variation.

As if she already understood something was wrong.

I did not slow down.

I said nothing.

I entered the meeting room.

And I knew, seeing the faces already seated, that the day had truly tipped.

The door of the room closed with that small discreet sound that resembles a polite sentence.

The meeting lasted less than expected. The corrected document had been integrated. Two people had made a sharp remark. Mister Delmas had answered for them with the firm calm of people who handle an error without dramatizing it publicly.

Then the others left.

Only the two of us remained.

Mister Delmas was still sitting at the end of the table, hands clasped in front of him. The screen behind us still displayed the internal control table, frozen like evidence.

I didn't know where to look.

So I stared at the table.

The light wood.

The fingerprints near the edge.

Useless details.

Anything except the moment about to arrive.

Mister Delmas finally spoke.

"Right."

His voice was neither cold nor soft.

Just very composed.

"Let's be clear."

I nodded.

"What you sent this morning..."

He made a small gesture toward the screen.

"That is a serious mistake."

The word serious seemed to fill the entire room.

"Yes."

My voice came out lower than expected.

He continued.

"Not catastrophic. Not irreparable. But serious."

Silence.

"It is a confidential document."

"I know."

"And this is not a game."

I nodded again.

I could feel shame holding me by the back of the neck.
“I understand.”
He observed me for a few seconds.
Then sighed lightly.
“The problem, Elliott...”
He paused.
“Is not the mistake.”
I looked up.
“Everyone makes mistakes. Me too.”
He placed a hand on the file.
“The problem is your state.”
I frowned slightly.
“My state?”
“Yes.”
He was looking straight into my eyes now.
“You’re elsewhere.”
I stayed silent.
“Tired. Tense. For several weeks.”
He lifted his shoulders slightly.
“And it shows.”
The word passed through me like a cold current.
“I’m working.”
“Yes.”
He nodded.
“A lot. But not properly.”
Silence.
“Do you know why?”
I shook my head slightly.
“Because you’re drowning in your personal stories.”
The sentence fell heavily.
I lowered my eyes.
“Maybe.”
“Not maybe.”
His voice became a little firmer.
“You can’t screw everything up because of your personal issues.”
I felt something tighten in my chest.
Not anger.
Just that immense fatigue that had been following me for weeks.
“I don’t want to screw everything up.”
“I know.”
His answer was immediate.
And it almost surprised me.
Mister Delmas straightened slightly.
“Listen to me carefully.”
I looked up.
“You’re good.”
The sentence felt unreal.
“You’re even very good. Too good for a work-study student. That’s why you’re on this control.”
He tapped the file.

"I don't entrust this kind of work to just anyone."

I stayed still.

"But if you continue like this..."

He let the sentence float.

"You're going to sabotage yourself."

The silence in the room was almost heavy.

"And that, I can't let pass."

He paused.

"That's also my job."

I nodded.

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"I'll be careful."

He sighed.

"It's not a question of attention."

He gently tapped the table with his fingertips.

"It's a question of presence."

He fixed his eyes on me.

"You need to come back here."

Small pause.

"Not stay stuck in your head."

I felt my throat tighten.

"I'm trying."

"Don't try. Do it."

The sentence could have been harsh.

But his voice wasn't aggressive.

Then he added, a little more softly:

"But I'm not letting you go."

I lifted my head.

"Sorry?"

"I'm not letting you go."

He lifted one shoulder.

"If I wanted to get rid of you, it would already be done."

The calm with which he said that was almost reassuring.

"So here's what we're going to do."

He slid the file toward me.

"You finish this control. Properly. And you stop believing your inner world is more important than the rest of your life."

I took the file.

My hands were still trembling a little.

"Yes."

He nodded.

"Good."

Then he stood.

The gesture clearly signaled that the conversation was over.

"And Elliott?"

I looked up.

"Yes?"

He looked at me for one second.

“People who think too much often end up hating themselves for things that don’t even exist.”

I didn’t answer.

Because the sentence had just touched something very precise.

“Don’t do that.”

Then he opened the door.

“Go on. Get back to work.”

I stepped out into the corridor.

The air seemed less heavy than before.

But not lighter either. Just... different.

Like after a fall, when you know you haven’t broken anything, but you’re still ashamed of having fallen.

The open space was still there.

Keyboards.

Screens.

The normal life of the office.

But I was walking as if my legs belonged to someone else.

When I passed the legal department again, I felt a gaze.

I looked up.

Lyralda was standing near her desk.

She said nothing.

Not a word.

But her gaze stayed on me one second too long.

As if she wanted to check something.

As if she was maybe waiting for me to stop.

I looked away.

And I went back to my desk.

The control file in front of me.

The numbers on the screen.

The work.

The only thing that, in theory, did not reject me completely.

But this time...

even that seemed heavier than usual.

The end of the day stretched like a bad fever.

I stayed at my desk.

The numbers continued existing on the screen. The columns. The filters. The reconciliations.

Everything was there, perfectly logical, perfectly functional.

Except me.

I corrected.

I checked.

I went back over the lines one by one with almost unhealthy attention.

As if precision could make up for what had cracked somewhere else.

No one really came to speak to me.

Clara passed once behind my desk, placed a quick hand on my shoulder without saying anything, then left. Mehdi threw a joke from far away, but it got lost in the noise of the keyboards.

