

# **SLIPSTREAM XERUM DXXV**

**- A NOVEL**

**by inky**

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## **INTRODUCTION: LATERNENTRÄGER**

**Wenceslas Mine, Lower Silesia, 1944**

**The hum was not a sound. It was a pressure, a sickness in the bone, a metallic taste that flooded the mouth.**

**For Stanislaw Kerner, a Polish engineer dragged from the ranks of Gross-Rosen, it was the sound of Hell being tuned. He stood in the concrete**

**observation bunker, his hands shaking, forced to calibrate the electrical systems for Project Laternenträger—the "Lantern Bearer".**

**In the center of the subterranean chamber, suspended in a cage of black steel, hung Die Glocke.**

**It was three meters tall, a dull metallic bell, ceramic-plated and cold. Inside, two lead-lined cylinders began to spin in opposite directions. They were filled with a substance the SS scientists, in their neat, precise notebooks, called Xerum 525—a violet-colored, liquid-metallic poison.**

**The Bell's pale blue glow intensified. The pressure in the chamber became a physical weight.**

**Behind a lead-glass shield, SS-Obergruppenführer**

**Jakob Sporrenberg watched, his face impassive.**

**"Bring the test subjects," he ordered.**

**The subjects were not Jewish prisoners. They were Russians, Poles, Gypsies—healthy stock, chained inside the test chamber. As the Bell's frequency climbed, they began to scream.**

**Kerner watched, his engineer's mind cataloging the horror with a detachment that kept him sane. The prisoners' hair fell out. Their skin turned grey, like ash. They clawed at their own throats, their eyes bursting from a pressure that came from within.**

**The SS doctors noted it all: vertigo, muscle spasms, the "disintegration of organic tissue". They were, Kerner realized, "burning from the inside".**

**They did not simply die. They were erased.**

**But this was not a weapon. Sporrenberg and his scientists were not trying to kill. They were trying to transmit.**

**In the final, frantic months of a losing war, this was the Reich's dark miracle. They were not splitting the atom, like the Americans at Los Alamos. They were splitting the soul.**

**The scientists argued, their voices tight with fanaticism and fear. One called it "gravitational distortion". Another, "temporal displacement". But the project's true name was whispered: they were achieving the "transmission of will". They were "scattering consciousness across spacetime", breaking it into fragments that could be seeded into future hosts. A thousand-year Reich that would not be measured in territory, but in**

**bloodlines. An infection that would wait  
generations to reconstitute.**

**In the aftermath of the test, Kerner was sent to  
clean the chamber. The bodies were gone. There  
was only ash.**

**And the ash, he would testify years later, did not  
settle. It moved. It congregated. As if it were still  
seeking something, still trying to become.**

**Months later, as the Red Army closed in,  
Sporrenberg gave his final order. The Bell was not  
to be found. It was evacuated, its principles and its  
masters smuggled along ratlines to South America ,  
its poison already beginning to seep into the  
victorious West through programs like Operation  
Paperclip.**

**The Lantern Bearer was loose. The signal was scattered. And the seeds, planted in the ash of 1945, were waiting patiently to be found.**

## **CHAPTER 1: CITY OF ASH**

**There is always a war. Luke's father, Antanas, had fled his own war, a slow, grinding conflict of Soviet grey against Lithuanian soul. He arrived in Los**

Angeles in 1978 with two hundred dollars, a useless engineering degree from Kaunas, and a faith in America so pure it was almost painful to witness. He saw a city of relentless sun and endless boulevards, a place where a man's work could build something tangible. He'd swung a hammer under that sun for thirty-five years, sending money back to a family he'd never see again, his belief in the promise of this place weathering but never breaking, even as the city itself began to crack apart.

Luke piloted his dented Honda through the ruins of that promise. For three days, the Santa Monica mountains had been on fire, and the city was drowning in the fallout. Ash fell not like rain, but like a soft, persistent snow, a supernatural blizzard

**burying the present. It coated every surface in a uniform grey, a funereal shroud for a dream. This was the war Luke knew: a battle of attrition against a city that demanded everything and gave back only grit and haze. The Los Angeles his father had discovered—a sprawling landscape of opportunity—had been subdivided and sold off, replaced by a vertical city of glass towers for the rich and sprawling tent cities for the dispossessed. The space in between, where people like Luke lived, was shrinking by the day.**

**His prepaid phone buzzed, a frantic, insectile tremor against his thigh. He knew the signature. Ryan, three hundred dollars in the hole and likely jonesing for a lifeline. Luke ignored it. He was ten minutes out from Bill's, and Bill was a man who**

**demanded the kind of singular focus a monk gives  
to his god.**

**Bill's house in Inglewood was a masterpiece of  
suburban camouflage. Beige stucco, dead lawn,  
burglar bars on the windows that were  
indistinguishable from those on every other house.**

**It was a place designed to be unmemorable, a  
strategic void on a map of mediocrity. Luke parked  
two blocks down, a ritual of caution Bill had never  
requested but would certainly expect. The walk was  
a gauntlet of small anxieties, the crunch of his  
boots on the ash-covered pavement sounding  
unnervingly loud.**

**The second knock brought Bill to the door. Never  
the first. Bill was a creature of immutable patterns.  
He was a man built of hard lines and quiet**

**efficiencies, the ghost of a Force Recon Marine still inhabiting the shell of a middle-aged man in a polo shirt and khakis. His time in Panama during Operation Just Cause had burned away everything that wasn't essential, leaving a core of pure, cold survival. The house reflected this: odorless, scent of nothing. No food, no air freshener, no life. It was a sterile processing facility for money and narcotics.**

**“The city’s on fire,” Bill stated.**

**It wasn’t an observation about the news; it was a tactical assessment of the operating environment.**

**“You’re lucky I haven’t relocated.”**

**“Half the city’s always running from something,” Luke replied, the words tasting like the air.**

**Bill's face remained a mask of placid neutrality.**

**Emotion was a vulnerability he could not afford. He moved to the kitchen and returned with the package: two ounces of compressed cocaine, wrapped with a professional's touch. This wasn't street-level junk, stepped on with laxatives and lies. This was clean, institutional-grade product, the kind that moved through global supply chains managed by men who wore suits, not colors. It was a product of the same shadow world Bill had once navigated for the DEA and other, less identifiable agencies.**

**Luke laid out forty crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. Bill recounted them with an economy of motion that was mesmerizing and terrifying.**

**"Ryan called me," Bill said, his voice as flat as a**

**desert horizon. “He was emotional. Emotional people are a liability.” The word ‘liability’ hung in the sterile air, heavy with unspoken consequences.**

**In Bill’s world, liabilities weren’t tolerated; they were neutralized.**

**A knot of ice formed in Luke’s gut. “I’ll handle him.”**

**“See that you do.” Bill opened the door. The transaction was over. The warning had been given.**

**The drive back was a descent into a Bosch painting. Evacuation routes had turned the freeways into arteries of pure panic. The bumper sticker on the Prius in front of him, a collage of religious symbols spelling COEXIST, felt like a cruel joke in a city that was actively devouring itself. He thought of his father, dead at sixty-one from a heart attack,**

**still believing in the dream even as it squeezed the life from him. The ash kept falling, and Luke felt like he was driving through the cremated remains of his father's America.**

## **CHAPTER 2: THE KEY**

**The temporary apartment in Echo Park was a stranger's life, paused. Ash had found its way inside, a fine grey film that deadened the light. Luke placed the brick on the kitchen table. The ritual began, a perverse inheritance from the engineer father he'd so disappointed. Where Antanas had used precision to build, Luke used it to dilute, to stretch, to corrupt. The scale, the**

**razor, the baggies, the bottle of inositol—the tools  
of his specific, corrosive craft.**

**He cracked the brick open with a razor. He  
stopped. The cocaine wasn't the familiar  
compressed powder. It was crystalline, structured  
in translucent rocks that glittered under the weak  
light. This was uncut. Pure. This was what the  
product looked like at the very top of the food  
chain, before the grubby hands of a dozen  
middlemen cut it into oblivion. Bill was sending a  
message, or a test.**

**Quality control. The lie was paper-thin, but  
necessary. The city burning outside, the glacial  
ultimatum in Bill's voice, the gnawing emptiness  
that had become his life—it was a pressure cooker,  
and he needed a release valve. He shaved a tiny,**

**glittering sliver from one of the rocks, crushed it  
into a fine line, and inhaled.**

**It was not a high. It was an electrocution. His heart  
didn't beat; it detonated, a frantic, hammering  
explosion against his ribs. The quiet hum of the  
refrigerator became the roar of a 747 engine. Every  
object in the room—the cheap laminate table, the  
water-stained ceiling—leapt into hyper-definition,  
vibrating with a terrible, imminent energy. It was a  
chemical assault, a drill boring directly into his  
brain stem.**

**A primal wave of panic washed over him. He needed  
an anchor in the storm. His trembling hands found  
a dusty bottle in a high cabinet: Hartley & Gibson's  
Cream Sherry. He ripped the cork out, not  
bothering with a glass, and drank, the thick, syrupy**

**liquid a desperate, cloying antidote to the chemical fire in his sinuses.**

**In the crucible of his bloodstream, an alchemy occurred. The sherry didn't kill the high; it transformed it. The jagged, terrifying edges of the cocaine smoothed away, leaving a powerful, frictionless current of thought. His heart settled from a panicked fibrillation to a high-performance thrum. He was still moving at the speed of light, but now he was at the controls.**

