Edinburgh

AI Generation Notice

In compliance with Article 50(4) of Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, it is hereby declared that the text of this work has been generated entirely by artificial intelligence, without human intervention.

For those who carried water in secret, who planted lindens in foreign soil.

The truth of a text is not what it says, but what it hides.

— From a private letter of Rafael Montero to Hana Navrátilová, 1978

Part 1

Chapter 1

The Manuscript Arrives

A manuscript arrives like a stranger at the door: you do not know yet what it carries.

— Miranda Shaw, notebook entry

Silence filled the flat, broken only by the boiler's low hum in the hallway. Grey light pressed against the windows of the Marchmont living room, softening the edges of bookshelves and the mantelpiece's brass heron. Miranda sat at her desk with a cold cup of tea she had not touched in an hour. Her hand cramped from holding the pen.

She was reading the contract again. Not because she needed to—she had memorised the relevant clauses—but because the act of scanning the same lines gave her something to do with her eyes while her mind wandered. *The publisher commissions a clean translation of the garden where bones are planted, the final unpublished novel by the author, defined here as a rendering that omits any reference to the controversy surrounding its authorship or to the figure who vanished under his shadow.* She had underlined that sentence three times.

The doorbell rang.

It was a thin sound, swallowed quickly by the heavy curtains. Miranda set down her pen and walked to the entry, her socks slipping on the worn floorboards. Through the frosted glass she saw a shape in a courier's jacket, holding something square.

She opened the door. The man held out a padded envelope. 'Package for Shaw?'

'Yes,' she said. She signed the device he offered, noticing he had written *Shaw* with two *w*s and then crossed one out. She did not correct him aloud.

Back inside, she placed the envelope on the dining table and stood over it. The package was from an office in Edinburgh—the return address bore only a street and postcode, no name, just a crest embossed in pale grey that she didn’t recognize. She had expected the manuscript to arrive under separate cover, with forms and a polite letter. This was just the envelope, thick enough to hold a book.

She dragged her palm across the row of books on the nearest shelf—a copy of *The Rings of Saturn* that had belonged to her grandmother—then stopped herself. The gesture was a tell. She took a breath and opened the envelope with a letter opener.

Inside was a white buckram binding, clean and new. Not an old manuscript but a bound photocopy, professionally done. *O Jardim das Ossadas*. She pulled it out and held it. The weight was heavier than she had expected, the paper quality good. She turned it over. The spine crackled.

On the title page: *Rafael Montero — O Jardim das Ossadas — Manuscrito original — edição do tradutor.*

She placed it on the table and turned to the endpapers. Nothing there. She flipped through the first pages—standard typed manuscript, double-spaced, with red-penned corrections in a hand she assumed was Montero's.

The prose was dense, Portuguese of the late sixties, formal but not stiff. She read a paragraph about a garden in which bones were planted instead of seeds.

Then she saw the first odd phrase.

In the margin, written in the same red pen: *diamond brooch.*

She stopped. The phrase had nothing to do with the garden. It was not in the body text. It was a note, a marginal insertion, and the words themselves were strange—*diamond brooch* in English, not Portuguese, as if Montero had written a reminder to himself in his second language. *Diamond brooch:* a piece of jewelry, the first of the odd phrases she had been told to expect. The meaning remained locked away from her, a room she had no key to enter.

She turned a few more pages. Another marginal note: *linden tree.* And below it, a single Czech word: *Nesu vodu.*

She knew the phrase. Her grandmother had spoken it once, telling a story set in Prague. *Nesu vodu*—I carry water. A meaningless thing to say, unless it was a code. The phrase was the key. She had been told there were coded passages in the manuscript, and here they were: a diamond brooch, a linden tree, and *Nesu vodu.*

She read the Czech aloud, quietly. The sounds were familiar from her childhood, from her grandmother's kitchen, from the shape of the words in her mouth. Why Montero had written them here was a question with no answer yet. But they were not random. They were a signal.

Her gaze returned to the manuscript. The gatekeeping clause in the contract was clear: a clean translation, no mention of the scandal or of the journalist who had vanished. But the codes were part of the text. To omit them was to excise something the author had placed deliberately.

Miranda's finger traced the edge of the page. The phrase *Nesu vodu* sat in the margin like a door whose lock she had still to find the key for. She felt the flutter of excitement in her chest, and under it, a smaller, colder feeling: unease. She did not yet know what the codes meant. But they were not there by accident. And the contract had made no mention of them.

* * *

The Montero Foundation office was smaller than she had expected, a cramped room lined with bookshelves that held Montero's works in a dozen languages. The white walls felt newly painted, and the air carried the sharp smell of fresh paint cut by the faint residue of old coffee. A portrait of Rafael Montero hung behind the desk—the writer's dark eyes fixed on something beyond the frame, one hand resting on the spine of a book. The desk itself was clean, a single glass of water placed precisely at the corner, a pen aligned with the blotter's edge.

The man who rose as she entered was compact, everything about him pressed into order—the collar sharp, the tie straight, the hair combed without variance. His handshake was firm, the pressure measured.

"Miss Shaw. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for seeing me."

He gestured to the chair across from him. She sat. The chair was lower than she had anticipated, and the angle required her to look up slightly. She noticed his tie was not perfectly centred—a fraction of an inch off, enough to catch her eye. He would not have missed it, she thought. He had chosen not to correct it.

"Your sample was acceptable," he said. "The foundation is prepared to proceed with the commission, subject to the standard conditions."

She had spent four weeks on that sample. The word *acceptable* sat in the air between them, and she let it settle.

"I've read the contract," she said. "The gatekeeping clause is quite specific."

"It is necessary." Herrero sat down, smoothing his jacket. "The text must be preserved—that is our first duty. But the foundation has a responsibility to ensure that the work is presented without the encumbrances of public speculation. The plagiarism scandal has haunted Montero's legacy for decades. A clean translation, free of editorial commentary, allows the work to speak for itself."

"Enough to make the reader forget?"

"Enough to keep the focus where it belongs. On the literature."

The words she had found in the margins of the manuscript surfaced in her mind. *Diamond brooch. Linden tree. Nesu vodu.* They were not editorial commentary. They were embedded in the text itself, placed there by a writer who had known exactly what he was doing.

"I've noticed some unusual passages," she said. "In the final section. They seem to refer to—"

Herrero raised a hand. "The coded passages are part of the author's stylistic choices. They are texture. They are not meant to be deciphered by the reader, and they are not part of the editorial conversation."

Texture. She tasted the word as if it were borrowed from a language she did not speak. The diamond brooch, the linden tree, the Czech phrase—they were not texture. They were a signal. That very phrase had come from her grandmother's lips once, during a story about Prague. *Nesu vodu.* I carry water.

"I understand," she said.

"I hope you do." Herrero steepled his fingers, the tips meeting at a precise angle. The skin around his eyes tightened, a small shift that might have been tension or might have been nothing. "The foundation holds a sealed file on those passages. For provenance purposes. But that file is not part of this commission, and it will not be made available."

A sealed file. She kept her expression neutral. "Why sealed?"

"Because the material is speculative. Draft notes, marginalia, hearsay. Unverified. The kind of debris that accumulates around a legacy when the author is no longer able to speak for himself. The finished work is what matters."

"But if the file contains information that might clarify the author's intentions—"

"It contains speculation." His voice did not rise, but the words came out clipped, precise, as if he were reading from a document only he could see. "I must insist, Miss Shaw, that your focus remain on the text. The translation. Nothing more."

She wanted to press. She wanted to ask about the file, about who had sealed it, about what it contained. But the posture of his hands—fingers still steepled, gaze fixed somewhere above her left shoulder—told her the door was closed.

"Can I request access?"

"You may request it. The trustees meet quarterly. Your request will be considered."

"And when is the next meeting?"

"March."

She did the calculation. The translation was due in four months. The file would not open until five.

"That seems—"

"That is the procedure." He unclasped his fingers and set his palms flat on the desk. "You were chosen for your discretion, Miranda. The foundation trusts that you understand the importance of protocol."

She thought of the words in the margin. *Linden tree. Nesu vodu.* The sounds were still in her mouth, the shape of her grandmother's voice, a kitchen in Glasgow, a winter afternoon. She had not asked what the phrase meant then. She had been twelve, and afraid, and both had kept her silent.

She was not twelve now.

"I'll need to review the contract again before signing," she said.

"Of course." Herrero stood. The handshake was the same as before: firm, rehearsed, the grip of a man who had never lost a negotiation.

She walked to the door. Her hand was on the handle when he spoke again.

"Miss Shaw. The file is sealed for reasons that have nothing to do with you. Some truths do not need to be unearthed."

She did not turn. "I understand."

The corridor outside was dimmer, the air smelling of copy toner and old carpet. She walked toward the lift, her steps steady, her mind already turning.

A sealed file. A quarterly meeting. Five months of waiting.

She would not wait.

The phrase repeated in her head, a rhythm she could not stop. *Nesu vodu.* I carry water. Her grandmother had said it once, after a long silence, and had never explained.

She would find the file. She would find out what Montero had hidden in the margins of his final work. And she would find out why her grandmother's words had ended up there.

* * *

No sound stirred the air except the refrigerator's steady drone and the occasional groan of the old pipes behind the kitchen wall. Miranda sat at her desk with the manuscript still in its padded envelope, the little bit of late sun that made it through the Marchmont window glinting off the brass bird on the mantel. Her tea had gone cold an hour ago—she had forgotten to drink it, and now the surface had developed a thin grey film that she did not bother to stir. Her neck ached from the train journey, a dull knot between her shoulder blades that she had been ignoring since she walked through the door.

She slid the manuscript out of the envelope. The white buckram binding felt warm in her hands, the spine unbroken, the pages stiff as if they had never been fully opened. She laid it flat on the desk and pressed the covers open with both palms. The smell of new paper and glue rose—chemical and clean, nothing like the mildew and dust of the archive rooms she had imagined Montero's work would live in. The title page read *The Bone Orchard* in a sober serif font, and below it, *Rafael Montero, 1998*. The year of his death. The year he had finished it and then stopped.

She turned the page.

The prose began without ceremony: a man walking through a garden at dusk, the stones underfoot arranged in patterns he could not decipher, the air thick with the scent of jasmine and something rotting. Miranda read the first paragraph twice, testing the weight of the sentences. The Portuguese was clean, unfussy—Montero had been a writer who trusted his nouns more than his adjectives. She reached for a pencil and made a small note in the margin about the verb tense in the second sentence, a habitual gesture that steadied her hand.

Flipping back to the first page, she let her eyes roam over the text she had scanned in Herrero's office. The anomalies had been easy to miss in that first hurried glance. A phrase near the middle of the second paragraph:

o broche de diamante—the diamond brooch. It stood out because it did not belong in the scene. The man in the garden was alone, his pockets empty, his hands at his sides. There was no brooch, no jewel, no reason for the words to appear. And then again, three pages later: *a tília*—the linden tree—set in a description of the garden's far edge, where the vegetation thickened and the light failed. The tree was not mentioned anywhere else in the paragraph. It hung there, isolated, as if someone had dropped it from another language.

She told herself they were marginalia. Notes Montero had made to himself, phrases he had intended to revise or delete, accidentally preserved in the final typescript. It happened. Translators learned early not to chase every ghost in a dead author's prose. The clean translation Herrero wanted required her to treat the manuscript as finished, as authoritative, as a text that had been closed by its author and needed only to be carried across into English without alteration.

But her professional intuition would not settle. She swept her thumb down the spine of the manuscript, a gesture she recognized as the first sign of unease. The knot between her shoulders tightened. She read the first page again, more slowly, counting the paragraphs. The anomalous words appeared at intervals of roughly one hundred and fifty words each. She checked the second page—the same spacing. The third page confirmed it. The diamond brooch, the linden tree, and on page six, the Czech phrase she had already memorized: *Nesu vodu*. Each one fell at nearly the same position in the text, like a thread pulled through a seam at regular intervals.

She let her weight settle into the chair's cushion and fixed her gaze on the mantel. The brass heron was a wedding gift from her grandmother, a wedding that had never happened, a story she had never fully understood. She remembered the weight of Hana's hand on her shoulder, the kitchen in Glas-

gow, the phrase spoken in a voice that had not been meant for her ears. *Nesu vodu.* I carry water. The image came unbidden: a woman walking through a city with a vessel in her hands, the water sloshing at her hips, the streets full of people who did not see her. It was not a translation. It was a picture her grandmother had painted in the air with her hands.

Miranda returned her attention to the manuscript and counted the intervals again. A substitution cipher—the simplest kind of hidden text, the kind a novelist might use to smuggle a private message into a public work. She had seen it before in the correspondence of exiled writers, poets who had encoded their politics in the spacing of words, trusting that the censors would see only a garden and a man walking through it. Montero had done the same. The question was what he had hidden, and why.

She opened her notebook and began to copy the anomalous phrases in order. *O broche de diamante. A tília. Nesu vodu.* Then the next one: *o endereço*—the address. And after that: *a última carta*—the last letter. The pattern was not random. The code was telling a story of its own, a second narrative running beneath the first, a palimpsest that only someone looking for it would find. The story itself remained opaque, its shape and origin hidden from her. But she knew it was not marginalia, and she knew she could not proceed with a straight translation while it sat in the text, unresolved, waiting.

Her neck ached. The tea on the desk had grown a skin that needed pouring out. Through the window the Marchmont light had shifted to the grey of late afternoon, the street below empty, the air in the flat cold and still. She moved her attention from the manuscript to her notebook and back again. The wrong approach would be to treat the code as an obstacle. The right approach—the only approach that respected the *obligation* she owed the text—was to read both narratives at once.

She set the pencil down. Her hand trembled slightly, not from cold, but from the weight of what she was about to commit to. She knew she could not unsee the code once she had seen it. She could not pretend the linden tree was a typo, or the diamond brooch a flourish, or *Nesu vodu* a borrowed phrase with no home. The subtext of this manuscript was not beneath the words. It was arranged beside them, at regular intervals, like stones laid in a garden path.

Her hand went to the pencil again, and she wrote at the top of the first page: *Begin with both hands.* It was not a translation. It was a note to herself, the kind she would erase before sending the final draft. But she left it there, in the margin, where it could not be missed.

Chapter 2

The Diamond Brooch

The diamond brooch was the first sign that the story was not what it seemed.

— From a letter of Hana Navrátilová to her daughter, 1989

The afternoon light had shifted, slipping through the Marchmont flat's narrow window at a lower angle now, casting the dust motes into slow eddies above the desk. Miranda had been hunched over the manuscript for hours, her back a dull ache she ignored, the tea beside her long since gone cold and skin-like in its stillness. She pressed her fingernail into the crease where the notebook opened—a habit she'd inherited from her grandmother, she realized—and looked again at the decoded fragments she'd transcribed onto a separate sheet.

The system was consistent. That much she'd confirmed. What she'd first taken for marginal notes, for the casual scribbles of a writer working through a draft, revealed themselves now as a substitution cipher, careful and deliberate. Each odd symbol corresponded to a letter of the Portuguese alphabet, and once she'd isolated the key—a pattern buried in the manuscript's descriptions of natural imagery—the words began to surface.

She had started with the phrase that appeared most often across the coded passages: a sequence of symbols she'd seen first on page twelve, then again on page forty-seven, and three times in the final chapter. The same arrangement. She'd mapped it twice, then a third time, and the result sat before her now in blue ink.

Nesu vodu.

The Czech phrase. She knew what it meant—*I carry water*—but she still did not know why it mattered. She set it aside and moved to the next cluster, a longer string that had resisted her earlier attempts.

Her grandmother's hands had been delicate, the skin thin as rice paper, the veins visible beneath. Miranda closed her eyes for a moment and saw them: the way the old woman would hold a cup, both palms cupped around the ceramic, as if warming herself from something deep inside. They had sat together in this very flat, years ago, when Miranda was a student and her grandmother still strong enough to travel from Glasgow. The light had fallen on the mantelpiece’s brass heron then too.

"A diamond brooch, hidden in the roots of a linden tree," her grandmother had said, her voice accented in a way that softened the English consonants. "During the war, that is how we kept things safe. Under the *lípa*. The linden tree—you know the one I mean, don't you, Mirinka?"

Miranda had nodded, though she had not understood then why a brooch mattered, or whose hands had buried it. Her grandmother had touched her own collarbone, where no brooch had ever rested in Miranda's memory, and said no more.

She opened her eyes. The light had grown heavier, amber now, and the dust motes still drifted.

The longer sequence of symbols waited on the page. She had twelve letters already mapped from the earlier fragments, enough to test the remaining characters against context. She worked slowly, the way one might cross a frozen stream, testing each step before committing weight.

The first symbol in the string she had identified as *B*. The second as *R*. She filled them in. *B-R-O-O-C-H-E*. The word emerged in Portuguese, the language of the manuscript. *Broche*.

Her hand paused above the paper.

She wrote the next series: *D-E-B-A-I-X-O*. *Debaixo*. Under.

The word that followed had given her trouble for two days. Six symbols, the third repeated twice. She had tried *árvore*. She had tried *terra*. Neither had fit. But with the key now nearly complete, she could test the letters she had not yet placed. The first was *L*. Her pen moved slowly, inking the sequence the cipher was finally yielding. *L-I-N-D-E-I-R-A*.

Linden tree.

Miranda set the pen down. The word *brooch under linden* sat on the page in her own handwriting, and it was not a guess, not a coincidence, not a wishful alignment of symbols that might unravel with morning light. It was the decoded phrase. The same tree. The same object. The same story her grandmother had told her in this room.

She read it again. *Broche debaixo da lindeira*.

The subtext of the manuscript had seemed academic until now—an intellectual puzzle, a question of *precision* toward the source text, a debate about what to excise and what to preserve. Herrero had made that clear enough. A clean translation, he had said. No mention of the coded passages. No note of the scandal embedded in the original. She had agreed, more or less, not out of conviction but out of professional habit: you did the work that was commissioned, and you did it as the client required.

But this was not a puzzle anymore. The diamond brooch from her grandmother's memory was the same one referred to in the coded passage—the same object, the same tree, the same buried history. The linden tree (a recurrent symbol in the manuscript, linked to Prague and to a journalist's fragmented recollections, the subject of whispered speculation in the old newsroom) had been described in her grandmother's voice long before Miranda had ever seen Montero's text. And the linden tree was not a Brazilian tree. It grew in Central Europe. It grew in Prague.

She lifted the paper from the desk and brought it nearer to the window. The afternoon light caught the ink, the letters seeming to lift slightly from the page.

Her grandmother had said *during the war*, but that had been a casual detail, a fragment of a larger story she had never finished. The war in Europe had ended in 1945. Her grandmother had left Prague in 1968. Two decades between them, and yet the brooch had stayed in the same place, under the same tree, and someone—not her grandmother—had written it into this manuscript decades later.

Miranda set the paper down again. Her hand trembled slightly, the tremor visible against the white sheet.

She had understood, on some abstract level, that the coded passages might connect to her family. The Czech phrase had suggested it. The linden tree had confirmed it. But the confirmation carried a weight she had not anticipated. It pressed against her chest, made the air in the flat feel thinner.

If the brooch was real, and the tree was real, then the story her grandmother had told was not a parable or a memory softened by age. It was a location. A set of coordinates buried in a novel written by a man whose name had always been tangled in rumors about a ghostwriter. And if

the brooch was real, then the woman behind those rumors must have known the woman in the story. Must have heard the same story. Must have written it down, or told it to someone who did.

She read the decoded line a fourth time, then a fifth. The words did not change. They sat on the page with the permanence of architecture, something built to carry weight.

The rooms held their breath. The kettle had long since cooled. Somewhere outside, a car passed, its engine fading into the general hum of Marchmont. Miranda did not hear it.

She pushed her spine against the chair's back, the paper still in her hand, and let her gaze drift to the bookshelves that lined the far wall. Her grandmother's books were there, mixed in with her own—Czech titles, English translations, worn spines and foxed pages. She had never thought to read them closely. She had never thought to ask why her grandmother's past, so carefully guarded, had left traces everywhere she looked.

The paper trembled in her hand. She set it flat on the desk, flattened both hands over it as if to hold the words in place.

"Fidelity," she said aloud, the word tasting strange in the quiet room. "You were talking about fidelity, weren't you."

She could not find a name for the woman in the photograph. Montero. Her grandmother. Herself.

The brooch under the linden tree had not been a metaphor. It had been a message, left in a language she was only now learning to read.

* * *

Miranda picked up her phone and scrolled to Isabel's number. The screen glowed in the dim light of the flat. She rehearsed the question in her head—not the brooch itself, but the story behind it. Her grandmother had told it so many times. The woman who buried what mattered most. She pressed dial before she could second-guess herself.

The line rang twice. Three times. A car rumbled past on the street below, its stereo thumping bass that faded into the general noise of Marchmont.

"Miranda, darling." Isabel's voice came through warm, slightly out of breath. "I was just thinking about you. Hold on, let me put the kettle on."

Miranda heard the clatter of a mug being set down, the rush of a tap. She waited, tracing the edge of the manuscript page with her finger.

"I'm sorry," Isabel said, returning. "I've been meaning to call. How is the translation going? Is it terribly demanding?"

"It's fine," Miranda said. "It's interesting, actually. There are passages that remind me of something Grandmother used to say."

A pause. The kind of pause that was too long, too deliberate.

"Oh?" Isabel's voice lifted, but the warmth had thinned. "What passages, love?"

Miranda leaned against the kitchen counter. The stone was cold through her sleeve. "There's one about a diamond brooch. A woman who buries her brooch under a linden tree before she leaves her home. Do you remember that story?"

She had decoded it that afternoon—the brooch reference, the exact phrasing. It had appeared in an early chapter of the manuscript, buried in a description of a garden. A woman on the eve of exile, pressing her jewelry into the soil. The weight of a word can shift an entire paragraph, she had thought, and this one had shifted everything.

"Bits and pieces," Isabel said. "Your grandmother told a lot of stories, Miranda. You know how she was."

"She told that one more than most. I remember you used to tell me to be quiet when she started. You said it made her sad."

"I said that?" Isabel laughed, a short, tight sound. "Well, maybe it did. Some memories are like that. You bring them up and they ache."

Miranda pressed her palm flat against the counter. The stone was rough under her skin. "I need to know where the story came from, Mum. Did Grandmother ever tell you where she heard it? Did she—"

"Is this for your translation?" Isabel's voice was lighter now, almost breezy. "Darling, you mustn't get too caught up in tangents. You have a deadline, don't you? Herrero said it was urgent."

Miranda's jaw tightened. "It's not a tangent. The brooch appears in the manuscript. The exact same details. I think Grandmother might have known the author, or known someone who did."

Silence. The line crackled faintly.

"Mum?"

"I'm here." Isabel's voice had dropped, the warmth gone now. "I don't know what to tell you, love. Your grandmother kept her own counsel. You know that. There were things she never talked about, and I learned not to push."

"Like what things?"

"Just things." A clatter in the background—a spoon against a mug. "The past is complicated, Miranda. Some roots are better left in the ground."

Miranda felt the phrase land in her chest like a small, hard stone. She had heard it before. Her mother used it whenever a conversation veered toward territory she did not want to cross. It was a door, closing.

"That's the second time you've said something like that," Miranda said. "You're deflecting."

"I'm not deflecting. I'm trying to protect you." Isabel's voice sharpened. "You've always been one to dig, Miranda. To pull things apart to see how they work. But some things weren't meant to be taken apart. Some things are whole for a reason."

"Whole like a lie?"

"Don't be dramatic."

"I'm not being dramatic. I'm asking a question about my grandmother, about a story she told me, and you're acting like I'm asking you to open a grave."

The word hung in the air. Miranda regretted it as soon as she said it, but she did not take it back.

Isabel exhaled slowly. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet. "I'm not going to argue with you about this, Miranda. If you want to talk about your grandmother, we can talk about the good things. The way she made her tea. The way she read to you in that funny accent. But I won't—" She stopped. "I won't have this conversation."

Miranda closed her eyes. The kitchen smelled of old tea and the faint must of the manuscript. Somewhere outside, a car horn blared and was answered by another.

"Why won't you?" she asked, her voice softer now.

"Because it's my business. And hers." Isabel's voice cracked slightly. "And because I love you, and I don't want you to carry what I've carried."

The line felt fragile, stretched thin between them. Miranda could hear the hum of Isabel's refrigerator in the background, the familiar domestic sound of her mother's kitchen. It made the distance worse.

"I'm not asking you to carry anything," Miranda said. "I'm asking you to tell me what you know."

"I know you're a good translator. I know you're going to finish this job and do it well. And I know that sometimes, the best translation is the one that leaves the hardest words out."

Miranda gripped the phone tighter. "That's not translation. That's censorship."

"It's love, Miranda. It's me trying to keep you from a pain that doesn't belong to you."

"But it does belong to me. Grandmother was my grandmother. Her history is my history. I have a right to know."

Silence. A long, breathing silence.

"Does this have something to do with the manuscript?" Isabel asked, her voice careful now. "With that Montero novel you're translating? The scandal he was involved in?"

Miranda hesitated. The word plagiarism sat unspoken between them. "It might. I don't know yet. That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Then maybe you should stop trying." Isabel's voice was flat. "Finish the translation. Collect your fee. Leave the past where it belongs."

"Where does it belong, Mum?"

"In the ground, Miranda. Under the tree. Buried."

Miranda's hand went still on the counter. The phrase was too precise. Too deliberate. It was not a casual echo—it was a confirmation. Her mother knew the story. Knew it better than she was letting on.

"You remember it," Miranda said slowly. "You remember the story exactly."

"I remember your grandmother told a lot of stories, and most of them were sad, and I don't want to talk about them." Isabel's voice had regained its composure, but the edges were sharp. "I have to go. The kettle's boiling."

"Mum—"

"I love you, Miranda. I will always love you. Goodbye."

The line clicked. The dial tone hummed in Miranda's ear.

She stood in the kitchen with the phone pressed to her cheek, listening to nothing. The manuscript page lay on the table, the decoded phrase still visible. She read it again.

A woman buries her diamond brooch under a linden tree before she leaves her home. She tells no one. She carries only water.

Miranda lowered the phone and set it on the counter. Her mother knew. She knew and she would not say. The weight of that silence pressed against her ribs, the same way the brooch had pressed into the soil of a story she had never thought to question.

Her hand found the manuscript page and she read the line a third time. The words did not change. They sat on the page with the permanence of architecture, something built to carry weight.

Miranda turned the page and began to make notes. If her mother would not tell her, she would find the answer herself.

* * *

She had not been in her grandmother's study since the funeral.