Around five, the open space began to empty.

Bags closed.

Chairs moved back.

Evening light entered through the large windows.
I stayed in front of my screen a little longer.
I had been rereading the same page for several minutes without really understanding it.
Finally, I closed the file.
Save.
Close.
Simple gestures.
I slowly gathered my things.
When I stood, I saw Lyralda at the back of the room.
She was still at her desk.
Her computer lit her face.
She looked up as I passed.
Our eyes met.
Just one second.
“Have a good day, Elliott.”
“Have a good day.”
I continued toward the exit.
The street was calm.
The air cold.
I walked without really looking where I was going.
Shop windows passed by.
People passed.
Some were laughing.
Some were on the phone.
Normal life.
Again.
And I had the impression of moving through all of it like a ghost a little too solid to disappear completely.
When I got back to my studio, the room seemed smaller than usual.
The white walls.
The desk lamp.
The tiny kitchen.
Everything was exactly in its place.
And yet, something in me gave way.
I put down my bag.
Took off my shoes.
Then sat on the edge of the bed.
The silence of the apartment fell on me all at once.
I stayed like that for a long time.
Back slightly hunched.
Hands still.
Gaze lost somewhere between the floor and the opposite wall.
At one point, I lay down on the bed without taking off my jacket.
The blurry ceiling above me.
Time passed.
I couldn't say how much.
At some point, my phone vibrated on the bedside table.
I didn't move right away.
Then I reached out.

The screen lit up.
A message.
Lyralda.
I stayed frozen for one second.
Then I opened it.
The message was short. Very short.
“I’m here if you need me, Elliott.”
That was all.
No question.
No reproach.
No pressure.
Just that.
I looked at the screen for a long time.
A very long time.
My fingers stayed still.
I could answer.
One word. Two. Anything.
thank you
I’m not okay
can you come?
sorry
Anything.
But I didn’t.
I put the phone back beside me.
And I stayed there, in the darkness slowly beginning to enter the room, with that
very simple and very sad feeling:
maybe I had arrived exactly at the moment when I should have reached out.
And I didn’t even have the strength anymore.

Chapter 22

Jade

Jade's message arrived in the evening.

"What are you doing tonight?"

I stayed for a few seconds looking at the screen.

For several weeks, I had been avoiding almost everyone. Jade too, partly. Well, I was avoiding her the way you avoid people who keep talking to you when you've decided to become furniture.

I finally answered:

"Nothing"

The three dots appeared immediately.

"Perfect"

One second later:

"Come have dinner"

Pause.

"I need to talk. Just you and me"

I stared at the screen.

My brain told me it was probably a bad idea.

A very bad idea.

But my body was tired of always running away.

So I simply answered:

"Okay"

Her apartment was on the fourth floor of an old building, not far from the office.

When she opened the door, she was wearing a loose T-shirt and black pants, her hair tied up quickly. She looked simpler than usual.

She gave a small smile.

"You came."

"I told you I would."

"I had doubts."

I lifted my shoulders slightly.

"So did I."

She laughed softly.

"Come in."

The apartment was warmer than I would have imagined. A small table near the window. An open kitchen. Yellow lights that made the place almost comfortable. Not luxurious. Not perfectly tidy. Just alive. Truly lived in.

"I ordered," she said. "I couldn't be bothered to cook."

"That works for me."

We sat at the table.

At first, the conversation stayed surprisingly simple.

The office.

University.

Mehdi, who always told the same jokes with the energy of a man who still believed he was inventing them.

Clara and her coffee that was far too strong.

One of Jade's clients who had said "quick point" before talking for forty-two minutes.

Jade seemed relaxed.

Softer than usual.

At one point, she looked at me a little longer.

"You've changed."

"What do you mean?"

"You're more silent."

I smiled weakly.

"I already don't talk much."

"This is different."

She crossed her arms on the table.

"Before, you were calm. Now it feels like you're absent."

I lowered my eyes to my plate.

"Maybe."

She sighed.

"I don't like it."

I lifted my head slightly.

"Why?"

She lifted one shoulder.

"Because I preferred when you looked at me as if I were someone good."

The sentence caught me off guard.

"You are."

She gave a small laugh.

"You see? That's exactly it."

"What?"

"You always have a kind answer ready before you've even thought about what you actually think."

I didn't answer.

Because I could already feel that the evening was not going to stay quiet for very long.

Silence fell again for a while.

Then Jade stood up to clear the plates. I heard her run some water in the sink, open a cupboard, close a drawer. Simple gestures. Normal ones. The kind of gestures that almost make you want to believe you're in a simple scene.

When she came back, she didn't sit across from me again.

She took the chair beside me.

Very close.

I immediately felt the tension change.

Her knee brushed mine.

"Eliott."

Her voice was lower now.

"Yes?"

She looked at me for a long time.

"Do you know why I invited you?"

"To talk."

She shook her head.

"Not only."

She placed a hand on my arm.

"I needed to see how long you were going to keep going like this."

I frowned slightly.

"Like what?"

"Like a little ghost that's too polite."

I let out a breath.

"That's a bit violent."

"Yes."

She wasn't really smiling anymore.

"Because apparently, gently doesn't work."

I turned my head slightly toward her.

"What doesn't work?"

"You."

Small silence.