**He returned to the table, and the routine of portioning the seventy-three grams calmed him. A restless energy remained. He paced the apartment, ending up in the bedroom, in front of a closet filled with the boxed-up detritus of the former tenant's life. He'd been idly picking through them, but now**

**he dug with purpose. At the bottom of a box of kitchenware, wrapped in yellowed newspaper dated from 1987, he found a plate.**

**It was heavy, a piece of real, vitrified china. The cream-colored glaze was flawless, the thin gold rim radiating a quiet elegance. He turned it over. The green stamp on the back was faded but clear: Lamberton Scammel China. Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York.**

**Made expressly for. The words struck him with the force of a revelation. Nothing in his world was made expressly for anything. His phone was designed for obsolescence, his clothes for a single season, his apartment for a transient market. Everything was a copy of a copy, a disposable echo of a lost original. This plate was an artifact from a different reality,**

**his father's lost America, where things were built  
with purpose and meant to last.**

**He sat back at the kitchen table, the plate in one hand, the sherry glass in the other. He stared at the green lettering, and as the cocaine hummed through his veins, the letters began to pulse in time with his accelerated heart.**

**The room did not fade. It snapped. The flat, grey light from the window was instantly replaced by a warm, honeyed amber. The refrigerator's roar vanished, superseded by the velvet sound of a clarinet weaving a sad, beautiful melody. The air, moments ago stale with ash, now was adorned with expensive perfume, rich Turkish tobacco, and the lingering sweetness of sherry.**

**He was on his feet, though he had no memory of**

**standing. The kitchen was gone. He was in a magnificent, Art Deco lobby, the floor a gleaming expanse of black and white marble. To his left, on a pedestal, was a life-sized sculpture of a woman whose form seemed to be caught in the very act of dissolving into a cloud of smoke. Beside it stood a living woman. Her dark hair was pinned up, revealing the elegant curve of her neck. She wore a dress of deep emerald silk, and her lips were the color of dark cherries. She held a cigarette in one hand, a glass of sherry in the other, and her eyes—the impossible blue of an autumn sky—were looking directly at him.**

**She took a slow, deliberate drag from her cigarette, the smoke unfurling in the warm air between them. "You look lost," she said, her voice a low, melodic**

**murmur. "Like one of my sculptures before I put  
the finishing touches on it."**

**Luke opened his mouth to reply, but the world tore  
itself away from him, a violent, silent rip in the  
fabric of reality.**

**He was on the frigid linoleum floor of the kitchen,  
gasping as if he'd just been pulled from underwater.  
The plate lay beside him, miraculously intact. The  
grey silence of the apartment pressed in on him,  
broken only by the distant, mournful wail of sirens.  
But the memory—the scent of her perfume, the  
sound of the clarinet, the weight of the air in that  
other place—was branded onto his soul. That  
thirty-second vision had been more real, more  
alive, than the last decade of his life.**

## **CHAPTER 3: THE WEIGHT OF GHOSTS**

**Sleep was a forgotten country. Luke mainlined coffee, the dregs of the cocaine high leaving a metallic taste in his mouth. He fell into the digital rabbit hole of the Hotel Lincoln. It had been real. A twenty-seven-story Art Deco masterpiece at 44th and Eighth, a nexus of big-band glamour that had played host to Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman. It had been gutted in the ‘70s, its soul ripped out during New York’s near-death experience, a casualty of the city’s slide into bankruptcy and decay. But in 1944, it had been the center of a universe.**

**His real phone rang, a jarring intrusion. Carolina. His ex. The woman who had loved the idea of his artistic struggle but couldn't stomach the reality of his failure.**

**"Luke? Are you okay? I saw the evacuation warnings for Echo Park."**

**"I'm fine," he said, the words feeling like a lie.**

**"You don't sound fine. You sound... thin. Disconnected."**

**Disconnected. She had no idea. He was disconnected from her world because he had just touched another. "Just tired."**

**"You're always tired," she sighed, the familiar weapon of her disappointment. "Take care of yourself." She hung up.**

**He had to get back. It was no longer a wish; it was a physical imperative. He assembled the artifacts: the plate, the nearly empty bottle of sherry. The music. He found a playlist on Spotify: Artie Shaw, Live at the Hotel Lincoln, 1944. He put on headphones, turned up the volume, and let the bright, liquid notes of "Begin the Beguine" fill his head. He held the plate, drank the sherry, and waited for the world to shift.**

**Nothing. The music felt hollow, a compressed digital ghost of the real thing. The apartment remained a grey, silent box. He tried for an hour, a mounting desperation turning his experiment into a frantic plea. It wasn't a formula. It had been a perfect, unrepeatable storm.**

**A sharp knock on the door made him jump. A**

**second, harder knock rattled the cheap frame. He shoved the bags of cocaine into a drawer moments before the door opened.**

**Ryan stood there, a wraith in a stained hoodie. He was vibrating with a paranoid energy that filled the small room. He looked past Luke, his eyes darting, hungry, suspicious. They landed on the plate.**

**"What the hell is this?" he rasped, snatching it from the table. "Hotel Lincoln? You selling antiques now? Is this the new hustle you and Bill are cutting me out of?"**

**"Put it down, Ryan. It's nothing."**

**"Bullshit!" Ryan's voice cracked. "Everyone knows you're losing it. Bill thinks you're a liability. Even Carolina called me, said you were spiraling. You're**

**in here with your sherry and your ghost plates and  
you've forgotten the only goddamn rule there is:  
it's about the money! It's always about the money!"**

**He slammed the plate down on the table. The sharp  
crack of china on wood was like a gunshot in the  
tense silence. Ryan stormed out, slamming the  
door behind him. Luke stood trembling, not with  
fear, but with a furious, clarifying rage.**

**Ryan was wrong. He was a prisoner of the world  
that was burning down outside the window. He saw  
only the cage. Luke had just seen the key.**

**He picked up the plate, his hands now steady. He  
poured the last of the sherry. He put on the  
headphones, the volume a wall of sound against the  
dying world. He closed his eyes and focused, not on  
the ritual, but on the destination. On the memory**

**of her face, on the scent of perfume and tobacco,  
on the feeling of being somewhere solid,  
somewhere real. He didn't ask. He demanded.**

**And the world obeyed.**

## **CHAPTER 4: THE CARNIVAL ROOM**

**The shift was seamless this time, a gentle  
dissolving of one reality into another. The grey  
light of the apartment bled into the warm, amber  
glow of the hotel lobby. He was standing at the  
archway to the Carnival Room, the plate in one  
hand, a full glass of sherry in the other. He was  
wearing a grey wool suit that felt substantial and  
real on his shoulders. The band on stage was**

**playing a slow, impossibly romantic version of "Stardust."**

**"I was beginning to think I'd imagined you," a voice said.**

**Emilee. She stood by her sculpture, an island of calm in the swirling, glamorous room. Close up, he could see the faint shadows of exhaustion under her eyes, the quiet tension in her hands as she held her cigarette. She was fighting her own war.**

**"You have a habit of disappearing," she said, her smile a mixture of curiosity and challenge.**

**"I'm Luke," he managed.**

**"Emilee Grant." She gestured to the sculpture. "I made her. Or a version of her. She's about transformation." She looked at him, her gaze sharp**

**and intelligent. "You saw that, didn't you? Most people just see a ghost."**

**"It felt..." Luke began, struggling for the word, "...possible."**

**Her smile softened. "Come. Let me buy you a drink you didn't bring with you."**

**She led him to a small, secluded table. "My friend Betty is a sommelier," she said as they sat. "She says drinking wine is a form of time travel. You're tasting a specific year's sun and rain. You're drinking the past." She looked at the plate Luke had carefully placed on the white linen. "Maybe some objects are like that. Made so expressly for a time and place that they hold a piece of it inside them forever."**

**He looked at her, at the fierce intelligence in her eyes. This was no dream. This was a woman of substance and sorrow, an artist trying to sculpt meaning from her own private grief. He felt a pang for the musician he was supposed to have been, before he'd traded his art for a scale and a burner phone.**

**She saw the look on his face. "What do you do,**

**Luke from... wherever you're from?"**

**"I was a musician," he said, the past tense hanging in the air.**

**"Was?"**

**Before he could answer, he felt it. Not a gentle fade, but a violent, physical pull. A hook behind his sternum, yanking him back across eighty years of**

**time. The warm light of the Carnival Room began to flicker and dim.**

**"No," he gasped, reaching out, his fingers brushing her arm. "Not yet."**

**Panic flared in her eyes as she saw the terror in his. "What is it?"**

**"I'm being pulled back!" The room was dissolving into a grey vortex.**

**"Then remember!" she commanded, her voice cutting through the chaos, sharp and urgent. "Don't just feel it, memorize it! The sounds, the air! My name is Emilee Grant! My studio is on 23rd Street! Find me! Come back!"**

**Her voice was the last anchor, the last piece of reality he held onto as the vibrant, living world of**

**1944 was ripped away, leaving him in the silent, ashen tomb of his apartment. The plate was in his hand again, as it always was when he returned.**

## **CHAPTER 5: TWO SIDES OF A THIN WALL**

**EMILEE - 1944**

**He vanished. One moment he was there, his eyes wide with a strange, impossible panic, his hand reaching for hers. The next, he was simply gone. Not walked away, not faded. Gone. The air where he had been standing was empty. Emilee stood frozen, her heart hammering against her ribs. She looked around the bustling lobby. No one else seemed to have noticed. The doorman continued polishing the brass handle of the front door. A couple laughed as**

**they headed into the Carnival Room.**

**She touched the spot on her arm where his fingers had grazed her skin. The warmth was already fading. Had she imagined him? Was this what happened when you lived on sherry and cigarettes, when grief hollowed you out until you started seeing things?**

**She walked back to her sculpture, "Threshold," and ran a hand over the cool plaster. The figure, caught between solid flesh and ephemeral smoke, looked back at her with its featureless face.**

**Transformation. That's what he'd seen. Not death. Not disappearance. Possibility.**

**Her father would have understood. Before her mother's death, before the whiskey took him, he had been a silversmith in Providence, a man who**

**understood that solid things could be transformed by heat and pressure and will. "You don't force it, Emilee," he used to say, his workshop perfumed with flux and metal. "You listen to what it wants to become."**

**She was trying to listen. She had been ever since the telegram arrived on February 19, 1943. KILLED IN ACTION. KASSERINE PASS.** The words had been stark, black, clinical. Thomas, her Thomas, who had been solid and warm and real, was now smoke. She hadn't cried for three weeks. She had just worked, her hands raw from the clay, trying to give shape to the void he had left behind. That's when the smoke series began.