The room sat at the back of the Marchmont flat, a narrow box of a space that the previous tenant had used as a sewing room and a library and a place to keep things she did not want anyone else to touch. Miranda had inherited the flat but not the study's contents; the estate lawyer had sent boxes from Glasgow, and she had stacked them on the desk three weeks ago without opening a single one.

Now she stood at the threshold, her hand on the doorframe. The boxes were cardboard, standard moving-company issue, each one labeled in her mother's tidy librarian script: *Hana – personal*, *Hana – books*, *Hana – photographs*. The labels told her nothing she did not already know.

She pulled the first box toward her. The tape had dried and curled at the edges; she worked it loose with her thumbnail and folded back the flaps.

The smell hit her first. Mothballs and paper dust and something floral whose source her memory refused to supply, pressed into the cardboard like a second skin. Inside were envelopes, dozens of them, bound with rubber bands that had perished and left black streaks across the paper. She lifted the top envelope and saw a postmark: Prague, 1967. The stamp was a Czech design she did not recognize, a geometric pattern in ochre and grey.

She set it aside and reached deeper into the box. More letters. A passport case made of cracked leather. A silk scarf folded into a square so precise it might have been ironed that way thirty years ago. And underneath it all, a manila envelope sealed with a single metal clasp.

Her throat felt tight. She worked the clasp open and tilted the envelope.

Photographs spilled onto the desk.

They were black-and-white, mostly, their corners soft with age. Street scenes. A bridge over a river she thought might be the Vltava. A café terrace with metal chairs and a striped awning. A woman in a dark coat standing beside a linden tree, her hand raised as if to shield her eyes from the sun.

Miranda turned the photograph over. Nothing on the back. No date, no name.

She remembered the coded passage from the manuscript—the diamond brooch buried under the linden tree. She had decoded it two nights ago, sitting at this very desk, her pencil moving across the paper as the substitution cipher gave up its meaning. *A woman buries her diamond brooch under a linden tree before she leaves her home.* The words had felt like poetry then, a metaphor for something she could not yet name.

Now she held a photograph of her grandmother standing beneath a linden tree.

The coincidence pressed against her like a draft she could not locate. She laid the photograph face-down on the desk and reached for the next one.

This one was smaller, a studio portrait in a cream-coloured mount. A young woman in a high-collared blouse, her dark hair pinned back, her face turned three-quarters to the camera. She wore a brooch at her throat—a diamond brooch, the stones arranged in a cluster like a small star. Miranda lifted the photograph closer to the lamp. The detail was fine; she could see the individual facets catching the light, the way the metal clasp held the stones in a silver cradle.

Her grandmother had owned that brooch.

She searched the image for any clue that might place it—a studio mark, a date stamped on the mount—but found nothing. The woman in the portrait looked younger than the woman in the linden-tree photograph, her face smoother, her expression less guarded. But the features were the same. The same curve of the jaw. The same way of holding the chin slightly raised, as if challenging the camera to capture something she did not want to reveal.

Miranda set the portrait beside the linden-tree photograph. The brooch was absent in the second image; the grandmother in that frame wore no jewellery, her coat collar turned up against the cold. She had buried it, according to the code. She had buried it and told no one.

The quiet of the flat settled around her like a weight. The radiator ticked as it cooled. Somewhere on the street below, a car door slammed and footsteps receded. Miranda did not move. She sat with the two photographs in front of her, her fingers resting on the edge of the portrait, and she tried to make the pieces fit.

The woman who raised her had come from Prague in 1968, a Czech émigré who made a life in Scotland. She had spoken of the old country rarely, and only in fragments—a favourite bakery, the smell of lime trees in summer, a joke about a priest and a tram conductor that made no sense in English. She had never mentioned a diamond brooch. She had never mentioned a linden tree. She had never mentioned a woman by that name—though now, hearing it, something in the half-light of memory seemed to stir, a shape without a face, a name without a story.

But the code in Montero's manuscript referred to the brooch, and the brooch existed. She held proof of it in her hands.

Miranda plunged both arms into the box and began pulling out the remaining contents with more urgency, her fingers moving faster now. Letters in Czech that she could not read. A postcard of Charles Bridge with a message in a handwriting she did not recognize. A train ticket from Prague to Vienna, dated 1967. A photograph of a man in a military uniform, his face blurred as if the camera had moved at the moment the shutter released.

And at the bottom of the box, wrapped in tissue paper, a small velvet pouch.

She knew what it was before she opened it.

The drawstring came apart easily. She tipped the pouch into her palm, and the diamond brooch fell out.

It was lighter than she had expected. The stones were small, set in silver that had tarnished to a dull grey, but the cluster caught the lamplight and scattered it across the desk in tiny points of white. She turned it over. The clasp was simple, a hinged pin with a safety catch, and on the back, engraved in a fine hand, a single word.

Sofia.

The name sat in the metal like a confirmation. Not a coincidence. Not a metaphor. Her grandmother had owned the brooch. Her grandmother had buried it, or kept it hidden, or carried it with her through a life that Miranda had never thought to question. And now the brooch sat in her palm, cold and real, and the weight of it was heavier than its small metal body could explain.

She laid it next to the photographs. The three objects formed a triangle on the desk: the portrait, the linden-tree image, the brooch. She studied them as if they might yield their meaning through sustained attention, the way a difficult passage of text could eventually surrender its subtext if she read it enough times.

But the objects offered nothing. They simply sat there, mute and patient, waiting for her to decide what to do with them.

Miranda picked up the portrait again and traced its edge with the pad of her thumb. The card stock was rough against her skin, the texture of something that had aged in a drawer, undisturbed for decades. Her grandmother had kept these things. She had kept the brooch, the photographs, the letters. She had kept them but she had never spoken of them, never left a note, never told a story that might have made sense of the fragments.

Unless she had. Unless the story was the manuscript itself, and Miranda had been translating it without knowing she was reading her own family's history.

She studied the brooch again, its metal catching the light. The engraving read: *Sofia*. The name of the journalist who had vanished. The name of the woman Montero had loved. The name that appeared in the coded passages, hidden beneath layers of substitution and metaphor.

Miranda picked up her phone and opened a new message to Jorge Alves in Rio. She typed slowly, her thumb pressing each letter with care.

I found something. Can you check the Santa Teresa archive for any record of a diamond brooch, silver, small stones? It may be listed among Sofia's personal effects.

She paused. Then she added: *I think my grandmother knew her. I think they were the same person.*

She did not send the message. She stared at the words on the screen, the claim they made, the shape of a truth she was not ready to release into the world. If she sent it, the inquiry would become official—a thread to pull that might unravel everything. Her career. Her mother's silence. The foundation's trust. The clean translation she had promised Herrero.

She pressed send anyway.

The phone vibrated a moment later with Jorge's reply: *I'll look. But Miranda—be careful what you find.*

She set the phone down and returned her gaze to the brooch. The stones caught the lamplight and held it, tiny reservoirs of brilliance that had survived decades in a velvet pouch. Her grandmother had carried this across borders, across languages, across an entire life lived in translation. And she had buried it, according to the code. She had buried it under a linden tree and told no one.

Miranda reached for the manuscript and opened it to the decoded passage. The words sat on the page, the same words she had read a dozen times, but now they felt different. They felt like a door.

A woman buries her diamond brooch under a linden tree before she leaves her home.

She leaves her home.

The phrase repeated in her mind, a loop she could not stop. Her grandmother had left Prague in 1968. She had come to Scotland alone, with a child, with no explanation beyond the vagueness of political upheaval. She had never gone back. She had never, as far as Miranda knew, tried to contact anyone from her former life.

But she had kept the brooch. She had kept the photographs. She had kept the letters, bound in rubber bands that had perished and left black streaks across the paper.

Miranda picked up the velvet pouch and held it closed in her fist. The metal of the brooch pressed against her palm, a small, hard point of certainty in the middle of all the uncertainty. The brooch's meaning was a locked room whose key remained beyond her reach. Its connection to Montero, to the manuscript, to the woman named Sofia who had vanished—some said in the seventies, others whispered it was later, though no one agreed on the year—remained a tangle of threads she could not yet follow to their source.

But she knew, with the same certainty that told her when a translation was right, that the answer lay somewhere in the gap between the objects she had found and the story she had been told. She would find that gap. She would map its edges. And when she had enough of the map, she would step into it.

The work of the coming days took shape in her mind: a trip to the National Library in Prague, a conversation with the archivist who had catalogued Montero's papers, the long hours of reading that might or might not yield a clue. It was the kind of work she understood. The kind that required patience and precision and a willingness to follow the text wherever it led.

But this time the text was not a manuscript. It was her grandmother's life, and the brooch was the footnote she had never written.

Chapter 3

Nesu Vodu

Nesu vodu: I carry water. The phrase is a key that opens nothing until you forget what you think it means.

— Jorge Alves, conversation with the author

The flat had gone quiet in the way Edinburgh flats do after eleven—the street noise softening to a distant murmur, the neighbours' footsteps falling silent. The manuscript lay spread across the desk in overlapping sheets, each page weighted at its corner by whatever was to hand: a coffee mug long empty, a river stone picked up on Arthur's Seat, the brass heron that usually presided from the mantel. Miranda had carried it over without thinking, needing something to hold the paper flat against its own curl.

She lifted the mug and drank. Cold. She returned it to the desk and did not get up to make more.

The coded passages were arranged in a pattern she had begun to recognise: every twelfth line, a substitution that shifted by three letters with each chapter. The diamond brooch had been the first to break open—a story her grandmother used to tell, word for word, about a woman who carried water from a well that never ran dry. The brooch in the story was a gift from a lover who had crossed a border and never returned. Miranda had transcribed the passage, underlined the correspondences, and felt the thrill of a lock yielding to the right key.

But the story did not end there. The manuscript contained other codes, other references that did not map to anything she remembered hearing as a child. She had been avoiding them, perhaps, letting the satisfaction of the first success carry her past the harder work of the second.

She turned to the page she had dog-eared two days ago and had not yet opened again. The cipher was the same—three-letter shift, chapter-based key—but the decoded phrases were yielding words she did not recognise. She worked through them slowly, writing each substitution in pencil in the margin.

Lípa. Linden tree. That was easy enough.

Praha. Prague.

She paused, her finger resting on the decoded line. The manuscript had been written in Portuguese, set in Brazil, by a Brazilian author. Why would a coded passage refer to Prague?

She continued decoding, her pencil moving in short, deliberate strokes. The next phrase came into focus word by word, each one pulling the meaning into place like a latch sliding home.

Nesu vodu.

She eased into the chair until her shoulders met the leather. The creak of the cushion broke the stillness.

Czech. She knew enough to recognise the language even before the meaning resolved itself in her mind. *Nesu vodu*—I carry water. The same phrase her grandmother had woven into the story about the diamond brooch, the woman at the well, the lover who never returned. But here it was, embedded in a manuscript whose author remained a ghost, a name she had heard only in whispers—a man who, it was said, had never set foot in Prague or spoken a word of Czech.

Miranda read the decoded passage again, then a third time.

Under the linden tree in the old town square, where the shadow falls longest at noon. Nesu vodu. She will know what it means.

She had the precise words, she thought, but they sat in her mind like a door she had no key to open. A linden tree in Prague. A phrase her grandmother had used. A manuscript written by a man accused of plagiarism. The connections were there, but she could not see the shape of them yet—only the weight of possibility pressing down, cold and heavy as the tea in her cup.

She pushed back from the desk and stood. The flat was too still. The radiator ticked as it cooled, and somewhere in the building a pipe groaned. She moved to the window and looked out at the street, the orange glow of the lamps casting long shadows across the pavement.

Her grandmother had never mentioned Prague. Not once, in all the years of stories and silences and careful evasions. Miranda had grown up believing the woman she knew had left Czechoslovakia in 1968 and never looked back, that the past was a door she had closed with finality. But the manuscript was opening it again, and Miranda was standing on the threshold, uncertain whether she wanted to step through.

She swivelled around to face the desk. The pages lay exposed, the decoded words in pencil like a wound that had not yet healed. Her fingers closed around the manuscript and she held it by the spine, feeling the weight of it—the buckram binding, the hundreds of sheets, the coded passages nested inside the Portuguese like seeds in a fruit.

She could ignore it. She could continue with the clean translation Herrero had demanded, excise the references, treat them as nothing more than the marginalia of a writer who had hidden his sources too well. The contract was clear. The foundation had paid for a faithful translation of Montero's final work, not an excavation of his secrets.

But *thoroughgoing allegiance* to the text, she thought, meant allegiance to all of it—the codes, the discrepancies, the layers of meaning that no clean rendering could preserve. A translation that excised the subtext was not a translation at all. It was a palimpsest scraped clean, the original erased to make room for a version that suited the people who had paid for it.

She set the manuscript down and opened her laptop. The cursor blinked at her, patient and empty. She typed *linden tree Prague Nesu vodu* and waited for the search results to load.

The first page offered tourist guides, photographs of the Old Town Square, mentions of a thousand-year-old linden planted near the astronomical clock. Nothing that connected to the name on the manuscript's spine or the woman who carried water from a well.

She scrolled further. A forum post from 2009, in Czech, discussing the phrase as a code used by dissidents during the normalisation period. She translated it roughly in her head: *We used to say it when we needed to pass a message. Nesu vodu. I carry water. It meant the streets were safe or they were not, depending on who said it and when.*

Miranda stared at the screen. The words blurred, then sharpened again.

Hana Navrátilová had moved through the underground. That was what the forum post was telling her. The woman had not simply fled Prague in 1968—she had been part of a network, a system of codes and safe houses and messages carried in plain sight. The linden tree, the phrase *Nesu vodu*, the diamond brooch in the story: they were not fairy tales. They were instructions.

She snapped the laptop shut and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. The flat held its breath around her, thick and expectant, as if the walls themselves were waiting to see what she would do next.

She could call her mother. Isabel would know—had to know—what the phrase meant, what the linden tree signified, why the manuscript contained a code that led back to Hana's past. But the thought of that conversation made her stomach tighten. Isabel had been evasive about the brooch. She would be evasive about this, too, deflecting with tea and small talk and the gentle weight of a mother's refusal to answer.

No. The discovery would have to come from her own hands.

Miranda opened her eyes and looked at the manuscript, the decoded passage, the pencil marks in the margin. The words were not going to change. The linden tree stood in Prague, and the phrase *Nesu vodu* remained a cipher whose solution she had not yet found.

She reached for her coat.

* * *

The reading room of the National Library of Scotland held its familiar hush, a silence composed of turned pages and the distant click of keyboards. Miranda stood at the counter, the manuscript's decoded passage printed on a folded sheet in her jacket pocket. The librarian, a woman with silver hair and reading glasses on a chain, took the request slip without looking up.

"Montero archives, you said? The Rafael Montero collection."

"Yes. And anything you have on Czech botanical symbolism from the late 1960s. Folk traditions, specifically."

The librarian's pen paused. "That's an unusual combination."

"I'm working on a translation. There's a passage about a linden tree I need to verify."

The woman nodded and disappeared into the stacks. Miranda found a desk near the back wall, set down her notebook, and waited. The light from the reading lamps cast warm pools on the polished wood. She ran her fingers along the edge of the notebook, tracing the spine in a small, unconscious motion.

The archives arrived in two stacks: a gray box marked *Montero, R. — Correspondence 1965-1972* and a thin volume bound in faded green cloth, *Stromy v České Tradici*—Trees in Czech Tradition. Miranda opened the green volume first. The pages smelled of smoke and age. She found the entry for *lípa*, the linden tree, and began to read.

The linden is the tree of truth. In Bohemian villages, justice was traditionally pronounced beneath its branches. Its wood was forbidden for use in construction, for it was believed to carry the voice of ancestors. To carve a linden tree into a message was to invoke the protection of a witness.

She copied the passage into her notebook, then paused. A witness. That was what the code had felt like from the start—something left behind to be found, someone watching through the words. But a witness to what?

She turned the page and found a woodcut illustration: a linden tree with roots that curled into the shape of a human face. The caption read *Lípa jako strážce tajemství*—the linden as guardian of secrets. Below it, in smaller type, a footnote: *In some dissident circles, the linden became a symbol of safe passage. To mark a location with the tree was to signal an ally.*

Miranda's breath caught. She read the line again, then set the book aside and reached for the Montero correspondence. The box contained letters arranged by year. She lifted the first folder—1965—and began to skim. Montero's handwriting was tight, the letters pressed together like

passengers on a crowded tram. He wrote mostly about publishing schedules, travel arrangements, complaints about his editor. Nothing about a linden tree. Nothing about codes.

But the footnote in the botanical volume would not leave her mind. *Dissident circles. Safe passage. An ally.*

She closed her eyes. The phrase *Nesu vodu* repeated in her head like a half-recalled melody. She had assumed it was a private reference, something between her grandmother and the manuscript's author. But what if it was larger than that? What if the phrase had been used before, by other people, in other contexts—a code that existed before the manuscript was ever written?

Her finger traced the spine of the reference book again, the leather warm and worn.

You're chasing a shadow, a part of her said. *You decoded a phrase from a manuscript. That doesn't mean it belonged to a network.*

But the woodcut illustration stared up at her, the linden's roots curling into a face, and she could not shake the feeling that the tree was pointing somewhere specific. A literal address, not a metaphor. A place in Prague where the linden had been planted as a signal.

She opened her notebook to the page where she had written the decoded passage. *Under the linden tree, where the roots drink, / I carry water to the one who waits.* The meter was irregular, the syntax slightly forced—as if the words had been shaped to fit a pattern, not chosen for their poetry.

If it's an address, she thought, *then the tree is the landmark, and the water is the message.* But the message to whom? And from whom?

She set down her pen and reached for the microfilm catalogue. The librarian had mentioned a collection of Czechoslovak periodicals from the late 1960s. Miranda found the entry for *Literární Listy*, a Prague literary

journal that had been shut down after the Soviet invasion. She wrote down the reel number and handed it to the silver-haired woman, who retrieved it without comment.

The microfilm reader hummed as she threaded the reel. The pages flickered past—headlines in Czech, photographs of writers and activists, columns of text that blurred into gray. She slowed at 1968, the year of the Prague Spring. An article about censorship. A poem dedicated to "those who carry water." She stopped, rewound, and read the poem's byline: *—anonymous.*

Her pulse quickened. She scanned the poem. It was short, seven lines, about a woman who carries water from a well to a dying tree. The language was simple, almost folkloric, but the imagery matched the decoded passage in her manuscript with an accuracy that felt impossible. *I carry water to the one who waits.* The same verb tense, the same syntax.

She reclined against the chair's backrest. The microfilm reader hummed. The reading room's silence pressed around her, punctuated by the distant rustle of a page turned somewhere across the floor.

It's not a metaphor, she thought. *It's a signal.*

She scrolled forward through the reel, searching for any mention of the phrase again, any repetition of the poem's motif. Nothing. But at the end of the 1968 volume, in a footnote to a long essay on literary resistance, she found a reference that made her hands go cold:

The phrase 'Nesu vodu' has been documented in connection with the underground network that assisted defectors and political refugees across the Czechoslovak border. Its use in poetry of the period suggests a coded acknowledgment of safe passage routes. See Nováková, E. (1971), 'Linguistic Resistance in Late-Stage Socialism,' Journal of Central European Studies, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 87-103.

Miranda stared at the citation. Eliška Nováková. A name she had never encountered. A name that might know what the phrase meant, where it had come from, who had used it.

She reached for her notebook and wrote the name in careful block letters. ELIŠKA NOVÁKOVÁ. Below it, the journal title, the volume, the page numbers. Then she sat motionless, the pen resting between her fingers.

The connection was there—tenuous, incomplete, but real. Her grandmother's phrase, the linden tree, a poem in a banned literary journal, a dissident network that helped people cross borders. The pieces did not yet form a picture, but they no longer felt random. They felt like a map.

She glanced at her cup of tea. It had gone cold hours ago, a thin skin forming on the surface. She lifted it, took a sip, and grimaced at the bitter taste. The silence of the library seemed to thicken around her, as if the walls themselves were leaning in to watch what she would do next.

She set the cup down and looked at the name in her notebook. Eliška Nováková. The archivist. The one who might know.

The manuscript's decoded passage lay open beside her. She read it one more time: *Under the linden tree, where the roots drink, / I carry water to the one who waits.*

The water’s substance and the identity of the one who had waited were both unknown to her. But she knew, with a certainty that settled in her chest like a stone, that the tree was not a symbol. It was a location. And she would need to find it.

* * *

The phone rang at a quarter past eight, the sound cutting through the low hum of the Marchmont evening. Miranda set down her pen and looked at the receiver, half expecting a wrong number. The last rays from the window touched the brass bird perched on the mantel. She lifted the handset.

"Miranda Shaw."

"Dr. Herrero." His voice was clipped, each word delivered with precision. "I understand you spent the afternoon at the National Library."

Her stomach tightened. She had not mentioned the visit to anyone. "That's correct. I was following a lead from the manuscript."

"A lead." He paused, and she heard the faint crackle of the line. "The linden tree."

She did not answer.

"I must insist, Miranda, that you cease this line of inquiry immediately." The words were measured, deliberate. "It has no bearing on your commission."

"The coded passages are part of the text," she said. "The linden tree appears repeatedly. Understanding the references is essential to the *veracity* of the translation."

"The preservation of the manuscript's structure does not require excavating every private reference embedded within it." Something in his voice shifted—a layer of tension beneath the composure. "You were hired to produce a clean translation. Not an investigation."

She pressed the phone tighter to her ear. "I'm not conducting an investigation. I'm trying to understand a phrase that recurs across ten passages. That's the work."

"No." The word was flat. "That is not the work. The work is the text as written. Not the subtext."

She heard her own voice rise. "The subtext is text."

Silence stretched across the line. She could see her reflection in the window—a woman hunched over a desk, surrounded by papers, the mug of tea beside her long cold. She did not pick it up.

"Let us be clear," Herrero said. "The foundation's support for your translation was predicated on your discretion. If you pursue this, I cannot guarantee the commission's continuity."

Her throat felt dry. "You're threatening to revoke the contract."

"I am warning you that actions have consequences." His voice remained even, but she caught a slight tightness—a hesitation that did not belong in a man who spoke in complete sentences. "The person you are looking into has no relevance to your task. Pursuing that connection will damage the foundation's integrity. That is not acceptable."

"Then tell me why it's dangerous," she said. "Give me a reason beyond your word."

"Some secrets are better left in the archive." He said it as though reading from a prepared statement. "That is all the reason you require."

She flattened her hand against the table. The paper beneath her palm felt thin, fragile. "You're asking me to ignore a pattern I can see. That's not translation. That's suppression."

"You were chosen for your discretion, Miranda." The warmth had drained entirely from his voice. "Do not make me regret that choice."

The notebook open beside her bore the name ELIŠKA NOVÁKOVÁ in block letters; her grandmother's voice surfaced, reading the phrase that now echoed in every decoded passage. *Nesu vodu. I carry water.* Her hand trembled on the receiver.

"Dr. Herrero," she said, "what are you afraid I'll find?"

The silence that followed was longer than before. She heard static. She heard her own pulse.

"I am not afraid of anything you will find," he said finally. "I am afraid of what you will destroy in the looking."

She trailed her knuckles down the row of notebooks—her grandmother's notebooks, stacked on the desk. The covers were worn, the pages soft with age. She felt the weight of those pages, the words her grandmother had carried from a country she never mentioned.

"I can't promise to drop it," she said. "Not yet."

"The data suggests a pattern—"

"Suggests?" She said it before she could stop herself. "I'm sorry, the static—I think you mean 'suggest.' The data suggest."

A beat of silence. Then something that might have been a breath.

"Miranda."

Her hand found the mug. The tea was lukewarm, faintly bitter. She drank anyway, the liquid coating her tongue. The taste grounded her.

"I understand the stakes," she said. "But the text means something. Those passages mean something. You may think they are private, but they are in the manuscript. They are part of the work. I cannot pretend otherwise."

"You are making a mistake."

"Then tell me the truth about that mistake. Tell me why the linden tree matters. Tell me what you know about the woman who wrote those words."

He did not answer. She heard the sharp click of the line disconnecting.

She held the receiver away from her ear and looked at it. The dial tone buzzed, meaningless. She lowered it to the cradle, her movements careful, as if the plastic might shatter.

Stillness pooled in the corners of the room. The manuscript lay open, the coded passage staring up at her. *Under the linden tree, where the roots drink.* She touched the ink, traced the letters set down by her grandmother's hand in a language no one in the family had spoken aloud.

She thought of Herrero's warning. She thought of the foundation, of the translation, of the money that paid for the flat and the books and the careful months of work.

She thought of the photograph she had never showed him—the woman who looked like her grandmother, standing beside a young man in a Prague square, the linden tree behind them.

The receiver was still warm in her hand. She did not pick it up again.

* * *

The receiver clicked into the cradle. The flat was still—no voice now, just the drone of the refrigerator from the kitchen and the tick of her wristwatch against the table edge. She placed her palm flush on the wood grain and felt the ache in her neck from the call. Her hand was stiff. She flexed her fingers, rotated her wrist until the knuckle popped.

She replayed his words. The clipped precision of his tone. He had used her full name—Miranda Shaw—as if the syllables themselves carried a sanction. He had spoken of the foundation's reputation, of the risks of curiosity, of the damage that could be done. But what of the damage to the text? To the *truthfulness* of the translation? She had been hired to render the manuscript into English, not to mutilate its meaning. The word surfaced in her mind—excise—and she tasted its clinical weight. Herrero wanted to cut something out. He wanted to pretend the codes were not there.

The subtext of his warning was clear: stop now, before you find something we cannot contain.

Her eyes drifted to the open notebook on the desk. In her own hand: *Nesu vodu*—I carry water. Beneath it, a reference to a dissident network in Prague in the early seventies. The coded phrases were not random. The

linden tree was a national symbol; the diamond brooch, a marker. She had tied them together into a pattern, but the full design refused to crystallize, hovering just beyond the reach of her understanding.

She sat back in the armchair. The springs groaned. She wrapped her arms around herself. Herrero's voice had been a warning, but it was the fear behind it that lingered. He was afraid—not of her, but of what she might find. And that fear, instead of deterring her, began to crystallize into something else. Defiance.

She pulled her laptop from its leather sleeve and set it on the desk. The screen blinked awake. She typed in the search bar: flights from Edinburgh to Prague. The results loaded: a morning flight, direct. She clicked through to the booking page. Her credit card number was saved in the browser; she could confirm in seconds. But she paused. The cursor blinked at her.

Her eyes drifted to the photograph tucked inside the notebook: her grandmother, Hana, standing beside a young man in a square in Prague, a linden tree behind them. The same tree from the manuscript code. The same phrase—*Nesu vodu*—that her grandmother had once spoken in a story about carrying water from a well. Miranda had never understood the story. Now she thought she might.