"Well, no. Not you."

She corrected herself almost immediately, but without softening her voice.

"The way you let things crush you and call it thinking."

I straightened slightly.

"Jade..."

"No."

She shook her head.

"Tonight, you're going to listen to me."

Her hand slowly slid to my neck.

The gesture was the same as before.

Precise. Familiar. Almost reassuring.

And yet, something had changed in her gaze.

This time, it wasn't a check. Or a game. Or a way to calm me down.

It was a test.

"Do you know what drives me crazy about you?" she asked.

I didn't answer.

"You're intelligent. Kind. Attentive."

She gave a small joyless laugh.

"And yet you spend your life acting as if you should apologize for existing."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"I don't apologize."

"Yes, you do."

Her hand left my neck and came to rest on my chest.

"All the time."

The contact made me jump.

She noticed immediately.

"You see?" she murmured. "Always that."

"What?"

"That hesitation. That restraint. That way you have of asking permission to be there."

I took a breath.

"You're dramatizing."

"No."

She moved a little closer.

"I'm simplifying."

"Jade..."

"What?"

I finally looked at her.

Her eyes were hard now. Not cruel. Not really. Sharper. Deliberately sharp.

"Why are you doing this?"

She stared at me for one second.

Then lifted one shoulder slightly.

"Because otherwise you're going to keep watching yourself die in silence as if it were a quality."
The silence became heavier.
I could have left then.
Stood up. Said it was pointless. Gone home with my fatigue and my wounded pride.
But I stayed.
Because part of me had understood that something was preparing itself.
Her hand slid a little lower over my chest.
Not brutally.
But with an almost provocative confidence.
"Look at yourself."
Her voice was low, very close to my face.
"Always stuck between what you want... and what you think you're supposed to be."
I closed my eyes for one second.
"Jade, stop."
She gave a small laugh.
"Stop?"
Her hand stopped.
Then she moved back slightly to look at me.
"Why?"
I finally looked at her.
"Because it leads nowhere."
She tilted her head.
"Yes, it does."
"Where?"
"To the truth."
I frowned slightly.
"What truth?"
She shrugged.
Then dropped the sentence calmly, almost without effect:
"That you're just a little puppy incapable of expressing yourself."
The world seemed to freeze for one second.
My brain took a moment to understand the words.
Then the sentence settled in.
Heavy.
Brutal.
Perfectly unbearable.
I stood so abruptly that the chair scraped violently against the floor.
"What?"
My voice had changed.
Louder.
Harder.
Jade stayed seated.
And I saw something almost satisfied pass through her gaze.
Not because she had hurt me.
Because, for the first time in a long while, I was finally there.
"Oh. You're finally waking up."
I could feel my heart beating in my temples.

"You're really comparing me to that?"

She lifted one shoulder.

"You're convenient. Kind. Always available. Always ready to understand others before yourself."

She lifted her eyes to me.

"People like you are easy to use."

Something exploded in my chest.

"I'm worth more than that!"

The shout came out louder than expected.

The walls of the apartment seemed to vibrate for one second.

Jade stood slowly.

Her expression changed immediately.

No more game. No more mask.

"Obviously you are."

She stared at me.

"But do you really believe you're worth more than that?"

I was breathing too fast.

"Yes!"

She shook her head.

"No."

Small pause.

"You may feel it sometimes. You hope it. But you don't believe it."

I stayed frozen.

Because part of me knew exactly that she had just hit the right place.

"Do you know what you do, Elliott?" she continued.

Her voice was no longer aggressive. Just firm. Very firm.

"You let people choose for you. You let them define you, move you, reject you, interpret you. And then afterward you suffer in silence as if it were noble."

I clenched my fists.

"You think I do it on purpose?"

"No. I think you adore yourself in the role of the guy who gets hurt without saying anything."

I looked at her as if she had just slapped me.

"That's false."

"Oh really?"

She took one step toward me.

"Then why do you never say things when they matter?"

"I..."

"Why do you prefer withdrawing rather than asking?"

"Because..."

"Why did you dump Lyralda like a vexed child instead of talking to her honestly?"

This time, the sentence hit me like a blow to the stomach.

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

"Yes, I do."

She looked at me with almost painful clarity.

"I know exactly what I'm talking about. I know you."

The silence between us had become enormous.

I stared at her.

Then the words finally came out.

Not clean. Not calm. But true.

"I'm tired of it."

The silence tightened again.

"I'm tired of always having to understand others before myself."

My throat was tightening, but I continued.

"I'm tired of always being the one people leave, the one people can lose, the one who has to stay reasonable, calm, kind, decent."

My voice trembled slightly.

"I'm tired of feeling replaceable everywhere."

Jade didn't move.

She let me speak.

"And I'm tired..."

I took another breath.

"I'm tired of acting as if it doesn't do anything to me..."

The last sentence fell lower than the others.

But it stayed.

And for one second, the silence that followed was almost more violent than the argument.

Jade was looking at me.

Not hard anymore.

Just attentive.

"There," she murmured, before taking me in her arms.

I was still breathing too fast.

"There what?"

"There."

She looked at me.

"Now you exist."

I stayed still.

All the anger dropped at once, replaced by something heavier. More empty. That kind of fatigue that comes after you have finally said the truth too loudly.

"Do you hate me?" she asked softly.