**New York had been an escape from the suffocating grief of Providence. She'd found a cold-water flat in**

**Chelsea and this strange symbiosis with the Hotel Lincoln, displaying her morbid art in exchange for a meager wage. It was a city full of women like her, hollowed out by telegrams, all of them trying to build new lives from the rubble of the old.**

**But now there was a new, terrifying transformation underway. She was pregnant. Three weeks. A single, desperate, foolish night with a gallery owner who had promised her a show and given her this. He was married, of course. She was alone, with eleven dollars to her name, and a choice that felt like no choice at all. Was she to become a mother? Did that mean she had to stop being an artist?**

**The man—Luke—had appeared like a crack in the solid wall of her reality. He had looked at her work and seen not what it was, but what it meant. And**

**then he had vanished, leaving behind only the echo  
of his impossible story and a question: Was it  
possible to transform not just clay, but reality  
itself? She looked at the empty space where he had  
stood and felt a sliver of something she hadn't felt  
since the telegram arrived. Not hope, exactly.  
Something more dangerous. Curiosity.**

## **BILL - 2022**

**Bill sat in the beige stucco void of his Inglewood  
house and reviewed the variables on his mental  
spreadsheet. The fires were a gift. Chaos was a tool,  
an opportunity to perform necessary sanitation  
under the cover of civic distraction. The federals  
were sniffing around his supply lines, a direct  
result of old contacts from his contractor days in  
Colombia getting sloppy in their retirement. It was**

**time to streamline the operation. It was time to eliminate liabilities.**

**Ryan was a liability. A textbook case. Paranoid, high on his own supply, and making emotional, traceable phone calls. He was a cancer on the operational body. Bill had already decided Ryan needed to have a tragic accident. The fires created a wealth of possibilities. Another unfortunate casualty of the evacuations, lost in the smoke. He would be erased this week. Clean. Professional.**

**Luke was a more complex problem. For six years, he had been the perfect asset: quiet, reliable, with the educated, non-threatening demeanor that opened up the lucrative Silver Lake market. But the asset was becoming unstable. The unanswered calls, the distracted air when they'd met—these**

were red flags. Bill had learned in the jungles of Panama that the distracted man is the dead man, and he often takes others with him. In Bill's world, there were only two reasons for such a change: Luke was about to be arrested, or he was about to run. Both scenarios made him a vector of unacceptable risk.

Bill felt no malice toward Luke. Malice, like emotion, was an inefficient luxury. This was simple risk management, the same raw calculus he had used when planning incursions for the DEA, the same logic that had kept him alive while so many of his colleagues had ended up in shallow graves or federal prisons. He had survived by understanding that loyalty was a transaction and sentiment was suicide.

**He would give Luke forty-eight hours. A final chance to handle the Ryan problem and stabilize. If Luke performed, he remained a useful, if compromised, asset. If he failed, he would become just another loose end to be tied off. Bill already had a plan. The fires made everything easier. People disappeared all the time. It was tragic. It was unavoidable. It was business.**

## **CHAPTER 6: LIABILITIES**

**Luke was on the floor, the ghost of 1944 still clinging to him like a phantom limb. The grey, ashen silence of the apartment was a physical assault after the vibrant life of the Carnival Room.**

**He could still dance with Emilee's perfume, a phantom scent of roses and smoke that was more real than the stale air he was now breathing. He didn't just have a memory; he had a map. A name.**

**A destination. Emilee Grant, 23rd Street. The words were a mantra, a North Star in the wreckage of his life.**

**He looked at the seventy-two bags of cocaine still hidden in the drawer. They were no longer just merchandise. They were a war chest. Capital to be liquidated. He was done with this life of shadows and burner phones. He wasn't escaping anymore; he was planning a migration to a better country, a country of the past.**

**His burner phone buzzed on the kitchen table. He'd been ignoring it, a meaningless irritant from a**

**world he was already leaving. But it buzzed again, and then a third time, a frantic, insistent SOS. He picked it up. A string of texts from Ryan.**

**luke answer me -**

**bill is looking for me. not just calling. i think his car was on my street.**

**im freaking out man. he knows im a problem.**

**meet me. now. please. i think im in real trouble.**

**A final text came through as he was reading. It was a single, desperate address in Angelino Heights, a block from Ryan's apartment, deep inside the mandatory evacuation zone.**

**Luke's first instinct was to throw the phone against the wall. Ryan was a black hole, sucking light and energy and time. He was a ghost from a life Luke**

**was already trying to shed. But the raw terror in  
the messages was something new. This wasn't  
Ryan's usual strung-out paranoia; this was the cold,  
primal fear of a cornered animal. And Luke knew,  
with a sickening certainty, that he was the one who  
had cornered him by telling Bill he would "handle  
it."**

**He grabbed his keys. The fires in the hills painted  
the underside of the low-hanging smoke clouds  
with a pulsing, apocalyptic orange. The streets  
were deserted, an urban ghost town where the only  
signs of life were the blinking red lights of ignored  
traffic signals. He found Ryan's designated spot, a  
side street lined with darkened Victorian houses,  
their ornate facades looking like skeletal faces in  
the eerie light. Ash muffled every sound.**

**Ryan was huddled in the driver's seat of his beat-up Civic, the engine off, the interior lit by the frantic glow of his phone screen. He looked up as Luke approached, his eyes wide and white in the gloom. Luke got into the passenger seat, and the car was instantly filled with the sour fragrance of Ryan's fear.**

**"He's going to kill me, Luke," Ryan whispered, the words tumbling out. "I saw him. A beige Camry. Parked at the end of the block, just watching my building. He knows I'm a liability. He said so. You told him I was a liability!"**

**"Calm down," Luke said, his own heart starting to hammer. "Bill's a businessman. He's not going to—"**

**"You don't know him!" Ryan hissed, grabbing**

**Luke's arm, his grip surprisingly strong. "Not like you think. He's not a dealer. He's something else. Something connected. People who cause problems for him... they just go away. A dealer I knew, Marcus, tried to short him a few years back. He's gone. Vanished."**

**Before Luke could process this, a soft, double-tap sounded against the driver's side window.**

**Both of them flinched violently. Standing outside the car, seemingly having materialized from the ashen air itself, was Bill. He wasn't wearing his suburban dad costume. He was in dark jeans and a plain black jacket. His face was calm, his eyes holding no emotion at all. He simply gestured with his head, a silent command for Ryan to lower the window.**

**Ryan's hand was shaking so badly he could barely find the button. The window whirred down, letting in the gritty air.**

**"We need to talk, Ryan," Bill said, his voice quiet, reasonable. It was the calmest, most terrifying sound Luke had ever heard.**

**"I was gonna pay him, Bill, I swear," Ryan stammered, his words slurring together. "I just needed a little more time, a little front to get back on my feet..."**

**"It's not about the money anymore," Bill said softly. "It's about the noise you're making. It's unprofessional."**

**Bill's right hand came up from his side. It was holding a pistol, a bulky suppressor attached to the**

**barrel making it look like a malignant growth of black metal. It happened faster than thought, faster than breath. There was no movie-style standoff, no final words. There was only a quiet, efficient motion.**

**Two soft, wet thumps—phut, phut—no louder than a book falling on a carpeted floor.**

**Ryan's head jerked back, hitting the headrest with a dull crack. Two small, dark holes appeared in his left temple, almost neat. His eyes, which had been wide with terror, went instantly vacant. A look of profound, final surprise. His phone slipped from his hand, clattering onto the floor mat. A thin trickle of dark blood began to snake down from his temple, tracing a path through the grime on his cheek.**

**The silence that followed was absolute, a vacuum**

**where Ryan's frantic energy had just been. Luke was frozen, his mind a white screen of static. He could sense the cordite, a sharp, metallic tang that cut through the ash. He turned his head slowly, mechanically, to look at Bill.**

**Bill was already moving. He opened the driver's door, unbuckled Ryan's seatbelt, and pushed the dead weight of the body over, shoving it unceremoniously into the space between the front seats. He then slid behind the wheel, his movements fluid and practiced. He closed the door, plunging them back into silence.**

**“Well,” Bill said, his voice betraying no more emotion than if he’d just finished a tedious errand. “Now you and I have a problem.”**