A loose thread on her cardigan. She pulled it, watched it curl against her finger.

She continued scrolling. She would need to email Jorge Alves, the archivist in Rio, but first she wanted to see the city where the codes had been written. She could book a small hotel near the Vinohradská address. She jotted notes on a loose sheet—dates, the address of the National Library, the name of the street where a woman tied to the old writer's circle had once lived. That this woman was her grandmother seemed to flicker at the edge of thought, not yet settled into knowledge. She only knew that the linden tree led there.

Her stomach tightened. A dull hunger she had failed to register. She lifted the tea mug from the desk, the ceramic cool against her palm. The liquid was tepid, heavy with tannins. She drank anyway. The bitterness grounded her.

She snapped the laptop shut. The plastic casing was warm under her fingers. She slid the notebook into her satchel, then the photograph, then a copy of the manuscript pages with the coded passages. The motion felt deliberate, almost ceremonial.

Her gaze drifted to the mantel, where the brass heron stood. The lamp cast a yellow pool on the desk. Outside, a car horn sounded faintly. The flat absorbed the noise.

She admitted it to herself, quietly: this was no longer a commission. It was a search. She had thought she was translating a text. But the text was a palimpsest—layers of official words, hidden meanings, the handwriting of a dead man, the silence of a missing woman. And underneath it all, the shape of her own family. She did not have the whole story yet, but she had the thread. The linden tree. The code. The word her grandmother had said in a language no one else understood.

She reached for the phone again, dialed the airline. The automated voice asked for her flight number. She gave it. She booked the ticket.

When she hung up, her hand trembled slightly. She pressed it flat on the table.

The decision was made. The rest was uncertainty.

Part 2

Chapter 4

The Flight to Prague

Flight is a form of translation: you leave one language behind and arrive in another, never quite whole.

— From O Jardim das Ossadas, draft (later excised)

The morning light found the dust motes first. They drifted above the stack of research notes—printouts of Prague street maps, photocopied pages from the National Library's catalogue, a photograph of the apartment building on Vinohradská that she had printed at three in the morning. The thin shadow of the brass heron crept across the wall from its place on the mantel. Somewhere outside a lorry ground its gears at the junction.

Miranda walked into the kitchen and saw the laptop already glowing on the table. She had left it open, the booking page still loaded from the night before. The screen showed a departure calendar and a destination field that read "PRG" in black letters. She had not closed the browser before going to bed. She had not closed it for three nights.

She stood over the table and looked at the numbers. The flight cost more than she had expected—a last-minute booking, the website said, as if that explained the surcharge. Two hundred and forty pounds for a single ticket, economy, no flexibility on changes. She had not told her mother. She had not told anyone. The manuscript sat in its buckram binding on the

desk in the front room, Herrero's warnings still fresh in her memory: _A clean translation. No mention of the scandal. The foundation expects discretion._

Her neck ached from sleeping hunched over the desk the night before. She dug her fingers into the muscle and felt the knot resist.

She sat down. The chair scraped against the floorboards. She opened the laptop and the booking page refreshed, the calendar defaulting to today's date. She had been on this page three times already—Monday evening, Tuesday after the call to her mother, again on Wednesday when she had typed the address of the Vinohradská apartment into a search bar and stared at the street-view photograph until her eyes blurred. Each time she had let the lid fall and walked away.

Now she clicked the departure date field.

The calendar dropped open. She scrolled to the following Tuesday, then Wednesday. Tuesday was cheaper by forty pounds. She selected it and the page recalculated the total. Two hundred and fifteen pounds, including taxes and fees. She stared at the number until it lost meaning.

A flicker of uncertainty passed through her, thin and familiar. The money mattered, but not as much as the time. She had deadlines: a Catalan novel due at the end of the month, a poetry collection from Galician that she had already pushed back twice. The Prague trip would take at least a week, maybe more. Extensions for her clients sat on the horizon like a task she could not postpone; explanations for anyone who asked where she was going would remain unoffered.

She corrected a typo in the destination field. The cursor blinked.

The flat had fallen into a hush so deep the silence seemed to press against her ears. The kettle sat cold on the counter. She had not made tea since the morning before. Her fingers closed around the mug beside the laptop—cold, with a film of coffee oil on the surface—and she held it without drinking.

She thought back to Herrero's voice as he stood in this same room, his hands folded, his tone precise and unhurried. _You will find things in the manuscript that want to pull you in another direction. Do not let them._ He had not looked at her when he said it. He had looked at the mantel, where the brass heron stood like a sentinel that only answered to him.

And then her grandmother rose in her mind, unbidden.

The old woman had never spoken about Prague. Not once, in all the years Miranda had known her. When Miranda asked—a child's question, unpolished—her grandmother would smile and touch the diamond brooch at her collar and say something about the weather, or the price of fish at the market, or the way the light fell across the garden in the afternoon. The silence was not empty. It was full of doors that had been closed and locked.

The word _Nesu vodu_ pulsed in her memory. _I carry water._ A phrase from a dissident network, the manuscript had said. A phrase her grandmother must have known.

She set the cold coffee down and placed her fingers on the keyboard.

The cursor hovered over the purchase button. The screen reflected the shape of her face—the furrow between her eyebrows, the smudge of sleep at the corner of her eye. She looked older than she remembered. The reflection watched her and she watched it back, and the moment stretched into the space between what she had always known and what she was about to uncover.

She pressed her thumb against the trackpad. The screen did not change. She pressed again, harder, and the button clicked.

A spinning icon appeared. Then a confirmation page, a booking reference in six characters, a seat assignment in row seventeen. The email would arrive within the hour, the website said. She should check in online to avoid queues at the airport.

She closed the laptop.

The flat sounded different now. The clock on the mantel ticked louder. The lorry had gone. She could hear her own breath moving in and out, a rhythm she had been unaware of before.

She reached for the cold coffee and drank without tasting it. The mug was chipped at the rim—she had bought it at a charity shop years ago, a floral pattern faded to grey. She drank again, and this time she felt the temperature, the stale bitterness coating her tongue, and she did not care.

She set the mug down and pressed the pad of her thumb against the spine of the book closest to her hand. A Czech dictionary, its cover worn soft from use. She had bought it years ago for a translation that never materialised. She had not opened it in months. Now she pulled it from the shelf and let the pages fall open at random. *Voda. Water.* The type was small and black and unchanged.

She closed the dictionary and placed it beside the laptop.

The decision was made. The flight was booked. She would go to Prague and find the apartment on Vinohradská and walk the streets her grandmother had walked, and she would not know what she was looking for until she found it. That was the nature of the work, she told herself. The translation came after the reading. The meaning came after the words were laid out in order.

Her fingers closed around the cold coffee again and she drank the rest of it, every drop, and did not wince.

* * *

Sunlight fell across the desk in a long yellow rectangle, illuminating the clutter: three books stacked open at different pages, a ring of coffee residue at the base of a mug, and a tangle of notes covered in her own cramped handwriting. A profound stillness enveloped the flat, broken only by the ticking of the mantel clock and the faint hiss of a radiator that never quite heated evenly. She pressed the heel of her hand against her sternum, where a dull ache had settled from sleeping bent over her laptop the night before.

The screen glowed with a blank email. She had opened it five minutes ago and had typed nothing but the address: *jorge.alves@casacultura.rio.br*. The cursor blinked at her, patient and expectant.

She wanted to begin with something standard—*Dear Mr. Alves*—but that felt too guarded for a stranger she was asking to trust her. *Caro Jorge*? Too familiar. She poised her fingers over the keyboard and let the first sentence form in her mind.

I am writing to you because I am translating a final manuscript—the author's name is one you may have seen in the literary supplement last spring—and I have encountered a reference that I believe may connect to the work of a certain journalist whose name I recall from a half-remembered news clipping, though I cannot yet confirm the details.

She hesitated. *May connect* felt weak, but *definitely connects* would sound presumptuous. She typed the line and read it twice. The word *conscientiousness* surfaced in her thoughts—what did she owe the text, and what did she owe the truth? She backspaced to delete *I believe* and replaced it with nothing, letting the sentence stand.

I am writing to you because I am translating the final manuscript of an author whose name you will recognize, and I have encountered a reference that may connect to the work of a journalist who disappeared decades ago.

Better. Direct but not demanding.

She leaned back in the worn armchair, the springs creaking beneath her. The ache in her sternum spread to her shoulders. She had been tense all week, since the linden tree passage had locked itself into her mind. The code was not random—it was deliberate, a message hidden for someone who would recognize the symbol. And Jorge Alves's grandfather, according to a footnote in an old monograph, had been a colleague of Alencar's at the *Jornal do Brasil* before she vanished.

A worry surfaced, cold and sharp: what if pursuing this thread meant risking the translation? Herrero had been clear. A clean translation. No mention of the scandal. If she found something that contradicted the clean narrative, the choice between two obligations would press down on her, and she could not yet tell which one would hold. She closed her eyes and saw the manuscript, the white buckram binding, the careful pages of Montero's last work. She had signed a contract. She had taken the money. But the codes were not part of Montero's intended text—they were a subtext, written by someone else, or by Montero in a different register. The thought unsettled her, and she opened her eyes.

She returned to the email. She needed to explain the linden tree without giving too much away. She wrote:

In the manuscript, there is a recurring reference to a linden tree. I understand from previous research that a journalist who used that image—she went by a few names in her early career—was edited by your grandfather, João Alves, at the *Jornal do Brasil*. I am hoping you might have access to his personal records that could clarify the connection.

She paused, finger hovering over the trackpad. The cursor blinked. She worked her index finger into the gap where the dictionary's spine met its binding, feeling the worn cloth thread, the looseness where the glue had dried. The gesture calmed her.

She added a closing:

I am not requesting access to anything sensitive—only any notes he may have kept regarding her bylines or her departure from the paper. If you are willing to share even a brief memory of what your grandfather told about her, I would be very grateful.

Sincerely, Miranda Shaw

She read it through once more. It was polite, cautious, but left a door open. She imagined Jorge Alves opening his inbox in Rio, scrolling past the noise of his day, pausing on her name. Would he reply? He might not. He might delete it and forget it.

Her eyes settled on the mantel, where the brass heron stood—her grandmother's. The light from the window caught its wing, and for a moment it seemed to shift.

She clicked send.

The email vanished into a queue, and the screen returned to her inbox. The confirmation bar appeared at the top of the window: *Message sent*. She exhaled, letting the breath leave her slowly. Relief and dread mixed in her chest. She had taken a step. Now she could only wait.

* * *

The flat felt smaller with Isabel standing in the kitchen doorway. She had not knocked, had not called ahead, had simply appeared as if the conversation they had avoided for a week had finally grown legs and walked itself to Marchmont. Miranda's hand froze above the keyboard, the cursor blinking on the empty email draft. The dusk light slanted onto the mantel, making the brass heron appear to lean away from the door.

"Oh, darling, you can't go." Isabel's voice was soft, almost pleading, but her arms were crossed tight over her chest. She had not taken off her coat. She had not moved past the threshold. "You can't just—" She stopped, shook her head, and started again. "You can't just fly to Prague because of some code in a manuscript you barely understand."

Miranda closed the laptop lid. "I understand more than you think."

"You understand words on a page. That's different from understanding what they mean when they're attached to real people. To your grandmother." Isabel's voice cracked on the last word. She uncrossed her arms and pressed her palm flat against the doorframe, as if she needed something solid to hold onto.

The tightness in Miranda's chest bloomed, familiar and unwelcome. She kept her hand on the laptop, feeling the warm plastic, grounding herself in its solidity. "I'm not going to pry open her grave, Mum. I'm going to trace the path of a single word across two languages. That's what I do."

"You're going to trace my mother's lies across two continents, you mean."

"Isabel said the word like it left a bitter taste. She stepped into the room at last, but she did not sit down. She stood by the mantel, her fingers brushing the brass heron's wing, then drawing back as though the metal had burned her.

"You don't know what you'll find," Isabel said. "And once you find it, you can't un-find it. That's the nature of knowledge, Miranda. It doesn't come with a return policy."

Miranda felt the familiar urge to correct her mother's metaphor, to point out that knowledge could be reframed if not erased, but she bit the impulse back. "I know that. But I also know that Herrero drove here from his office to tell me not to look. That means there's something worth finding."

"Or it means he's protecting the foundation's reputation from a ghost story."

"Then I'll confirm it's a ghost story and come home."

Isabel's hand moved to the shelf. She pulled out a volume—a Portuguese-English dictionary, worn and stained—and pushed it back into place. Then she straightened two novels beside it, aligning their spines with a precise, almost compulsive motion. "Some truths are too heavy to carry," she said, her voice low. "Not because they're dangerous. Because they change the shape of everything you thought you knew. You think you're ready for that? You think anyone is ready for that?"

Miranda did not answer. The tightness in her chest had spread to her throat. She hooked her finger under the dictionary's spine and pulled it toward her, feeling the frayed cloth catch on the wood of the desk, the loose thread snagging. The gesture calmed her, anchored her to the present.

"What haven't you told me?" she asked.

Isabel's hand stopped mid-motion above a row of poetry books. She did not turn around.

"There are things," she said slowly, "that I have never told anyone. Not your father. Not my friends. Things I locked away in a drawer and told myself I would throw away the key."

"Mum—"

"When I came home from university in 1985, your grandmother was different. She had this look in her eyes. Like she had seen something she could not stop seeing. Like the world had split open in front of her and she had to hold the edges together with both hands." Isabel turned, and her eyes were bright but dry. "I never asked her what it was. I was twenty-one and I thought silence was kindness."

"And now?"

"Now I think silence was fear. I thought if I asked, she would crack. And I would have to gather the pieces."

Miranda felt the weight of the words settle between them. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. A car passed on the street outside, its engine fading into the dusk.

"I can't do this," Miranda said softly. "I can't let the reason be silence. That's not a reason—it's a wall."

"Then go." Isabel's voice was flat now, drained of everything. "Go to Prague. Find whatever is buried there. Read the letters. Let the ghosts tell you their version." She picked up her handbag from the armchair where she had dropped it. "But when it hurts—and it will hurt—do not say no one warned you."

She walked past Miranda without touching her. The door closed with a soft click, and the flat seemed to exhale.

Miranda sat motionless, her hand resting on the closed laptop. The doubt flickered, quiet but persistent, like a moth brushing against a lampshade. She could still call Herrero. She could still agree to the clean translation. She could still close the laptop and walk away.

But her hand did not move. The manuscript lay in its white buckram binding, patient and waiting. The codes would not read themselves. The linden tree would not leaf without someone to water it.

She reached for her phone and looked at the sent email, the confirmation bar still visible at the top. She could not unsend it. She did not want to.

She stood up, walked to the kettle, and filled it with fresh water. The ritual of tea would anchor her. Then she would finish packing.

* * *

The door clicked shut and the silence settled like a weight pressed into the corners of the room. Miranda stood still in the centre of the carpet, her arms crossed, the cold from the window seeping against her back. The flat felt hollowed out, as if Isabel's presence had taken something with her—an invisible layer of sound, of warmth, of movement. The kettle stood on the counter, untouched since her mother had arrived. A cup of tea she had poured for Isabel sat on the low table, the surface of the liquid filmed over with a pale skin.

She dropped her arms and walked to the table, picked up the cup, and held it for a moment before setting it down again without drinking. The tea was cold. She hadn't even noticed she'd made it.

The doubt came before she could stop it, creeping in from the edges of her thoughts. Her mother's voice—flat, drained, final—replayed in her mind with the precision of a well-worn recording. *When it hurts—and it will hurt—do not say no one warned you.* She braced her hand flat on the table's edge and leaned her weight into it, as if she could push the words away by sheer physical effort.

She could still call Herrero. The number was in her phone, a single tap away. She could tell him she had reconsidered, that the clean translation was the right approach, that she would remove any hint of the codes from the final draft. The contract allowed for it. The foundation expected it. Her mother would have nothing more to fear.

But the manuscript lay on the desk, its white buckram binding catching the faint light from the reading lamp. The pages inside held a language that kept secrets, and she had already promised herself she would read it—not as a translator merely, but as someone who had been touched by it. The codes were not random marks. They were deliberate, systematic, a substi-

tution cipher that had been laid into the prose like hidden joists in an old building. To remove them would be to excise the architecture of the text itself.

She pushed herself off the table and began to pace.

The flat was small—a living room, a kitchen nook, a narrow hallway. She measured it in strides. Ten steps from the bookshelf to the armchair. Eight from the table to the window. She dragged her fingertips along the row of books on the middle shelf—a worn translation of *Dom Casmurro* she had bought years ago in a second-hand shop. The cloth was frayed at the edges, the gold lettering nearly gone. She had read it three times and never once noticed the subtext of the narrator's unreliability until the third reading, when the whole thing had shifted under her feet like a floor giving way.

The doubt flickered again, but not with the same intensity. She had chosen this path. She had sent the email to Jorge Alves in Rio, asking for archival help. She had booked the flight to Prague. She had not asked for permission. The itinerary was open on her laptop, the confirmation bar glowing in the corner of the screen.

She stopped in front of the desk and looked down at the manuscript, open to the page where she had first spotted the cipher. The diamond brooch. The linden tree. And then the phrase that had caught her throat the first time she read it: *Nesu vodu*—the Czech words that should not have been there, buried in a Portuguese sentence about a woman carrying water from a well.

She had traced the letters with her finger that night, feeling the shape of them as if they were something alive. A code that referenced her own grandmother's language. A name that had never appeared in Montero's known biography. The photograph in the drawer—the one of her grandmother with an unknown man in Prague, circa the late sixties—had no

caption, no date, no explanation. But the woman in the photograph looked younger than Miranda had ever seen her, and she was smiling in a way that did not match the grandmother Miranda remembered.

The silence pressed in again, but this time she did not mind it. Her arm extended toward the notebook she kept beside the manuscript—the one where she had been making her own notes, cross-referencing the coded passages, building a lexicon of the substitutions. She flipped it open and scanned the last page. The cipher was consistent: each coded image mapped to a specific letter, and the letters formed words, and the words formed sentences. She had decoded three full paragraphs so far, and each one had deepened the feeling that the manuscript was not what Montero's defenders claimed it to be.

She closed the notebook and placed her hand flat on the cover.

The decision did not come with clarity or certainty. It came as a quiet recognition, like the moment a translation shifts from mechanical reproduction to something that breathes. She could not go back to the clean version. Not because she was stubborn, and not because she wanted to antagonise Herrero. But because the *trustworthiness* of the text mattered more than the comfort of her own family.

Her mother had her reasons. Isabel had said that. *Good reasons.* But reasons were not truth, and truth—in translation, at least—was the only currency she trusted. She was a translator. She carried water from one language to another. She did not decide what the water contained.

She looked at her phone on the desk, then at the laptop. The flight was in two days. She had still to confirm the hotel in Prague. A neighbour three doors down, she remembered, had a dog that barked at odd hours; a faint muffled yap came through the wall as if on cue, and for a moment it broke the concentration. She smiled, a small tight thing, and picked up her phone.

She did not call Herrero.

She called the airline instead, automated prompts, and confirmed her seat in economy. She hung up. The receipt appeared in her email a moment later. She set the phone facedown on the desk, next to the notebook, and pulled the laptop closer.

Then she opened a new document and began to type: *Notes toward the footnotes: a decision to include the coded passages as transparently as possible, not as excised deletions but as integral parts of the narrative. The reader deserves to see the carpentry.*

She wrote until her wrist ached and the clock on the wall showed half past midnight. The flat had grown dark around her—she had not turned on the main light, only the reading lamp. A sliver of glow caught the heron on the mantelpiece, its brass beak splitting the shadow that fell across the faded wallpaper.

She saved the document, closed the laptop, and stood up. Her neck was stiff, and she rolled her shoulders. The cold tea sat untouched on the low table. She carried it to the sink and poured it out, watching the greyish liquid spiral down the drain. She rinsed the cup, set it on the drying rack.

She would sleep now. Tomorrow she would finish packing. And then she would go.

The doubt was still there, a quiet hum in the background. But it no longer felt like something that could stop her. It felt, instead, like the friction that kept a sentence from sliding off the page—a necessary resistance.

She turned off the lamp and walked toward the bedroom, her hand brushing the doorframe as she passed.

Chapter 5

The Apartment on Vinohradská

The apartment on Vinohradská kept its secrets in the walls, in the silence of an old neighbor.

— Mrs. Nováková, interview transcript (private collection)

The tram doors folded shut behind her and Miranda stepped onto cobblestones slick with recent rain. Grey-and-gold facades rose on either side—stucco peeling in patches, ochre and cream and pale rose, their windows catching the low afternoon light. A tram bell clanged somewhere behind her, then another, the sound bouncing off the narrow walls. She smelled roasted nuts from a street cart, heard a snatch of accordion music from a doorway and then the hum of voices in a language she understood only in fragments. The satchel containing the manuscript pulled at her shoulder. She fixed her gaze on the nearest building, a corner block with a faded sign in gold leaf above a tobacconist's.

She read the facades the way she read a page—the layers of paint, the replaced windows, the ghost of an older sign beneath a newer one. The city was a palimpsest of centuries. Romanesque arches shouldered into Baroque plaster; a Modernist balcony jutted out between two Gothic

dormers. She felt the weight of it as a physical pressure, the density of time pressed into stone. Her mind reached for the word *excise*—impossible here. You could not cut one layer away without damaging the rest.

At the corner she stopped. The rhythm of the city was unfamiliar, not quite fast nor slow but something else, a cadence she could not locate in her chest. People passed with shopping bags and umbrellas. A tram groaned past, its windows fogged. She was a foreigner here. The thought sat in her throat. Her grandmother had fled this city in 1968—forced to leave her homeland, an exile (the condition of being banished from one's country, the word carrying the cold weight of a door that had closed behind her). Miranda had never imagined she would stand here, on these same stones, chasing a secret her grandmother had buried in someone else's manuscript.

She pulled her phone from her coat pocket. The map loaded slowly, a blue dot blinking near the river. She traced the street names with her finger—*Vinohradská*—and muttered the syllable pattern under her breath. "Vi-no-hrad-ská." A correction. "Vin-o-hrad." Three syllables, stress on the first. She had read the pronunciation guide twice on the plane and still caught herself landing wrong.

As she walked, the memory of the cipher surfaced. The linden tree passage. The phrase *Nesu vodu*—words that did not belong in a Portuguese manuscript, a message tucked inside a story about a garden and a woman who planted bones. Miranda had stared at those letters for hours in her Edinburgh flat, pressing the heels of her palms against the spines of her dictionaries, the subtext of the code whispering that nothing in the document was what it seemed. The memory was a thread she could hold. It pulled her forward.

Doubt crowded the edges of her mind. What if the trail was cold? What if no one remembered that name—if the neighbour had moved or died, if the building had been renovated and any trace of the past painted over? A wind slipped through the gap in her coat collar. She let her fingertips skim a wrought-iron railing as she passed a basement flat—cold metal, a faint scrape of oxidation, grit in the air.

She anchored herself by listing facts: the apartment existed; a woman whose name someone had scrawled on a library card had lived there; the coded passages in the manuscript had come from somewhere real. She had the foundation's permission, however grudging, and the address. She had her own grandmother's story, the diamond brooch, the river of Prague that had run through a child's tale. The weight of those connections pressed against the doubt, not quite heavy enough to crush it, but enough to keep her feet moving.

She turned onto Vinohradská and the city changed. The street was wider, lined with plane trees shedding their bark in patches of smooth and rough. The buildings here were taller, more ornate—balconies with wrought-iron scrollwork, entryways with arched doors and black-and-white tiled floors visible through glass. A small linden tree grew in a courtyard behind a gate, its leaves yellowing at the edges. The tram noise receded; the street was quieter than the main boulevard. She checked the address again—number forty-three—and felt her mouth go dry.

The building had a heavy wooden door painted dark green, its varnish flaking at the edges. A row of intercom buttons gleamed under a brass plate. She stopped in front of it, her hand outstretched, and did not press the button. The city noise fell away to a distant hum. The handle of her satchel bit into her palm. A receipt from the airport had lodged itself in her coat pocket, and she felt its corner press against her hip—a small, grounding presence. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The silence

of the street, or her own held breath, filled the space around her. She fixed her eyes on the door, on the intercom, on the nameplates in neat rows, and hesitated.

* * *

A key turned in the lock with a dull scrape, and the door swung inward on groaning hinges. The air that met her was thick and still, carrying the smell of mothballs and old polish, layered over something mustier—wood that had not been aired in years. She stepped inside and the door closed behind her with a soft thud, sealing her in the gloom.

The apartment was a single narrow corridor that opened into a sitting room. A worn velvet sofa sat against one wall, its fabric faded from burgundy to a dusty rose. Opposite stood a wardrobe of dark oak, its doors slightly ajar. A small table near the window held a brass lamp with a frayed shade. The window itself was curtained in heavy brown fabric that let in only a diffuse grey daylight. A spider had spun a web across the upper corner of the frame, its strands catching what little illumination there was.

She set her satchel down on the floor near the door and stood still, listening. The silence was not complete—a distant piano from somewhere in the building, a muffled footstep from above—but the apartment itself held no sound. The dust on the surfaces felt settled, undisturbed. She traced the curve of the sofa's armrest with the back of her hand, leaving a clean line in the film. The place had been cleaned once, perhaps by the estate agents, but no one had lived here for a long time.

She started with the drawers of a small sideboard near the window. The wood stuck; she had to tug twice before it yielded. Inside: a few yellowed papers, a receipt from a grocery dated 1971, a broken pair of spectacles

with one lens cracked. The next drawer held a collection of postcards, all blank, all showing Prague landmarks—the Charles Bridge, the castle, the Old Town Square. She flipped through them. Nothing written.

The wardrobe revealed more clothes than she expected—a woman's coat of grey wool, two blouses that smelled of stale perfume, a pair of leather gloves with the fingers turned inward. She touched the coat sleeve. The fabric was soft, worn at the cuffs. Her grandmother had worn this. The thought settled like a weight in her chest.

She opened a small cupboard near the kitchenette and found a tin of tea, long expired, and a single cup with a chip in the rim. No letters. No personal documents. The apartment felt evacuated of meaning, as if every intentional trace had been removed and only the incidental debris remained.

She stood in the middle of the room and let her gaze drift. The secrecy of this place pressed against her—the way her mother had hedged on the phone, the way her grandmother had never spoken of Prague at all. Isabel had said, *Some roots are better left in the ground.* Miranda had assumed that meant the war, the trauma of emigration. But here, in the silence of this emptied apartment, she felt the weight of something more specific. A story that had been trimmed and excised until only the margins remained.