I let out a small laugh.

"I don't know."

She nodded.

"That's already better than 'I'm fine.'"

I passed a hand over my face.

I suddenly wanted to disappear again. Not because she had won. Because she was right about too many things at once.

Jade took one step back.

Then pointed to the door.

"Get out."

I looked up at her.

"What?"

"Get out."

Her voice wasn't cruel.

Almost soft now.

"Go do something with what you just said."

I stayed there one second longer.

Then I took my jacket.

I walked to the door.

My hand was trembling slightly when I opened it.

As I stepped out, I heard her say behind me:
“Eliott.”
I half turned around.
“Get home safe.”
I didn’t answer.
The building corridor was silent.
I went down the stairs without really feeling my legs.
The street air hit my face when I stepped outside.
I walked.
No direction.
No thinking.
The anger was already falling away.
Replaced by something much heavier.
An immense fatigue.
I finally stopped at the street corner.
Hands in my pockets.
And for the first time in a long while...
I did not feel only empty.
I felt reached.
As if something had finally pierced the thick layer of fatigue, shame, and silence I
had put between myself and the rest.
It hurt.
It really hurt.
But at least that pain had a shape.
I could no longer keep living like someone waiting for others to explain his own
life to him.

Chapter 23

Lyralda

I walked for a long time after leaving Jade's place.

Well, long in the sense that time, in moments like that, becomes a very unreliable material. Maybe twenty minutes. Maybe forty. Long enough for the anger to fall back down.

The sidewalk slipped under my feet without me really looking at it. Shop windows passed by. Groups were laughing in front of bars. A car went too fast down a side street. The city, as always, kept existing with an almost vexing regularity.

And I felt like I was walking with something open in my chest.

Not a hole.

Not a spectacular wound.

More like a seam that had come undone.

Jade had been right about too many things at once, which was deeply annoying for someone who had just been called a little puppy incapable of expressing himself.

I could still feel the sentence in my stomach.

But I could also feel, even more violently, what had come out after. What I had said. What I had finally said without detour, without polishing it, without turning it into a small reasonable sentence to avoid bothering anyone.

I'm tired of it.

I'm tired of feeling replaceable everywhere.

I'm tired of acting as if it doesn't do anything to me.

The problem is that once words exist out loud, they become much harder to put back in the box.

I stopped at a street corner.

My phone was in my pocket.

I already knew who I wanted to write to.

Which, in a simpler world, should have made things easier for me.

Obviously not.

I took out the device.

The screen lit up.

Lyralda's last message was still there.

I'm here if you need me, Elliott.

I had left it unanswered.

Like a very mature guy.

I stared at the sentence for a few seconds.

Then I opened the conversation.

I typed:

"Good evening"

I deleted it.

"Are you awake?"

I deleted that too.

"I'm sorry"

I left the words for one second.

Then deleted them as well.

The worst thing with shame is that it makes you believe you have to arrive somewhere clean. With a proper sentence, a measured request, a posture that doesn't disturb too much.

When in reality, when you're truly not okay, you're never very clean.

I finally wrote:

“Can I see you please?”

I stayed still after sending the message, as if my phone had just transmitted legal proof of my general state to the entire universe.

The answer came very quickly.

“yes”

Then, almost immediately:

“where are you?”

I looked around me.

I recognized the pharmacy on the corner, the small closed kiosk, the bakery that would pretend to be artisanal again tomorrow morning.

I sent her the name of the street.

Three little dots.

Then:

“don’t move”

I couldn’t have said whether that answer reassured me or finished me off a little more.

I stayed there.

Hands in my pockets.

The air was colder than earlier. Or maybe I had just stopped walking fast enough to ignore it.

People passed in front of me without looking. A woman was laughing on the phone. Two students were half arguing about whether the tram was still running. A smell of fried food came from a snack place farther down.

I watched all of it as if I were on the other side of glass.

Lyralda arrived on foot.

No grand effect. No running. No visible panic. Just her, dark coat, hair tied back, moving down the street with that way she had of making it look like she knew exactly where she was going, even when the situation was clearly less simple than that.

When she saw me, she barely slowed.

Then stopped in front of me.

Her eyes moved over my face for one second.

A long second.

I didn’t know exactly what she was reading. The fatigue, surely. The rest too.

“Good evening, Elliott.”

Her voice was calm.

Not cold.

Not soft either.

More fragile, maybe, but you had to know her to hear it.

“Good evening.”

Silence.

The kind of silence where everything already exists, but no one has chosen the first useful sentence yet.

Then she asked:

“Do you want to walk or do you want to go upstairs?”

I blinked.

“Upstairs?”

“I’m five minutes away.”

I should have answered right away.