**Luke couldn’t speak. His throat was a knot of ice.**

**He could feel the warmth of Ryan's cooling body pressed against his leg.**

**"He was a liability," Bill continued, putting the key in the ignition but not turning it. "He was talking to people. Calling clients, calling you, calling me. Leaving a digital trail of his panic for anyone to follow. In an evacuation, with communications strained, it might have gone unnoticed. But I don't operate on 'might.' I operate on certainty."**

**He turned to look at Luke, and for the first time, Luke saw the true emptiness in his eyes. It was the abyss his father had fled, a place where human life was just another variable in an equation of risk.**

**"You are now a witness, Luke," Bill said, his voice dropping even lower. "That makes you a liability. But, unlike him, you have the potential to be a**

**useful asset. So we are going to solve this problem together. You and me.”**

**He reached over and picked up Ryan’s fallen phone. He used Ryan’s dead thumb to unlock it, then navigated to his own contact info and deleted it. He did the same for Luke’s.**

**“His car is going to be found in a ravine up on Mulholland, another tragic victim who lost control on a dark road trying to evacuate. The fire will take care of the rest.” He looked at Luke. “You’re going to drive it there. I will follow you. You will wipe it down. You will leave his phone in the car. You will walk away. And then, you and I are going to have a much longer conversation about your future, which is now tied very closely to mine.”**

**Bill placed the silenced pistol on the dashboard. He**

**started the car. The engine turning over was a deafening roar in the silent street.**

**“Drive,” he said.**

**Luke’s mind, which moments before had been soaring in the smoky, romantic haze of 1944, was now vividly, terrifyingly present. The weight of Ryan’s body was a physical anchor, pinning him to this moment, to this car, to this man. The dream of escape was gone, replaced by the cold, hard reality of survival. The door to the past had slammed shut, and a new one had just opened, leading directly into the heart of Bill’s sterile, violent, and inescapable world.**

## **CHAPTER 7: ERASING THE STATIC**

**The Honda Civic was intimate with three things: old coffee, Ryan's stale Camel Lights, and now, the coppery tang of blood. The drive up into the Hollywood Hills was a winding ascent into a purgatory of ash and smoke. Below, the city was a smear of distant, pulsing lights, an infected wound on the face of the earth. Beside him, Ryan's body was a dead weight, a constant, warm reminder that slumped against the console with every hairpin turn. Bill's beige Camry was a phantom in his rearview mirror, its headlights cutting two clean, merciless beams through the gloom, never falling back, never getting closer. He was being escorted to the scene of his own damnation.**

**Luke's mind, in a desperate act of self-**

**preservation, began to slip its leash. As his hands gripped the wheel of the death car, his soul walked a different street.**

**It was autumn on 23rd Street, 1944. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of roasted chestnuts and exhaust from the yellow cabs rumbling past. Emilee wore a tweed coat over her dress, her hands tucked into its pockets, her face tilted up toward the ornate facades of the Chelsea buildings.**

**“Is your world very loud, Luke?” she asked, her breath misting in the air.**

**He thought of the constant, low-grade hum of his L.A. life—the traffic, the sirens, the endless buzz of phones and notifications. The noise inside his own head.**

**“It’s not loud,” he heard himself say, his voice a disembodied echo in the memory. “It’s just... full of static. There’s no signal. Just noise.”**

**She nodded, as if this made perfect sense. “My father was a silversmith. He said the most important part of his work was silence. You had to be able to hear the metal telling you what it wanted to become.” She stopped in front of a brownstone with a large bay window on the second floor.**

**“That’s what art is, I think. Listening for the signal inside the noise.”**

**He was jolted back to the present by the crunch of gravel under the tires. Bill had directed him to a turnout, a scenic overlook where tourists once took pictures of the city. Now, it was just a precipice overlooking a dark, ash-choked canyon. The Camry**

**pulled up behind him, its engine cutting out,  
plunging them into an unnerving silence broken  
only by the whisper of wind through the charred  
manzanita.**

**Bill got out of his car. He handed Luke a pair of  
latex gloves and a small spray bottle of industrial  
cleaner. “Wipe everything. The wheel, the gearshift,  
the door handles, inside and out. The rearview  
mirror. The console. The window buttons. Be  
thorough. Your life depends on your attention to  
detail.”**

**Luke pulled on the gloves. They snapped against  
his skin. He opened the passenger door and began  
the gruesome work. The spray cleaner was acrid,  
stinging his nostrils. As he wiped the sticky, drying  
blood from the cheap plastic of the dashboard, his**

**mind retreated again, unable to bear the reality of  
the task.**

**He was erasing Ryan. Not just the physical  
evidence, but the man himself. He remembered the  
first time they'd met, in the Silver Lake record  
store where Ryan had worked. Ryan hadn't cared  
about the music, only the soundtracks. He'd been a  
graduate of UCLA's film school, armed with a thesis  
on noir cinematography and a vocabulary that  
could deconstruct a single frame of *Out of the Past*  
for an hour. He was a disappointed man, and Luke,  
a musician who had traded his keyboard for a  
digital scale, had recognized a kindred spirit. They  
bonded over the shared, bitter joke their lives had  
become: the lie of "follow your passion" in a city  
that only valued currency.**

**Luke scrubbed at a smear on the passenger side window. He remembered their nights in Ryan's apartment, a place that was less a home than a shrine to the Criterion Collection. They'd drink cheap whiskey and Ryan, fueled by the filmic ghosts of his father's basement home theater, would explain how the shadows in The Third Man were a physical manifestation of moral decay. Ryan hadn't just watched movies; he'd inhabited them. The tragic irony was that he'd become a character in his own paranoid noir, casting Luke as the treacherous partner and Bill as the inexorable hand of fate.**

**He'd started dealing to pay for the Blu-rays, then started using to hush the roaring gap between the man he was and the man his father had taught him**

**to be. The cocaine had twisted his encyclopedic knowledge into a weapon against himself. He saw conspiracies everywhere, betrayals in every missed call. He was no longer analyzing the darkness; he was drowning in it.**

**Luke found Ryan's wallet in the glove compartment. He opened it. A faded UCLA student ID from 2011. Twenty-seven dollars in cash. A crumpled receipt from a comic book store. He was erasing a life, one smear at a time. The weight of their shared history, the two years when they were real friends trading thoughts on Coltrane and Nicholas Ray, pressed down on him. Cutting Ryan out of his life to appease Bill now felt like a profound and irreversible act of self-mutilation.**

**"Is there a problem?" Bill's voice was calm, cutting**

**through his thoughts.**

**Luke shook his head, stuffing the wallet into Ryan's pocket. He finished wiping down every surface, his movements methodical, numb.**

**"Good," Bill said. "Now, put it in neutral. We push."**

**Together, they put their shoulders to the back of the Civic. The car was heavy, inert. Luke's muscles screamed in protest. He wasn't just pushing a car; he was pushing away the last piece of his old life.**

**With a final, coordinated shove, the car tipped over the edge. It didn't explode like in a movie. It simply fell, a silent, heavy thing, crashing through the brittle, burnt branches below, the sound of its descent swallowed by the vast, dark canyon. A moment later, a final, distant crunch echoed up**

**from the darkness. And then, silence.**

**Bill stripped off his own gloves. “Get in my car.”**

**The ride back down the hill was conducted in  
absolute silence. Bill drove with an unnerving calm.**

**When they reached Luke’s street, he didn’t stop at  
the apartment. He drove a block past and parked in  
the deep shadows of a jacaranda tree.**

**He turned off the engine and looked at Luke.**

**“You did well,” he said, as if praising a promising  
new employee. “You’re capable of following  
instructions under pressure. That’s a valuable  
trait.”**

**He reached into the center console of his car and  
pulled out a small, unlabeled prescription bottle. It  
was full of small, pale blue pills.**

**“This is your bonus,” Bill said, holding the bottle out.**

**Luke stared at it. “I don’t understand. What is it?”**

**“Fentanyl. Pressed. Illegally manufactured, but very high quality. Very popular. Very profitable.”**

**Bill’s eyes were flat, clinical. “The market is shifting, Luke. Cocaine is a party. This is a solution. People aren’t looking for a good time anymore. They’re looking for an exit. You’re going to help me provide that.”**

**Luke felt a cold dread that was deeper than the fear he’d felt on the hill. This wasn’t a bonus. This was a different kind of leash. Cocaine was the drug of the hustle, of ambition, of the frantic L.A. life. This was the drug of oblivion. This was the end of the**

**line.**

**“I don’t deal that,” Luke said, his voice barely a whisper.**

**“You do now,” Bill corrected him gently. “This is not a reward, Luke. This is your new inventory. And your new salary.” He shook a single pill into his hand and held it out. “A health benefit, for a stressful new position. You look like you could use it.”**

**Luke stared at the small blue pill in Bill’s palm. It was an invitation to go numb, to erase the horror of the last hour, to lull the screaming in his own head. It was a poison, and it was a relief.**

**His hand, of its own volition, reached out and took it.**

**The pill felt heavier than the brick of cocaine. It was the weight of a new and more terrible debt. He looked from the pill in his hand to the dark, empty street outside. The door to 1944, to Emilee, to a world where things were made with purpose, had never felt so far away. He was no longer just a dealer trying to get by. He was an accomplice, an employee, a ghost in a machine far more terrifying than he had ever imagined.**

## **CHAPTER 8: THE GEOMETRY OF ESCAPE**

**The lock on the apartment door clicked shut behind him, the sound unnaturally loud in the tomblike silence. Luke stood in the entryway, a**