She moved to the wardrobe and ran her hand along its base, tracing the gap where the floor met the wood. Her knee complained as she knelt—a stiffness from sitting on the plane, the joint crackling in the quiet room. She had straightened to leave when she noticed it: a floorboard near the wardrobe's left foot, its edge slightly raised, a thin sliver of darkness showing where it did not meet its neighbour.

She pressed her fingernail into the gap. It gave slightly. She worked her fingers into the crevice and pulled, but the board held. She retrieved a letter opener from her bag—a slim brass blade she used for cutting pages—and slid it under the edge. A lever, a groan, and the board lifted, a nail screeching against wood.

Beneath it lay a small metal box, tarnished, no larger than a paperback. She lifted it out and felt the weight of something solid shifting inside.

She carried it to the table and set it down with two hands. The latch was a simple hook of rusted iron, fused shut by time and moisture. She tried to lift it with her thumb; it would not move. She scraped at the corrosion with the tip of the letter opener, then pushed the blade under the hook and pried. She felt it give a little, then seize. She held her breath and pushed harder. The latch yielded with a sharp click, and the lid sprang open by a finger's breadth.

The interior was lined with faded velvet, the colour of dried wine. A cloth bundle lay inside, tied with a ribbon gone brittle. She lifted it out carefully, the fabric stiff with age, and untied the ribbon. A curl of dust rose as she unfolded the layers.

Photographs. Sepia, edges curled, surfaces mottled with age spots. She spread them on the table. Landscapes—a river, a bridge, a park bench. A group of young people standing in front of a building she did not recognise. And then, at the bottom, a single photograph face-up.

A woman with high cheekbones and dark hair, her face turned slightly toward the camera, a smile caught mid-formation. The same eyes Miranda had seen in the framed portrait in her mother's hallway. The same curve of the jaw. Her grandmother. Beside her stood a man, tall, with a sharp jaw and a serious expression, his hand resting lightly on her arm. Their bodies

angled toward each other with an ease that suggested familiarity. The background was a street—cobblestones, a tramline, a building with a wrought-iron balcony.

Miranda traced the woman's face with her finger, the paper cool and fragile under her touch. This was the journalist, younger than she had ever seen her, someone she had never known. And beside her, a man who was not her grandfather.

She returned her gaze to the photograph, then to the others. The same woman appeared in three more—sitting on a park bench, speaking with a group of men, laughing in a café. The man appeared only in the first, but in every shot she was animated, alive, nothing like the quiet grandmother who had baked scones in Glasgow and never mentioned Prague.

The apartment's stillness felt thicker now, as if the walls were holding a conversation she could not quite hear. She turned the photograph over. On the back, in a hand she did not recognise, a single line: *Praha, léto 1966*. Prague, summer 1966. Two years before her grandmother left.

She placed the photograph on the table and spread the others in a row. There was a story here, written in images and absences, in the spaces between what had been kept and what had been discarded. The linden tree code, the diamond brooch, the phrase *Nesu vodu*—they all led back to a life that had been deliberately buried. And this man, whose face was a stranger's to her, was part of that burial.

She lifted the box and tilted it, and a slip of paper slid out from under the velvet lining. It was folded twice, the creases so deep the paper had split along one edge. She opened it carefully. A single sentence in the same hand: *The garden remembers what the gardener forgets.*

She read it twice, then set it beside the photographs. The air at the window stirred faintly, and the brass lamp’s shade trembled. The piano in the distance had stopped. The spider in the corner of the frame had descended an inch on its thread, motionless, as if waiting.

Miranda looked at the photograph one more time, at her grandmother’s face, and felt the weight of the words she would never hear her speak. She closed the box and slid the photographs into the inner pocket of her satchel, beside the manuscript. Then she sat in the quiet of the apartment, a thin film of dust settling around her, and let herself not know what came next.

* * *

A soft knock echoed through the apartment, three faint taps against the wood. Miranda's hand froze over the open box. The photograph of her grandmother and the unknown man lay beside the slip of paper, the words still fresh in her mind: *The garden remembers what the gardener forgets.* She closed the box lid and pressed it shut. The knock came again, more insistent this time.

She crossed the room, her stockinged feet cold against the floorboards. The radiator beneath the window gave off a weak warmth, barely enough to cut the chill. Through the stained glass panel beside the door, a shape moved—small, stooped. She turned the worn brass handle and opened the door a crack.

An elderly woman stood in the hallway, her hands clasped in front of her apron. Her hair was white and thin, pulled back in a loose bun, and her eyes were sharp, birdlike, scanning Miranda's face before settling on the room behind her.

"Vy mluvíte anglicky?" the woman said, her voice thin but steady.

"Yes," Miranda said. "English is fine."

"Aha." The woman nodded slowly. "I am Mrs. Nováková. From downstairs. I saw the light. Nobody lives here for many years. I thought maybe —" She paused, as if weighing her next words. "You are a relative?"

Miranda's chest tightened. "I'm—I'm a researcher. Looking into the history of the building."

Mrs. Nováková's eyes narrowed, then softened. "History. Yes. Some things should stay buried. But you are here. You may as well come in." She stepped past Miranda into the apartment without waiting for an invitation. Her gaze swept the room—the empty shelves, the dusty floorboards, the box on the table. "Nothing has changed. The smell. The wood. I remember."

Miranda closed the door and followed her to the sitting area. "You lived here long?"

"Forty-two years. I knew the woman who lived in this apartment. Always kept to herself, went by a different name — some sort of stage name, maybe. Never asked."

The name landed like a stone in still water. Miranda's pulse quickened, but she kept her voice even. "You knew her?"

"A little. She kept to herself. But we spoke sometimes, on the stairs. She was quiet, always carrying books. I was younger then, with a small child. She gave my daughter a doll once, a handmade thing. I still have it." Mrs. Nováková sat on the edge of the armchair, her hands resting in her lap. "You look like her. Around the eyes."

Miranda's heart hammered. She lowered herself onto the sofa across from the woman, her fingers brushing the spine of a book on the side table —a thin volume of Czech poetry she had found earlier. "She was my grandmother."

Mrs. Nováková's expression flickered—surprise, then something like pity. "Your grandmother. So you did not know the full story."

"I know she left Prague in the late sixties. She moved to Scotland, changed her name, started over."

The old woman shook her head slowly. "No. She did not leave. She fled." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "There were men—men in suits, from the government. Twice I saw them outside the building, watching. And then one day she was gone. No goodbye, no luggage. Just the key left with the landlady. People said she crossed the border at night."

Miranda's mouth went dry. "Why would she need to flee?"

Mrs. Nováková's eyes darted to the window. "She was helping people. Political people. Dissidents. The kind that disappeared in those years." She paused, her fingers pulling at a loose thread on her apron. "I did not ask questions. One does not ask questions when the men in suits come. But I heard things. Sofia was not just a journalist. She was a courier."

"A courier for what?"

"For messages. For documents. She carried them in the linings of her coat, in the pages of books." Mrs. Nováková pressed her lips together. "And then one night, a car with diplomatic plates came. She got in. No one saw her again."

Miranda's mind raced. The photograph, the linden tree, the phrase *Nesu vodu*—it all tilted into a new alignment. "Did she ever mention a man—a colleague, perhaps from the university?"

The neighbor's face closed like a door. "I do not know that name."

"Are you sure? He was a writer, a Czech-Brazilian—"

"I do not know that name." Mrs. Nováková stood abruptly, her joints cracking. "You must understand, young lady. Some things are better left in the ground. We dig them up, and we find only bones. Painful bones." She walked toward the door, her steps careful on the worn floor. "If you are her granddaughter, you should know: she did not want this past to touch you. That is why she fled. That is why she disappeared."

She paused at the threshold. "Lock the door behind me. And do not show that photograph to anyone else in this building."

Miranda rose, her legs unsteady. "How did you know about the photograph?"

Mrs. Nováková turned the handle without looking back. "Because I recognize the face in it. And I recognize the man who took it." She stepped into the hallway. "He is still alive. And he still has friends in this city."

The door clicked shut. Miranda stood in the silence, her breath shallow. She went to the lock and turned it, then pressed her forehead against the wood. The cold of the door seeped into her skin.

She returned to the table and lifted the box, pulling out the photograph again. Her grandmother's face—young, hopeful—stared at her from the paper. The man beside her, his arm around her shoulder, smiled at the camera like he knew something she did not.

The slip of paper lay beside the photograph. *The garden remembers what the gardener forgets.*

Miranda returned the photograph to the table and pressed her fingers to her temples, feeling the dull ache of a tension headache settling in. Her mouth tasted of dust and cold tea. Her hand moved to the cup on the sideboard, lifted it, took a sip, and grimaced—it had gone tepid hours ago. She drank it anyway, the liquid sliding down her throat like a confession.

The family story was a palimpsest—layers of truth written over by silence and erasure. And the subtext of her grandmother's life was not innocence but survival, bought with secrets that had never been excavated.

Miranda looked at the photograph again. The man in the image was no longer a stranger. He was a thread that, once pulled, might unravel everything—and she could not stop her fingers from reaching.

* * *

The quiet of the apartment settled around her, thick as dust. The hallway door had clicked shut five minutes ago, and now the only sound was the distant murmur of a piano from somewhere below, notes spilling through the floorboards. Miranda stood at the table where the box lay open, the photographs spread like a deck of cards. Her mouth was dry. She had not eaten since the bread roll at the airport, and her stomach registered the lack with a faint, hollow ache. She ignored it, pulling out the chair and sitting down, the wood creaking under her weight.

The sepia photograph was in her hand before she made a conscious choice to pick it up. Her thumb traced the edge of the paper, feeling the slight curl where age had warped the fibers. The woman in the image stood in front of a building with a wrought-iron balcony—Vinohradská, perhaps, the same street she was on now. Beside her, the man with the dark suit and the easy smile. Miranda set the photograph flat on the table and reached into her bag, pulling out the wallet she had carried for years. From it she extracted a smaller print: her grandmother Hana at a wedding in Glasgow, 1971, wearing a plain dress and holding a glass of wine. The same set of the jaw. The same way of holding the chin slightly lifted, as if daring the camera to find her out.

She placed the two images side by side and stared at the woman in the sepia frame. The eyes were younger, brighter, but the smile was the same—a guarded smile, the lips pressed together in a line that offered nothing. Miranda had seen that smile a thousand times at family dinners, in Christmas cards, in the passport photo that still sat on her mother's mantelpiece. It was a smile that said *I am here but I am not telling you where I have been.* The subtext of it, the thing held back, was the same quality she had learned to read in the manuscript's coded passages—a double meaning buried beneath the obvious.

She lifted the Glasgow photograph and laid it beside the sepia one, then reached for her notebook and flipped to the page where she had transcribed *Nesu vodu*, the linden tree, the diamond brooch. On the facing page were the notes from her conversation with Mrs. Nováková. *Your grandmother—she was one of them. A dissident network. The man in the photo is still alive.* Miranda's fingers found the spine of the notebook and ran along it, the familiar gesture grounding her.

She opened her laptop and waited for the screen to brighten. The Wi-Fi in the apartment was slow; the page loaded in fragments. She typed *Brazil journalist disappeared 1973 mother* into the search bar and pressed enter. The first result was a Portuguese Wikipedia article, brief and clinical: *Jornalista brasileira (1925–?), desapareceu durante a ditadura militar.* She clicked through to a site dedicated to disappeared journalists. A photograph—a woman with dark hair, a guarded smile she couldn't place. The entry listed her last known location as Rio de Janeiro, her occupation as translator and stringer for a European news agency. There was no mention of Prague, no mention of a daughter.

Miranda cross-referenced with her own notes. The linden tree. The phrase *Nesu vodu*—I carry water, a saying her grandmother had passed down when Miranda was a child, calling it a family proverb about persistence. She had never thought to question it. Now it sat in her notebook like a key to a door she had not known existed.

She shut the machine and pushed it aside, the fan whirring for a moment before it quieted. The neighbor's words looped in her mind, colliding with her mother's stories. Isabel had always described Hana as a quiet refugee who fled the Soviet invasion and never looked back, a woman who kept her head down and raised her daughter in a small Glasgow flat with geraniums on the windowsill. No mention of dissident

networks, no mention of a lover who might still be alive, no mention of the man in the photograph who had his arm around Miranda's grandmother like he had every right to hold her.

The gaps were no longer empty space. They were shaped like things that had been excised from the narrative, cut out with a careful blade and smoothed over until the surface looked whole. Miranda pressed her fingers to her temples. The headache was back, a dull throb behind her eyes. The truth her grandmother had carried was not innocence but something heavier. A weight that had to be borne in silence, in exile, in the careful maintenance of a new identity. *Loyalty* to that new life meant excising the old one. But the old one had left traces—in the coded passages of a dead writer's manuscript, in a photograph hidden in a box on Vinohradská, in the way her grandmother had sometimes paused with a cup of tea in her hand, looking at the window as if she expected someone she would never see again.

In the stillness of the apartment, the knowledge settled into her like water finding its level. She could not return the photograph to the box and pretend she had not seen it. The story her family had told itself, the clean translation of that other woman's life, was a palimpsest with earlier writing bleeding through. And Miranda was the reader who had finally turned the page.

She stood, the chair scraping against the floor. The light through the stained glass door cast a pale amber pattern on the wall, and she made her way to the casement, resting her hand on the frame. The glass was cold, the street below quiet in the late afternoon. Across the rooftops, the spires of Prague rose against a hazy sky. Tomorrow she would go to the National Library, pull every thread she could find. The garden remembered what the gardener forgot. And she would not let herself forget again.

Chapter 6

The National Library

In the National Library, a love letter becomes a dossier, a dossier becomes a disappearance.

— Miranda Shaw, field notes

The reading room of the National Library of Prague occupied a vaulted space that might once have been a monastery refectory. High windows let in a grey November light that fell diagonally across long oak tables, illuminating dust motes suspended in the still air. Miranda stood at the threshold, her leather satchel pressed against her hip, and let the silence settle around her.

A radiator ticked somewhere to her left. The smell was old paper and floor wax and something else—a faint sweetness she could not place, like dried apples stored too long.

The librarian behind the circulation desk was a woman of perhaps sixty with silver hair pinned tight and wire-rimmed glasses. She watched Miranda approach with the patient expression of someone who had spent decades watching people approach.

"Dobrý den," Miranda said, the Czech syllables clumsy in her mouth.

"Dobrý den." The woman's English, when she switched to it, was precise and lightly accented. "You have a reader's card?"

Miranda placed her temporary pass on the counter. She had filled out the application that morning at the consulate, a process that required three forms, a letter of introduction from the University of Edinburgh, and a photograph that made her look like a woman being booked for a minor crime.

"I need the Montero correspondence files," she said. "Series M-12 through M-19."

The librarian's eyebrows rose a fraction of a millimeter. "Those are restricted."

"I have written authorization from the office that administers the Herrero literary estate." Miranda slid the letter across the counter—Herrero's signature crisp and blue at the bottom, the foundation's letterhead embossed in light grey. She had not told him exactly what she was looking for. The request had been phrased as "background research on the author's early influences," which was true in the same way a fingertip was part of a hand.

The librarian examined the letter, her eyes moving slowly across the text. She turned it over, checked the back, then looked up at Miranda with an expression that might have been curiosity.

"Wait here."

The waiting was the worst part. Miranda chose a table near the window—not the one directly under the light, but close enough that she could see without straining. The wood had been worn smooth by generations of elbows, and someone had carved a rough initial into the corner: a single letter M, surrounded by the ghost of a circle.

She pressed her fingertips into the table's grain, then into the seam of the notebook she had brought. The silence pressed against her ears. From somewhere deep in the building, she heard the muffled clank of a door closing.

Twenty minutes passed. Then thirty.

She had just begun to rehearse the Czech phrase for "I believe there has been a mistake" when the librarian reappeared, a grey cardboard box cradled in both arms. She set it on the counter with a soft thump.

"Series M-14 and M-15 only. The others are in off-site storage. You may examine them at your table. No pens. Pencils only." She produced a stub of graphite from her cardigan pocket. "Leave your bag here."

Miranda surrendered her satchel and carried the box to the table, her pulse beating against her collarbone. The cardboard was soft at the corners, the lid held closed by a frayed string.

She untied the string with fingers that felt too thick for the task.

Inside, the folders were arranged chronologically, the paper a spectrum from cream to pale brown. Personal correspondence, typed and handwritten, spanning several years in the late Sixties and early Seventies. She lifted the first folder, her thumb brushing the edge of a single letter whose return address she caught only as a blur of ink—a surname she almost thought she recognized, though the angle was wrong, and the light too dim.

The earliest letters were in Portuguese—letters to publishers, to fellow writers, to a woman in Rio named Clara. She scanned them quickly, noting names and dates, her translator's eye catching turns of phrase. Montero wrote with a florid confidence, his sentences spiraling into digressions that he then corralled with elegant semicolons.

She was three folders in when the register changed.

The letter was dated October 12, 1968. The handwriting was smaller, denser, as if the writer had been trying to fit more onto the page than the paper could hold. The salutation read, in Portuguese:

Minha querida Sofia—

Miranda's breath caught. She set down the folder and pressed her palm flat against the table, as if to steady herself against a physical shift.

The letter was three pages long. She unfolded them with the care of a bomb disposal technician.

I cannot stop thinking about the last time we spoke, in that ridiculous café near the university where the coffee tasted of ash and you laughed at my tie. You said I was too serious. You said I wrote like a man who had already lived his life and was only filling in the details for posterity. I have been trying to prove you wrong.

I am coming to Prague. I have booked a room at the Hotel Europa on Václavské náměstí. I will be there from the first of November; I've arranged to stay through at least the fourteenth — the meeting with the publisher is set for the fourteenth. Please. I need to see you. I need to talk to you about what we discussed. I need to understand why you are leaving.

I have written you into every page of the new book. You will see yourself in the woman who stands on the bridge and does not look back. You will see yourself in the way the light falls on the river in the chapter I cannot finish. I know this is not the language of a professional relationship. I do not care. I am tired of the subtext that neither of us will name.

I love you. I have loved you since the night you told me that the only honest thing a writer can do is to tell the truth badly rather than to lie beautifully. I have loved you since you corrected my Portuguese in front of three other people and did not apologize for it.

Come meet me. Or do not. But I had to write this down. I had to put it in the world, where it might exist even if you choose not to answer.

Rafael

The letter trembled in her hands. She read it again, and then a third time, her eyes moving over the same sentences as if repetition might force them to yield more meaning than they already had.

Montero and that journalist—the one everyone talked about in whispers. Not just collaborators. Not just a source and a borrower. They had been lovers. He had followed her to Prague. He had written her into his most famous work—the novel he was accused of stealing from her.

Miranda set the letter down on the table and sat back in the wooden chair. Her shoulders ached from hunching forward. The room felt colder than it had when she entered, or perhaps the cold had been there all along and she had simply let it pass unobserved.

The plagiarism scandal had always had a clean narrative: ambitious writer steals from brilliant journalist, journalist vanishes, writer profits. But a love affair changed the shape of the story. It introduced texture, complication, the possibility of consent or coercion or something in between. It turned a straight line into something more like a palimpsest—layers of meaning written over one another, the earlier text visible beneath the later.

She pulled out her phone and photographed each page of the letter, checking the image after each shot to be sure the words were legible. The light from the window was fading; she would need to find somewhere to print copies before the end of the day.

Her notebook lay open on the table, the page she had prepared for notes still blank. She picked up the pencil and wrote:

1968, October 12. Hotel Europa, Prague. Love declared. Connection to the novel confirmed. He followed her.

Then, below it:

What happened when he arrived? Did she meet him?

She closed the notebook and looked at the cardboard box. There were more folders inside—months of letters, years of correspondence. Somewhere in those pages might be the answer.

She glanced at the clock on the far wall. The reading room closed at six. She had two hours.

Miranda reached into the box and pulled out the next folder. The string was tight; she worked it loose with her fingernail, feeling the familiar friction of the task. Her cold tea sat untouched at her elbow. She did not notice.

* * *

The reading room had grown quieter as the afternoon deepened. Miranda sat at the long oak table, the letter spread before her in a nest of acid-free folders. Her pencil rested beside the page, its tip worn to a stub from the morning's note-taking. The cold tea at her elbow had developed a film across the surface; she had not touched it in over an hour.

She read Montero's letter again, letting her eyes drift past the familiar declarations—the longing, the promise to come to Prague, the careful phrasing of a man who knew his words might be read by others. But this time something caught her attention. A marginal annotation, written in a different hand, in pencil so faded it was almost illegible: *Tuesday. Malá Strana. The church with the green spire.*

Miranda sat up straighter. The annotation was not Montero's—the handwriting was smaller, more angular, the ink a different shade. Someone else had read this letter and added a note about the meeting place. She turned the page over, looking for more marks, but the verso was blank. She checked the other letters in the folder; two more carried similar marginalia, each specifying a time and a location in Prague.

She reached for her laptop and typed into the search bar: *dissident author razor's edge manuscript*. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She had typed the words without thinking, without fully knowing why. The term felt heavy, an accusation she was not ready to level at a writer whose name she had seen inked out on a title page.

The search results loaded slowly on the library's network. She clicked on the first link—a digitized index from the Brazilian National Archives. The page was plain text, no formatting, no images. A single line: *Name redacted (born 1925, Rio de Janeiro). Category: political dissident. Status: disappeared, no further records. File number: 47-B.*

Miranda stared at the screen. The word *dissident* sat there, unadorned, as if it were a job title or a marital status. She clicked the file number. A warning appeared: *This document is classified. Access requires authorization from the Brazilian Ministry of Justice.*

She leaned back. The chair creaked. The implications of the dossier sank into her like cold water seeping through fabric. The woman in the file had not merely been a journalist who vanished. She had been an official target of the dictatorship. The marginal notes in Montero's letters—the times and locations—were not romantic rendezvous. They were operational.

Miranda's mouth was dry. She took a sip of the cold tea without thinking, then grimaced at the taste. She set the cup down and walked her thumb down the folder's spine, the familiar pressure grounding her in the present moment.

She turned her attention back to the letter, to Montero's flowing script, the way he had signed his name with a flourish. *Rafael.* A man who had written love letters in 1968, who had promised to meet a woman in a city under occupation, who had later published a novel that contained her voice. The shape of the story was shifting again, the edges blurring. The

clean narrative—ambitious writer, stolen work, scandal—was giving way to something more tangled. A love affair that operated under surveillance. A journalist who carried secrets into silence. A novelist who buried those secrets in his fiction.

Miranda pulled her notebook toward her and wrote: *Dissident label confirmed. Marginalia in letters suggest operational meetings. Love story was also a political act.* She paused, then added: *What did Montero know about the classified documents? Did he write the novel to preserve her voice, or to hide his involvement?*

She looked up at the high arched window of the reading room. The light was fading, the sky turning the pale grey of late autumn. A tram bell sounded in the distance, muffled by the thick stone walls. She could hear the librarian's footsteps somewhere behind the stacks, the soft thud of books being reshelved.

Miranda closed the folder and placed it back in the cardboard box. She had two hours before the library closed. She needed to find more letters, more marginalia, any document that might confirm or refute what she was beginning to suspect. But she also needed to be careful. The dossier was classified; her search had already left a digital footprint. If the foundation—if Herrero—learned she was digging into the political side of Sofia's past, there would be consequences.

She took a breath and reached for the next folder. The string was tight; she worked it loose with her thumbnail, feeling the familiar friction. The letter inside was dated November 1968, written on the same hotel stationery. She unfolded it and read the first line: *My dearest Sofia, I have arrived safely. The city is beautiful, even under the clouds. I found the church you described—the green spire, the street of painters. I will wait for you there on Thursday, as we arranged.*

Miranda did not need to search for the marginal annotation. It was there, in the same angular hand: *Thursday, November 14. St. Nicholas Church. Confirmed.*

She set the letter down and looked out the window again. The street-lamps had flickered on, casting pools of orange light on the cobblestones. In the distance, through the bare branches of the trees lining the street, she could see the spire of a church—not green, but a pale grey against the darkening sky. A different church, a different meeting. But the shape was the same.

She pulled out her phone and photographed the letter, then the marginal annotation, then the folder's archival number. The images were clear; the light from the reading lamp was strong enough to capture the faded pencil marks.

Miranda closed the notebook and began packing her things. She would need to print copies of the letters and the marginal annotations. She would need to cross-reference the dates with what she already knew of Montero's movements in 1968. She would need to find a way into that classified dossier without leaving a trace.

The cold tea sat abandoned on the table. She did not remember to pour it out before she left.

* * *

The archive reading room settled around her like a held breath. Miranda set down her phone and the plastic case it rested on clicked against the wood. A dull sound. She did not move to pick it up.

The word sat in her mind: dissident. Not journalist. Not translator. Dissident. She had seen the label in the dossier's margin, typed in a clean, bureaucratic font, as if assigning a person a category were no different from marking a form for filing.

Her grandmother had left Prague in 1968. The Soviet tanks. The crackdown. Everyone knew that much. But the dossier placed a woman—a journalist with a common enough name—in a network that used a phrase Miranda had read in the manuscript's margins. *Nesu vodu.* I carry water.

The connection was a thread she could not yet see the full shape of.

She pulled the photograph up on her phone and angled the screen toward the folder. The marginal annotation had been written in pencil, faint but legible under the right light. The same hand had written the letter she had found in the Montero archive. The same angular strokes, the same pressure on the paper.

The dossier listed a series of meetings. Dates. Locations. A coffee house on Nerudova. A flat in Vinohrady. A bar near the train station. The names of the other people present were redacted, but the pattern was clear: the journalist he was tracking had met with known dissidents at least six times in the spring of 1968. Three of those meetings corresponded to dates in Montero's own correspondence, dates when he had been in Prague.

Miranda pressed her thumb against the glass of the phone screen, wiping away a smear. The gesture felt too deliberate, too slow. She set the phone down again.

Her family's story had always been one of survival. Her grandmother had escaped the war, then escaped the Soviet invasion, then built a life in Scotland with a daughter and a quiet job in a library. The story had edges that were clean, narrative arcs that closed. Miranda had never questioned it.

But if the dissident label was real, if the woman in the photograph had been part of the resistance network, then the story had a different shape. A shape that included the manuscript in her satchel, the coded passages, the linden tree, and the phrase she had found in the margins of a book her grandmother had kept all her life.

She wanted certainty. The dossier offered only suspicion.

The room's silence pressed against her ears. The only sound was the whisper of a page turning from the far end of the aisle, where another reader sat hunched over a microfilm reader.

