

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Nature Retreat

*Five days. Four lives. One forest.*

### FRIDAY — ARRIVAL

The first thing James Rush noticed when he stepped out of the car was the silence.

Not the silence of an empty room, or the silence of a muted phone — he knew those silences well, had spent years filling them. This was different. This was the silence of something large and patient that had been here long before he arrived and would remain long after he left.

He stood for a moment with one hand still on the car door.

The forest was dark at the edges. The sky above the treeline held the last pale light of the evening. Somewhere a bird called once and stopped.

"Mr. Rush."

He turned. A man was walking toward him across the gravel — calm, unhurried, as though he had all the time in the world. Tom. He looked the same as he had on that terrace in Portugal eighteen months ago. The same steady eyes. The same slight smile, as if he already knew something you hadn't figured out yet.

"You made it," Tom said.

James almost said something about the traffic on the A1. He stopped himself. He wasn't sure why.

"I made it," he said instead.

Two other cars had already arrived. A woman stood near the entrance of the lodge, holding a glass of water and looking at her phone with the expression of someone trying to decide whether to put it away. She was perhaps forty-five, well dressed, efficient-looking — the kind of person who walked into rooms as though she already owned them. Her name, James would learn, was Diana. Director of Strategy at a pharmaceutical firm. Three hundred people reported to her. She had not taken a proper holiday in four years.

Near the treeline, a man in his fifties sat on a low wooden bench with his arms on his knees and his head bowed slightly forward. He was not looking at anything in particular. His name was Martin. He had built a logistics company from twelve employees to twelve hundred, sold it eighteen months ago for more money than he had imagined possible, and had not known what to do with himself since. His wife had suggested he come. He had agreed in the way that people agree when they have run out of better ideas.

The fourth car arrived just as Tom was handing James a key.

A young man climbed out — younger than the others, mid-thirties perhaps — moving quickly, talking on his phone, holding up one finger to indicate he'd be just a moment. He had the taut, slightly frantic energy of someone who had been running at full speed for so long he had forgotten there was another gear. His name was Patrick. He had founded three companies. Two had failed. The third was about to go public. He had agreed to this retreat because his doctor had used the word burnout and he had decided to prove the doctor wrong.

*Tom collected their phones after dinner. He did it quietly, without drama, placing them in a wooden box on the sideboard. Nobody objected. That, in itself, was something.*

Dinner was simple. Soup, bread, a stew that tasted of something slow-cooked and unhurried. The five of them sat around a long table in the lodge while the forest pressed against the windows.

The conversations, at first, were predictable.

Diana talked about a restructuring she was managing. Martin described the logistics sector with the authority of a man who had spent thirty years in it and wasn't quite sure what to do with that expertise now. Patrick talked fast — about valuations, about his investor calls, about a competitor he was watching. James listened and nodded and heard himself say something about Q3 revenues that landed with a hollow sound he recognised.

Tom said very little. He asked a question here and there. Simple questions, the kind that seemed almost too obvious — and then you noticed that nobody had quite answered them.

At some point James realised he had been talking for forty minutes and hadn't said anything that was true.

He went to bed at ten o'clock.

He lay in the dark listening to the forest and thought: I don't remember the last time I went to bed at ten o'clock.

He was asleep in four minutes.



## **SATURDAY MORNING — THE WEIGHT OF IT**

Tom woke them early. Not with an alarm — he simply appeared in the corridor at half past seven, knocked twice on each door, and said: "Walk. Twenty minutes. Boots if you have them."

The forest in the morning was something else entirely.

The light came through the trees in long pale columns. The ground was soft and dark and smelled of something that James's brain kept trying to name and couldn't. He walked behind Diana, who had exchanged her blazer for a fleece and looked, for the first time, like a person rather than a function. Patrick was ahead of them both, still moving too fast, as though the walk were a meeting he needed to get through.

Martin walked beside Tom at the back. James could hear fragments of their conversation drifting forward through the trees. He couldn't make out the words, only the rhythm — Tom asking, Martin answering slowly, pausing in the middle of sentences as if surprised by what was coming out.

After breakfast Tom sat them down with paper and pens. No laptops. No templates. Just a blank page and a simple instruction:

"Write down what you want to leave behind."

James stared at the page.

He had expected something more complicated. A framework, a matrix, a facilitated discussion with colour-coded sticky notes. This was what executives expected. This was what they paid for — the sophisticated apparatus of professional reflection.

Instead: a blank page and a pen.

Tom gave them three headings. I. We. Them.

*I — things in your own life that drain you. Your habits, your health, the stories you tell yourself.*

*We — tensions in your relationships. What has been left unsaid. What has been left unresolved.*

*Them — the things at work that hollow you out. The decisions you keep not making. The problems you keep not solving.*

The room went quiet.