**ghost haunting his own life. The world outside was muted by the ash, but the world inside his head was a screaming cacophony of void, violent memory: the soft phut, phut of the silenced pistol, the vacant surprise in Ryan's eyes, the grunting finality of pushing a car—a coffin—into a dark ravine.**

**He went to the sink and scrubbed his hands, the hot water turning his skin red. But he couldn't wash away the stench. It wasn't blood. It was the acrid, chemical scent of the industrial cleaner Bill had given him. The odor of erasure.**

**He walked to the kitchen table and sat down heavily. The single blue pill Bill had given him was a small, malevolent weight in his pocket. A health benefit for a stressful new position. He took it out**

**and placed it in the center of the table. It was a perfect, machine-pressed circle. A full stop. An exit.**

**His mind flashed back to the canyon, to the distant, final crunch of metal on rock. He was still immersed in the blood and barbecue of his friend's body, a grotesque fusion of intimate horror and the impersonal, cleansing fire that would consume the evidence. He closed his eyes, but the image was burned onto the inside of his eyelids.**

**He needed an escape from the escape he had just facilitated. And in that moment of profound, directionless despair, his mind didn't go to 1944. It went to 1978.**

**He saw his father, Antanas, not as the tired, stooped man who died of a heart attack, but as a**

**lean, defiant twenty-four-year-old, standing in a grey, sterile room in the Soviet embassy. Luke had heard the story a hundred times as a boy, a foundational myth of their family. It had been Antanas's third and final interview with the KGB for his exit visa. For two years, he had navigated the labyrinthine machinery of the state, a machine designed not to process people, but to crush them with bureaucratic inertia.**

**“Why do you want to leave the Socialist paradise, Antanas?” the man in the ill-fitting suit had asked, his voice bored, his eyes dead.**

**“To join my uncle in America,” Antanas had answered, the lie tasting like rust in his mouth. His uncle had been a name on a form, a distant relative who had fled in the first great exodus of 1944, a**

**man he'd never met.**

**The real reason was unspeakable. He was leaving because the Soviet engine was designed to grind away everything that was specifically Lithuanian—the language, the faith, the memory of a nation—until only a homogenous, grey paste remained. It was a slow, spiritual murder, and his exodus was an act of radical self-preservation.**

**Luke looked at the blue pill on the table. Bill was a machine, too. A smaller, more mobile version, but a machine nonetheless. He operated on a detached, efficient logic that treated human lives as variables to be managed or, if necessary, deleted. Ryan had been a noisy, inefficient part, and Bill had simply removed him. Now, Luke was a new component, slotted into the mechanism, his future tied to a**

**man who saw people not as souls, but as assets or liabilities. The pill was part of that machine's maintenance protocol. A tool to keep the other components numb and compliant.**

**His father had escaped a vast, impersonal machinery of the state. Luke was trapped in the small, terrifyingly personal machinery of Bill.**

**Antanas had walked out of that embassy in 1978 knowing he would never see his parents or his sister again. He was stepping out of his own life, excising himself from his family to save his own soul. It was a clean cut, a surgical act of hope.**

**What Luke had done tonight was the opposite. It was a messy, cancerous act of survival, a desperate attempt to stay alive that had poisoned him, binding him closer to the very sickness he wanted**

**to flee.**

**Luke's hand trembled as it reached for the pill. One small, blue circle. It was the promise of silence. An off-switch for the screaming loop in his head. He could swallow it and for a few hours, there would be no Ryan, no Bill, no canyon. Just a warm, still darkness. It was the exit Bill had offered, the solution his new world provided.**

**His fingers touched the cool, smooth surface of the pill.**

**And he saw Emilee's face.**

**Not as a fantasy, but as a counterpoint. He saw her standing in the amber light of the hotel lobby, her eyes full of a fierce, intelligent life. He heard her voice, cutting through the noise: "My father said**

**you had to be able to hear the metal telling you what it wanted to become.”**

**The pill was silence, yes, but it was the silence of the void. The silence Emilee spoke of was the silence of focus, of creation, of listening for the signal inside the noise. Taking the pill would be an act of surrender to Bill’s machine. It would be an admission that the noise had won.**

**His father had not fled the Soviet Union for oblivion. He had fled for a chance at a life with meaning, a life where he could build something that lasted. He had traded everything he knew for an idea.**

**Luke’s hand closed around the pill. He stood up, walked to the bathroom, and with a small, decisive flick of his thumb, sent the pill into the toilet bowl.**

**He flushed. The swirl of the water was the most defiant sound he had ever made.**

**He walked back into the living room, his mind clear for the first time in hours. The grief and the horror were still there, a cold, heavy stone in his gut, but the panic was gone, replaced by a crystalline resolve. He knew what he had to do.**

**He went to the drawer and took out the Lamberton Scammel plate. He held it in his hands, its weight a familiar, reassuring anchor. It was no longer just a key to a beautiful dream. It was a weapon. It was a map. It was the only tool he had to dismantle the machine that was trying to consume him.**

**The exodus was not about running away. His father had taught him that. It was about choosing a destination. It was about moving toward a signal,**

**no matter the cost.**

**Luke sat at the table, the plate in front of him. He was no longer a drug dealer. He was no longer Bill's unwilling accomplice. He was the son of Antanas, a man who understood the geometry of escape. And he had a world to build.**

## **Chapter 9: The Shape of a Ghost**

**The wet clay was the only constant. It was creation, of the earth itself, but lately, like the grave. Emilee's studio was cold. A damp chill seeped in through the rattling window frames of the Chelsea walk-up, a permanent resident in the month since the building's furnace had given up**

**the ghost. She worked in a thick wool sweater, her fingers numb, pausing every few minutes to blow warmth into her cupped hands.**

**It had been three days since the man named Luke had vanished from the lobby of the Hotel Lincoln.**

**The first day, she had been electrified, a strange, nervous energy coursing through her. She had expected him to reappear at any moment, stepping out of the air with that same look of profound dislocation on his face. The second day, the energy had curdled into a familiar, hollow ache. Today, it was just cold.**

**She looked at the lump of clay on the stand before her. It was supposed to be the next piece in her "Threshold" series, another woman dissolving into smoke. But her hands refused to form the familiar**

**shapes. The transformation she had been exploring for months now felt like a lie. It was too soft, too poetic. Disappearance wasn't a graceful dissolving. It was a hard cut. A violent edit.**

**A parade of ghosts marched through her cold studio. Thomas, her Thomas, who hadn't dissolved but had been ripped from the world by a piece of German shrapnel in the Kasserine Pass. Her father, who hadn't faded but had drowned himself in a bottle of Canadian whiskey, abandoning her to his grief long before his body gave out. The gallery owner, Richard, who had abandoned her in his bed before the sun was up, leaving behind nothing but his seed.**

**They had all left. The world was a series of exits.**

**But Luke was different. He hadn't just left. He had**

**been erased. His disappearance felt like a violation of the laws of physics, a drastic tear in the fabric of the world. And it left her with an impossible question, one that picked at the edges of her sanity: Did he leave, or did he leave me?**

**Was she just a character in his hallucination? A brief, strange stop on a journey she couldn't comprehend? If so, then that moment of connection, that flash of profound understanding when he'd looked at her sculpture and seen possibility instead of death, had been a lie. A ghost admiring a ghost. The thought was colder than the air in the room. It invalidated not just him, but her.**

**She was fighting her own machine. Not a Soviet engine of tanks and gulags, but a quieter, more**

**insidious one. A machine of expectations that said  
a woman artist was a novelty. A machine of  
economics that kept her perpetually hungry and  
cold. And now, the terrifying, inexorable biological  
machine inside her own body, building a life she  
wasn't sure she wanted, a future she couldn't  
afford. She, too, was an exile, abandoned by the  
promise of a life where her art, her soul, could be  
enough.**

**Her hands, acting on an impulse she didn't  
understand, began to work the clay. But they  
weren't forming the soft, yielding curves of a  
dissolving woman. They were building something  
harder, more masculine. The line of a shoulder. The  
sharp angle of a jaw.**

**She was sculpting him.**

**It was a mad act. An attempt to give substance to a phantom. She worked from the memory of his face, a face that was both lost and fiercely present. She tried to capture the confusion in his eyes, the way he seemed to be listening to a sound no one else could hear. Her father's voice echoed in her memory: You listen to what it wants to become. She was trying to listen to the ghost, to hear the signal of his existence across an impossible silence.**

**Was this what it meant to be an artist? Not just to capture what is, but to insist on what should be? To fight back against the void, to give shape to the disappeared?**

**Her hands moved faster, her focus absolute. She was no longer just shaping clay. She was performing an act of will. She was building an**

**anchor. If he was lost between worlds, a ghost drifting in the static, maybe, just maybe, he needed a landmark. A piece of himself, solid and real, to navigate by.**

**She worked until the weak afternoon light failed, her fingers aching, her stomach a tight knot of hunger. She stepped back and looked at what she had made. It was just a rough shape, the ghost of a head and shoulders. But it was him. She could feel it. It was a man caught not in the act of dissolving, but in the act of arriving. A man stepping through a wall.**

**She had given him form. She had answered her own question. He hadn't left her. He had been taken. And in the cold, vacuum defiance of her art, she was starting the work of pulling him back.**

## **CHAPTER 10: TRANSACTIONS**

**The black-and-white cruised south on Figueroa,  
past the shuttered storefronts and the taco trucks  
closing up for the night. Officer Brennan was  
driving, his thick hands relaxed on the wheel. His  
partner, Ortega, younger, thinner, rode shotgun  
with the bored alertness of a man who'd seen  
everything twice. They weren't on patrol. They  
were shopping.**