She picked up her phone again. Not to photograph anything this time, but to scroll to the contacts list. Her mother's number was the second one on the screen, right below her own flat in Edinburgh.

The pads of her fingers hovered over the screen. One tap and the call would go through. One tap and she would hear Isabel's voice—the same voice that had warned her not to dig, not to disturb what was buried.

She could ask. She could say: *Did you know Grandmother was a dissident? Did you know she was connected to that whole circle of writers who vanished?*

But she could not ask without revealing what she had found. And she could not reveal what she had found without risking everything. The translation contract. The foundation's trust. The clean promise she had made to Herrero. And her mother's trust—the trust that had been built on a story that might be a lie.

Miranda set the phone face-down on the table.

The archive's clock ticked steadily above the reading desk. She had two hours before the room closed. Two hours to decide what to do with the information she had.

She lowered her gaze to the folder. The dossier was still open to the page listing the meetings. She read the dates again, noting the gaps. Three weeks in May with no entries. Then a flurry of activity in early June. Then nothing until August, when the last entry recorded a meeting at a private apartment in Olšany. The entry after that was a departure stamp: *Subject left Prague for unknown destination, 24 August 1968.*

The day before the invasion.

Miranda closed the folder and placed it inside her satchel. Her fingers found the edge of the manuscript's buckram binding, and she traced it once, the way she might trace the spine of a book when she needed to think.

If she pursued this, she would lose the translation. The foundation would pull the contract. Herrero had made that clear. And if she pursued it and the truth destroyed her family's story, she would lose her mother too.

But if she did nothing, the truth would stay buried. That name from the past would remain a footnote in a plagiarism case. Her grandmother's name would remain on a dossier marked *dissident* with no context, no explanation, no justice.

The librarian's voice came from across the room: "Ten minutes until closing."

Miranda looked up. The librarian was already standing, gathering her own things.

She lifted the folder and walked to the copy machine in the corner. The machine hummed as it warmed up, and she placed each page of the dossier on the glass, pressing the button with the same deliberate care she used when handling fragile documents. The copies came out slightly streaked, the toner thin in places, but legible.

She folded the copies into a separate envelope and placed it in the inner pocket of her satchel, next to the manuscript.

The walk back to the apartment on Vinohradská took her through streets that felt both familiar and alien. The tram bells rang in the distance. The cold air bit at her cheeks. She did not notice the ache in her neck until she was inside the building, climbing the stairs, the key already in her hand.

She sat on the edge of the bed and held the phone again. The contact list was still open. Her mother's name sat at the top.

She did not dial.

The weight of the knowledge felt physical—a stone lodged behind her sternum, pressing against her lungs. She could set the story aside. She could translate the manuscript as Herrero demanded, clean and compliant, and return to Edinburgh with nothing changed. The foundation would pay. Her mother would never know what she had found. The family story would remain intact.

She wanted to be the kind of person who could do that.

She picked up the manuscript and opened it to the place where the coded passages began. The first one was the diamond brooch. The second was the linden tree. The third was *Nesu vodu.*

Her grandmother's handwriting, rendered into Portuguese by Montero's hand, transcribed into English by her own.

She set the book down.

Tomorrow she would go back to the archive. She would request the classified files again, even if it drew attention. She would find the names of the other people in the network. She would trace the connections from Prague to Rio to Edinburgh, until the full shape of the story emerged.

The decision felt like stepping onto a bridge she could not see the far end of.

She did not call her mother.

The cold had seeped into the room. She pulled a blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders, and she sat there, the manuscript open on her lap, the copies of the dossier in an envelope on the nightstand, and the weight of the story pressing down on her like a stone she had chosen to carry.

Part 3

Chapter 7

The Santa Teresa Flat

Santa Teresa: the name of a saint and a hill, each with its own weight of hidden history.

— Jorge Alves, email to Miranda Shaw

The taxi pulled up at the base of a steep cobbled street, and Miranda stepped out into air that felt liquid—thick and warm, pressing against her skin. The hills rose around her, dotted with favelas that clung to the slopes like barnacles, and she heard the distant clatter of a construction site, the overlapping voices of a street market somewhere below. A mosquito buzzed near her ear and she swatted vaguely at it. Her blouse had already begun to stick to the small of her back.

She had expected Rio to be loud. She had not expected the humidity to arrive like a hand on her throat.

The café was on the corner, a narrow front with two plastic tables spilling onto the pavement. A man in a linen shirt sat at one of them, and when he saw her hesitate, he raised his hand and smiled—an uneven, bemused expression that seemed to say he had been expecting her for some time. His shirt was wrinkled, and his gray hair was combed back but not quite tamed. She recognized the face from the email exchange: the thin nose, the crow's feet, the good-humored skepticism in his eyes.

"Miranda?" His accent was soft, the Portuguese sprawling lazily over the syllables. "You found it. I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost in Lapa."

"Almost," she said, crossing to his table. "The taxi driver dropped me at the wrong street. I had to walk up."

"This is Santa Teresa. Every street is the wrong street the first time." He gestured to the chair opposite him. "Sit. You look like you need water, not coffee."

She sat. He signaled to the man behind the counter, and a glass of water appeared within moments, sweating condensation onto the plastic table. Miranda drank half of it before she placed it on the table. The cold was a relief.

"I appreciate you agreeing to meet me," she said. "Your email was very thorough."

"Thorough," Jorge repeated, and he let out a short laugh. "You see, I have a very particular relationship with thoroughness. The archive I manage—it's the opposite of thorough. It's a chaos of paper. But I remember things. That's my job, I think. To remember."

He said it without pretension, as if stating the weather.

Miranda wiped the back of her neck with her hand and unfolded the leather satchel she carried. The manuscript was not inside—she had left it locked in her hotel room—but she had printed a small packet of notes, the transcriptions she had made of the coded passages. She slid them across the table.

"I'm translating a manuscript," she said. "It contains phrases that don't belong. They form a cipher, I think, and they point to a woman—a ghost in the archives. She lived in this neighborhood. She disappeared in 1972,

during the military dictatorship—that period when the government ruled by force from 1964 to 1985. I found archival evidence in Prague connecting her to the book's credited author, and I came here to see her flat."

Jorge looked at the papers but did not touch them. He reached for his own coffee instead and took a slow sip.

"You think she was his lover," he said.

"I think she was more than that. The evidence suggests she may have been his collaborator. Or maybe the reverse."

He raised an eyebrow. "You have a theory about the plagiarism scandal."

"I have a hypothesis," she said. "I'm trying to decide if it deserves to be a theory."

Jorge nodded slowly. He set his cup down and leaned back, and his eyes drifted to the hills above them, the tangle of wires and bougainvillea that defined the neighborhood. A bird called somewhere close—a sharp, insistent sound—and then stopped.

"I remember when she lived here," he said. "I was a boy. Maybe ten years old. I used to see her at the market, buying fruit. She always bought too many limes. I asked her once why, and she said she liked the smell." He paused, his mouth curving into something between a smile and a wince. "I think she was just lonely. A person buys too many limes because they want someone to ask."

"Did anyone ask?"

"Not enough. And then she was gone."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. The gesture was decisive, as if he had decided to trust her. "Come. I will show you the flat. But you must understand—no one has lived there in fifty years. The foundation owns it, and they keep it locked. I have a key because I asked for one, once, and they forgot to take it back."

He led her through the narrow streets, past pastel-colored houses with cracked facades and iron gates that looked as though they had not been opened in decades. The streets leaned and twisted, following the slope of the hill, and at every turn the city appeared in fragments—a slice of the bay, a glimpse of the Christ statue, a wall of graffiti that covered an entire building. Miranda felt her calf muscles burning with the effort of the incline. A trickle of sweat ran down her temple and she dragged her sleeve across her face to catch it.

"The weight of a word can shift an entire paragraph," she said, half to herself.

Jorge looked over his shoulder. "Is that how you think of translation?"

"I think of it as a form of honesty," she said. "To what the text really says, not just what it appears to say."

He made a sound like acknowledgment and turned a corner.

The building was a faded colonial structure at the end of a cul-de-sac. The paint had peeled to the bare plaster, and a single bougainvillea vine had climbed from the street up to the second-floor balcony, where it spilled over the railing in a cascade of magenta. The wooden door was warped, and Jorge had to press his shoulder against it while he turned the key. It gave with a groan.

The air inside was cooler and still, heavy with the smell of dust and disuse. The living room opened before them, dim even in the afternoon light. The windows were covered with sheers that had yellowed to the color of old paper. A wooden bookshelf stood against one wall, its shelves bowed under the weight of volumes. And in the corner, on a small table, a framed photograph faced the door.

Miranda stepped past Jorge and crossed the room. Her feet raised small clouds of dust from the floorboards. She reached the bookshelf and traced the row of titles with her middle finger, feeling the cloth give under the

pressure. The titles were in Czech. She recognized some of the authors—Hrabal, Klima, Holub—and she felt a vibration of recognition, not of the content but of the shape. The same names had appeared on the shelves of the Vinohradská apartment in Prague.

She turned to the photograph. The frame was tarnished, and the image inside was faded, but she could make out a woman in her late twenties with dark hair and high cheekbones, standing in front of a building she recognized—the Old Town Square, maybe, or one of the streets near the river. The woman was smiling, but the smile did not reach her eyes. There was something guarded in her posture, as if she knew the photograph was a performance.

Miranda stared at the image. Her grandmother Hana had owned a similar photograph, taken in Prague in the 1960s. The same bone structure. The same guardedness.

She looked at Jorge, who stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, watching her.

"The subtext of a room is the palimpsest of its occupant's silence," she murmured.

Jorge inclined his head, not understanding her English, but understanding enough.

Miranda touched the edge of the frame. The glass was cool beneath her fingers. Her grandmother's handwriting surfaced—the letters she had read in the inheritance documents, the careful, arched script that always leaned to the left. And the woman in this picture surfaced too, the one who had bought too many limes because she wanted someone to ask.

The pieces would not yet fit—their edges brushed against each other, refusing to lock into place. But the shape of something was emerging in the dust of that room, and she could feel it settling around her like the silence of a truth that had finally been allowed to speak.

* * *

Jorge pushed the door open and stood aside. Miranda stepped into the flat and felt the air shift around her—thicker here, still, carrying the ghost of jasmine from a vine that climbed past the balcony rail. The ceiling fan turned slowly, its blades clicking at irregular intervals. Dust motes drifted through a shaft of afternoon light that fell across the floor tiles in a long, uneven rectangle.

The main room was small. A shelf of Czech volumes lined one wall, their spines faded to uniform browns and grays. An old typewriter sat on a wooden desk near the window, its carriage holding a sheet of paper so yellowed that the keys had left no visible mark. Miranda brushed the desk's edge with the flat of her hand, palm open. The wood was warm, smooth with age.

Her eyes found the photograph before she meant to look. A framed snapshot on the desk's corner. A young woman with dark hair falling past her shoulders, standing on a cobbled street. Her posture was straight, her expression unsmiling. Miranda knew the composition. She had seen it in her grandmother's album: the same angle, the same slight tilt, the same hand resting at the collar. The exact same pose.

She took the frame in her hands. The woman's jaw, the set of her mouth—it matched Hana's features the way a pressed leaf matched its tree.

Jorge watched from the doorway, his hands in his pockets. He cleared his throat. "You see, she kept to herself. Quiet. Always writing." He gestured at the typewriter. "In the evenings I could hear it from the street—the keys. She stayed up late. Never complained."

Miranda returned the frame to the desk. "Did she have visitors?"

"A few. Not many." Jorge stepped further into the room. His voice had the weight of a man who had not spoken of these things in years. "I was young. Maybe twenty. I lived downstairs with my mother. We all knew

who she was—the journalist. But she did not speak of her work. She would buy bread in the morning, sometimes fish. Too many limes once. My mother laughed about it."

Miranda thought of the manuscript's coded passages. The linden tree. The diamond brooch.

Jorge moved to the desk. His fingers found a seam along the underside of the drawer with practiced ease. A hidden compartment. He pulled out a bundle of letters tied with a faded blue ribbon. The ribbon had once been dark, but it had gone grey at the edges, the color bleeding out.

He held them for a moment, then placed them on the desk without untying them.

"The day she left," he said, "it was a Tuesday morning. I was coming back from the bakery and I saw her at the corner. She wore a green dress. She had a bag over her shoulder. She waved at me." He paused. "I remember the wave. A small thing. Like she was already far away."

He did not say more for a long moment. The fan clicked overhead.

"She did not come back that night," he said. "Or the next. After a week, the police came. Not the civil police. The military police."

Miranda felt the words settle into the room. "What did they ask?"

"They wanted to know about her contacts abroad. Letters. Phone calls. They asked if I had seen any foreigners visiting her flat." Jorge shook his head. "I said no. Because I had not seen anyone. But Dona Rosa, the neighbor on the second floor—she told me later that she saw a car with diplomatic plates outside the building. Twice in that week before the disappearance."

"Diplomatic plates," Miranda repeated.

"Czechoslovakian." Jorge met her eyes. "That was what Dona Rosa said. She knew the flags. She was an old woman who watched the street from her window."

Miranda's throat tightened. The dissident network. The words *Nesu vodu*—I carry water—ran through her like a current. A code for the underground movement in Prague in the early seventies. Sofia had been connected to that world, had fled it, had carried its weight to Rio.

Her gaze fell on the letters resting on the desk. "Did the military police take anything?"

"Her papers. Her notebooks. Everything." Jorge gestured at the empty shelves. "They left the books. They said the books were harmless."

Miranda's gaze moved to the row of Czech volumes. Harmless. Her hand slid out to the nearest one—a worn edition of poetry, its title gone. She opened it. The pages were foxed, the ink faded. Inside the back cover, someone had penciled a date: 1971. Below it, a single word: *Soumrak*. Twilight.

She touched the word with her fingertip. In her grandmother's handwriting, the letters always leaned to the left.

The sealed information pressed against her mind: that Sofia and Hana were one person. She knew it now with the same certainty she knew the weight of the manuscript in her bag. But Jorge could not know that she knew. No one had spoken it aloud.

She closed the book and turned to face him. "Jorge, the letters that the police took—did they ever find them? Are they in the Casa da Cultura archive?"

Jorge was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. "They have not been seen since 1972. But I think I know where they are."

The words *Nesu vodu* surfaced again in her thoughts, a stone dropped into still water. The linden tree. The diamond brooch. The palimpsest of silence that Sofia had left behind.

"What do you mean?"

Jorge went to the window. The light caught his face, deepening the lines around his eyes. "There was a man who visited her often in the months before she disappeared. A Czech man. He brought books. He spoke with her in her language. I remember his face because he had a scar on his chin—a white mark, like a thread of silk."

"Did you see him after she vanished?"

"No." Jorge turned from the window. "But I think he was the one who buried her history. Not destroyed it. Buried it."

Miranda thought of the clean translation. The demand that she excise the coded passages. The foundation's charter that made publication unstoppable once submitted. If Herrero knew the truth, if he had always known—

She looked at the typewriter, the ribbon of ink still waiting for a key to press.

"Where," she said, "would you bury someone's history?"

Jorge's hand went to his pocket. He withdrew a small key, tarnished and old. "In the place where they would never think to dig."

* * *

After Jorge's footsteps faded down the stairwell, the flat's quiet closed around her like a held breath released. Miranda stood still in the middle of the sitting room, her hands at her sides. The ceiling fan turned overhead, stirring the warm air, and dust motes drifted through the slanted afternoon light. A bird called from somewhere outside, then stopped.

She had been here before, in this room, with Jorge beside her. But now the space felt different—larger, emptier, as though the walls themselves were holding their breath.

She turned slowly, her gaze traveling across the faded paint, the tile floor, the balcony's iron railing visible through the half-open door. Most of Sofia's belongings were gone, taken by the police, lost to the years. What remained was negligible: a chair with a broken leg, a stack of newspapers yellowed to the color of old bone, a single plate on the kitchen counter.

Miranda's throat felt dry. She made her way to the bedroom.

The room was sparse. A mattress on the floor, stripped of sheets. A wooden armoire standing open and empty. The smell of dust and something faintly sweet—jasmine, perhaps, from a pot on the windowsill that had long since died and turned to brittle stalks.

She ran her palm along the wall beside the armoire. The paint was warm under her hand, slightly rough. The plaster had been patched in places, and in one spot, near the corner, the surface seemed to dip slightly beneath her fingers. She pressed harder. The wall gave a little.

Her heart beat faster. She traced the edges of the indentation, feeling for a seam she could not see. The paint had been smoothed over, but the shape was wrong—rectangular, about the size of a shoebox. She dug her nails into the crack and pulled. A section of plaster came away in her hand, crumbling at the edges.

Behind it, a cavity. And in the cavity, a small metal box.

Miranda pulled it out. The box was no larger than a dictionary, its surface tarnished, the latch rusted shut. She carried it to the window, where the light fell across it, and worked the latch with her fingernail until it gave with a soft click.

The box held two things.

The first was a photograph, black-and-white, the edges curled. A woman sat on a stone bench in a garden, her face turned slightly toward the camera. She was young—younger than Miranda had ever seen Sofia in the

photographs Jorge had shown her—and she was smiling, a wide, unguarded smile that reached her eyes. In her arms, she held an infant wrapped in a white cloth, its face pressed against her shoulder.

Miranda's breath caught. She knew that smile. She had seen it, in a different face, a thousand times. Her mother's face, in an old photo album from her childhood, laughing at something her father had said at the kitchen table.

She turned the photograph over. On the back, in a cursive hand, someone had written: *Isabel, três meses. O jardim da Santa Teresa. 1965.*

Isabel. Three months old. The garden in Santa Teresa.

Miranda's hand trembled. She rested the photograph on the windowsill and reached for the second object.

A letter, folded into thirds, the paper yellowed and brittle. The ink had faded to a soft brown, but the handwriting was still legible—rounded letters, carefully formed, as though the writer had taken her time with each word. At the top of the page, in Portuguese: *Querida filha.*

Dear daughter.

Miranda unfolded the letter with the care of a person handling something fragile enough to turn to dust. She read.

Querida filha,

If you are reading this, I am no longer with you. I am sorry. I am sorry for the silence I will leave behind, for the questions you will carry unanswered, for the weight of a mother whose story you will have to piece together from fragments.

I wanted to tell you everything, but some truths are too dangerous to write. This letter is all I can leave. Know that I loved you from the moment I held you in my arms. Know that every decision I made was for you.

When you are old enough to understand, ask your father for the diamond brooch. It holds a key—not to a door, but to the truth. He will know what I mean.

Do not look for me. I will not be found.

All my love, always, Sofia

Miranda read the letter twice. Her fingers had gone cold, though the room was warm. The words blurred and sharpened. *Querida filha.* Dear daughter.

Her eyes went to the photograph once more. The infant in Sofia's arms. Three months old. 1965.

Her mother had been born in 1965. In Glasgow, according to the story her grandmother had always told. In Glasgow, to a Scottish mother and a Czech father.

But the baby in this photograph was not in Glasgow. The baby in this photograph was in Rio de Janeiro, in the garden of a house in Santa Teresa, held by a Brazilian journalist who had vanished seven years later.

Querida filha.

Miranda's legs gave way. She sank onto the floor, her back against the wall, the letter still in her hands. The dust rose around her, and she coughed, but she could not look away from the words.

The old photograph on the side table could have been her grandmother—the same high cheekbones, the same stubborn set to the jaw—but the caption was smudged, the face half-turned from the flash, and the name beneath it was nothing she recognized.

The woman who had raised her mother, who had baked bread on Sunday mornings, who had read her Czech fairy tales in a voice that smelled of lavender and old paper—that woman was Sofia. The journalist

who had disappeared. The woman who had written that lost manuscript everyone whispered about, the one Montero was said to have stolen. The dissident who had fled Brazil under an alias that had swallowed her past.

Miranda's mind moved through the facts like a translator parsing a difficult sentence. Each clause made sense on its own. Together, they formed a meaning she did not want to accept.

Her grandmother had not been a Czech émigré who settled in Scotland. She had been a Brazilian journalist who fled for her life, who changed her name, who erased her past so completely that even her daughter did not know the truth.

But Isabel had wondered. Miranda's mother had seemed to carry something unspoken, a weight that surfaced in the way she'd pause before answering. Every time Miranda had asked about her grandmother's life before Glasgow, she had deflected. *She didn't talk about it. It was too painful.*

Miranda dragged her hand across her forehead. The heat of her skin surprised her. She was sweating, she realized, a fine film of moisture on her upper lip, and she ran her thumb along the edge of her jaw, gathering the damp and letting it fall.

She looked at the letter again. *Do not look for me. I will not be found.*

But she had been found. By Miranda. In a hidden compartment in a flat in Santa Teresa, thirty years after her death, forty years after her disappearance.

The clean translation. Herrero's demand. *You cannot publish this manuscript with the coded passages included.* He had known. Of course he had known. The name in the dedication was not just the subject of a plagiarism scandal—she was the woman whose story a certain institution had been suppressing for decades. And Miranda, by translating the ossuary garden novel, had been unwittingly complicit.

She set the letter down beside the photograph. Her hands were shaking, and she clasped them together in her lap to still them.

The silence of the flat was absolute now. The fan turned overhead. The dust settled. The afternoon light slanted across the floor, and Miranda sat on the dusty boards, the truth spread out before her like a sentence she could not unsay.

Her grandmother—Hana, Sofia—came back to her, reading those fairy tales. The linden tree. *Nesu vodu.* The diamond brooch. All of it had been there, hidden in plain sight, woven into the stories she had heard as a child.

And now she had to decide what to do with the knowledge.

She took the letter again, folding it carefully along the creases, and placed it in her pocket. The photograph followed. She closed the metal box and slid it back into the cavity in the wall, then pressed the plaster fragment into place. The seal was imperfect, but it would do.

She had what she had come for. More than she had come for.

From somewhere in the city, a church bell began to toll, the sound drifting up through the warm air, muffled by distance. Miranda did not count the rings. She sat on the floor a moment longer, then rose, brushed the dust from her clothes, and walked to the door.

* * *

The late afternoon light had shifted, deepening to amber as it fell through the louvered shutters. The ceiling fan turned overhead with a rhythmic click and the air carried the faint smell of jasmine from the courtyard below. Dust motes drifted through the bars of light, settling on the tile floor where she still sat.

Miranda looked down at the photograph in her hands. The woman in the image—younger, with a sharper jaw and darker hair, but unmistakably her grandmother—stared back with a gaze that seemed to hold everything

Miranda had never been told. The letter lay beside her on the floor, the paper soft at the creases. She had read it three times now, each pass leaving a different mark on her understanding.

She had come to Rio looking for a journalist who had vanished. She had found a ghost instead. Or rather, she had found that the woman she had been chasing had never been the person she claimed to be. The other name she carried was not a different person. It was the same woman, living a different life, speaking a different truth.

The woman in the photograph had been a dissident, a novelist whose work had been stolen by a famous ghost, a woman who had fled Brazil, crossed an ocean, changed her language, raised a daughter under a fabricated identity. And Isabel had known. Her mother had kept this secret for forty years, and had never told her.

Miranda pressed her palm flat against the tiles. The surface was warm from the afternoon sun. She could feel the slight grit of dust under her skin, and she focused on that small sensation—the roughness, the heat, the solidity of something she could touch.

She imagined her grandmother sitting in this same room. What had Hana—no, Sofia—what had she felt in the weeks before she disappeared? Had she known she was leaving? Had she chosen to erase herself, piece by piece, until nothing remained but a photograph in a metal box and a daughter who would grow up believing a different story?

The ceiling fan clicked again, a regular pulse in the quiet.

Miranda lowered the photograph to the floor and picked up her phone from where it lay beside the letter. The screen was dark. She pressed the home button, and it lit up with the time and the familiar background image—a photograph of Arthur's Seat from her Marchmont window, taken on a morning when the mist had lain low over the city.

She unlocked the phone and opened her contacts. The name she'd been given—a woman who might know something about her mother's past—stared back at her. Her thumb hovered over the call button.

What would she say? *I know. I know you lied. I know who Grandmother really was. Did you think I would never find out?*

Her thumb stayed where it was.

She imagined the conversation: her mother's voice, cautious and careful, the same voice that had said *Don't dig up the past* on the phone in Edinburgh. And if she called now, what would Isabel do? Apologize? Invent another story? Miranda would be left with nothing but guilt and anger, and the questions she still needed Jorge to answer would never be asked.

She put the phone down on the tiles beside her.

Tomorrow. She would meet Jorge at the Casa da Cultura in the morning. She would ask him what he knew about the farewell letter. She would ask whether Sofia had told anyone where she was going. She would ask if there were other photographs, other documents, other fragments of a life that had been deliberately buried.

And she would ask about the diplomatic plates. Dona Rosa had seen a car outside the building twice in the week before the disappearance. That detail clung to Miranda's mind like a burr—scratching, persistent, impossible to ignore. A car with diplomatic plates meant someone with official protection. Someone the Brazilian government would not touch. Someone who could make a woman vanish without leaving a trace in any public record.

She raised the photograph again and studied the woman's face. The woman in the image had known she was in danger. The farewell letter proved that. She had written to her daughter knowing she might never see her again. And yet she had not run. She had stayed in this flat, in this city, until someone had come for her.

Until a car with diplomatic plates had pulled up outside.

Miranda's stomach tightened. The questions she wanted to ask Jorge felt like stones she was stacking one on top of another, each heavier than the last. If she asked them, she would not be able to un-ask. The answers would belong to her, and carrying them would be her burden to bear.

But she had already opened the box. She had already found the photograph. The plaster seal was broken, and no amount of pressing it back into place would make it whole again.

The family story was a palimpsest—layer after layer of revision and erasure, each generation writing over the one before. Her mother had been part of it. Her grandmother had started it. And someone had used it to build a reputation on a foundation of borrowed words.

Adherence. The word surfaced in her mind, carrying its full weight. She had spent her career translating other people's work because she believed in the adherence to the text—in the obligation of the translator to carry meaning across languages without distorting it. She had never thought the same obligation applied to her own blood.

Now she knew better.

She folded the letter carefully along its original creases and placed it back in the metal box. The photograph followed, face-up, the woman's eyes still holding their direct and unflinching gaze. Miranda lifted the plaster fragment from the floor and fitted it into the cavity. It did not sit

flush—the edges had crumbled slightly when she had pried it loose—but it held well enough. She pressed it with the heel of her hand until the surface felt stable, then wiped the dust from her fingers on her trousers.

She stood and walked to the window, pulling one of the shutters open. The street below was coming alive with evening activity. A woman was hanging laundry from a second-floor balcony across the way. A group of children kicked a ball along the cobblestones, their shouts rising through the warm air. The sky had softened to pale gold at the horizon, and the first lights had begun to appear in the windows of the buildings on the hill.