Instead, I looked at her as if she had just offered me an equation.
She understood immediately.
Obviously.
“Eliott.”
“Yes?”
“Are you shaking a little?”
I lowered my eyes to my hands.
It was true.
Not much.
Just enough to annoy me.
“Are you cold?”
She lifted her shoulders slightly.
“So we’re going upstairs.”
She turned around before I had even formally validated the decision, which was very... her.
I followed her.
We walked in silence.
The street gradually emptied as we moved away from the livelier terraces. Our steps made a regular sound on the sidewalk. Twice, I almost spoke. Twice, I found nothing that wasn’t ridiculous or too late.
When we reached her building, she took out her keys without a word.
The lobby was quiet. The elevator even more so.
In the metal wall, I caught sight of my reflection beside hers.
Her apartment was warm.
Not in a dramatic sense.
Just that slightly soft temperature of places where someone thought to close the windows before night.
She placed her keys in the small bowl near the entrance. Took off her coat. Then looked at me.
“Do you want water?”
I nodded.
“Yes.”
She went into the kitchen.
I stayed in the entrance one second too long, like a badly briefed guest on the exact level of intimacy of the scene.
When she came back with a glass, she handed it to me without comment.
I took it.
Our fingers barely touched.
And that tiny contact reminded me, in a very unhelpful way, that we had already been much closer than that.
I took a sip.
Then another.
Then I kept the glass between my hands just to have something to hold.
Lyralda said nothing.
She waited.
Not impatiently.
Not with that fake neutral expression that actually wants to force speech.
She really waited.
As if she considered that after giving me space, the least she could still do was leave me the words.

Maybe that was the worst part.
Or the best.
I didn't know anymore.
"I'm sorry," I finally said.
She didn't move.
"Why?"
I looked up.
"You know very well."
"I'd rather you say it."
Obviously.
I let out a breath.
"For the other day."
She nodded slightly.
"Okay."
I stopped.
She waited again.
"That's all?" she asked after a few seconds.
I lowered my eyes to the glass.
"No."
The word came out lower than expected.
"I said nonsense."
"Yes."
I lifted my head immediately.
"Ah."
"Do you want me to lie to you?"
I shook my head slightly.
"No."
"Then yes."
Her voice stayed calm. Not hard.
"You said nonsense."
Silence.
Then she added, without raising her tone:
"And above all, you gave me intentions that were not mine."
I took that in silence.
Because I couldn't really do otherwise.
She came a little closer.
Not too much.
Just enough for the distance to stop being comfortable.
"You decided all by yourself that I was somewhere else. All by yourself that I was keeping you as an option. All by yourself that I was waiting for better."
I looked at the glass.
"I know."
"No."
The word made me look up.
"You know it now. That's different."
She paused.
"At the time, you didn't want to know."
I felt shame return, cleaner this time. Sharper. Not the blurry shame of being "not normal." A much simpler shame: the shame of having been unfair.
"I thought..."

“Yes.”

She had that small breath which, with her, sometimes replaced a laugh when the situation was not funny at all.

“You thought a lot of things.”

I lifted my eyes to hers.

“Are you angry with me?”

This time, she took longer to answer.

She looked away barely. Just one second. Then came back to me.

“A little.”

The sincerity of the sentence tightened something in me more than if she had said yes outright.

“Because I had let you come.”

The “you” passed through me like a discreet current.

I did not point it out.

Not openly.

But something in me registered it very well.

“And because you left before asking me,” she added.

I lowered my eyes.

“Yes.”

“And also because I respected exactly what you wanted.”

I lifted my head.

“I know.”

“No.”

She continued very calmly.

“You don’t know what it cost me, Elliott.”

The silence after that sentence was enormous.

Not theatrical.

Just real.

I had nothing to answer that wouldn’t be miserable.

So I said the only exact thing.

“I’m sorry.”

She looked at me for a long time.

Then nodded, very slightly.

“I know.”

I placed the glass on the coffee table before I dropped it.

My hands were empty now.

That was a bad idea.

I no longer had anything to hold.

The calm of the apartment suddenly weighed much heavier on me.

Jade.

Work.

Mister Delmas.

The shame.

The file.

Aïcha.

Me in the middle, always.

I ran a hand through my hair.

“I don’t know how to do it anymore.”

The sentence almost escaped me.

It wasn’t even very well phrased. Not worthy of a real confession. Just... tired.

Lyralda didn't answer right away.

Then she asked:

"Do what?"

I gave a small joyless laugh.

"Exist properly."

The answer floated between us.

I immediately regretted saying it.

Too dramatic.

Too naked.

Too true as well, so unbearable.

But she didn't smile.

She didn't minimize it.

"You still think it's a question of correctness," she said softly.

I frowned slightly.

"What?"

"You think that if you held yourself a little better, if you said things a little better, if you were a little less intense, a little less awkward, a little less you, then everything would be better."

I stayed still.

Because she had just formulated something that had lived in me for years with the air of a natural fact.

She took one step toward me.

"And since it never really works, you end up hating yourself."

The silence closed over the room.

I felt my throat tighten too fast.

I turned my head a little.

Bad idea.

She saw everything.

Obviously.

"Eliott."

Her voice had changed.

Lower.

I already hated what was going to happen.

Because I could feel the crack opening, and I no longer had the energy to hold it shut.

"I'm tired," I said.

It was a ridiculous sentence.

Too small to contain what it had to carry.

But it was the true one.

She came closer again.

This time, she placed a hand on my arm.

Just that.

Not a grip.

Not an immediate embrace.

As if she were still leaving me one second to choose.

"That's normal, Eliott. You've lived through this year."

And that sentence, more than anything else, made something give way.

Not brutally.

Not in elegant movie tears.

I lowered my head.

I felt my shoulders contract.
Breathing became more complicated.
I vaguely heard her voice.
“Come here.”
And this time, I didn’t think.
I let her take me against her.

