

CHAPTER THREE

Six Weeks Later

What actually changed.

Tom had chosen a restaurant in the centre of the city — one of those places that is neither too formal nor too casual, with good light and tables far enough apart that you can speak without being overheard. He arrived first, as he always did, and ordered water and waited.

They arrived over the following twenty minutes, each with the slightly tentative air of people who share an unusual thing and are not sure yet how it will feel to be back in the ordinary world together.

Martin arrived first, with the bearing — Tom noticed immediately — of a man carrying less than he had been. He looked well. He had put on a small amount of weight, which was a good sign. He had been too thin at the retreat, in the way that people are thin when they have forgotten to eat because they have also forgotten to want anything.

Diana came in just behind him, talking on her phone, then caught herself, looked at the phone, and put it in her bag. She looked at Tom with a slight smile that said: *I noticed that I did it. Progress.*

Patrick arrived at exactly the time he'd said he would — to the minute — which was already different. Patrick at the retreat would have arrived twelve minutes early and been checking his email while he waited.

James came last. He was not late. He had simply, Tom suspected, taken the long way.



WHAT SIX WEEKS HAD DONE

Tom's rule for follow-up sessions was simple: no performance. No presenting of results. Just honest accounting.

"Tell us what you said you'd do," he said, when they had ordered. "And then tell us what actually happened."

Martin went first, as he had at the retreat.

He had called his wife from the retreat — that first evening, after the presentations, using the phone Tom had returned to him for exactly that purpose. He had told her what he'd told the group by the fire. Not a summary. The real version. She had listened without interrupting, which was not her usual approach, and at the end had said: "I've been waiting two years for that conversation."

They had spent a weekend in the mountains. Just the two of them, no agenda, no restaurants booked, no plan beyond being somewhere that wasn't home. It had been, Martin said, the best weekend he could remember. He said this simply, without sentimentality.

He had also — and this was the thing he'd been less sure about — started meeting with a former colleague who ran a small foundation working on supply chain sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa. "He keeps asking me to get involved," Martin said. "I've been saying no for two years on the basis that I'm too busy. I'm not too busy. I've never been too busy. I just — didn't believe it counted as real work."

He had said yes. He was flying to Nairobi in three weeks.

He had also — and he mentioned this last, almost as an aside — started keeping a journal. Tom had said something on Tuesday morning about thinking on paper, and Martin had recognised it immediately as something he had always needed and never given himself permission to do. He had bought a notebook at the airport on the way home.

He had filled one notebook in six weeks and started a second. He mentioned this last, almost as an aside. That was the point.

"What do you write about?" Patrick asked.

Martin thought about this. "What I notice," he said. "That's all. What I notice."

"That's the lecture hall," James said quietly.

Martin looked at him. "What?"

"Nothing," James said. "Go on."

Diana had done the thing she said she would do. She had had the conversation with her chairman. It had not gone the way she'd planned — it had gone better.

He had listened. Actually listened, not in the way that executives listen in order to prepare their response, but in the way that someone listens when the person talking has decided to say something real. He had asked her to take three months before making any final decision.

She had agreed — not because she was uncertain, but because three months was reasonable and she was a reasonable person and she had spent twenty years confusing reasonableness with defeat.

"What changed?" Tom asked.

"I knew what I wanted," Diana said. "That sounds obvious. But I've sat in a hundred negotiating rooms and I've never once started from that position. I've always started from what I could get. This time I started from what I actually wanted and worked backwards." She paused. "It's a completely different conversation."

Patrick had not taken three months off.

He said this as though announcing a verdict against himself, and then held up a hand before anyone could respond. "I know. But here's what I did do." He had taken every Friday off for six weeks. Not working from home. Off. He had spent three of those Fridays with his daughter, who was seven, doing things she had chosen — which had included, in sequence, a pottery class, an inexplicably long visit to a petting zoo, and an afternoon building a cardboard castle that had taken four hours and had collapsed twice and that he had found, bewilderingly, to be the most satisfying construction project he had been involved in since his first startup.

"She kept asking me if I was having fun," Patrick said. "Every twenty minutes. 'Daddy, are you having fun?' I didn't know how to answer that at first. By the cardboard castle I could answer it."

"What was the answer?" Diana asked.

"Yes," Patrick said. "Just yes. It was a complete answer."

He had also — and this was the practical part — restructured his senior team. He had promoted two people he'd been underutilising and removed one person he'd been carrying for eighteen months because the confrontation had seemed like too much work.

"The carrying was more work," he said. "I'd been calculating it wrong the whole time."