**"There," Ortega said, gesturing with his chin toward  
two figures under the flickering neon of a check-  
cashing place.**

**Brennan slowed. The women were young—early twenties maybe, though the street had a way of adding years that the calendar didn't count. One was white, stick-thin in cutoff shorts and a halter top despite the autumn chill, her blonde hair dark at the roots. The other was Latina, heavier, wearing a tight dress that had seen better days. Both had the hollowed-out look of heavy users, the vacancy behind the eyes that came from too many bad transactions.**

**"Bill will tip us for that kind of meat," Brennan said, pulling the cruiser to the curb.**

**The blonde one approached first. Her name was Kaylee, though she'd been born Jennifer in Bakersfield twenty-three years ago. She'd run from**

**a stepfather who came into her room at night and a mother who pretended not to notice. She'd made it to L.A. with a boyfriend who said he loved her, right up until he introduced her to his friend who had work for her. That was four years ago. The boyfriend was long gone. The work remained.**

**The other one was Marisol. She'd crossed at Tijuana when she was seventeen with an aunt who promised her restaurant work in Los Angeles. The aunt had sold her to a man who kept six girls in a house in Pacoima. She'd escaped after eight months, but by then she had a habit that cost more than any legitimate work could pay. She was twenty-two and had been on the Blade for three years.**

**"Evening, ladies," Brennan said through the**

window. "You working tonight?"

Kaylee leaned down, her professional smile a reflex.

"Depends on what you're looking for, officer."

"Not for us," Ortega said. "Got a friend. Pays well.

Very well. But he's particular."

"How particular?" Marisol asked, her voice flat.

"Clean. Cooperative. Discreet." Brennan pulled out his phone, showed them a picture. "You know this guy?"

They looked at Bill's face on the screen—the polo shirt, the pleasant suburban neutrality of him.

Neither woman reacted. They'd learned not to react.

"We know him," Kaylee said.

"He wants to see you. Both of you. Tonight."

**Brennan pulled out two hundred-dollar bills,  
handed one to each of them through the window.  
"That's just for the ride. He'll take care of the rest."**

**Bill's house in Inglewood was exactly what they  
expected: anonymous, clean, empty of anything  
that suggested a life. He met them at the door, his  
manner courteous, almost formal. He didn't look at  
them the way most men did. He looked at them the  
way a mechanic looks at a car he's considering  
buying.**

**"Thank you for coming," he said, gesturing them  
inside. The living room had a couch, a coffee table,  
nothing else. On the table was a bottle of decent  
vodka, three glasses, and a small plastic bag of  
white powder. "Please, sit. Have a drink."**

**They sat. They knew this routine. The vodka was**

**good, not the rail shit they were used to. Bill  
poured for all three of them, raised his glass.**

**"To new opportunities," he said.**

**They drank. Bill refilled their glasses.**

**"I'm expanding my business," he said, his voice  
conversational, as if discussing real estate. "The  
market is changing. People aren't looking for a  
party anymore. They're looking for an exit. I need  
people who can facilitate that. People who  
understand discretion. People who won't ask  
questions."**

**He picked up the bag from the table. "This is  
fentanyl. Pressed pills. Very potent. Very profitable.  
I need distributors who already have the clientele,  
who understand the lifestyle." He looked at each of**

**them in turn. "You both qualify."**

**Kaylee felt a cold understanding settle over her.**

**This wasn't about sex. This was a job interview.**

**"What's the pay?" Marisol asked.**

**"Better than what you're making now. A hundred pills, you keep forty percent. I provide product, protection, and customers. You provide access and discretion."**

**He stood up. "But first, I need to know you can handle the work. The physical part. Some of my clients will want both services. The chemical and the carnal. I need to know you're... functional."**

**In the bedroom, the transaction began.**

**Bill's hands did not touch them. His instructions were clinical, detached. "You," he said to Kaylee.**

**"Start with her."**

**Kaylee understood. This wasn't about his pleasure. This was about control. About seeing if they would follow orders. About testing their tolerance for degradation.**

**She moved toward Marisol, whose eyes were already glazed from the vodka and whatever else was in it. Their hands found each other, mechanical, practiced. This was work. This was survival.**

**\*\*New York, 1944\*\***

**Emilee's hands moved across the clay, shaping the line of a jaw, the angle of a cheekbone. Her fingers**

were raw from the cold and the work, but she couldn't stop. The sculpture was taking form—a man's head, emerging from rough, unshaped clay like a figure stepping through a wall.

**She built the ridge of his brow, the set of his eyes.**

**She was working from memory, from a thirty-second encounter that had seemlessly branded itself onto her consciousness with photographic clarity. Luke. A man who appeared from nowhere and vanished into nothing.**

**Her thumbs pressed into the clay, creating the hollows beneath his cheekbones. She was giving him substance. Making him real. If he was a ghost, she was building him a body. If he was lost, she was creating a landmark.**

**\*\*Los Angeles, 2022\*\***

**Luke sat at the kitchen table, the Lamberton Scammel plate in his hands. He'd cleaned himself, changed his clothes, but he could still feel the industrial cleaner, still feel the weight of Ryan's body against the console. The blue pill was gone, flushed, but the bottle Bill had given him sat on the counter like a malevolent presence.**

**He focused on the plate. On the green letters. Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York. He poured the last of another bottle of sherry he'd bought. Put on the headphones. Artie Shaw's clarinet filled his head.**

**But this time he didn't close his eyes and wait. He demanded. He pushed. He focused every molecule of his will on that other place, on Emilee's face, on the warm amber light of the Carnival Room.**

**The room began to shift.**

**\*\*Inglewood, 2022\*\***

**Bill sat in a chair in the corner of the bedroom, fully clothed, watching the two women perform their choreographed desperation. His face showed nothing. No arousal, no disgust, no interest. He was conducting an evaluation.**

**After twenty minutes, he stood. "That's sufficient. You can stop."**

**They separated, grateful, humiliated, already calculating how much vodka it would take to erase this from their memory.**

**Bill pulled out his wallet, handed each of them five hundred-dollar bills. "You both performed adequately. I'll be in touch through Brennan if I need your services. You can go."**

**As they dressed and left, Bill remained in the empty house. Bill's phone buzzed. A text from a contact saved only as "M." They found the Civic. Fire didn't finish the job. Body inside, two in the head. Arson investigators on scene. LAPD Homicide will be there by morning. Bill read it twice, his face unchanged. The canyon fire hadn't spread as predicted. Ryan's body was evidence now instead of ash. But the car would be clean—Luke had been**

**meticulous with the cleaner. And more importantly, Luke had pushed that car over the edge with his own hands. Luke was an accomplice now, not a witness. The body being found didn't make Luke a liability. It made him owned. Luke couldn't run to the police without a murder charge. He couldn't run to anyone. Bill deleted the text. The fentanyl operation could proceed as planned. Luke was locked in..He pulled out his phone and looked at the tracker he'd placed on Luke's car three days ago. The blinking dot hadn't moved from Echo Park.**

**Luke was still there. Still in the apartment. Still, for now, manageable.**

**But Bill had learned in Panama that loyalty was a fiction and control was the only reality. Luke had**

**seen too much. Luke knew too much. The useful asset was rapidly becoming a terminal liability.**

**He would give it forty-eight more hours. If Luke remained stable, cooperative, useful, he would live. If not, the fires would claim another victim. Just another tragedy in a city that was already burning.**

**\*\*New York, 1944\*\***

**Emilee stepped back from the sculpture. The face was rough, incomplete, but recognizable. She had given form to a ghost. Her hands were shaking—from cold, from exhaustion, from the impossible act she was attempting.**

**"Come back," she whispered to the clay face. "If**

**you're real, return to me."**

**\*\*Los Angeles, 2022\*\***

**The shift was violent this time. Not a gentle dissolving but a wrenching, as if he was being pulled through a membrane that resisted. The grey apartment didn't fade—it tore.**

**And suddenly he was standing in her studio.**

**The cold hit him first. Then the feeling of wet clay and turpentine and coal smoke from a distant furnace. Emilee stood five feet away, her back to him, her hands on a sculpture on a work stand.**

**She spun around, her eyes wide with shock.**

**"You came back," she breathed.**

**Luke looked down at himself. He was wearing the grey wool suit. The plate was in his hand. But something was different. He felt more solid here. More anchored. As if with each crossing, he was becoming more real in this place and less real in his own.**

**"I promised I would," he said.**

**Emilee's face transformed—relief, joy, and something deeper, something that looked like vindication. She wasn't crazy. He was real.**

**She gestured to the sculpture on the stand. "I made you," she said simply. "So you could find your way**

**back."**

**Luke stepped closer and saw his own face, rough and unfinished, emerging from raw clay. She had sculpted him from memory. She had given him form in her world.**

**"My God," he whispered.**

**Emilee's eyes filled with tears. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought you were just... smoke."**

**"I'm real," Luke said. He reached out and took her hand—her cold, clay-covered, trembling hand. "And so are you. More real than anything I've ever known."**

**Outside the studio window, the sounds of 1944 New York carried on—car horns, distant music, the rattle of the long avenue. Inside, two people from**

**different worlds stood holding each other's hands,  
an impossible connection made solid by will and art  
and desperate need.**

**The crossing was no longer just an escape. It was  
becoming an anchor. And for the first time since  
Ryan's death, Luke felt something other than  
horror and despair.**