Chapter 24

At the Highest Point

I stayed against her for a long time.

Not really crying.

Not really talking either.

Just... there.

My arms around her. Her coat under my fingers. Her calm breathing against me.

I had never realized how much holding someone could silence so many things in your head.

At first, I could still feel my heart beating too fast. The anger from the evening, Jade's words, the shame, all of it was still turning somewhere.

Then it slowed.

Very slowly.

As if someone had finally turned down the volume of the world.

Lyralda said nothing.

Her hand moved gently over my back from time to time, a simple gesture, almost absent. Not to calm me. Not to control me.

Just to be there.

I finally breathed out:

"Sorry."

She didn't answer immediately.

Then she simply said:

"I know."

I stayed against her a few more seconds.

Then I pulled back a little.

She was looking at me.

Not with that precise gaze she had at the office. Not the one she used when she was analyzing something.

This one was more... open.

As if she was no longer trying to understand.

"Do you want to sit down?" she asked.

I nodded.

We went to sit on the sofa.

I sat a little stiffly, hands between my knees. She sat beside me, not too far, but not pressed against me either.

Silence fell again.

This time, it wasn't uncomfortable.

Just fragile.

"Jade invited me over tonight," I finally said.

"I suspected."

I turned my head toward her.

"Really?"

She gave a small smile.

"You had the face of someone who had just been told the truth by someone who doesn't bother much with diplomacy."

I let out a breath.

"That's exactly it."

Small silence.

"She called me a little puppy incapable of expressing himself."

Lyralda raised her eyebrows slightly.

“Cute.”

“No.”

I ran a hand through my hair.

“At the time, I thought I was going to snap.”

“And then?”

I lowered my eyes.

“Then... I realized she was right about some things.”

She didn’t answer right away.

Then she said softly:

“It’s not always pleasant to be right.”

I lifted my head.

“You think?”

“Yes.”

She crossed her arms.

“Because it means someone had already been hurting for a while.”

I stayed silent.

Then I breathed out:

“I’m tired of thinking all the time.”

She gave a small smile.

“So am I.”

I looked at her.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“You think it’s restful to be someone who sees everything?”

I stayed surprised for a second.

I had never thought of her as someone who could be tired of thinking.

“But you give the impression that everything is simple.”

She gave a small laugh.

“No.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“I give the impression that I know what to do even when I don’t.”

Silence returned.

Then she looked at me. More seriously.

“Eliott.”

“Yes?”

“You know I never saw you as a plan B?”

I felt my stomach tighten.

“I know.”

She fixed her eyes on me for a moment.

“No.”

Her voice was calm.

“You understand it now.”

She moved slightly closer on the sofa.

“But I still want to say it.”

I didn’t move.

“When we kissed the first time...”

She stopped for one second.

“It surprised me.”

“Sorry.”

She gently shook her head.

“No.”

Small silence.

“Mostly, it scared me.”

I frowned slightly.

“Scared?”

“Yes.”

She was looking at the floor now.

“Because I already knew you were someone who felt a lot.”

She lifted her eyes to mine.

“And that you were capable of hurting yourself very deeply if you got it wrong.”

I stayed still.

I felt something loosen in my chest.

Not complete relief.

But something very close.

She observed my face for a few seconds.

Then she said:

“Come here.”

I didn’t even have time to think.

She gently pulled on my arm.

I found myself closer to her on the sofa.

Very close.

Her fingers came to rest against my cheek.

I felt my heart speed up.

Not panic.

Just... something alive.

She passed her thumb under my eye.

“You’re exhausted.”

“Yes.”

“And a little stupid.”

I let out a small laugh.

“That too.”

She smiled.

Then her hand slid into my hair.

The gesture was slow. Natural.

I was no longer thinking about what I should do.

I was no longer thinking about what I should be.

I was simply looking at her.

And for the first time in a long while, I didn’t feel like I was being observed as a problem to solve.

She murmured:

“You know what I like about you?”

I blinked.

“No.”

She gave a small smile.

“You always try to understand people.”

“That’s a flaw.”

“Sometimes.”

She lifted her shoulders slightly.

“But it also means you care about others.”

The word stayed in the air.

I didn’t know what to do with it.

She saw it immediately.

“Does that scare you?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

I shrugged.

“Because I always feel like if I truly love someone... I’m bound to lose them.”

She didn’t answer right away.

Then she gently placed her forehead against mine.

The gesture was so simple I stayed still.

“Eliott.”

Her voice was very low.

“There’s something you haven’t understood yet.”

“What?”

Her fingers tightened slightly around my hand.

“You’re not losing me.”

I felt my throat tighten.

She stayed there, forehead against mine.

Then she murmured:

“You’re finding me.”

The world seemed to slow for one second.

I looked at her.

She was looking at me.

And this time, there was nothing complicated in her eyes anymore.

Just something very clear.

I gently passed my hand over her back.

“Lyralda...”

She didn’t wait for the end of the sentence.

Her lips came to rest against mine.

The kiss was different from all the others.

Not rushed. Not hesitant either.

Just... soft.

I felt my body relax completely.

As if everything I had been carrying these past months was slowly dissolving.

When she pulled back slightly, she was smiling.

“You see.”

I breathed softly.

“What?”

She lifted her shoulders.

“You know how to exist.”