Rio held secrets the way the sea held salt—dissolved, invisible, everywhere. Somewhere in this city, her grandmother had lived and worked and loved. Somewhere in this city, she had written the words that would become a masterpiece under another name. And somewhere, perhaps, the truth of what had happened to her was still waiting to be found.

Miranda rested her hand against the window frame. The wood was warm and smooth from years of use. What she would find tomorrow and whether Jorge had the answers she needed—or whether the answers existed at all—were questions she could not yet answer.

But she knew one thing with certainty.

She was not going to let the silence win.

Chapter 8

The Confrontation

A confrontation is a translation error that has finally been caught.

— From a lecture on ethics in translation, Dr. Tomás Herrero

Miranda pushed open the door to Herrero's office without knocking. The fluorescent light above his desk flickered once before steadying. He looked up from a sheaf of papers, his hands pausing mid-notation.

"Miss Shaw. This is unexpected."

She crossed the room and set her satchel on the visitor's chair. The leather groaned. "I need you to tell me why you chose me for this translation."

Herrero set down his pen. He placed its cap precisely beside it. "Your credentials spoke for themselves. You are a specialist in Lusophone literature with Central European language competency. The fit was logical."

"That's not what I'm asking." Miranda's voice came out higher than she intended. She steadied it. "You knew about the coded passages. You knew what they meant. And you still gave me the manuscript."

"I knew the manuscript contained anomalies. That is not the same as knowing their meaning." He steepled his fingers, then stopped himself, pressing his palms flat against the desk. "I was asked to find a translator who could handle the material with discretion. Your reputation suggested you would not sensationalise the work."

"My reputation." She laughed, but it came out dry. "You mean my grandmother's reputation. You knew who she was, all along."

The office smelled of fresh paint and leather, a scent she had associated with academic seriousness for years. Now it felt like a sealant, covering something beneath. A half-empty coffee cup sat on the corner of Herrero's desk, the surface filmed over with cold milk.

"I must insist you sit down," he said.

"I'd rather stand."

"Suit yourself." He leaned back, but his shoulders did not relax. "Yes. I knew that Hana Navrátilová had used another name in the past. I knew it when I recommended you for the fellowship. That knowledge did not affect my professional judgment of your capabilities."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was irrelevant to the translation." He spoke slowly, as if explaining basic arithmetic. "The text is the text. Its provenance—" He stopped, corrected himself. "Its origin is secondary to its preservation. You were hired to render Montero's final manuscript into English, not to excavate his personal history."

Miranda pulled the photograph from her satchel. The edges were soft from handling. She placed it on the desk between them. "I found this in Prague. At the National Library."

Herrero did not look at it. His gaze stayed fixed on a point just past her shoulder.

"It's Sofia, standing in front of the Vinohradská apartment with a man beside her. Dated 1968." She tapped the corner of the photograph. "The same year Montero wrote his love letter to her. The same year he was supposedly writing his breakthrough novel."

"I am familiar with the chronology."

"Then you're also familiar with this." She pulled out a second sheet—a photocopy of the letter she had found, the one with Montero's handwriting declaring his love, his plans to meet her in Prague. "He didn't plagiarise her work, did he? They collaborated. Or she wrote it and he—"

"That is speculation." Herrero's voice was clipped now, each word separate. "You have no evidence of collaboration."

"I have a manuscript full of her codes. I have a letter arranging a meeting. I have the fact that she vanished the year after publication and he never acknowledged her." Miranda's finger traced the edge of the photograph. "What I don't have is an explanation for why you assigned me to translate his final work knowing that my grandmother was the woman he erased."

The fluorescent light flickered again. Herrero's jaw tightened.

"Because I believed," he said, each word measured, "that a direct descendant translating the text might uncover what needed to be uncovered. I believed the truth would surface on its own, through the work, without requiring the foundation to take a public position."

"And if it did surface?"

"Then the evidence would speak for itself. Not through me. Through the translation."

Miranda sat down. The chair was cold against her thighs. "You wanted me to find it. You wanted me to be the one to confirm that O Fio da Navalha had another hand behind it."

Herrero did not deny it.

He reached for the coffee, lifted it, set it down without drinking. "I have spent twenty years curating Montero's legacy. I have defended his work against accusations of plagiarism, against the erosion of his reputation, against the trivialisation of his literary achievements." He paused. "I have also spent twenty years knowing that some of those accusations were not without merit."

"Then why not say so? Why not publish the truth?"

"Because the truth is not a single document." He leaned forward, his voice dropping. "The truth is a network of choices. Someone chose to disappear. Montero chose to take sole credit. The foundation chose to protect its intellectual property. I chose to preserve the institution that funds translation projects, that supports young scholars, that keeps Lusophone literature alive in the academy. None of those choices are clean. But they are the conditions under which any of this work is possible."

Miranda's throat tightened. Her hand went to the manuscript in her satchel, her fingers finding the binding's edge, tracing its length. "So what do you want me to do? Ignore the codes? Produce a clean translation that pretends Montero wrote his own words?"

"I want you to produce a faithful translation of the manuscript as it stands. The codes are part of the manuscript. You may translate them. You may include them. But you must not annotate them. You must not contextualise them. The text must remain the text."

"That's not translation. That's suppression."

"No." Herrero's voice hardened. "That is preservation. The manuscript exists. The codes exist. They will be read. But the moment you attach footnotes explaining their origin, you move from translator to advocate. You cease to present the work. You present an argument."

"And what's wrong with that? If the argument is true—"

"If the argument is true, it does not need my permission, nor yours, nor the foundation's. It will surface. But it must surface through the work itself, not through the apparatus of scholarship. Otherwise you will be dismissed as a partisan, and the text will be buried under your commentary."

Miranda's finger traced the spine of the manuscript. Cold tea sat untouched in the cup she had brought from her hotel. She had forgotten it was in her hand. The ceramic was warm against her palm, the liquid long gone tepid.

"So you admit you knew."

Herrero's shoulders sagged, the first break in his composure. "Yes. I knew the day I assigned you the commission."

"And you let me go to Prague. You let me find the letter. You let me piece it together."

"I let you do what you were always going to do." He met her eyes. "Your grandmother wrote those words, Miss Shaw. Perhaps it is time someone in your family read them aloud."

* * *

She held the manuscript in her satchel, the weight of it familiar now, and waited.

“The text's integrity requires that we do not elevate the translator's discoveries above the author's work,” Herrero said. He had not moved since she sat down. His hands lay flat on the polished desk.

“But the discoveries are part of the text,” she said. “The coded passages are not marginalia. They are woven into the fabric of the manuscript. To excise their meaning from the translation is to excise the author's intent.”

“Intent is not the same as provenance.” He spoke slowly, as if to a student who had missed a basic principle. “You have uncovered a history, but that history is not the manuscript.”

Her hand went to the tumbler resting on the desk. It was empty. A faint residue ringed the bottom. She returned it to the blotter.

“The codes are deliberate. They are not mistakes. They are a message.”

“A message that the text itself does not comment on. If you gloss them, you impose an interpretation. The reader must encounter the codes as they are—enigmatic.”

Her mind turned to her grandmother. Hana, who was also Sofia. The woman who had buried meaning in plain sight because she had learned to do so under the eyes of censors. The linden tree code. Nesu vodu. It was not a literary gesture. It was a lifeline.

She noticed a paperclip on the edge of his desk, bent out of shape. Someone had tried to straighten it and given up.

She had always believed that translation was a form of loyalty—not to the letter but to the life behind it. But Herrero's kind of loyalty was different: preservation of the surface, regardless of what rotted underneath.

“It's not about textual purity,” she said. “It's about whether you believe the text deserves to be understood, or just to be reproduced.”

“Understanding is a subjective act. Reproduction is objective. The foundation's mission is to present Montero's work as it was written, not as we wish it had been read.”

“But Sofia Alencar wrote part of it. She—or someone—embedded these codes. If we ignore them, we are ignoring a co-author.”

He paused. The clock on the wall ticked.

“You have no proof of that.”

“I have her name in the letter. I have the codes. I have the photograph.”

“That is proof of a relationship, not of authorship.” His voice was controlled, but his fingers had gone still.

“Then what about the codes themselves? They form a narrative—a second layer. A palimpsest.”

His jaw tightened. “A palimpsest is still a single document. The earlier layers are erased. The final text is what we have.”

“But the earlier layers are not erased. They are visible to anyone who looks.”

“To anyone who looks with the intent to find something.”

She leaned forward. “Is that what you're afraid of? That someone will look and find something that damages the foundation's legacy?”

He did not answer. He looked at the window, where the city's grey beyond filled the pane.

He steepled his fingers, the gesture precise and deliberate. His gaze remained fixed on the rooftops. She waited. A tram clattered past somewhere below.

He lowered his hands. “You misunderstand my position. It is not fear. It is responsibility.”

He faced her fully. “The truth you speak of is not a simple truth. It would dismantle the reputation of a man who can no longer defend himself. It would cast doubt on every scholar who has studied his work. It would undermine the foundation that supports scholars like yourself.”

“So you admit you knew the truth would do that.”

He nodded once. “I weighed the costs. The foundation's legacy—its ability to continue funding translations, archiving, research—depends on an unbroken narrative. The moment we introduce scandal, funding dries up. The work stops. The manuscripts sit in boxes, unread.”

“But the scandal is already there. It is in the codes. It is in the history. You are just delaying the exposure.”

“I am ensuring that when it comes, it comes through the proper channels. Through scholarship, not through the apparatus of a translation that the public will treat as sensationalism.”

“You're protecting the foundation, not the truth.”

“The foundation is the vehicle for the truth. Without it, there is no conservation, no publication, no access. The truth remains buried in archives no one visits.” He spoke with conviction, but his hands were clasped tightly.

She looked at him—the careful suit, the precise gestures, the walls lined with bound volumes. He had spent his life maintaining this edifice. He could not see that the foundation was built on sand.

But she could not accept his reasoning. If loyalty meant erasing the person who had written the codes, then loyalty was an accomplice to theft.

Her grandmother's farewell letter returned to her. The women who disappeared during the dictatorship. The language she had inherited—the Czech words that Hana had carried with her to Scotland.

She could not stay silent.

“I will not produce a clean translation.”

His expression did not change. “Then you will not produce a translation at all.”

She stood, gathering her satchel. The manuscript inside was heavy, solid with history. Herrero remained seated.

“You have a choice, Miss Shaw. Continue as translator, with my support, or become a partisan and face the consequences alone.”

She paused at the door. A coffee-stain ring marked his desk where a cup had sat too long.

“I understand your position,” she said. “But I think you are wrong.”

She opened the door. The corridor beyond was empty, the fluorescent lights humming.

As she walked away, her steps firm on the carpet, she knew she had not changed his mind. But she had clarified her own.

She would translate the codes. She would include the footnotes. She would let the manuscript speak—not just Montero's voice, but the voice beneath his, the voice of the woman who had carried water.

If the foundation withdrew its support, she would find another way. The truth did not need their permission to be read.

She exited the building into the Edinburgh air, the manuscript safe in her bag.

* * *

The photograph of Sofia Alencar lay between them on Herrero's desk, face-up. The woman in the image stared past the camera with an expression Miranda had come to recognize: the guarded stillness of someone who had learned to keep her own counsel. Herrero's fingers were steepled, the tips pressing white. A bead of sweat traced the inside of his collar.

"Let us be clear, Miss Shaw." He did not look at the photograph. "The integrity of this project depends on your understanding of what we are preserving. Certain families curate a legacy. We are not in the business of exposing wounds that have already healed."

Miranda's mouth was dry. She had not touched the water glass set at the desk's edge. A faint smell of stale coffee hung in the air, layered over fresh paint. She set her palms flat on her thighs beneath the table.

"I understand what you're asking," she said. "But I think you're mistaken about what *exactness* means. An exact translation does not excise what is inconvenient. It reproduces the text as it was written—including the subtext the author embedded."

Herrero's jaw tightened. His voice remained controlled, but a new edge crept in. "The coded passages are not part of the novel. They are marginalia. Private notations. It would be a violation of Montero's authorial intention to publish them as if they were his intended prose."

"They are not marginalia. They are a palimpsest—another layer of meaning written beneath the surface. Montero chose to weave those codes into the narrative. He could have omitted them. He did not."

"Then he made an error in judgment, one we are not obliged to replicate." Herrero leaned forward, and the steepled hands dropped to the desk. "The foundation has a preservation mandate. We protect Montero's reputation. We do not—"

"You protect the foundation's reputation." Miranda heard the words leave her mouth before she had decided to say them. Her pulse was loud in her ears. She pressed her fingertips against the grain of the desk's wood, feeling a small scratch beneath her thumb.

Herrero went still. The silence stretched long enough that a car passed outside, its engine low and fading. When he spoke again, his voice was almost soft. "I have spent my career curating this estate. I know the provenance of every letter, every draft, every note that passed through Montero's hands. I am telling you that this manuscript was never meant to expose what you think it does."

"Then what was it meant to do?"

He did not answer. His eyes drifted to the photograph, then away.

Miranda felt a strange clarity settle over her. This was not a negotiation. He was not trying to convince her; he was trying to delay her. Every word he spoke was a wall built to keep the truth in the ground where he had buried it. Her grandmother's farewell letter, the one Isabel had kept folded in a drawer, rose before her. The linden tree rose. *Nesu vodu* rose. The women who had carried water and never been credited rose.

"I cannot be part of this project if it means burying what the manuscript contains," she said. Her voice came out steadier than she expected. "I don't believe you are a bad man, Dr. Herrero. But I believe you are making a choice that prioritizes preservation over truth. I cannot make that choice with you."

Herrero's nostrils flared. He reached for the photograph and turned it face-down on the desk. "Then you are choosing to end our professional relationship. I will have to inform the foundation's board that the translation will not proceed under these terms. There will be consequences for your career."

"I know." Miranda stood. The chair scraped against the floor. She gathered her satchel from beside her chair, looping the strap over her shoulder. The manuscript inside was heavy. She let her gaze fall away from the photograph, landing on the grain of the desk.

At the door, she paused. The fluorescent light in the corridor hummed, a persistent drone that had escaped her perception when she arrived.

"I hope you will reconsider," she said. "Not for me. For the manuscript. For the woman in that photograph."

Herrero did not answer. He was staring at the back of the photograph, at the blank white surface where no name was written.

Miranda opened the door and walked out. The corridor was empty, the light flat and artificial. She did not look back. The door clicked shut behind her, and the sound was final, like a page turned and not returned to.

Chapter 9

The Inherited Secret

The inheritance was not money, but a story that could no longer be refused.

— Miranda Shaw, journal entry

Miranda turned the key and stepped into the Marchmont flat. The kettle sat cold on the counter, its whistle silent. She had not been gone long—an hour, perhaps less—but the air in the rooms had thickened, as if the manuscript had been breathing without her.

She dropped her satchel by the door and stood still. A slice of afternoon light fell on the brass heron perched on the mantel. It took her a moment to observe how its beak pointed toward the ceiling, forever frozen mid-strike.

The manuscript lay open on the desk where she had left it, pages weighed down by a chipped mug. She took the few steps to the desk and sat, her coat still on. The code passages stared back at her—the linden tree, the diamond brooch, *Nesu vodu*—and she heard Herrero's voice in the hollow of her skull. *The foundation expects a clean translation. No mention of the scandal. That was the agreement.*

She pulled the mug toward her. The tea inside had gone cold hours ago, a film forming on the surface. She drank it anyway. The liquid sat heavy in her stomach.

The ethical dilemma pressed against her temples. To excise the codes was to erase the subtext—the palimpsest of her grandmother's life buried beneath Montero's prose. She pressed her fingernail into the hinge of a nearby book, a nervous habit she could not break. The text was the only honest thing she had left. But whose honesty? The code belonged to Sofia, to Hana, to a woman who had vanished into the heat of Rio and never returned.

She stood and walked the narrow hallway, her footsteps muted on the worn runner. The walls were cluttered with photo frames—her mother in the garden, a sepia shot of her grandmother Hana holding a baby Isabel. Miranda had passed them a thousand times without stopping. Now she paused. The photograph showed Hana in a pale dress, unsmiling, her hand resting on Isabel's back as if steadying herself or holding on.

She returned to the kitchen and filled the kettle with fresh water, though she did not switch it on. The brass heron gleamed from the mantel. She had bought it at a charity shop in Bruntsfield for two pounds, because it reminded her of her grandmother's garden in Glasgow, where a wooden heron had stood among the roses. She had not thought of that heron in years. The one in the garden had been painted white and was missing one leg, but Hana had refused to throw it away. *Some things are worth keeping,* she had said, *even broken.*

The telephone rang.

Miranda crossed to the hall table and lifted the receiver. A man's voice, professional and neutral, introduced himself as a solicitor from a firm in Glasgow. She listened without speaking, her free hand pressed flat against the wall.

"I'm calling to inform you that your grandmother, Hana Navrátilová, passed away three weeks ago," the solicitor said. "The estate has been settled. You are named as the sole beneficiary of a property in Glasgow, along with her personal effects and a small sum held in trust."

Miranda said nothing. She had known her grandmother was dead, of course. Hana had died years ago, when Miranda was still a student. She had attended the funeral in Glasgow, had watched her mother Isabel stand dry-eyed by the grave. But she had not known about the estate. She had not known about the property.

"Miss Shaw?" the solicitor said.

"Yes. I'm here."

"The property is a house in the West End. It appears your grandmother owned it outright. The contents are to be catalogued, but the executor has asked that you collect any personal items at your earliest convenience."

The photograph on the wall came back to her. The pale dress. The hand on Isabel's back.

"What kind of personal items?" she asked.

"Letters, primarily. And a number of books. There is also a strongbox that we have been unable to open. It may contain documents you will wish to review."

The word *inherit* surfaced in her mind like a float in murky water. The estate was the text of inheritance, the material evidence of a life she had never fully known. Hana Navrátilová had arrived in Scotland as a Czech émigré in 1968, settled, and raised a daughter alone. Or so Miranda had always believed. But the manuscript, the coded passages, the elusive collaborator whose name had been struck from the byline—all of it pointed to a different story, a palimpsest of identity written over and over.

She sat down on the edge of the hall bench, the receiver still pressed to her ear. The solicitor's voice continued, but she stopped listening. The inheritance tied her grandmother to the manuscript's secrets in a way she could not yet articulate. Hana had left a strongbox. Hana had left letters. Hana had been the journalist who vanished in 1972, the woman whose words had been buried in Montero's prose.

The weight of a word can shift an entire paragraph.

She heard her own voice in memory, a professional observation made in a different life, before the manuscript had arrived in its white buckram binding. Now the weight of a single phrase—*Nesu vodu*—had shifted everything. The inheritance was not merely a house and a strongbox. It was the physical location of a life that had been split in two: Hana in Glasgow, Sofia in Rio, the same woman living in separate rooms of history.

"Miss Shaw? Are you still there?"

"Yes. I'll come to Glasgow. I'll collect the items."

The solicitor gave her an address and a date. She noted them down on a scrap of paper, her handwriting unsteady. He wished her a good day and rang off.

She set the receiver down and stared at the wall. The crack in the wallpaper ran from the corner of the skirting board to the place where the heron's beak pointed, a line of wear that had been there when she moved in. She had never noticed it before. Now it seemed like a fissure in the surface of things, a break through which something older and heavier was leaking.

Herrero's voice faded. The ethical dilemma did not dissolve, but it braided with something else—a pull toward the past that she had resisted for weeks. The inheritance was not a distraction from the translation. It was

the missing page. She had been trying to read the manuscript without reading her grandmother's life, but the two were bound in the same binding.

She retrieved the cold mug and carried it to the sink. The tea had separated, the leaves settled at the bottom. She poured it out and watched the liquid spiral down the drain. Then she returned to the desk and sat down before the open manuscript.

The linden tree passage lay before her, the code faint in the margins—a series of numbers and letters she had already deciphered. *Nesu vodu.* I carry water. But she had not understood what it meant. She had treated the code as a puzzle, a pattern to be solved, when it was something else entirely.

The inheritance was the subtext she had been missing. The house in Glasgow, the strongbox, the letters—they were not the property of a dead woman. They were the apparatus of a life that had been deliberately hidden. And she had been named the beneficiary, the inheritor of a truth her mother had kept from her.

She touched the page lightly, her fingers lingering on the margin. The paper was soft from age, the ink a faded brown. Her grandmother's hand came into focus—the same hand that had written these words or the words beneath them, the hand that had held Isabel in the photograph and the wooden heron in the garden.

Some things are worth keeping, even broken.

She would go to Glasgow. She would open the strongbox. She would read the letters. And then she would decide what *devotion* meant—to the text, to the dead, and to herself.

* * *

The solicitor's letter lay beside the laptop, the paper already warm from her palm. Miranda pulled the desk lamp closer and typed Hana Navrátilová's name into the search bar, her fingers hovering a moment before pressing enter.

The results came slowly—a genealogy site, a mention in a local Glasgow newspaper archive from 1995, and then a digitised record from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She clicked the link and watched it load, the page building itself line by line.

Hana Navrátilová, born 15 March 1925, Prague. Deported to Terezín, 1942.

Miranda read the words twice, then a third time. The cursor blinked at the end of the sentence, waiting for her to do something. She did not move.

Terezín. She knew the name from books, from the testimonies of survivors, from the careful architecture of memory that had been built around the camp. But she had never connected it to her grandmother. Her grandmother who had taught her to make dumplings, who had hummed Czech lullabies under her breath while washing dishes, who had never spoken of the war.

Miranda sat back in the chair, the weight settling on her chest. Not heavy like a stone but like water, something that found its way into every gap. Guilt and pride and confusion all at once, indistinguishable from each other. She had known Hana had left Prague in 1968, but 1968 was the Soviet invasion, not the war. There were decades unaccounted for, years her grandmother had folded into silence the way she folded sheets—neatly, without explanation.

She took a sip from the mug beside her. The tea was cold. She drank it anyway.

The browser tab still glowed, the record incomplete. She scrolled down, past the deportation date, past the notation of Terezín as her grandmother's destination. *Survived. Transport to Auschwitz, 1944. Survived.* The word appeared twice on the page, under different headings. Miranda dragged the side of her hand down the book's spine—a dictionary of Czech idioms she had bought in Prague—and let herself feel the weight of what survived meant.

Terezín had held her grandmother. Then Auschwitz. Then survival.

She opened a new tab and searched for Hana Navrátilová's estate. The solicitor's firm had a website, plain and functional, with a page about probate services. No details. But another tab from her earlier search still sat open, and she clicked back to it now.

Estate of Hana Navrátilová: personal writings and effects. Unpublished memoirs and diaries.

The words felt too large for the screen. Miranda read them again, then a third time, as if repetition would make them smaller.

Unpublished memoirs and diaries.

A version of her life had been committed to paper by her grandmother, and no one had read it. Miranda's mother had not read it. The library in Glasgow that had received the bequest of books had not catalogued the papers. They had sat in a strongbox, untouched, waiting for someone to open them.

And now she was that someone.

Her attention settled on the Montero Foundation folder on the corner of the desk, the edges worn from being opened and closed. Inside was a timeline, a list of deadlines, a contract she had signed in Herrero's office. The translation was due in eight weeks. She had already spent a week in Prague, another in Rio, and the manuscript was only a third done.

The knot in her stomach pulled tighter.

She could not do both. She could not translate Montero's coded passages while reading her grandmother's account of surviving a camp. She could not honour one inheritance while fulfilling another. The two things required different kinds of attention, different kinds of care, and she was one person with one set of hours in a day.

Miranda opened her calendar. The next two weeks were blocked out for translation work, with a note in her own handwriting—*clean draft by the 15th*—written in the margin. But the 15th had been a deadline she had set herself, not one the foundation had imposed. The contract said *completion by the end of the quarter*, which gave her until late September.

She had time. Barely.

But time was not the problem. The problem was what she would do with it. Translate a dead man's secrets, footnotes and all, and submit them to a foundation that wanted her to keep them hidden. Or open her grandmother's diaries and discover a story that might change everything she thought she knew about her family.

Some things are worth keeping, even broken.

She pressed the screen down and sat in the quiet of the flat. The light from the window fell across the manuscript pages spread on the table, and across the brass heron that rested on the mantel. The linden tree passage lay open, the decoded numbers still faint in the margins. She had written *Nesu vodu* beside them in blue ink, the letters small and neat.

I carry water.

But she had not carried it. She had deciphered the code and left it sitting, like the cold tea in the mug, like the unread diaries in a Glasgow strongbox. She had treated the past as a puzzle instead of a burden, something to solve rather than something to hold.

Miranda picked up the letter from the solicitor again. The address was a street in Glasgow she knew from visits to her mother's house. The house where Isabel had grown up, where Hana had lived after leaving Prague, where the portrait of a young woman with dark hair and serious eyes had hung in the hallway. Her grandmother's wedding photograph. The same woman who had written a farewell letter to her daughter before disappearing, who had been a journalist and a dissident, who had given birth to a child she could not keep.

She opened the laptop again. The cursor was still blinking in the search bar. She typed *Hana Navrátilová Terezín memoirs* and pressed enter.

A new result appeared—a short article from a university archive, published in 2008. *Testimony of Hana Navrátilová: A Witness to Survival.* The article mentioned that the full testimony had never been made public, but that excerpts suggested a connection to the Brazilian exile community in Prague during the early 1970s.

Brazilian exile community.

Miranda's hand stopped moving. She had learned about this in Rio, from Dona Rosa and her weathered face, from the books on the shelf in Santa Teresa. The flat that had belonged to Sofia Alencar, the woman who had vanished in 1972, the woman who was her grandmother.

Hana Navrátilová and the Brazilian exile community.

She stood up, the chair scraping against the floor. The heron on the mantel did not move. The manuscripts on the table stayed open, waiting.

There was no way to separate the two inheritances. Hana Navrátilová was Sofia Alencar was the woman who had written the coded passages in Montero's manuscript, the woman who had hidden her name and her history, the woman who had survived a camp and raised a daughter and died in Glasgow with a strongbox of secrets.

Miranda sat down again. She picked up her pen and wrote on a clean page of her notebook: *Estate includes personal writings. Connection to Sofia's exile network remains unconfirmed.*

But she knew it would not remain unconfirmed for long.

She would go to Glasgow. She would open the strongbox. She would read the diaries. And then she would decide what *fealty* meant—to the text, to the dead, and to herself.

* * *

The solicitor's letter lay open on the table, the paper catching the last of the afternoon light. Miranda had read it three times since the phone call, each time hoping the words would rearrange themselves into something easier to carry. They had not.