Not the performative quiet of a meeting where people are pretending to think. Something different. The quiet of people actually going somewhere uncomfortable.

James wrote for twenty minutes without stopping.

He hadn't known there was that much. He hadn't known because he hadn't looked. He had been moving too fast to look — for years, he realised, he had been moving specifically fast enough not to have to look.

When he finally put the pen down, his hand was shaking slightly.

Not from effort. From recognition.

Diana had written three pages. She held them face-down on the table and did not look at anyone for a long time.

Patrick had written half a page and then stopped and stared at the wall. James watched him from across the table. He watched the moment Patrick's jaw tightened and then, slowly, released.

Martin had written almost nothing. He sat with his pen resting on a single sentence. When James tilted his head slightly he couldn't read it, but he could see it was short — five or six words — and that Martin kept returning to it, the way you return to a bruise.



## **SATURDAY AFTERNOON — THE WALK**

Tom took them into the forest after lunch.

Not a guided meditation walk. Not a structured debrief. Just walking.

James found himself beside Diana on a narrow path that wound through the trees. For a while neither of them spoke. The silence between them was not awkward — it was the silence of two people who have looked at something honestly and don't yet know what to say about it.

"How long have you been doing this?" Diana asked. She meant the overwork. The running. James understood immediately.

"Since I was twenty-six," he said. "That's when I became a manager. I told myself I'd slow down once I made director. Then once I made MD. Then once we hit the revenue target. Then once—" He stopped.

"Once once once," Diana said.

"Yes."

She nodded as though he'd confirmed something she already knew about herself.

Further up the path, Patrick had fallen back from the front of the group. He was walking slowly now — the first time James had seen him move slowly — with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground.

Tom appeared beside him without any particular drama. He didn't say anything immediately. He walked with Patrick for three or four minutes in silence, and then said something — James couldn't hear what — and Patrick stopped walking entirely.

He stood still in the middle of the path.

Then he started moving again. Slower still.

Martin walked alone at the back. He had that quality some people have of carrying their solitude like a piece of furniture — something heavy, something they'd stopped noticing the weight of because they'd been carrying it so long.



## **SATURDAY EVENING — WHAT GETS CARRIED**

Around five o'clock something changed.

James noticed it first in the quality of the light — or thought he did. Later he decided it wasn't the light at all. It was something in the group itself. The way they moved. The way they occupied the space around the fire. The shoulders had dropped. The sentences had shortened. The silences had grown longer and nobody was filling them.

Tom had built a fire outside the lodge. They sat in a rough circle on logs and flat stones as the last of the daylight disappeared and the flames took over.

"Tell us something true," Tom said.

Nobody asked what he meant.

Diana spoke first. She talked about her father. He had been a surgeon — brilliant, driven, admired by everyone who worked with him. He had also been absent for most of her childhood in the specific way that high-functioning people are absent: physically present, emotionally somewhere else entirely. She had decided at the age of twelve that she would be different. She had spent the next thirty-three years becoming him.

The fire crackled.

Nobody said anything. Nobody needed to.

Martin spoke about the sale of his company. Not about the money — about the morning after the deal closed, when he had woken up and lain in bed for two hours because there was nothing that needed him. Twelve hundred people, and not one of them needed him anymore. He had built a machine so good it had made him redundant. He said this without self-pity, but with the careful neutrality of someone who has been sitting with something painful for so long they have made peace with the pain but not yet with the cause.

Patrick was quiet for a long time. Then he said: "I think I've been afraid the whole time." He said it the way people say things they've never said aloud before — quickly, as though they might take it back. "Every company, every pitch, every hire. I thought I was being driven. I think I was just running."

"From what?" Tom asked.

Patrick looked at the fire.

"From what it would mean to stop."

James spoke last. He talked about the collapse — the real one, not the version he'd told his board. Not the 'exhaustion' that appeared in the company announcement. The afternoon in the office when he'd looked at his screen and found it completely meaningless. Not stressful. Not overwhelming. Meaningless — as though someone had quietly removed every reason the work had ever mattered and replaced it with the shell of the same activity. He'd sat there for forty minutes without moving and then called his assistant and said he was leaving early.

He had not told anyone that before. Not his wife. Not his doctor. Not the executive coach the company had provided afterwards, whom he'd charmed successfully for six sessions.

He told it to four people he had met twenty-four hours ago, sitting around a fire in a forest.

*He told it and something in him settled, like sediment finally reaching the bottom of a glass.*

*"There is always something you can do now. Not tomorrow. Not after the next thing. Now." Tom let that sit in the air for a moment. "That's what tonight is about. Not understanding. Action."*

He brought out the wood and the axe without ceremony.