I stayed looking at her for a few seconds.

Then I smiled too.

Maybe this time...

I no longer needed to fight against myself.

End

The night had started well.

Lyralda was never really hesitant. Not even in the simplest gestures. She moved with that quiet confidence that always made me feel like she knew exactly where she was going.

I was only just learning how to breathe again.

After putting away a plate, she stood still for a moment.

Then she turned toward me.

Her eyes studied me as if she were checking something one last time.

“Come here.”

Her voice was soft.

I stood up.

She stepped closer.

Her fingers slipped into mine.

The gesture was simple.

And yet I felt as if something settled a little more inside my chest.

She looked at me for a second.

Then she said:

“We’re going out.”

I frowned slightly.

“Now?”

She lifted a shoulder.

“Yes.”

A brief pause.

Then she added, with that half-smile that belonged only to her:

“Unless you’d rather keep being miserable indoors.”

I let out a soft breath.

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, I’m coming.”

She squeezed my fingers lightly.

And for the first time in a long while, following someone didn’t feel like disappearing.

Night had already fallen when we stepped outside.

The air was cool. Streetlights cut the road into patches of orange light. People were still out. Cars moved slowly through the city.

We walked side by side.

Her hand was still in mine.

She moved with that calm certainty I knew so well. As if everything were simple for her.

I was just trying to stay in the moment.

Not think.

Just walk.

We reached a livelier street.

A bar was making noise on the corner. Two people were laughing too loudly near a bus stop.

And then Lyralda stopped.

I turned toward her.

“What?”

She was looking at me.
Not the way she usually did.
As if she had made a decision.
Her fingers tightened slightly around mine.
Then, without warning, she pulled me toward her.
And her lips met mine.
For a full second, my mind went completely blank.
The street still existed around us.
People were walking past.
Someone was talking behind us.
A car drove by.
And there I was, standing in the middle of a sidewalk, kissing a woman as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist.
I tensed slightly. A stupid reflex.
I glanced around.
Nobody was really looking at us.
Or maybe they were.
I couldn't tell.
That old anxiety surfaced briefly.
Other people's eyes.
Lyralda, meanwhile, didn't seem to spare the thought a single second.
Her hands came to rest against my neck.
The kiss was slow.
Calm.
As if she were silently telling me:
stop thinking.
I felt my chest tighten.
Then something gave way.
And I kissed her back.
For real this time.
Not halfway.
Not carefully.
Just...
like her.
When we finally pulled apart, she was looking at me with that small smile.
"You see?"
I raised an eyebrow.
"See what?"
She shrugged.
"Nothing."
Then she took my hand again.
"Shall we?"
I looked around the street one more time.
People kept living their lives.
No one seemed particularly shaken by our existence.
Something light rose inside my chest.
An unexpected relief.
I squeezed her fingers a little tighter.
"Yes."

Epilogue

The apartment smelled... strange.

I stood motionless in the kitchen doorway, trying to identify the scent.

Something between burnt tomato sauce, overheated cheese, and a faint hint of... plastic.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Lyralda?"

Her voice came immediately from the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"Simple question."

I stepped closer to the saucepan.

"Can you explain why there's melted plastic in your sauce?"

She turned toward me, a wooden spoon in her hand.

Her expression was perfectly serious.

"That's probably a technical detail."

I looked at the saucepan.

Then at the lid resting on the counter.

Then at the warped piece of spatula beside it.

I crossed my arms.

"You melted... the spatula?"

"I did not melt the utensil."

She pointed at the saucepan with the spoon.

"It chose to participate actively in the recipe."

I stared at her for a second.

Then I burst out laughing.

A real laugh.

The kind that arrives before you can think.

She rolled her eyes.

"It's not funny!"

"Yes, it is."

I stepped closer to inspect the sauce.

"It's tragically funny, actually."

I grabbed a spoon and tasted it.

The grimace arrived immediately.

"My God."

"Is it bad?"

"There's plastic in it."

She sighed.

"I'm trying to learn."

I set the spoon down.

"You know you live with someone who cooks very well, right?"

"Yes."

She crossed her arms.

"But I refuse to depend on a man to survive."

I smiled.

"You already depend on a man to eat. Or frozen meals."

She frowned.

"Excuse me?"

I pointed at the saucepan.

“If I’m not here, you poison yourself.”
She bumped her shoulder lightly against mine.
“You’re unbearable.”
I shrugged.
“Not as unbearable as your cooking.”
She looked at me.
Then she smiled.
A smile that carried none of the distance it once had.
“That’s true.”
She stepped closer.
Her hands slid around my waist.
“And you smile more now, too.”
I raised an eyebrow slightly.
“That’s your fault.”
“Obviously.”
She rested her forehead against mine.
“You know you changed my life?”
I stayed silent for a second.
Not because I didn’t know what to answer.
Because I took the time to feel the sentence.
The kitchen.
The evening light.
Her breathing against mine.
I murmured:
“You changed mine too.”
Then I added:
“Except I never melted a kitchen utensil.”
She rolled her eyes.
“Then make something. It’s still early.”
I shrugged.
“That works for me.”
I walked toward the oven.
“In that case, we’re having lasagna.”
Life had gone on.
Not in any spectacular way.
Just... normally.
Work had gone on too.
Jade had become herself again: a few teasing remarks, a few jokes, and sometimes we had lunch together.
And that was perfectly fine.
At university, Aïcha and I had found a strange but peaceful distance. We greeted each other, sometimes talked for a bit.
Something had changed.
No resentment.
Maybe friendship.
And then there was Lyralda.
Still direct.
Still impossible.
But different.
Or maybe I was the one who had changed.