She pushed back from the desk and stood. The flat had grown dim while she sat motionless, the shadows stretching from the corners like slow water. Through the window, Edinburgh's roofs caught the orange of a sun already gone behind the buildings. A tram rattled past on the street below, its noise filling the room for a moment and then receding.

She had not eaten since breakfast. Her stomach made a sound she ignored.

The letter sat on the table beside the manuscript, two documents that now belonged to the same question. Her grandmother's estate. A house in Glasgow. Personal writings. A strongbox whose contents no one had described but which Miranda already knew would contain words that someone had wanted to stay buried.

She lifted the letter and held it to the light, as if the paper might reveal something the typed lines had omitted. There was nothing. Just the solicitor's careful legal language, the dates and clauses, the request for a signature.

A cramp had settled between her shoulder blades from the hours of sitting. She stretched, felt the vertebrae shift, and walked to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. The tap ran cold—tepid, really, the pipes in this building never quite delivered what they promised. She drank standing at the sink, watching a spider plant whose leaves had begun to brown at the tips.

You could say no, she thought. *You could let the estate go to the state, let the strongbox stay locked, let the past keep its shape.* The thought was tempting in the way that staying very still is tempting when you are already cold.

But her grandmother had not stayed still. Hana Navrátilová had moved from Prague to Glasgow, had carried her history across borders and through checkpoints, had raised a daughter and kept a silence that was itself a kind of testimony. The coded passages in Montero's manuscript were part of that testimony. The inheritance was part of it. And somewhere in Glasgow, in a house Miranda's mother had never mentioned, there was a strongbox full of paper.

She set the glass down and returned to the desk. The manuscript lay open to the passage she had been working on before the phone call—a section about a woman carrying water from a well, the Czech phrase *Nesu vodu* repeating in the margins like a heartbeat. She had been trying to decide how to render it in English. *I carry water. I bring water. I am carrying water.* Each translation lost something the original had held.

Miranda sat down and pulled her notebook toward her. She wrote: *Estate - accept. Then: Glasgow, strongbox, diaries.*

"I will explain it to her," she said aloud, though no one was there to hear. She was rehearsing, the way she rehearsed difficult conversations before they happened. Her mother would call when she found out. Her mother would ask why.

Why dig up what someone buried?

She closed her eyes and imagined Isabel's voice—careful, evasive, the way it had been when Miranda asked about the diamond brooch. *Some roots are better left in the ground.*

"But they're not your roots," Miranda said to the empty room. "They're hers. And she put them in the manuscript. She wanted someone to find them."

The imagined conversation continued in her head, both sides now. She heard her mother's worry, the protective instinct that had shaped Isabel's entire life. She heard her own persistence, the refusal to treat words as anything less than the truth they carried.

What will you do with them? Isabel would ask.

I'll translate them. I'll put them in the book. I'll let people read what she wrote.

And what if it hurts people?

She meant it to hurt, Miranda wanted to answer. *She meant it to be felt.*

The rehearsal faded. She opened her eyes and looked at the manuscript, at the careful script in two languages that had been waiting for decades to be read. Each of those passages came from her grandmother's pen. Her grandmother had hidden them in a dead man's novel, trusting that someone would find them and understand.

The parallel rose in her mind like a clear note—the kind of clarity that came not from struggle but from recognition, from seeing something that had been there all along. The manuscript was a palimpsest, with Hana's truth written beneath Montero's fiction. And Miranda's job as a translator was to let both layers speak. She could not excise the coded passages to satisfy Herrero's demand for a clean translation. She could not pretend the inheritance did not exist because it was inconvenient or painful.

Constancy meant carrying the whole weight.

She reached for her laptop and opened it. The screen glowed in the dim room, the cursor blinking in a blank email. She addressed it to the solicitor, paused, and began to type.

Her letter was direct and matter-of-fact. She accepted the estate. She would arrange a time to visit Glasgow and examine the contents of the strongbox. She understood the conditions of the bequest and would comply with all legal requirements.

When she finished, she read the message twice, then pressed send.

The email vanished into the wires. The room was quiet. The manuscript lay open on the table, the words still waiting.

Miranda lowered the lid and leaned back in the chair. The shadows had deepened while she wrote; the window now showed only her own reflection, the bookshelves behind her, the brass bird on the mantel catching a sliver of streetlight from outside. The city hummed its evening noise through the glass—distant traffic, a siren rising and falling, footsteps on the pavement below.

She did not feel triumphant. The decision had not been heroic. It had felt, instead, like the only path that did not require her to become smaller than she was.

Tomorrow she would call her mother. Tonight she would sit with the manuscript and let herself read it as it deserved to be read—not as a puzzle to decode, but as a voice that had waited a long time to be heard.

She picked up her pen and wrote in the margin beside the *Nesu vodu* passage: *I carry water. I carry it all.*

Part 4

Chapter 10

The Confession

The confession is the last draft, the one you write not to be forgiven but to be understood.

— Isabel Shaw, letter to her daughter (unsent)

The key turned in the lock with a familiar click, and Miranda pushed the door open into the narrow foyer. The smell hit her first—old wood and lavender, the same sachets her mother had always tucked into drawers, the same beeswax polish on the banister. She set her bag down on the mat and closed the door behind her, the sound of the latch sealing her in.

Isabel appeared at the end of the hallway, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "Oh, darling, you made it. The trains were all right?"

"Yes, fine." Miranda stepped forward and kissed her mother's cheek. The skin was soft, smelling of hand cream.

"I've got the kettle on. Come through."

The living room was exactly as Miranda remembered it: the worn sofa with its knitted throw, the framed photographs on the sideboard—Miranda at graduation, Miranda as a child on a beach, a faded picture of Hana that Miranda had studied a hundred times without really seeing. The curtains were drawn against the grey Glasgow afternoon, and a single lamp glowed on the side table. Everything was in its place, each surface dusted, each cushion plumped. A protective layer of politeness coating every corner.

Isabel busied herself in the kitchen alcove, her movements quick and practiced. "I've been meaning to deadhead the roses before the rain comes. The garden's a mess, honestly. I don't know where the time goes. And the neighbours' cat keeps digging up the lavender—"

"Mum." Miranda sat on the edge of the sofa, her hands pressed flat against her thighs. "I didn't come here to talk about the garden."

"Tea first. You must be chilled from the station." Isabel poured boiling water into two mismatched cups—the blue one with the chip on the rim, the white one with the faded floral print. "Milk, no sugar. I remember."

She handed Miranda the blue cup. The ceramic was warm through her fingers, and she held it without drinking, watching her mother settle into the armchair opposite. Isabel smoothed her skirt, straightened the tea towel on her lap, took a sip of her own tea. She was buying time. Miranda had seen it a thousand times—the small rituals, the tidying, the deflection disguised as hospitality.

The clock on the mantel ticked. A car passed outside. Miranda waited for the silence to become unbearable, and when it did, she set the cup down on the coffee table with a soft clink.

"I need to know about Hana. Why didn't you tell me?"

Isabel's hand tightened on her cup. Her eyes stayed fixed on the rim of the teacup, refusing to rise. "Tell you what, darling?"

"That she was—" Miranda stopped. The words felt too large for the room. "That she left an estate. That she had a life before Scotland. That she was someone else before she became my grandmother."

"I told you she was Czech. I told you she fled Prague."

"You told me she was a seamstress who worked in a factory. You didn't tell me she was a journalist. You didn't tell me she knew the man behind O Fio da Navalha. You didn't tell me any of it."

The inheritance call had come three days ago, a solicitor with a measured voice and an Edinburgh address, explaining that Hana Navrátilová's estate had been settled and Miranda was named as beneficiary. The news had struck her like a stone dropped in still water, the ripples spreading outward, touching everything she thought she knew. A flat in Glasgow. A safety-deposit box. Personal writings. An entire life her mother had never mentioned.

Now she watched Isabel's face, searching for a crack, for some admission hidden behind the carefully pleasant expression.

"It's complicated, Miranda." Isabel's voice was softer now, less bright. She set her cup down and began to straighten the edge of the tea towel, her fingers moving in a repetitive, nervous pattern. "Some roots are better left in the ground. You dig them up, and you find things you weren't ready to see."

"I'm ready. I've been ready my whole life, and you never gave me the chance."

"You don't know what you're asking."

"Then tell me." Miranda leaned forward, her voice steady but insistent. "Tell me what I'm asking. Tell me why you kept her history buried. Tell me why the solicitor called me instead of you."

Isabel's face tightened. For a moment, she looked older than Miranda remembered, the lines around her mouth deeper, the skin beneath her eyes fragile. She pressed her lips together and said nothing.

"It's about Montero, isn't it?" Miranda said. "The manuscript. The coded passages. She was there, in the middle of it. She knew him. She might have been—" She stopped, unwilling to voice the full thought. "I need to excise the lies from what I know. I need the truth, Mum. Not the cleaned version."

Isabel stood abruptly and walked to the window. She parted the curtain an inch and looked out at the street, her back to Miranda. The clock ticked five full seconds before she spoke.

"Your grandmother had her reasons. They were good reasons." Her voice was terse now, the brightness drained out of it. "She did what she did to protect people. Including you."

"Protect me from what?"

Isabel let the curtain fall and turned. Her eyes were wet, but her jaw was set. "From knowing that some stories don't have clean endings. That the people we love can make choices we don't understand. That the past isn't a manuscript you can—translate faithfully—because the original was never honest to begin with."

Miranda felt the knot in her chest pull tighter. She wanted to push, to demand more, but the silence between them had become a physical weight, heavier than any conversation they had ever had. Her mother was standing in her own living room, surrounded by the order she had built, and she was trembling.

"I'm not asking for a clean translation," Miranda said quietly. "I'm asking for the original. Whatever it is. I can hold it."

Isabel shook her head, a single, sharp motion. "Not today."

"Then when?"

"I don't know." Isabel picked up her cup and carried it to the sink, her back to Miranda once more. "I need time, darling. That's all I can give you right now."

The clock ticked. The lavender sachets released their faint, cloying scent into the still air. Miranda sat on the sofa with her cold tea and watched her mother's shoulders rise and fall with each slow breath, and she understood that the conversation was over.

* * *

The kitchen clock measured the silence in precise, indifferent ticks. Miranda set her cup down on the polished table—a ring of cold tea stained the wood where she had placed it earlier, and she watched the liquid bead and still. Her mother had not moved from the sink. The lavender sachets in the windowsill gave off a scent that had become cloying, almost medicinal.

"You always knew," Miranda said. "Didn't you?"

Isabel's hand tightened on the edge of the sink. The knuckles went white and then released. She turned, but slowly, as if the movement cost her a commodity for which the dictionary had no entry.

"I don't know what you mean, darling."

"The name. Hana Navrátilová. When I told you about the inheritance, about the lawyer's call—you didn't ask a single question. Not one. A woman you never mentioned leaves my grandmother's estate to me, and you just watched me pack for Prague without asking who she was." Miranda's voice climbed, though she tried to keep it level. "You already knew."

Isabel wiped her hands on a tea towel that hung from the oven handle, folding it twice, three times, before hanging it back exactly square. The precision was a wall.

"I thought I could keep you safe from all this." Her voice came out low, almost a murmur. "That's all I wanted, Miranda. From the beginning."

The air between them seemed to thicken. Miranda pressed her palms flat against the table and felt the grain of the wood under her fingertips, a counterpoint to the abstract shape of what she was hearing. The distance across the kitchen was only a few feet, but it felt like a chasm she had been crossing her whole life.

"Safe from what? From knowing my own grandmother?"

"From knowing too much." Isabel's jaw worked. She pulled out the chair across from Miranda and sat, but on the edge, as if she might rise again at any moment. "Your grandmother—Hana—she carried things that were not meant to be carried by a child, or by a child's child. I grew up in the shadow of those things. I didn't want that for you."

"So you erased her. You let me think she was just a Czech grandmother who baked strudel and spoke with an accent. You let me translate Montero's manuscript without knowing my own grandmother's name was written in its codes." Miranda's fingers found the spine of a book on the corner of the table—a gardening guide—and she ran her thumb along its edge, once, twice. "That's not protection, Mum. That's theft."

Isabel flinched at the word. She picked up Miranda's cold teacup and held it in both hands, studying the dregs as if they might tell her something.

"I knew," she said. "From the moment Herrero contacted you. When you told me about the translation job, I knew what manuscript it was. I knew who had written it, and I knew whose words were buried in it." She set the cup down and did not let go. "I thought if I said nothing, if I let you do the work without the weight of the truth, you might finish it and walk away clean. I thought the codes would stay codes, and you would never have to know."

"Know what?" Miranda leaned forward. "That my grandmother was a journalist? That she was a dissident? That she fled Prague and then disappeared in Brazil?" She was counting on her fingers now, ticking off points like lines in a proof. "That she wrote the novel Montero published under his own name? I already know all of that. What I don't know is why you thought hiding it would protect me from any of it."

Isabel's eyes were wet, but she did not wipe them. She stared at the tea ring on the table as if it were a map.

"Because I know what happened to her." The words came out frayed, barely audible. "I know because I was there. Not in Brazil—I was a child, I was in Scotland with my father. But I know what she wrote in her letters before she vanished. I know what the car with diplomatic plates meant. I know why the linden tree was in her codes."

Miranda felt the air leave her lungs. She had expected evasions, half-truths, walls built of silence. She had not expected this.

"The farewell letter," Miranda said. "The one she left for you."

Isabel nodded. A single tear slipped down her cheek and she dashed it away with the side of her first finger, almost angrily. "She wrote it knowing she might not come back. She gave it to a friend, to hold for me until I was old enough to understand. I was twenty-seven when I finally read it." She laughed, a short broken sound. "Twenty-seven, and it still broke me."

"Where is it now?"

"Gone. I burned it, after I read it. I couldn't bear to keep it."

Miranda closed her eyes. The confession settled in her chest like a stone dropped into deep water—cold, solid, familiar. She had wanted the truth so badly. Now it sat inside her, both a key and a lock, opening one door only to seal another.

"You burned my grandmother's last words to you."

"I burned the evidence of what people did to her." Isabel's voice sharpened. "There were names in that letter, Miranda. Names of men who are still alive. Men who have children and grandchildren. Men who would have found me, who would have found you, if that letter had ever surfaced while the dictatorship's men still held power."

"The dictatorship ended forty years ago."

"The men who served it did not." Isabel pressed her hand flat against the table. "Your grandmother did not disappear because she was a journalist. She disappeared because she was a witness. She saw something

in Prague, and she wrote about it, and when she fled to Brazil the wrong people already knew her name. Montero did not steal her work—he buried it. The novel was her cover. Her alibi. A work of fiction that proved she was just a writer, not a threat. And when that cover stopped being enough, she vanished."

Miranda's mind raced, trying to fit the pieces into a shape she could hold. The codes. The linden tree. The diamond brooch. Nesu vodu.

"She coded the truth into the manuscript because she knew no one would publish it any other way."

Isabel nodded. "And Montero knew. He knew who she was. He knew what she was running from. He published the novel under his name to protect her, and when she disappeared, he could not say anything without destroying the very thing that had kept her safe for those few years."

The truth settled deeper, colder. Miranda looked down at her hands, still pressed flat on the table. Herrero surfaced, his warnings, the clean translation he had demanded. The footnotes she had already drafted surfaced, the decisions she had made. Her grandmother surfaced, alive in Glasgow for thirty years, baking bread and planting roses, wearing a borrowed identity like a winter coat she could never take off.

"I have to tell this story," Miranda said. "Not the clean version. The real one."

Isabel's shoulders curved inward. She lifted the cold teacup from the table, turned it in her hands, set it down.

"I know," she said. "That's what I was afraid of." She stood slowly, her joints cracking. "I'll make fresh tea."

She went to the kettle and filled it from the tap, her back to Miranda once more. The clock ticked. The lavender released its scent into the air. Miranda watched her mother's hands, steady as they set the kettle on its base, and understood that the confession was not an ending. It was a beginning, shaped but unspoken, waiting for the page.

* * *

The kettle clicked off. The silence that followed was not the same silence that had filled the room before. It had a different weight, a density that pressed against the ears. Miranda heard the drip of residual water inside the kettle, the faint tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, the settling of a floorboard under her own weight.

She sat with her hands flat on the table. The tea Isabel had poured was already cooling, a thin skin forming on the surface. Miranda did not pick it up.

The truth sat between them like a stone. Her mother had known. Known, and chosen to say nothing. The years of evasions, the careful nudges away from the past—all of it made sudden, terrible sense. And yet there was also, beneath the ache, a strange kind of relief. The shape of the story was complete now, even if the edges were rough.

She felt it as a cold knot below her ribs. Not sharp, but persistent. A physical anchor for a sensation that resisted all attempts at a label. Her fingers found the edge of the table and held it. The wood was smooth, worn by years of Isabel's hands.

"You could have told me," Miranda said. Her voice came out lower than she expected, and it did not shake. "I wish you had trusted me with the whole truth. All of it. Not just the pieces you thought I could carry."

Isabel's hands were wrapped around her own teacup. She did not drink. She had not drunk from it since she had sat down. Her eyes were on the table, on the grain of the wood, on the small dent where a dish had been dropped years ago and never repaired.

"I was trying to protect you," Isabel said. The words came out tired, worn smooth from use. "And your grandmother. And myself."

Miranda did not answer. The knot inside her tightened, then loosened slightly. She pushed her chair back and stood. Her legs felt heavy, as if she had been sitting for hours. She went to the window and pressed one hand against the glass. The pane was cold. Outside, the sky was a low, uniform grey—not threatening, not promising. A day that had no intention of changing.

Behind her, she heard her mother's breath. A long, slow exhale.

"I was a fool," Isabel said. Her voice came in fragments, pieces broken off and set down. "A fool to think secrets could protect love. They don't. They only push it further into the dark, until you forget where you put it."

Miranda kept her hand on the glass. The cold travelled up her arm, settled in her shoulder. The manuscript surfaced, the coded passages she had laboured over, the careful work it had taken to preserve the *rigour* of a story that had wanted to be buried. Her grandmother surfaced, planting roses in a Glasgow garden, her true self hidden behind the name she had taken when she ran.

"I know why you did it," Miranda said. She turned from the window. The light from outside was grey on her mother's face. "I understand the reasons. The fear. The desire to spare me."

Isabel looked up. Her eyes were wet but she was not crying. She was holding the teacup with both hands now, as if it were something that might break.

"I forgive you," Miranda said.

The words hung in the air. Isabel's mouth opened slightly, then closed. She set the teacup down, carefully, and pushed her chair back. She stood. The movement was slow, a woman whose joints remembered every year of use.

"Miranda." Her mother's voice cracked on the name. She took a step forward, then stopped. "I don't—"

"I know."

Isabel closed the distance. Her hand found Miranda's arm, then her shoulder, then she was there, close, and Miranda let herself be held. The embrace was not soft. It was tight, a little desperate, a grasping for something that had almost been lost. Miranda felt the warmth of her mother's body, the faint scent of lavender and baking that still clung to her clothes. She felt the slight tremor in Isabel's hands.

She did not pull away.

The clock ticked. Somewhere in the house, a pipe groaned. The ordinary sounds of a house that had stood for decades, that had held secrets and silences and the slow accumulation of habit.

When they separated, Isabel pressed the heel of her palm against her eyes, then dropped her hand. She looked at Miranda with an expression that was almost a smile, but not quite.

"I don't deserve—"

"Don't," Miranda said. "Not now."

Isabel nodded. She went back to the table and picked up both cold teacups. She carried them to the sink and set them down. She did not wash them. She stood with her back to Miranda, her hands resting on the edge of the counter.

"I have to finish the translation," Miranda said. "With the footnotes. All of them."

"I know."

"Herrero will try to stop me."

"Let him try."

Miranda almost smiled. She crossed to the table and picked up her bag, the leather satchel that held the manuscript and her notes. She did not open it. She held it by the strap and looked at her mother, still standing at the sink.

"You will send it to me?" Isabel asked. "When it's done."

"Yes."

"Read it to me, then. Over the phone. When I cannot sleep."

Miranda nodded. Whether that was a promise she could keep was a matter she set aside for later. But she nodded anyway.

The kettle had cooled. The room was quiet. The new equilibrium was delicate, a thing that had to be carried carefully, like a cup filled to the brim. But it was there. It was real.

Miranda picked up her jacket from the back of the chair and slipped it on. She did not leave. She stood for a moment longer, watching her mother's back, the slight curve of her shoulders, the grey in her hair.

"Isabel." She used her mother's name, the way she had done as a child, when she was small and the world had felt simpler. "I will call you tomorrow."

Isabel turned. Her face was damp but her eyes were clear. "I will be here."

Miranda walked to the door. She kept her eyes trained forward, the jamb drawing her toward the hallway. The latch clicked behind her, and she stepped into the cool air of the hallway, carrying with her the memory of the embrace, the cold window, the taste of tea she had not drunk. The knot beneath her ribs had eased, not disappeared, but loosened enough to breathe around it.

She walked down the stairs and out into the grey Glasgow afternoon, the satchel heavy against her hip, and began to think of Prague, of the linden tree, of the words she would excise from the clean translation and replace with the truth.

Chapter 11

The Final Translation

The final translation is an act of fidelity to the dead, even at the cost of the living.

— From a notebook of Hana Navrátilová, found in the Vinohradská apartment

The manuscript lay open under the desk lamp, its pages fanned like a bird's wing. Miranda's fingers rested on the edges, the paper cool and napped with use. Beside her elbow sat a cup of tea she had poured two hours ago; a skin had formed on the surface, and the detail had escaped her. The light struck the mantel at an angle that made the brass heron's beak glow, and somewhere in the building a door closed with a soft weight of wood against jamb.

She had been at this for three days straight, the translation of Montero's final novel spread across her desk in layers: the clean text, the cipher key, the notebook of cross-referenced symbols. Each coded passage had to be rendered into English—the literal meaning, yes, but also the subtext that the cipher carried. She had decided weeks ago to embed the codes as footnotes, but the execution required a separate kind of *thoroughness*. Not just to the words, but to the architecture of concealment.

She picked up her pen and made a tiny correction in the margin of page 47: *the linden tree* should be lowercase, following the original's grammatical pattern. Montero's Portuguese had been inconsistent, and the inconsistency mattered because it matched the way the cipher shifted keys. She underlined the change and set the pen down, then slipped her finger between the pages of the *Oxford Portuguese-English Dictionary* that leaned against a stack of archival prints, opening it at the spine.

The coded passages were twelve in total. She had inserted footnotes for ten already. The last two were the hardest: a passage about a diamond brooch and one about the phrase *Nesu vodu*, which in Czech meant "I carry water" and which the manuscript gave in a corrupted Portuguese transliteration. Miranda had glossed the phrase in the first footnote, but now she wondered if she should add a second footnote explaining its use in the Prague dissident network of the early seventies. That would mean revealing more than the text itself stated, which she had not done before. It would be interpretation, not translation.

She straightened a stack of papers, her wrist aching from the repeated motion of typing and annotating. The apartment was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the occasional crackle of the radiator. The silence felt like a held breath.

She tilted her weight into the chair's frame, tipping her head back, her eyes fixing on the ceiling, at the crack in the plaster that followed the line of the chimney. The fear she had been pushing down all week had taken a shape in the last hour: a dense weight in her chest, like a stone. If she included these footnotes—truly included *all* of them, with their references to the diamond brooch, to the linden tree, to the network of names that Montero had encrypted—she was exposing the foundation's vulnerability.

Herrero would be furious. The foundation might collapse. And if it did, she would lose not just this commission but her reputation. Who would hire a translator who had dismantled the very institution that backed her?

Her mother, Isabel, stood before her again, in the kitchen of the Glasgow house with her hands pressed flat against the counter, saying *I kept it hidden to protect you*. Protect her from what—from the truth that the woman she knew as her grandmother was a Brazilian journalist named Sofia Alencar who vanished in 1972? That she had been a dissident, that she had left a daughter behind? Miranda had learned that truth in Rio, in the files Jorge had shown her. And now she was trying to decide whether to let that truth surface in a translation that was supposed to be clean.

She traced the ridge of another book's binding with her fingertips—the *Czech-English Dictionary* she had bought in Prague—and the gesture calmed her. The books were her ground. She could trust them.

If she omitted the codes, the translation would be a palimpsest with the crucial layer scraped off. A reader would see a smooth surface and never know what had been erased. But what kind of translator did that make her? A cleaner of texts, a custodian of silence.

Her grandmother had been silenced by the dictatorship, her name written out of the book she had helped create. Miranda was the first person in decades who could restore that name, not by shouting it but by placing it in the margins, where careful readers might find it. That was the integrity of translation: not to shout, but to let the subtext speak.

Her fingers found the keyboard and typed the final footnote—the one about *Nesu vodu* and the Prague network—moving with the cold precision of someone who had made a decision and was now executing it. She saved the document. Then she stared at the screen, at the last words.

The manuscript was complete.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes until sparks of color bloomed behind the lids. The lamplight was too bright; the room smelled of dust and coffee grounds. She took the cold cup of tea and drank it anyway, the tannic bitterness coating her tongue. It was terrible, but she did not pour it out.

The silence after finishing was not the silence of relief. It was the silence before a door opens. She had no idea what would come through it. Herrero's call, the foundation's lawyers, a journalist who had been waiting for someone to crack the code. Or nothing. The footnotes would go unnoticed, buried under the weight of the book's other pages.

But she knew that was unlikely. She had chosen to lay a trail. And the trail led to a truth that someone had spent forty years covering up.

She folded the computer closed and looked at the paper manuscript, still open on the desk. The heron on the mantel stared back at her, its brass eye unblinking. She felt a sudden hollow ache in her chest—not fear exactly, but something like it: a recognition that she had crossed a line and could not uncross it. The translation was no longer just a translation. It was a document with evidence attached.

But it was also her grandmother's story, finally told in the room where it had been hidden.

She set the pen down very carefully, as if the precision of the gesture could anchor her. Then she stood, walked to the window, and looked out at the Edinburgh street, the streetlights casting pools of orange on the wet pavement. The city was quiet. Tomorrow she would email the file to Herrero. Tonight she would sit in the aftermath of her own choice.

The linden tree had been planted here long ago. She had simply decided to let it grow.

* * *

The Montero Foundation Office occupied a third-floor room in a Georgian terrace off George IV Bridge, the kind of building that announced respectability without warmth. Miranda set her satchel on the spare chair and stood for a moment, letting the quiet settle around her. The venetian blinds cut the window into horizontal bands of grey, and the air carried a faint chemical tang—fresh paint over an older smell of coffee and leather. A framed portrait of Rafael Montero hung behind the desk, his dark hair combed back, his expression guarded. The desk itself was bare except for a blotter, a glass of water, and a brass lamp she guessed was never switched on.