It was Patrick who went first. He stood in front of the chopping block for a moment, took the axe, and swung it. The wood split cleanly. He swung again. And again. By the fourth strike he was no longer thinking about technique.

Diana went next. She was methodical at first — precise, controlled. Then something shifted. The fifth blow landed differently. She stood back and looked at the pieces on the ground and said, very quietly: "Oh."

Martin simply picked up the axe, split the wood in two clean strokes, set the axe down, and walked back to his log by the fire without a word. But when he sat down, he sat differently. Looser. Like a man who has put something down after a very long time.

James took the axe and thought about the board meeting where they had told him the company needed a 'leaner structure' and watched his face while they said it to see if he'd flinch. He swung the axe. He thought about the three o'clock calls that had been scheduled on his calendar for six years without his consent. He swung again. He thought about every

answer he had given that was strategically correct and personally hollow.

He swung until Tom put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good," Tom said. Simply that.

They went back to the fire. Nobody said much. The silence was a different quality now — not the silence of things unsaid, but the silence of things finally, carefully, set down.



## **SUNDAY — DREAMING AGAIN**

James woke at six-thirty without an alarm and lay for a moment not knowing where he was.

Then he remembered.

He lay there a little longer than strictly necessary.

Sunday morning had a different texture entirely. The group moved more slowly. There was no urgency in the way people poured coffee or found their seats. Even Patrick was quiet — not the pressurised quiet of someone suppressing their natural speed, but something more like stillness.

Tom brought out magazines. Glossy ones — travel, architecture, culture, nature. He dropped them on the table without explanation.

"Don't read anything," he said. "Just look. If something pulls at you, take it out. Don't think about why."

James flipped through the pages quickly, the way Tom had said. He found himself pulling out an image of a man standing at the bow of a small sailboat, alone on open water, looking forward. He didn't know why. He set it aside.

He found a photograph of a kitchen table — morning light, coffee, two chairs, a newspaper, nobody in it yet. Something tightened in his chest.

He pulled out a picture of a lecture hall, full of students, with a man at the front drawing something on a whiteboard. He held it for a moment, puzzled, and kept it.

Across the table Diana had stopped. She was staring at an image she'd torn out — a woman in a garden, on her knees in the soil, with her hands in the earth. She was not a woman who gardened. She had never expressed any interest in gardening. But she held that image as though it were important.

"What is it?" James asked.

"I have no idea," Diana said. "But it's something."

They made their collages on large sheets of paper. Slowly, quietly, like people following an instruction they didn't fully understand but had decided to trust. Images were moved and rearranged. Some were discarded. Some, set aside as obviously irrelevant, were retrieved.

When the gluing was done, Tom asked them each to look at what they had made and say one word.

Martin said: "space."

Diana said: "ground."

Patrick looked at his collage — open roads, mountain ridges, a single image of a child's hand in an adult's — and said, very quietly: "enough."

James looked at his sailboat, his empty kitchen table, his lecture hall full of students.

He said: "forward."

*Nobody analysed anyone else's word. Tom had been clear about that. The word was not a conclusion. It was a door, left slightly open.*

In the afternoon they walked to the lake.

The sauna sat on the water like something from a dream — small, wooden, slightly improbable, trailing a thin line of smoke. Inside it was intensely hot and very quiet. Conversation, when it happened at all, was brief and unhurried. Long silences were not filled.

Patrick jumped into the lake twice and came up laughing both times — a real laugh, unguarded, the laugh of someone who had temporarily forgotten the IPO.

Martin sat outside on the small deck for a long time with his feet hanging over the water. He looked, James thought, like a man doing the first thing he had genuinely wanted to do in eighteen months.

Diana came back from her massage and sat without speaking for twenty minutes. Then she said: "I'm going to resign." Nobody asked her to clarify. She hadn't clarified it to herself yet either. But she said it, and it stayed in the air, and nobody challenged it, and that was enough for now.

James floated in the cold water of the lake for three minutes and stared at the sky.

It was a pale, enormous sky.

He had not looked at the sky in — he genuinely could not remember.



## **MONDAY — THE WORK OF CLARITY**

Tom put the framework on the table Monday morning like a map.

I. We. Them.

They had seen it before — on Saturday, when it had been an excavation tool. Now it was a compass.

"What do you want most?" Tom asked. "Not what you should want. Not what the strategy demands. What do you, personally, want most — across all three dimensions?"

James looked at his collage. The sailboat. The empty kitchen. The lecture hall.

*I:* He wanted to sleep. Not just that night — he wanted a life in which sleep was not a luxury or a defeat. He wanted to eat without checking his phone. He wanted to run without a goal, without a tracker, without turning it into another performance metric.

*We:* He wanted to be present for his daughter's remaining years at home. She was fifteen. He had three years. He had been present for approximately six weekends in the last two.