The IPO was on track. He was still nervous about it. "But it's a normal nervous," he said. "Not the kind where you can't feel your hands."



JAMES

James had been listening to the others with the particular quality of attention he'd been practising for six weeks — not the attention of a man assembling information for later use, but the attention of a man who is simply present for what is happening.

Tom let the pause sit for a moment before looking at him.

"James."

James looked at the table for a moment. Then he looked up.

"I went home and I told Sarah the real version of the collapse," he said. "The full one. The forty minutes in the car. What I'd thought about. The bridge." He paused. "She already knew. Not the details, but — she knew. She'd been watching me not-know it for three years. She said the kindest thing I've ever been told, which was: 'I'm glad you caught up.'"

He had told his board he was beginning a transition. Not a resignation — a transition, with an eighteen-month timeline and a proper succession plan. Two of the three board members had nodded with the expression of people who were surprised it had taken this long. The third had tried to negotiate. James had not negotiated.

"How did that feel?" Diana asked.

"Like putting something down," James said. The table recognised the phrase. Martin smiled.

He had called the two managers he'd mentored twenty years ago. One was now a CFO in Amsterdam. The other ran her own consultancy in Edinburgh. He had told them — simply, without making it too large a thing — that mentoring them had been the most satisfying work of his career, and that he'd been thinking about why for six weeks and thought he finally understood it.

The CFO in Amsterdam had said: "I think about those months with you all the time. I've modelled half my management approach on what you taught me." He'd said it so matter-of-factly that it had taken James a moment to understand what he was hearing.

"I didn't teach you anything," James had said. "I just asked you questions."

"Yes," the CFO had said. "That's what I mean."

He had booked a sailing course. Five days, on actual water, with an instructor who would tell him what to do and a boat that would require his full attention and a horizon that didn't care about Q3 revenues.

He was going in September. His daughter had asked if she could come. He had said yes without calculating whether it was convenient.

"And the journal?" Tom said. He asked it the way he asked most things — quietly, without loading the question.

James was quiet for a moment.

He had resisted it for three weeks after the retreat. He had recognised the resistance for what it was — the same mechanism that had kept him moving too fast to look at anything for the better part of a decade — and had resisted it anyway, because old habits are not broken by understanding them. They are broken by something else: a different moment, a different mood, an evening at a station with twenty minutes to spare and a small dark notebook in a shop window.

He had bought it on a Tuesday. He had written four words on the first page. He could not now remember what they were. He had filled twelve pages by midnight.

"It doesn't feel like writing," he said. "It feels like arriving somewhere I've already been."

Diana looked at him. "That's exactly it," she said quietly.

"And the lecture hall?" Martin said.

James glanced at him. "Still working on it," he said. "But I think I know what it is now. I'm going to start slowly. One person at a time. See what it feels like."

Tom said nothing. He looked at James with the expression he'd had on the terrace in Portugal eighteen months ago — the one that said: *I can already see where this is going.*



AFTER DINNER

They stayed for three hours.

Nobody looked at their phone. Tom noticed this but said nothing about it.

At some point the conversation moved away from the retreat entirely and became simply four people talking — about their lives, their families, things that had nothing to do with strategy or performance or the careful architecture of professional identity. Martin made a joke about the petting zoo that made Patrick laugh until he had to put down his glass. Diana described the architect her firm had hired for a renovation and the three of them spent twenty minutes giving her advice she hadn't asked for, which she accepted with the grace of someone who has recently become better at receiving things.

James sat in the middle of this and felt something he recognised from the terrace in Portugal. The sense of being exactly where he was, in exactly the room he was in, with no part of his attention elsewhere.

He had spent most of his adult life somewhere slightly ahead of himself. Planning, anticipating, moving toward the next thing before the current thing was finished. It was efficient. It was also, he now understood, a way of never quite arriving anywhere.

He was arriving.

Slowly, imperfectly, with a lot of work still to do.

But arriving.

Outside the restaurant the city was doing what cities do at nine o'clock on a Tuesday evening — purposeful, indifferent, full of people moving toward their own versions of the same questions. James stood on the pavement for a moment after the others had said their goodbyes, looking at none of it in particular.

He took out his phone. There were eleven notifications. He looked at them.

He put the phone back in his pocket.

He walked to the car park. He drove home. He parked in the driveway and did not sit in the car.

He went inside.

Sarah was in the kitchen with a cup of tea and a book, and she looked up when he came in, and he sat down at the table and said: "How was your day?"

She looked at him for a moment.

"Good," she said. "How was yours?"

"Good," he said. "Really good, actually."

She put the book face-down on the table.

They talked until midnight.