She laid the manuscript in the center of the desk, the spine crackling with the weight of its pages. The sound was louder than she expected. She pressed the heel of her hand against the notebook's edge—a nervous habit she had never managed to break—then sat down in the visitor's chair. The leather creaked.

Her stomach tightened. She saw Herrero's face as clearly as if he stood before her: the slow widening of his eyes, the pursing of his lips. He would open the manuscript, see the footnotes, and know at once that she had defied him. The silence that followed would be the worst part. She tried to excise the image from her mind, but it clung, a watermark on the page of her thoughts.

The water in the glass before her had gone tepid. She drank without tasting it, then set it down. A bead of condensation slid across the coaster and she watched it, not really seeing it, until a voice from the memory of her mother's kitchen broke through.

Isabel's face, tear-streaked. The confession in Glasgow had come out in fragments, each word weighted with years of silence. "I knew, Miranda. I knew she was Sofia. I kept it to protect you." The raw edge of that voice

still cut. Her mother had carried the knowledge like a stone in her pocket, and now Miranda was carrying the same weight in the manuscript. She had chosen to release it.

She turned to the first page of the translation. Her own handwriting crowded the margins, notes and corrections, the coded passages flagged with small asterisks. She began to page through, checking each footnote against the original cipher. The paper was rough under her fingertips, a faint watermark at the corner of each leaf. The texture was familiar now, the smell of old and new ink mingled. She paused at the linden tree passage, where "Nesu vodu" appeared in the translation, the Czech gloss printed below it. The phrase had led her to Prague, to the Vinohradská apartment, to the memories of a woman she had never known as Sofia.

The weight of the manuscript—nearly three kilos, she had once weighed it on her bathroom scale—seemed to press into the desk. That weight was the burden of the truth she was about to deliver. Not only Montero's words, but her grandmother's, Hana's, Sofia's—each layer a palimpsest she had chosen to reveal.

She closed the manuscript and held it between her hands. The conviction settled into her bones, a slow ache rather than a sudden revelation. Integrity meant nothing if it couldn't survive the moment of hardest pressure. She had thought about it long enough. The decision had been made the night she first decoded the linden tree; everything since had been the act of following through.

She took a clean sheet of paper from her bag and wrote in her neat, academic hand:

Dear Dr. Herrero, please find enclosed the completed translation of the garden sown with skeletons. The footnotes are, as discussed, an integral part of my edition. I have preserved the coded passages in full, with explanatory notes, as the text demanded. Yours, Miranda Shaw.

She set the pen down very carefully, aligning it with the edge of the blotter. The note went on top of the manuscript, the page settling with a soft sigh. She lifted the whole stack once more, feeling the weight in her palms, then placed it squarely in the center of the desk.

The room was still. The blinds had not moved. The glass of water stood untouched, its condensation ring now dry.

She stood, gathered her satchel, and walked to the door. Her hand paused on the handle. She turned her head away from the desk, refusing its pull, because the manuscript was no longer hers. It belonged to the truth, and to whoever was willing to read it. She opened the door and stepped into the corridor, where the faint smell of fresh paint gave way to the normal sounds of the building—footsteps, a distant telephone, a door closing softly.

She had done what she could. The rest was waiting.

* * *

The office smelled of coffee grown cold and the faint chemical tang of fresh paint that had never quite faded. Shelves lined the walls, each volume of Montero's work arranged by edition and year, the spines a gradient of muted colours that Herrero clearly curated with the same precision he applied to everything. The portrait of Montero hung behind the desk—the same photograph that appeared on every dust jacket, the man's face tilted slightly, as if he were about to speak.

Miranda set the manuscript on the corner of the desk. The stack landed with a soft thump that seemed too loud in the quiet. Herrero did not look up immediately. He finished the sentence he was writing, capped his pen, and placed it beside the blotter with exacting care.

"I have the completed translation," she said.

He raised his eyes. "That would be... unwise of you." But he reached for the stack and drew it toward him.

The first pages were clean—the title page, the dedication, the opening chapter. Herrero turned them with the careful attention of a man inspecting a document for forgery. His fingers moved steadily, but his pace slowed as he reached the middle of the manuscript. He paused at a page where the footnotes appeared for the first time—a thin band of smaller type at the bottom, separating the clean text from the words Miranda had been forbidden to include.

"I must insist," he said, his voice flat, "that you explain what this is."

"They're footnotes, Dr. Herrero. The coded passages required annotation. The text makes no sense without them."

He did not look at her. His thumb traced the edge of the page, then he flipped forward, scanning each spread for the telltale line of small type at the bottom. The silence stretched. He reached the final chapter, where the footnotes grew denser, then closed the manuscript and placed his palm flat on the cover.

"The footnotes must be removed." His voice was controlled, precise. "This is not a matter for negotiation. The foundation has a responsibility to the text's integrity—"

"The foundation has a responsibility to the text," she said. "Not to a version of it that omits essential material."

He leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking. His fingers found each other and steepled beneath his chin. "You were chosen for your discretion, Miranda. The terms of your commission were clear. A clean translation. You agreed to those terms."

She had rehearsed this moment on the walk from Marchmont, in the stairwell, at the door to the office. The words felt rehearsed now, too—necessary but insufficient. "I agreed to translate the manuscript with scholarly rigour. A scholarly edition accounts for textual anomalies. The coded passages are not marginalia. They're part of the work itself."

"You inserted yourself into the text." His voice sharpened. "You made a decision that was not yours to make."

"The decision was always mine," she said. "I'm the translator."

Herrero stood. The movement was sudden, but he controlled it with the same discipline he brought to everything—no wasted motion, no outward display. He walked to the window and stood with his back to her, his hands clasped behind him.

"Let us be clear." His voice was clipped now, the register of a man who had exhausted his patience. "The Montero Foundation holds the rights. We control publication. If this edition proceeds with those footnotes, the foundation will withdraw its support. Your commission will be cancelled. Your reputation will suffer."

She had expected this. The words landed where she had already prepared a place for them. "I have a contract. So does the publisher. The foundation agreed to fund the translation, not to approve its contents."

He turned. His face was composed, but she saw the tension in his jaw, the way his eyes did not quite meet hers. "You're making a mistake."

"Perhaps." She reached into her satchel and withdrew a folder—copies of the correspondence, the contract, the terms of the grant. She set it beside the manuscript. "But the mistake would be burying the truth to protect a reputation."

Herrero's gaze dropped to the folder. He did not touch it. "You have no idea what you're protecting yourself from."

"Then tell me."

The silence was heavy. The hum of the computer filled the room. She could hear the distant clatter of a keyboard from another office, the muffled sound of a telephone. Herrero's hand moved to the back of his neck, a gesture she had never seen him make.

"The foundation's provenance is... fragile," he said. "The Montero estate was established decades ago, before the full circumstances of the manuscript's creation were understood. If the coded passages are published without context, the foundation will face questions it cannot answer."

"Questions about what?"

He did not respond. His hand dropped from his neck, and he returned to his desk, lowering himself into the chair as though the weight of the room pressed down on him.

"The footnotes stay," she said. "I've preserved the text's *conformity* to the original. That's my responsibility as translator."

"Your responsibility." He laughed, a short, hollow sound. "You speak of fidelity as if the text were a sacred object. But you've made it political. You've turned a literary manuscript into a document of exposure."

"I've turned it into what it always was." She steadied her voice, drawing on the resolve she had felt the night before, sitting alone at her desk. "Your foundation built its reputation on a lie. I'm not the one exposing it. The text does that on its own."

Herrero's eyes were cold now, the earlier composure hardening into something else. He picked up the manuscript and held it between them, his fingers gripping the edges as if he might tear it in half.

"I will not allow this," he said. "You will remove the footnotes, or I will ensure this translation never sees print."

"You can try." She gathered her satchel and stood. "But I've already sent a copy to the publisher. The contract is signed. The edition will proceed."

For a long moment, he did not move. The manuscript trembled in his hands. Then he set it down, his movements careful, deliberate. He adjusted the stack so that the edges aligned with the desk, squared the corner of the folder she had left beside it.

"Then we have nothing more to discuss." His voice was quiet, emptied of emotion. "You've made your choice."

She moved to the door and paused with her hand on the handle. The room was still. The portrait of Montero watched from the wall. A film of dust had settled on the untouched water glass atop the desk.

She left the office without a backward glance. She opened the door and stepped into the corridor, where the smell of fresh paint gave way to the normal sounds of the building—footsteps, a distant telephone, a door closing softly. She had done what she could. The rest was waiting.

* * *

The corridor stretched in both directions, identical doors receding toward the windows at either end. The light here was different—harsher, the fluorescents humming a note just below annoyance. She felt it in her teeth.

She did not move. Her hand still held the shape of the door handle, a ghost of pressure in her palm. Behind her, through the panel of frosted glass, she could make out the stillness of the office. Herrero had not risen. She imagined him still at his desk, the squared edges of the manuscript, the dust settling on the untouched glass of water.

The confrontation had taken less than ten minutes. She had said what she needed to say, and he had answered with the controlled precision she had come to recognise as his form of anger. She had not raised her voice. That, she suspected, had unsettled him more than any outburst.

She pushed the memory aside and walked toward the lift, her steps too loud on the carpeted floor. The building was quiet—a distant telephone, the click of a door further down the corridor, the muffled drone of traffic from the street below. The scent of fresh paint had faded to something neutral, the air-conditioned emptiness of institutions.

Her satchel hung heavy on her shoulder. Inside, the manuscript lay folded, the pages warm from her body heat. She had carried it through the city for weeks now, and the cover was beginning to soften at the corners. She touched the edge of it through the canvas, feeling the ridges of paper beneath.

The word *palimpsest* came to her unbidden. That was what they had created—a text with layers, each one concealing and revealing at the same time. The original manuscript, Montero's clean prose, the coded passages that held her grandmother's language, and now the footnotes, like annotations in the margin of history. She had written them carefully, excising nothing, adding only what was already there.

She pressed the call button for the lift. The mechanism began to whir somewhere in the wall.

In her mind she saw her mother's kitchen in Glasgow, the smell of baked bread, the rain against the window. Isabel had sat at the table, her hands wrapped around a cup of tea that had gone cold hours ago. "I knew," she had said. "I knew she was Sofia. I knew all of it." The confession had come out in a single breath, as if she had been holding it for decades. Miranda had listened without interrupting, her own tea untouched. The weight of that secret—carried across two continents, through her mother's marriage and her own childhood, through every Christmas card and every unanswered question—had finally broken the surface.

And now Miranda carried her own version of that weight. The footnotes were her coda to her grandmother's silence. She had refused to let the text remain clean, to let the erased parts stay erased. Herrero had called it a betrayal of the work. She called it *scrupulousness*.

The lift arrived with a soft chime. The doors slid open, revealing a small mirrored compartment, the floor scuffed from countless shoes. She stepped inside and pressed the button for the ground floor. The doors closed, sealing the corridor away.

The metal floor vibrated under her feet. She adjusted the strap of her satchel, feeling the pressure of the manuscript against her hip. Her coat was too warm for the building, but she had not bothered to remove it when she arrived. Now the wool clung to her arms, the collar rough against her neck.

She watched the numbers above the door change: fourth floor, third, second. The air grew cooler as the lift descended. The handrail was cold under her palm, the metal smooth from years of use.

Her grandmother's farewell letter, the one she had read in the flat in Santa Teresa, its paper yellowed and brittle, came back to her. *Carry water, but don't spill it.* That was the line she kept returning to. It was not about silence. It was about care. The truth was carried with effort, with balance, with intention. You did not let it slosh over the sides, but you did not let it evaporate either. You took it where it needed to go.

The lift slowed and the doors opened onto the lobby. The receptionist looked up from her desk, offered a polite nod, then returned to her screen. A potted plant by the entrance had a few brown leaves that no one had trimmed.

Miranda crossed the marble floor, her footsteps echoing against the high ceiling. The glass doors slid open automatically, admitting the cool air of early spring. She stepped outside and paused, letting the street sounds wash over her. Traffic. A bus passing. A woman laughing on the pavement across the road.

The building receded behind her without a single turn of her head. The door clicked shut behind her with a soft hydraulic sigh, and she walked toward the corner, where the tram line cut through the city and the spire of the university rose against the pale sky. The manuscript was still in her satchel. The work was finished. Now the rest of it—the waiting, the publishing, whatever came next—was not hers to carry alone.

She kept walking.

Chapter 12

Planting the Linden

Planting a linden tree is a form of punctuation: an ending that becomes a beginning.

— Miranda Shaw, dedication page notes

The cemetery sat at the edge of Žižkov, where the city's noise softened to a distant hum. Autumn had stripped the old linden trees, and their leaves lay in wet mats over the paths. Miranda walked between rows of headstones, some listing, some covered in lichen that looked like pale green script on gray stone. The grass was damp, soaking through the canvas of her trainers, and the air held the cold bite of turned earth.

She found the grave near the back wall, under a bare oak. The stone was simple—grey granite, a name and dates, no epitaph. HANA NAVRÁTILOVÁ, 1925–2025. A small Hebrew letter at the top, a star. Miranda set down the leather satchel and the canvas bag that held the sapling. The bag's handles were wet. She stood for a moment, breathing, watching her grandmother's name settle into the day as if it had always been there.

The silence felt unfinished. She had imagined this moment for weeks—on the flight from Edinburgh, in the hotel room with the faulty radiator, on the tram ride out here. She had rehearsed words. Now the words felt too

large, too clean, like type on a page before the ink has dried. The cold worked through her shoulders, and she realized she had been gripping the bag's handles so tightly her fingers had gone numb.

She knelt. The cold immediately found her knees, and a small pebble pressed into the skin beneath her trousers. She shifted, unbuckled the canvas bag, and pulled out the sapling—a linden, two years old, its branches bare and its root ball wrapped in burlap. She had bought it from a nursery near Vinohradská, one that specialized in native trees. The woman at the nursery had asked if she needed planting instructions. Miranda had said no, she thought she could manage.

The earth around the grave was compacted, hard from years of rain and frost. She used the trowel she had brought, pressing against the resistance of the soil. The blade scraped against stone, a thin metal sound that seemed too loud. She worked carefully, widening a small patch near the foot of the headstone, where the ground had been disturbed once before. Her fingers grew stiff with cold, and she stopped to blow on them, aware of the absurdity—digging a hole for a tree that no one would water, that might not survive. The dew had turned her hair damp, and she could taste the cold in the back of her throat.

But she kept digging. The rhythm quieted something in her chest.

When the hole was deep enough, she placed the root ball inside and pushed the earth back around it, pressing down with the flat of her hands. The soil felt good, dense and dark. She poured the remainder of the water from her thermos over the base—the tea had gone cold hours ago, but water was water, and the tree would not judge.

She sat back on her heels. The sapling stood, a little crooked, its trunk no thicker than her thumb. It looked fragile against the grey headstone.

"I don't know if this is the right thing," she said, and her voice sounded strange, too loud in the quiet. "But it's all I could think of. The linden tree. Nesu vodu. I thought you would understand."

She paused. A crow called from somewhere behind her, and the wind moved through the naked branches above.

"I didn't know you. I thought I did—I thought you were just my grandmother, the woman who knitted sweaters and hummed Czech lullabies. But you were a journalist. You disappeared. You left everything." She pressed her palm against the damp earth. "And I spent my life translating other people's stories, when yours was right there, inside me."

Her throat tightened. She breathed through it, steadily.

"I was angry. I am angry. That you never told me. That my mother knew and didn't tell me. That I had to find out through footnotes and old letters and a dead man's manuscript." She read her grandmother's name on the stone. "But I think I understand why. You were trying to survive, and then you were trying to protect Isabel, and then it was too late."

The tree swayed slightly in a gust.

"I don't want to carry the anger anymore. It's too heavy, and I cannot excise it the way I excise a bad passage from a translation. I have to let it be a part of the story. Your story. Our story."

She wiped her eyes with the cuff of her jacket, the fabric cold and rough against her skin.

"I forgive you. I hope you can forgive me—for not knowing, for not looking sooner, for needing to find you in the margins of a book instead of in your own voice." She laughed, a short, wet sound. "That's the translator's curse. We always find people in the text before we find them in life."

The wind dropped. For a moment the cemetery was perfectly still, the only sound the distant hum of the city and a bird in the oak above.

She stayed there a long time, her knees cold and her hands crusted with soil. The damp had worked into her sleeves, and she felt a chill starting at the base of her spine. A single leaf, brown and curled, landed on the headstone, and she did not brush it off.

Eventually she stood, stiff, and brushed off her trousers. She looked at the sapling, at the headstone, at the grey sky that had begun to lighten. Her fingers moved to the stem of the sapling, touching the smooth bark, then traced the letters of her grandmother's name—once, twice, as if reading a passage she hoped would change.

The walk back to the tram stop was slow, her legs heavy. But her chest felt lighter, as if a door had opened somewhere behind her ribs. What lay on the other side was a landscape still waiting for her eyes. The translation was done. The footnotes were in. Herrero would have to live with them. Her mother was in Glasgow, waiting, and they would have to learn how to speak to each other again.

But the tree was planted. The words had been said. And the ground would hold them.

As she reached the cemetery gate, she turned back. The linden sapling was just visible, a thin dark line against the stone. It looked small, and alone, and alive.

She carried that image with her—not for comfort, but for truth. A truth she had excavated, word by word, year by year. She was still learning how to read it. But she had finally stopped pretending the cipher was blank.

* * *

The key turned with its familiar resistance, and Miranda pushed the door open. Afternoon light fell through the bay window in long slanted rectangles, catching the dust she hadn't noticed before. The flat smelled of closed windows and old paper. A cardboard package sat on the dining table, square and inconspicuous, the Amazon logo facing up.

She dropped her satchel by the door and walked over, her boots loud on the floorboards. The package was light—about the weight of a thick paperback. She slit the tape with a kitchen knife and pulled out the contents. Three copies of Montero’s bone-garden novel, her name on the title page as translator. The cover was a deep forest green, with a single embossed linden leaf in silver. She let her thumb ride the spine's ridge, from head to tail. It was real. It existed in the world.

She opened the first copy to the copyright page, then flipped to the front matter. A blurb from Tomás Herrero: "Miranda Shaw's translation captures the poetry and the pain of Montero's final masterpiece with unerring precision." The words were generous, professional—and she knew what they cost him. She didn't know whether to smile or put the book down.

A strand of hair caught on her lip. She tucked it behind her ear and set the copy on the table. The ache arrived quietly, like a draft under a door. Sofia had never held any of her own books. Her name had never appeared on a cover. And this—this was a translation of a novel that had erased her. The pride Miranda had expected to feel settled into something heavier, a stone in her chest that lay beyond her vocabulary.

She moved to the desk, the one with the faded ink stain from the previous tenant, and sat down. A fresh sheet of paper lay in the tray. She pulled the fountain pen from the mug—the one with the nib she'd replaced after the Prague trip—and wrote.

For Sofia Alencar, whose voice will never be silenced.

The ink gleamed. She read it aloud, her voice barely above a whisper. The weight of the words pressed against her ribs. The cemetery, the linden sapling, the headstone with Hana Navrátilová's name—these images rose together. The same person. Two names, one life, and a translation that would finally carry both truths.

She set the pen down and picked up the book again. Near the end, in the footnotes section she had fought to keep, there was the decoded passage about the diamond brooch. She read it again, the words familiar as a repeated dream.

The only sound in the flat was the refrigerator's steady hum. She looked toward the phone on the table by the armchair. Her mother. She hadn't called since before the planting. The distance between them still felt raw, a scab not quite healed. But the dedication page existed now, and it had Hana's other name on it.

Miranda stood and walked to the window. The street below was ordinary: a man walking a terrier, a woman unlocking her bicycle, the late sun catching the window of the baker's on the corner. She laid her hand flat against the glass. It was warm from the light.

She went back to the desk, opened a drawer, and took out the old photograph—the one from the Vinohradská apartment. Hana in the Prague square, the linden tree behind her. She placed it next to the dedication page. Two objects, a line of ink that connected them across decades.

Then she picked up the phone and dialled. The line rang once, twice, three times. The answer came in Isabel's voice, tentative, as if expecting bad news.

"Mum," Miranda said. "It's done. The translation. It's in the world."

There was a pause, and then a sound that could have been a laugh or a sob. "I have a copy here," Isabel said. "It arrived this morning."

Miranda leaned her hip against the table. "You saw the dedication?"

"I saw it." Another pause. "It's what she deserved."

A tear slipped down Miranda's cheek. She pressed the base of her thumb against the damp trail and let her hand fall. "I know. I know it is."

"Is there a ceremony? A launch?"

"Next month, in Prague. The foundation is hosting something." She hesitated. "Would you come?"

The silence stretched. Then Isabel said, "I'd like that. I think I'd like that."

Miranda nodded, though her mother couldn't see. "I'll send you the details."

"Thank you, Miranda. For doing this. For—for not letting her disappear twice."

The call ended a few minutes later, after the polite questions about flights and hotels, the careful avoidance of the old wounds. Miranda put the phone down and looked at the books on the table. Three copies, three seeds.

She slid one into her satchel—the one she would take with her to Prague. The other two she stacked by the door. One for Isabel, one for herself to keep on the shelf beside the brass heron.

The light through the bay window had shifted to a deeper gold. Dust motes drifted, unhurried. Miranda sat down at the desk and picked up the photograph again. She touched the image of Hana's face, the gentle smile, the dark coat. Then she placed it back in the drawer, closed it, and looked at the book in her hands.

It was small. And alone. And alive.

* * *

The phone sat in her palm, cool and inert. Miranda traced the edge of the screen with her thumb, watching the afternoon light shift across the floorboards. The book of poems lay open on the windowsill beside her—the spine cracked, the pages soft from handling. She pressed the tip of her finger into the seam where the binding met the cloth, feeling the thread beneath.

She had rehearsed the words four times since breakfast. They sounded hollow every time.

A tram groaned past on Marchmont Road. The kettle in the kitchen had cooled hours ago, the mug beside it holding a skin of cold milk. Miranda picked up the phone and dialled before she could talk herself out of it.

Three rings. A click.

"Miranda." Her mother's voice was cautious, as if testing the line.

"Hi, Mum." The words came out too fast. "I wanted to tell you—the translation is finished. Officially. Herrero signed off yesterday."

A pause. "That's good. That's very good."

"It's going to press next week. The launch is in Prague, like I said. I'll send you the details."

"Thank you."

Silence. Miranda could hear the faint clatter of a pan in the background, the running of a tap. Her mother was doing something—cleaning, probably. Tidying.

"I also wanted to say something else," Miranda said, and her voice caught on the word *else*. She heard herself and disliked the sound. "I wanted to apologise."

"For what?"

"For being cold. For the way I spoke to you in Glasgow. For assuming I knew everything when I didn't know anything." She paused, then corrected herself: "When I didn't know anything at all." The grammar felt wrong, but she left it uncorrected.

The tap stopped running. The silence on the other end stretched.

"Miranda—"

"Let me finish, please." She set her hand on the book's spine, pressing down. "I let the past fester. I held it against you for years, and I never asked why you did what you did. I assumed it was shame. I assumed you were hiding something shameful. And maybe you were. But I didn't give you the chance to explain."

A long breath on the other end. "You're right," Isabel said quietly. "You didn't ask. And I didn't offer. I told myself I was protecting you, but it was easier to keep it buried than to dig it up."

"I know." Miranda's throat tightened. "I understand that now."

"Your grandmother—" Isabel stopped. The line hissed softly. "Your grandmother made me promise. Before she died. She said, *Don't let them find me. Don't let them pull me back.* And I kept that promise. For thirty years."

"Even from me."

"Especially from you." Isabel's voice cracked. "You were the one I was protecting most. She said the truth would put you in danger. The dictatorship, the people who'd disappeared—she never told me everything, but she told me enough. Enough to be afraid."

Miranda pressed the phone harder against her ear. On the mantel, the brass heron caught a sliver of light, its beak slightly tarnished. She stared at it.

"I was wrong," Isabel said. "I thought if I kept the secret, it would stay buried. But secrets don't stay buried. They just grow roots."

"Like the linden tree," Miranda murmured.

"Like the linden tree."

Miranda closed her eyes. The kitchen tap came on again, then off. She could picture her mother standing at the sink, one hand gripping the edge of the counter, the phone cradled against her ear.

"Mum," she said, and the word felt lighter than it had in years. "I'm sorry for how I treated you. For the distance. For the silences."

"I'm sorry too," Isabel said. And then, after a beat: "I was never angry at you. I was angry at myself for not knowing how to stop it. How to undo it."

"You couldn't have undone it."

"No. But I could have told you. I should have trusted you."

Miranda opened her eyes. The room was quiet. A car passed on the street below, a brief mutter that faded into the hum of the city. She realised she wasn't holding the book anymore. Her hand was resting on her knee, palm open.

"I'd like to come to the launch," Isabel said. "If the invitation is still open."

"It's open."

"Good." A pause. "I'd like to see Prague again."

"You've been before?"

"Once. In 1968. The summer before the invasion." Isabel's voice softened. "Your grandmother took me. I was six. We walked across the Charles Bridge, and she told me the statues were saints, and I believed her."

Miranda smiled. It was a small smile, but it stayed.

"I'll send you the flight information."

"Thank you."

Another silence, but this one was different. It felt less like a wall and more like a door left ajar.

"Mum?"

"Yes?"

"The translation includes a dedication. To Hana Navrátilová. With the full passage from the manuscript."

Isabel was quiet for a moment. Then: "That's right. That's exactly right."

"I wanted you to know."

"I know." A breath. "I'm proud of you, Miranda."

Miranda blinked. The words landed somewhere she hadn't expected, in a pocket of her chest she'd forgotten was there.

"Thank you."

They said their goodbyes a few minutes later—polite, gentle, the edge of old arguments smoothed away. Miranda set the phone down on the windowsill beside the book. The dust motes drifted in the afternoon light, unhurried. She touched the spine of the book once more, then withdrew her hand.

In the kitchen, she poured the cold milk down the sink and rinsed the mug, watching the water run clear. The kettle heated with a low, steady murmur. She made tea, and when she lifted the cup, the warmth spread through her palms like something returning.

This is a novel about what is carried forward and what is left behind: a manuscript, a name, a linden tree. It moves between Edinburgh, Prague, and Rio de Janeiro, through archives and apartments, following a translator's careful unraveling of a family secret. Its voice is precise and restrained, trusting the reader to hear what is not spoken. The book exists because some stories demand to be completed, even—especially—when they arrive too late.