*Them:* He did not know what he wanted to contribute. That was the honest answer. He had been contributing to revenue for twenty years and it had stopped meaning anything. But the lecture hall in the collage kept returning to him. He had mentored two junior managers early

in his career — had spent real time with them, asked them questions, watched them grow — and it had been the most satisfying professional experience of his life. He had never thought about why. He was thinking about it now.

*"Which choice contributes most to I, We and Them together?" It was a deceptively simple question. James sat with it for a long time. The answer, when it came, was not complicated. It was just very different from the life he was currently living.*

The presentations happened late in the afternoon.

Tom had given them a template — a single A3 sheet with four questions printed on it. *Who are you? What matters? What do you want to create? What is your next step?* They had an hour to prepare.

Martin went first. He stood up with the bearing of a man who had given a thousand presentations and the expression of a man who had never given one like this. He talked about selling the company and the silence that came after. He talked about his wife, who had suggested the retreat, and who had known for two years what he was only just beginning to understand. He wanted to build something again — not a company, necessarily, but something. Something that required him. He was going to call his wife that evening.

When he sat down he said: "That took me ninety seconds. I have no idea why it took me eighteen months."

Patrick talked about the IPO. He was going to see it through — that hadn't changed. But he was going to change how he saw it through. He named three behaviours he was going to stop. They were specific and honest and cost him something to say. Then he said: "After the float, I'm going to take three months off. Not one month. Three." He said it as though announcing a board decision. Nobody challenged it.

Diana was brief. She had made a decision — a real one, not a vague intention. She was going to have a conversation with her chairman that she had been postponing for two years. She described what she would say. She described what he would likely say back. She had prepared for the counter-arguments the way she prepared for everything: thoroughly. "The difference," she said, "is that this time I know what I actually want. That's never been true before."

James spoke last.

He looked at his collage for a moment before he began. Then he looked up.

He talked about the collapse — the real one. He told the same story he'd told by the fire, but this time he told it as a beginning rather than an ending. He talked about the three years his daughter had at home and what he was going to do with them. He talked about the mentoring — about the two managers from twenty years ago and what it had felt like to watch someone figure something out with your help.

He was going to step back from the MD role. Not immediately — not next week — but within eighteen months. He was going to work with Tom on the transition. He was going to find out what the lecture hall meant.

"I don't have a plan," he said. "I have a direction. That's new."

Nobody applauded. It wasn't that kind of moment. Tom simply looked at him for a moment and said: "Good."

The same word he had used by the woodpile.

James decided it was enough.



## **TUESDAY — LEAVING**

The last morning was quieter than the first.

Not the quiet of exhaustion. The quiet of people who have found a kind of stillness and are not yet ready to let the world break it.

Tom ran them through the final exercise after breakfast. The framework again, but now as an action plan. *What will you start? What will you stop? What conversations need to happen? What experiments will you begin?*

Six weeks, Tom told them. Everything gets a six-week deadline. And in six weeks they would meet again — not here, but somewhere — and they would report back.

He also said, almost in passing, as he handed back their phones: "Some of you will find it useful to keep writing after today. Not reports. Just thinking on paper. A journal. Don't make

it complicated."

James looked at his phone. Eleven notifications. He put it in his pocket without opening any of them.

James wrote four things on the action plan sheet. He looked at them for a while. They were not complicated things. They did not require a consultant or a strategy deck or a weekend offsite. They required only that he do them — and that he keep doing them when the momentum of ordinary life tried to pull him back.

He folded the paper and put it in his jacket pocket.

The farewells were longer than the introductions had been. That was always the way. You arrive as categories — the overworked MD, the driven strategist, the founder who can't slow down, the man who sold everything and doesn't know what comes next — and you leave as people. Flawed, clearer, slightly lighter people, but people.

Martin shook James's hand and held it for an extra second. "Call me," he said. "If you figure out the lecture hall."

"You'll be the first to know," James said.

Tom walked him to his car.

"In Portugal," James said, "when you asked me that question — on the terrace, the first afternoon — what made you think to ask it?"

Tom considered this. "You were talking about everything except what was wrong," he said. "That's usually the sign."

James thought about his Q3 revenues and his board meetings and the forty minutes at his desk when the work had gone meaningless.

"That's what you saw from the outside?"

"From the outside it was quite clear."

James got into the car. He sat for a moment before starting the engine.

The forest was the same as it had been on Friday evening — dark at the edges, patient, indifferent in the way that only very old things are indifferent. It had seen people arrive burdened and leave lighter before. It would see it again.

He thought about his daughter. About the three years. About the particular quality of a kitchen table in the morning when there is nothing that needs doing yet.

He started the engine.

He did not turn the radio on.