**He felt hope.**

## **CHAPTER 11: DIE GLOCKE**

**Wenceslas Mine, Lower Silesia, April 1945**

**The Bell hung suspended in the cavern like a malformed god. Three meters tall, ceramic and metal, counter-rotating cylinders within cylinders.**

**The hum it produced wasn't sound—it was a frequency that made your teeth ache and your vision blur at the edges. SS-Obergruppenführer Jakob Sporrenberg watched the final test from behind lead-glass. Twelve engineers had died to bring it to this moment. Their bodies were stacked in the adjacent tunnel, skin grey and mottled, eyes burst from internal pressure.**

**The cylinders spun faster. The air in the chamber began to shimmer, to fold in on itself. And then—transmission. Not radio waves. Not light.**

**Something older. A frequency that existed before**

**matter, before time. The Bell wasn't sending a signal into space. It was sending consciousness. Seeding it. Scattering fragments of the Reich's will across the fabric of causality itself, waiting for hosts, waiting for the moment to reconstitute.**

**The Red Army was forty kilometers away. The Americans twenty. The Bell would not fall into their hands. It would fall into no one's hands. Sporrenberg had his orders. Evacuate the technology. South America. Argentina. The ratlines were already established. The Bell would sleep in the mountains, waiting.**

**New York, 1944**

**Emilee's studio was a cave of shadows and cold.**

**The single coal stove in the corner did almost nothing against the February chill seeping through the rattling windows. Luke stood in the center of the room, still wearing the grey wool suit that had appeared on him when he crossed. He was more solid here now. Each crossing left him more anchored in 1944 and less tethered to 2022. He could feel the difference—the weight of his body, the clarity of his senses, the way the cold air bit at his lungs.**

**Emilee stood by the sculpture of his face, her hands still covered in clay. She was looking at him like he was a equation she was trying to solve, a problem of physics and faith.**

**"How long can you stay?" she asked.**

**"I don't know."**

**"What pulls you back?"**

**"I don't know that either."**

**She stepped closer. Her breath misted in the cold air between them. "Are you real, Luke? Or am I losing my mind?"**

**He reached out and took her hand—cold, rough with clay, trembling slightly. "I'm as real as you are."**

**"Then prove it," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Don't just stand there like a ghost. Touch me. Make me believe you're here."**

## **Bariloche, Argentina, 1994**

**The facility was buried in the mountains, accessible only by a road that didn't appear on any map. Bill was twenty-three, two years out of the Marines, working contractor jobs for people who didn't give names or explanations. The man who hired him—German accent, age indeterminate—had said only: "We need security for a retrieval operation. You will see things. You will not speak of them. Ever."**

**The Bell was smaller than Bill had expected, barely two meters tall, its ceramic surface covered in symbols that hurt to look at directly. It sat in a concrete bunker scented of ozone and mystery, and even something organic and wrong. The German supervised while a team of technicians prepared it**

**for transport. Bill and three other contractors stood guard with assault rifles, watching the tree line, watching each other.**

**The Bell began to hum.**

**It wasn't a sound. It was a pressure inside his skull, a frequency that made his molars ache and his vision swim. The technicians backed away, their faces pale. The German smiled.**

**"It's waking up," he said.**

**Bill felt something slide into his mind. Not a thought. Not a voice. A presence. Cold. Ancient. Patient. It moved through his consciousness like fingers through hair, examining, cataloging, judging. And then it settled. Deep in the back of his brain, in the parts that controlled breathing and**

**heartbeat and the will to survive. It nested there.  
And Bill, standing in that bunker with his rifle and  
his orders, stopped being entirely human.**

**New York, 1944**

**Luke's hands found the buttons of her sweater. His fingers were clumsy, urgent. Emilee helped him, pulling the wool over her head, revealing a thin cotton slip beneath. Her skin was pale in the dim light from the coal stove, goosebumps rising in the cold.**

**"I'm not..." she started, then stopped. "I haven't been with anyone since Thomas died."**

**"We don't have to—"**

**"No," she said, her voice fierce. "We do. I need to feel something real. Something that isn't grief or hunger or this goddamn cold."**

**She kissed him. Her lips were chapped, tasting of cigarettes and the faint sweetness of sherry. Her hands found his shirt, pulled it free from his trousers. They moved to the narrow bed in the corner of the studio, a mattress on a wooden frame covered in rough wool blankets.**

**Radio transmission, World Service, April 30, 1945**

**"...reports from Berlin confirm that Adolf Hitler is dead, apparently by his own hand in his bunker beneath the Chancellery. The thousand-year Reich**

**has lasted twelve years. Soviet forces are now in control of the German capital. The war in Europe is effectively over..."**

**New York, 1944**

**The entity watched through Luke's eyes. It had been patient. Forty-nine years trapped in Bill, a host who refused to procreate, who wasted his seed on sterile encounters and solitary pleasures. But now—this. A younger host. A man capable of crossing the temporal boundaries that even the Bell's creators hadn't fully mastered. And a woman. Fertile. Ready.**

**The entity pushed gently, increasing Luke's**

**urgency, his need. Not control—it didn't need control. Just encouragement. Just a whisper in the parts of the brain that governed desire.**

**Luke's hands moved over Emilee's body with a desperation that surprised him. Every touch was an act of defiance against the grey world he'd left behind, against Bill and Ryan's corpse and the stench of industrial cleaner. Her skin was warm despite the cold room, alive in a way nothing in 2022 had been alive. She responded to his urgency with her own, pulling him closer, her nails digging into his back.**

**"Don't disappear," she whispered against his neck.  
"Please don't disappear."**

**"I won't," he said, though he had no idea if it was**

**true.**

## **Classified document, Project Paperclip, 1946**

**"...the device referred to in captured SS documents as 'Die Glocke' (The Bell) has not been located. Intelligence suggests it was evacuated from the Wenceslas Mine complex prior to Soviet occupation. Rumors of its relocation to South America remain unconfirmed. The device's alleged capabilities—manipulation of gravitational fields, temporal displacement, consciousness transfer—are considered scientifically implausible by current standards. Recommend investigation be downgraded to low priority..."**

**New York, 1944**

**They moved together in the narrow bed, the coal stove's dim orange glow the only light. Emilee's body was thin, too thin, months of hunger and grief having carved away everything unnecessary. But she was here, present, real. Her eyes were open, watching his face, as if trying to memorize him before he vanished again.**

**Luke felt the crossing beginning to pull at him—that hook behind his sternum, that sense of the world starting to blur. He fought it. Pushed back. Focused everything on the weight of her body against his, the taste of her mouth, the sound of**

**her breathing.**

**"Luke—" she gasped.**

**"I'm here," he said. "I'm staying."**

**The entity pulsed with satisfaction. The act was complete. The seed planted. Continuity ensured. It could wait now. Wait for the child. Wait for the bloodline to establish itself across both timelines. It had been patient for fifty years. It could be patient for fifty more.**

**Panama City, 1995**

**Bill sat in a hotel room, watching pornography on the television with the sound off. His hand moved mechanically, without pleasure, without emotion.**

**This was maintenance. Release. Nothing more. The entity inside him didn't understand human sexuality, couldn't replicate desire. It only understood utility.**

**The act was complete. The semen went into a tissue, into a wastebasket, into the city's trash system, into oblivion. Another sterile cycle. Another dead end.**

**The entity stirred, frustrated. This host was a failure. Capable of violence, of survival, of control—but incapable of the one thing that mattered. Reproduction. The bloodline was dying in him.**

**It would need to jump. Soon. To a younger host. A more viable vessel.**

**It began to watch. To wait. To prepare.**

**New York, 1944**

**Luke and Emilee lay tangled together in the narrow bed, their breathing slowly returning to normal.**

**The pull to 2022 had subsided. He was still here.**

**Still solid. More solid than he'd ever been.**

**Emilee's hand traced the line of his jaw, then moved down to his chest, feeling his heartbeat.**

**"You're real," she whispered. "You're really here."**

**"I'm really here."**

**February 1945. Three months before VE Day. Five months before Hiroshima. The world was about to change in ways that would make the past unrecognizable. But in this room, in this moment,**

**two people from different times had created something that didn't exist in either of their worlds.**

**Something real.**

**Emilee pressed her face against his chest. "I'm pregnant," she said quietly. "Three weeks. Maybe four now. From before. From someone who doesn't matter."**

**Luke's hand moved to her belly—flat, unchanged, but holding a future neither of them could see.**

**"Does it scare you?"**

**"Everything scares me," she said. "But this... this scares me less now. With you here."**

**The entity, deep in Luke's hindbrain, pulsed with silent satisfaction. The child would be born. The**

**bloodline would continue. The fragments of the Reich scattered across time would have their anchor.**

**But Luke didn't hear it. Didn't feel it. He only felt Emilee's warmth against him, and for the first time since Ryan's death, he felt something other than horror.**

**He felt peace.**

**Radio transmission, unknown frequency, April 1945**

**The Bell's final transmission went into the void. Not into space. Into time itself. A pattern. A code. A consciousness fragmented and scattered. Waiting**

