

CHAPTER I

March 3 — Vallière, Day 1

Elena woke before she was supposed to. For a few seconds, she had no idea where she was. It wasn't the familiar morning confusion of waking in a hotel room and needing a moment to match the ceiling, the bed, the unfamiliar curtains to whatever city you had fallen asleep in. This was different. It was too quiet. She lay still and listened. No cars. No distant sirens. No low mechanical hum of air-conditioning buried somewhere in the walls. No phone vibrating on the nightstand, because there was no phone on the nightstand. No watch either. They had taken that too.

Not taken, she corrected herself. She had handed it over. Voluntarily. A small analog clock hung on the wall opposite the bed, white face, black hands. It took her longer than it should have to make sense of them. 5:47.

In Greenwich, it would be just before midnight. Adrian would still be awake. For the past few months, he rarely went to bed before one, sometimes two. He said selling a company wasn't a nine-to-five job, and half the people he needed were on another continent anyway. Her first instinct was to picture him in his study. Door half closed. Shirt open at the collar. One hand on the mouse, the other resting beside a glass of water he hadn't touched in hours. Contracts, presentations, numbers spread across three monitors—numbers Elena once would have known by heart.

Not anymore.

She opened her eyes fully.

The room at Vallière was almost uncomfortably perfect. It wasn't large, but every inch of it felt considered. Instead of hotel polish,

it had the quiet confidence of a private mountain residence: matte surfaces, heavy textiles, dim lights recessed into pale wood. The air carried a faint scent of cedar and something herbal she couldn't identify. Light timber. Wool rug. Stone around a low fireplace that looked as though someone had cut it directly from the mountain. Two black-and-white photographs of alpine peaks. Bed linens without a single crease. A ceramic pitcher of water on the nightstand. A glass.

No phone. No laptop. No handbag. Her passport, credit cards, and everything else of value she had arrived with were in secure storage.

"So you don't have to think about them," the woman at reception had said the night before in a soft French accent.

At the time, it had sounded almost luxurious. Not having to think about her own passport. Elena sat up and placed her feet on the warm floor. Beyond the curtains, dawn was beginning in shades of blue. She pulled them open. For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

The mountains stood so close they looked unreal. Dark slopes rose above the valley, their peaks catching the first light. Fog filled the lower ground in a smooth, dense layer, like water in an enormous lake. Across the valley, streaks of snow still clung between the trees. Farther down, spruce forest covered the slopes so densely that from a distance it looked like a single dark-green surface. When the fog shifted, Elena caught a glimpse of a narrow strip of road. A few hundred yards later it disappeared again between the rocks. She wasn't even sure whether they had come that way yesterday.

From the room, it was impossible to tell where the Vallière property ended and the rest of the valley began. No houses. No town. Only the roofs of several Vallière buildings scattered below the slope and the paths connecting them. The main building had a broad stone roof and a glass façade facing the mountains. Two others had been built so discreetly into the hillside that at first Elena had mistaken them for part of the forest.

There was no visible fence around the property. Quite the opposite. The openness of the landscape made a fence seem unnecessary. She placed her palm against the cold glass. This was exactly what she had wanted. Silence. Six weeks in which nobody needed her. No emails. No invitations. No questions about Adrian. No questions about Veyra. No calls from people who began with I don't want to bother you, but... and then bothered her for twenty-five minutes.

Nobody wanted anything from her. For the first time in a very long time. She should have felt relieved. And she did. At least she thought she did. At seven, the bell beside the door sounded. A short, discreet chime. A young woman stood in the hallway wearing navy pants and a pale sweater. Her hair was pulled back. No name tag. No uniform.

“Good morning, Mrs. Ward. I’m Camille. I’ll take you to breakfast, and then to your first consultation.”

Elena looked at the clock. 7:03. Breakfast wasn’t until seven-thirty. Camille only smiled. “We have time.” There was no reproach in it. Still, Elena felt the old pressure gathering in her chest—the same unpleasant tightening that had appeared more and more often in recent months whenever she had the sense that she should have arrived earlier, remembered something, known something, answered someone. She asked for five minutes. Camille nodded and remained outside the door.

For a moment, Elena found that irritating. Then she reminded herself of the previous day: nine hours in the air, two hours by car from Geneva, and the final half hour on a mountain road so steep and winding that she had eventually stopped looking out the window. Of course someone was escorting her during the first few days.

That was all.

