

CHAPTER ONE

The Terrace

Portugal. Eighteen months earlier.

The doctor had used the word rest.

James Rush had nodded in the way he nodded at information he intended to process later, when he had more time. The doctor had apparently anticipated this response, because she had added: "I mean it, James. Not a long weekend. Not working from the pool. Actual rest. Ten days minimum. Two weeks if you can manage it."

"I'll see what I can do," he had said.

She had looked at him over her glasses with the expression of a woman who had heard that particular sentence from that particular kind of man many times before.

He had gone to Portugal because Sarah had booked it. She hadn't consulted him — had simply booked it, left the confirmation on his keyboard, and said: "Two weeks. Both of us. I've told your assistant." He had looked at the confirmation for a long moment and discovered he had no counter-argument that didn't sound absurd.

So Portugal.

A small hotel above the coast, white walls and terracotta tiles and a terrace that looked out over water so blue it seemed slightly implausible. The kind of place where time moved differently — not faster or slower, but sideways, in a way that made the calendar feel irrelevant.

He had been there for four days and had not rested at all.

He had worked from the pool on the first day. On the second, he had taken three calls before breakfast and spent the afternoon in the room with his laptop on the bed and the shutters half-closed and the sound of the sea coming through the gap. On the third day Sarah had said nothing, which was worse than if she'd said something. On the fourth day he had sat on the terrace with a coffee going cold in front of him and stared at the ocean and felt, with a clarity that frightened him slightly, absolutely nothing.



THE TERRACE — DAY FOUR

He didn't notice the man at the next table at first.

He became aware of him gradually — the way you become aware of something quiet. Not through any particular action, but through the quality of stillness. The man was reading. Not scrolling, not skimming, not holding a phone. Reading an actual book, with a coffee and a glass of water, in the full unhurried manner of someone who has nowhere else to be and is not troubled by this fact.

James found this faintly irritating.

He was perhaps ten years older than James — early sixties, perhaps, though it was difficult to tell. He was dressed simply: linen shirt, no watch that James could see. He had the particular ease of posture that comes not from laziness but from a kind of deep internal settlement, as if at some point in his life he had put something heavy down and decided not to pick it up again.

After a while the man looked up from his book, glanced at James's cold coffee, and said — without preamble, without introduction — "The view doesn't work if you're not actually looking at it."

James looked at him.

"I'm looking at it," he said.

"You're facing it," the man said, pleasantly. "There's a difference."

James should have found this impertinent. He had the instinct to find it impertinent. But there was something in the way the man said it — without judgment, almost with affection, as if pointing out that James had his shirt on inside out — that made irritation impossible.

"Tom," the man said, and extended a hand across the gap between the tables.

"James."

"Here for long?"

"Two weeks," James said. "Apparently."

Tom smiled slightly at the 'apparently' and returned to his book.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. It was not an uncomfortable silence. James was slightly surprised to find it was not an uncomfortable silence.

"What do you do?" he asked eventually. It was the question he always asked. It was the only opening move he knew.

Tom appeared to consider this genuinely, as though it were a more interesting question than it sounded.

"I help people think," he said. "Specifically, I help people who are very good at thinking about everything else think about themselves."

James waited for more. There wasn't more. Tom went back to his book.



THE FIRST QUESTION

They had dinner together that evening, the three of them — Tom was travelling alone — and it was the kind of dinner that James had forgotten existed. No agenda. No networking calculus. No subtle competition about whose company was more interesting. Tom asked questions with the unhurried attention of a man for whom other people's answers were genuinely the most interesting thing in the room.

He asked Sarah about her work — she ran a small architecture practice, had been running it for eleven years — and listened to her answer as though architecture were the most fascinating subject he'd encountered. He asked about specific projects. He asked what she was most proud of. He asked what she wished she'd done differently.

Sarah talked for twenty minutes without once glancing at James to check whether she was being boring.

James watched this and thought: when did I last ask her those questions?

He knew the answer. He didn't say it.

The next morning Tom was on the terrace again when James came down. Coffee, book, water. The implausible blue ocean.

James sat at his table. Ordered coffee. Opened his laptop.

Tom said nothing. He didn't look up. After perhaps ninety seconds James closed the laptop and put it on the chair beside him.

He wasn't sure why he did it. He did it.

They sat in the morning quiet for a while. A fishing boat moved slowly across the bay. The sound of the hotel kitchen starting up drifted out from somewhere behind them.

"Can I ask you something?" Tom said.

"Go ahead."

"When was the last time you did something that wasn't in service of something else?"

James frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Exercise, for example. Do you run?"

"Yes."

"Is it for your health? Or to hit a target? Or to manage stress so you can work better?"

James opened his mouth. Closed it.

"Or do you run because you enjoy running?" Tom said. "Those are different things."

James looked out at the water.

He ran for the Garmin data. He'd been running for the Garmin data for six years without noticing it.