With the lasagna in the oven, I turned toward her.
She had climbed onto the kitchen counter.
I stepped closer.
Slipped between her legs.
She wrapped her arms around my neck.
Her eyes shone faintly.
“Eliott.”
“Yes?”
She looked at me as if the answer had always been obvious.
“I love you.”
She lifted one shoulder.
“And I’m not ashamed to say it.”
I looked at her.
Really looked at her.
Those words no longer made me want to run away.
So I simply answered:
“I love you too.”
A small pause.
Then I added softly:
“I love you.”

LASAGNA BOLOGNESE

Lasagna Bolognese is a classic Italian dish, beloved for its generous layers of pasta, meat sauce, and creamy béchamel. This family-friendly dish is fairly simple to prepare and yields a comforting, flavorful result, perfect for a gathering with friends and family.

Prep time

25 minutes

Cook time

35 to 40 minutes

Ingredients (2 serves)

6 lasagna sheets
200 g ground beef
1 small onion
1 small clove of garlic
200 g crushed tomatoes (or tomato puree)
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 tablespoon olive oil
25 g grated Parmesan
60 g grated cheese (Emmental or mozzarella)
salt and pepper
(optional) 1/2 teaspoon herbes de Provence

For the béchamel sauce

20 g butter
20 g flour
25 cl milk
1 pinch of nutmeg
salt and pepper

Preparation

Preheat the oven to 180°C (gas mark 6).

Start by making the Bolognese sauce. Finely chop the onion and garlic, then sauté them in a large skillet with olive oil for 2 to 3 minutes.

Add the ground beef and cook, breaking it up with a spatula, until it is nicely browned. Stir in the crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, herbes de Provence, salt, and pepper. Let simmer for about 10 to 15 minutes until the sauce thickens slightly.

Next, prepare the béchamel sauce. In a saucepan, melt the butter, add the flour, and stir for one minute to form a roux. Gradually pour in the milk while whisking to prevent lumps. Let thicken for a few minutes, then season with salt, pepper, and nutmeg.

In a baking dish, spread a thin layer of Bolognese sauce. Next, arrange a layer of lasagna sheets, add some sauce, a little béchamel, and repeat the process until all the ingredients are used up.

Finish with a layer of béchamel and sprinkle with Parmesan and grated cheese.

Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until the top is golden brown and nicely browned.

Let it rest for 5 minutes before serving so the lasagna holds its shape better when cut.

Tip

For even more flavorful lasagna, prepare the Bolognese sauce ahead of time and let it simmer longer over low heat. This will give the flavors time to develop, making the dish even better.

LE BRUIT D'À CÔTÉ

The cat going missing shouldn't have been a problem.

In theory.

In reality, I'd just spent the last twenty minutes searching my apartment like an exhausted detective.

Under the couch.

Behind the TV stand.

In the bathroom.

Nothing.

I slowly straightened up in the middle of the living room.

"Where the hell have you gone this time..."

Silence.

I looked at the sliding glass door.

The balcony.

My stomach immediately tightened.

"No."

I walked over.

"No, no, no."

I leaned my head outside.

The balcony was empty.

The railing.

The street below.

No cat.

I stood frozen for a second.

Then I muttered,

"Tell me you didn't fall."

My brain instantly started producing absolutely catastrophic images.

A flying cat.

A cat missing a jump.

A cat flattened in the courtyard.

I ran a hand through my hair.

"Great."

I'd just accidentally murdered my own cat through sheer negligence.

Exactly what my life was missing.

I turned back toward the apartment.

"If you're hiding somewhere, I swear to God..."

Someone knocked on the door.

Three knocks.

Slow.

Very calm.

I frowned.

Nobody ever came knocking at my place.

I walked over and opened it.

A man in his fifties stood in front of me.

Very straight-backed.

Very dignified.

The kind of person who could walk into a room and instantly be taken seriously.
In his arms, lounging like a perfectly satisfied king, my cat was purring.
I blinked.
The man looked at me gravely.
"Young man."
A brief pause.
"Would this happen to be YOUR cat that entered my daughter's bedroom?"
My brain stalled for a second.
Then two.
Then three.
My cat looked up at me.
Perfectly happy.
Traitor.
Behind the man, a voice immediately protested.
"No, Dad, that's not fair!"
A young woman appeared behind him, clearly annoyed.
"We could've waited until tomorrow!"
She crossed her arms, then pointed at the cat.
"And besides, I didn't even get my allergies around him."
She looked up at her father with absolute conviction.
"That's obviously a sign from fate."
I remained frozen in the doorway.
My brain was still trying to process what was happening.
My cat had infiltrated the neighboring apartment.
The neighbor's father had just rung my doorbell.
And now the neighbor was talking about fate.
I stared at the cat.
The cat stared back at me.
Then I thought to myself:
Oh no.
Oh no, no, no.
Please tell me I'm having a nightmare.

...

Le bruit d'à côté
upcoming