She changed into beige pants, a cashmere sweater, and sneakers. She left the makeup in her suitcase. When she looked in the mirror, her own face startled her for a second. She looked tired. Not sick. Not tragic. Just older than the version of herself she carried around in her head.

Forty-two.

At forty-two, her mother had worn thick dark hair to her shoulders, worked six days a week, and whenever Elena, as a teenager, complained that she was tired, answered in Russian with something that translated roughly to: So you’re tired. And now what? Elena touched the skin beneath her eyes.

“And now what,” she said quietly.

She turned toward the door and stepped into the hallway. Camille was still there. The dining room had a wall of glass facing the valley. It was long and narrow, pale wood underfoot, the tables set far apart. There was no music. No hiss of an espresso machine, no clatter of a hotel bar. The staff moved almost silently. Elena had expected a

buffet, but everything was served at the table. Somehow that made the place feel more expensive than a five-star hotel precisely because nobody seemed interested in proving how expensive it was.

She wasn't given coffee. The first week focused on detox, and caffeine was apparently one of many ordinary parts of life included in that definition. Elena sat by the window and made herself eat more slowly. At the next table, a woman around her age was reading a book. Several tables farther away, an older woman in a white turtleneck ate grapefruit with such deliberate slowness that she seemed to have assigned a precise amount of time to each bite.

Nobody was in a hurry. Elena realized she was. She slowed down. That was why she had come. Her first consultation was in the building across the courtyard. They crossed a small open plaza facing the valley. A low pine grew in the center, surrounded by stone benches. The buildings combined old gray stone with large sheets of glass; Vallière clearly wanted to look more like an expensive private retreat than a medical facility.

If Elena hadn't known why she was there, nothing in the architecture would have told her. Camille left her outside Dr. Keller's office. For the first time all morning, Elena was alone somewhere other than her room. She had the absurd thought that she could simply turn around and walk the other way. It nearly made her laugh.

Dr. Keller was a small woman in her fifties, with short gray hair and a face that managed to look stern and kind at the same time. Her office was as restrained as the rest of Vallière. Pale walls. Bookshelves. A low table. A large window overlooking the forest. No desk separating doctor from patient. The only object that drew attention was the dark tablet resting on Keller's knees. Elena chose the chair closest to the door. She realized it only after she sat down. She wondered whether that was the sort of thing Keller noticed too. If it was, she said nothing.

The first ten minutes were exactly what Elena had expected. The flight. Sleep. Food. The drive. What she hoped to get from the stay.

"I want to stop," Elena said.

Keller asked what that meant. Elena didn't know.

"I assume that's why I'm here."

Then they moved to the exhaustion. Elena dated it back several months. Keller noted that Adrian had described something closer to a

year. There was nothing unusual about that. Adrian had completed part of the intake paperwork. Elena knew that. At least she thought she had known it. Keller mentioned Sunday afternoons. Anxiety before the beginning of a new week. Occasional nausea. Elena went still. All of it was true. She just wasn't sure she had ever told Adrian in quite those terms.

Of course she might have. Over the past several months, she had told him plenty of things she later couldn't remember saying.

"I didn't realize you'd spoken to him in that much detail."

Keller explained that during intake they also gathered collateral information from people close to the client. It helped them see the whole picture. When Elena asked how many times they had spoken with Adrian, Keller lowered her eyes to the tablet for a moment and said she didn't have the exact number in front of her. Elena nodded. She wasn't sure why she disliked the answer. Maybe because Keller did, quite literally, have the tablet in front of her.

Then they continued. Sleep. Work. Marriage. The feeling that she could never switch off. Gradually, Elena relaxed. Keller was good. She didn't put words in Elena's mouth. She didn't make dramatic conclusions. When Elena said that for the past few months she had felt as if she were living a few seconds behind her own life, Keller simply asked her to describe what that felt like. This was exactly what Elena needed.

As the hour drew to a close, Keller shut the tablet.

"One more thing. Are you still having those concerns about your husband's company?"

Elena stopped leaning back in the chair.

"What concerns?"

"About Veyra."

There was a pause. Very brief. But Elena caught it. Keller suggested they could come back to the subject later. Elena shook her head. "No. You asked me."

Keller reopened the tablet.

"I mean the concerns you expressed before admission regarding your husband's business affairs."

"Expressed to whom?"

Keller looked at her.

And Elena knew the answer before she heard it.

THE CHOICE WAS YOURS

“Your husband.”

* * *