"That's not a small thing," Tom said. "When everything becomes instrumental — when every activity is in service of something else — you eventually lose track of what the something else is actually for."

"So what do I do about that?" James asked. He asked it in the tone he used for practical problems — brisk, solution-oriented, ready to receive an action item.

Tom looked at him with something that might have been amusement.

"You could start by finishing your coffee while it's still warm," he said.

James looked at his coffee. He picked it up and drank it. It was warm.

The boat had reached the far side of the bay.

He watched it until it disappeared around the headland.

He could not remember the last time he had watched something to its conclusion simply because he wanted to see where it went.



WHAT WAS WRONG

It was on the sixth day that James told Tom about the collapse.

Not all of it — not yet. But the outline of it.

They had been walking along the cliff path above the town, the late afternoon light turning everything amber, the sea a long way below and entirely calm. Tom walked at the slightly infuriating pace of a man who has nowhere to be, and James had given up trying to set the pace and had simply matched him.

"There was an afternoon," James said. He stopped. Started again. "About eight months ago. I was at my desk and I looked at my screen and I felt—" He searched for the word. "Nothing. Literally nothing. Not stressed. Not overwhelmed. Those I knew how to handle. This was different. It was like the — the meaning had just quietly left. Everything was still there but the reason for it had gone."

Tom nodded. He did not appear alarmed or surprised. He appeared to be listening the way you listen when you've been waiting for someone to get to the real thing.

"How long had it been building?" he asked.

James thought about this honestly. "Years," he said. "I think years. I just—" He made a gesture that meant: I was moving too fast to notice.

"What did you do that afternoon?"

"I left. I told my assistant I was leaving early and I went home and I sat in my car in the driveway for forty minutes before I went inside."

"What did you think about? In the car?"

James had never been asked this. Not by his doctor, not by the company coach, not by Sarah — he hadn't told Sarah the full version. Nobody had asked what he had thought about in the car.

"My father," he said, slowly. "I thought about my father. He was an engineer. He designed bridges. Actual bridges — infrastructure, things that existed in the world and that people used. I remember as a child visiting one of them once and he showed me this specific joint — a hinge point in the structure — and explained how the whole bridge moved around it. He was so—" James stopped. "He was so pleased with it. Not proud. Pleased. There's a difference. He just loved it. He loved the thing he made."

The path curved. Below them the town was beginning to light up in the dusk.

"And?" Tom said.

"And I realised I couldn't remember the last time I felt that about anything I'd done," James said. "Not pleased. Not the way he was pleased. I've been successful. I've hit targets and made acquisitions and grown divisions. But pleased—" He shook his head.

Tom didn't offer a solution. He didn't reframe or redirect or suggest a framework. He simply walked alongside the admission and let it exist.

After a while he said: "What would please you? If you could design it from scratch — not what's realistic, not what the next logical step is — what would actually please you?"

"I don't know," James said.

"That's the right answer," Tom said. "Most people in your position have forgotten how to ask the question. The fact that you don't know means you're asking it honestly."

They walked in silence for a while.

"How do I find out?" James asked.

Tom looked at him. "That takes longer than a conversation," he said. "But I think you're ready for the longer version."



THE LAST MORNING

On the last morning in Portugal James came down to the terrace at seven o'clock.

Tom was already there. Coffee, book, water. The ocean. The fishing boats.

They didn't speak for a long time. This had become, over two weeks, a thing they did: sitting in comfortable quiet, watching the light change on the water, not requiring the silence to be filled.

James had not opened his laptop on the terrace since the second morning.

He had noticed this about four days in and had been faintly astonished by it.

"I have a question," James said.

"Go ahead."

"The people you work with — do they figure it out? Do they actually change?"

Tom was quiet for a moment.

"Some do," he said. "The ones who are genuinely ready. Not ready in the sense of wanting things to be different — everyone wants things to be different. Ready in the sense of being willing to look honestly at what's actually there."

"And the others?"

"They have a good experience and go back to their lives," Tom said, without judgment. "That happens too. It's not a failure. Sometimes people need to hear something three or four times before they're ready to act on it."

James looked at the ocean.

"I think I'm ready," he said.

"I know," Tom said. "That's why I told you about the retreat."

James picked up his coffee.

It was still warm.

He had been making a point of drinking it while it was still warm. It was a small thing. He had decided small things were not nothing.

Sarah appeared in the doorway of the terrace with her sunglasses on, looking at the two of them with the expression of a woman who has watched her husband slowly return to himself over fourteen days and is not going to say anything about it in case saying something ruins it.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning," they both said.

She sat down. Ordered coffee. Looked at the water.

The three of them sat on the terrace in the morning sun as the fishing boats went out and the town below them woke up and the day became itself.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

It was, James thought, one of the finest mornings of his adult life.

He could not have explained why. That was the point.