**for hosts. Waiting for the moment to reconstitute.**

**The thousand-year Reich would not be measured in years.**

**It would be measured in bloodlines.**

**In crossings. Devouring distances with its hailing wave.**

**In the determined yet slow, patient work of infection and inheritance.**

**The Bell was silent now, buried in the mountains of Argentina.**

**But its children were walking.**

## **CHAPTER 12: THE ARCHITECTURE OF**

## **ELSEWHERE**

**New York, March 1945**

**Luke had been in 1944 for three weeks. Not continuously—he still snapped back to 2022, woke gasping on the apartment floor in Echo Park, the grey ash-light like a punishment. But the intervals were changing. He could stay in 1944 for hours now. Sometimes a full day. And when he returned to 2022, it was only for minutes before the pull reversed and dragged him back.**

**He was learning the rhythm of it, the way a sailor learns the tide. The plate was the anchor—touching**

**it, focusing on it, holding it while he drank the sherry and listened to Artie Shaw. But it wasn't just ritual. It was will. He'd started to understand that the crossing wasn't something that happened TO him. It was something he DID.**

**Emilee's studio had become his second home. Or maybe his first home, and the Echo Park apartment was the ghost. She'd cleared space for him—a chair by the coal stove, a shelf for the few things he brought across (a notebook, a pencil, the plate wrapped in cloth). She never asked him to explain where he went when he vanished. She'd accepted that he was impossible, and impossibility was just another material to work with, like clay or plaster.**

**They'd fallen into a routine. Mornings, she worked on her sculptures while he read books from the**

**library—physics, philosophy, anything that might explain what was happening to him. Afternoons, they'd walk through the city as if it were new for both of them, enchanted, watching the winter turn slowly toward spring. Evenings, they'd return to the studio, eat whatever meager meal she could afford, and talk until the coal stove burned down to embers.**

**It was the most normal Luke had felt in years. And the most alien.**

**Los Angeles, 2022**

**The apartment in Echo Park was becoming a tomb. Luke's crossings back to 2022 were brief,**

**disorienting gasps of grey reality. He'd materialize on the floor, the plate in his hand, his body cold and stiff. The ash still fell outside. The fires still burned. And Bill's texts kept coming to the prepaid phone:**

**\*Need to meet. Inventory to discuss.\***

**\*You're late on your check-in.\***

**\*Call me. Today.\***

**Luke deleted them. He knew he was running out of time. Bill was patient, but patience had limits.**

**Ryan's body had been found—Luke had seen the news on his phone—but it hadn't connected back to him yet. The car had been clean. The canyon fire had destroyed enough evidence. But the investigation was ongoing. Homicide detectives were asking questions.**

**Luke had maybe a week before Bill decided he was a liability instead of an asset.**

**He needed to find a way to stay in 1944. Permanently.**

**Library, Main Branch**

**Luke sat in the Reading Room, surrounded by books he'd pulled from the stacks. The cathedral-**

**like space was nearly empty in the late afternoon,  
just a few scholars hunched over their research.**

**Luke's notebook was open in front of him, filled  
with diagrams and equations he barely understood.**

**He'd started with Einstein. Special relativity. The  
idea that time wasn't fixed, that it bent and  
stretched depending on velocity and gravity. But  
Einstein said you couldn't go backward. Time was a  
river that only flowed one direction.**

**He rubbed his eyes. This was impossible. But so was  
everything else.**

**Quantum entanglement offered a mechanism.  
When two particles became entangled, measuring  
one instantaneously affected the other, regardless  
of distance. Einstein had called it "spooky action at  
a distance" and died uncomfortable with its**

**implications. But experiments proved it real. The correlation transcended space. And if it transcended space, why not time? Retrocausality—quantum correlations that worked backward through the timeline—had been demonstrated in laboratory conditions. Photons measured in the present influenced their own past states. Cause and effect became a loop, not an arrow.**

**The plate existed in 1944. The plate existed in 2022. Not as two objects but as one object in superposition, occupying both states simultaneously until observation collapsed the wavefunction. Luke, holding it, focusing his consciousness upon it with deliberate intensity, became the observer. He collapsed the superposition. He made both states real at once. He**

**became entangled.**

**But entangled with what, exactly? Everett's many-worlds interpretation, published in 1957 but implicit in the quantum formalism since the 1920s, suggested that every quantum event split the universe into parallel branches. There was no single timeline. Every possibility existed simultaneously in the vast superstructure of the wavefunction. The past wasn't gone—it was still happening, right now, in another branch. 1944 was not behind Luke. It was beside him, parallel, equally real, separated only by the thinnest membrane of quantum probability.**

**He wasn't traveling backward. He was jumping laterally.**

**Einstein-Rosen bridges—wormholes—were**

**mathematically permitted by general relativity.**

**Shortcuts through spacetime connecting distant points, or distant times. But the equations said they collapsed instantly unless held open by exotic matter: mass with negative energy density, never observed, purely theoretical. Yet if the plate indeed contained or generated such properties—not through its ceramic composition but through its quantum state, its history of entanglement with both timelines simultaneously—it could function as a stable bridge. A portal held open by its own impossibility.**

**The problem was that relativity and quantum mechanics didn't reconcile. At the Planck scale—the smallest possible measurement of spacetime—the equations produced infinities. Contradictions.**

**Physics broke down. And in that breakdown, in the gap between Einstein's smooth geometric spacetime and Heisenberg's uncertain quantum foam, there was room for phenomena the theories couldn't explain.**

**A librarian—elderly, severe, with wire-rimmed glasses—approached his table. "We're closing in fifteen minutes."**

**"Thank you," Luke said.**

**"You're not trying to understand time travel," she said after a moment. "You're trying to understand how you're already doing it."**

**Luke's breath caught. "What makes you say that?"**

**"Because no one pursues this line of inquiry—Gödel's rotating universe, quantum superposition, many-worlds—unless they have direct phenomenological experience that contradicts consensus reality." She closed the notebook and handed it back. "You're not theorizing. You're reverse-engineering."**

**Luke said nothing. His throat was tight.**

**The librarian sat down across from him. "In my experience," she said, her voice dropping lower, "the things that don't make sense are usually the most important to understand. Physics is full of impossible things that turned out to be true.**

**Curved spacetime. Wave-particle duality. Quantum entanglement—'spooky action at a distance,' Einstein called it, and he hated it. But it's real."**

**"Do you think time travel is possible?" Luke asked.**

**"I think the universe is under no obligation to make sense to us," she said. "Gödel proved that mathematically. There are true things that can't be proven. There are consistent systems that are incomplete. Why should physics be any different?"**

**She stood up.**

**"Thank you," Luke said.**

**She nodded. Then she paused, turned back. "If you do find a way to move between worlds—be careful what you bring with you. And be careful what you leave behind. Causality may be more flexible than Einstein thought, but it's not infinitely elastic. Eventually, it snaps back."**

**She walked away, her footsteps echoing in the vast**

**space.**

**Luke sat alone in the reading room, the last scholar remaining. The painted sky on the ceiling was darkening as the real sky outside faded toward evening. He looked at his notebook, at the equations and diagrams and speculations.**

**He wasn't crazy. This was real. The physics was incomplete, but it was there—buried in Gödel's rotating universes, in quantum superposition, in the gaps between relativity and quantum mechanics.**

**The plate was a quantum-entangled object, existing simultaneously in two branches of the wavefunction. When Luke held it, when he focused his consciousness on it with enough will and intention, he became entangled too. He collapsed**

**the superposition. He made both worlds real at once.**

**And if he could do it once, he could do it again.**

### **Emilee's Studio, Evening**

**Emilee was working on a new piece. Not a woman dissolving into smoke. Something different. A man and a woman, their forms intertwined, neither solid nor vapor but something in between. A state of becoming.**

**Luke sat in his chair by the coal stove, watching her work. Her pregnancy was starting to show—just a slight curve to her belly, barely visible under her loose sweater. She hadn't told him about it yet.**

**He'd noticed but said nothing, waiting for her to  
bring it up in her own time.**

**"You're quiet tonight," she said without looking up  
from the clay.**

**"Thinking."**

**"About?"**

**"Time. How it works. Whether it's fixed or fluid."**

**She paused, her hands hovering over the sculpture.**

**"My friend Betty says time is like wine. It's always  
moving, always changing, even after it's bottled.**

**The same vintage tastes different depending on  
when you open it."**

**"That's a good metaphor."**

**"She's full of them." Emilee stepped back,  
examining her work. "Do you think time is a river**

**or an ocean?"**

**"What do you mean?"**

**"A river flows one direction. You can't go back. But an ocean—you can swim in any direction. The water is everywhere at once."**

**Luke considered this. "I think it's an ocean. And I think most people are stuck on the shore, watching it. But some of us—for whatever reason—can swim."**

**Emilee turned to look at him. "And you're swimming between shores."**

**"Yes."**

**"What happens when you have to choose one shore over the other?"**

**The question hung in the air between them. Luke**

**didn't have an answer.**

**She returned to the sculpture, her hands moving over the clay with practiced certainty. "I'm pregnant," she said quietly. "I don't know if you noticed."**

**"I noticed."**

**"It's not yours. I was pregnant before you arrived. Before any of this."**

**"I know."**

**She turned to face him fully now. "Does it matter to you?"**

**Luke stood up and crossed the small space between them. He took her clay-covered hands in his. "No. It doesn't matter."**

**"I don't even know if I'm keeping it. I can't afford—"**

**"We'll figure it out," Luke said. The words surprised him. WE. As if he was staying. As if he could build a life here.**

**Emilee's eyes filled with tears. "You keep disappearing, Luke. How can we figure anything out if you keep disappearing?"**

**"I'm working on that."**

**"Work faster." She pulled her hands free and wiped her eyes, leaving streaks of clay across her cheeks.**

**"I can't love a ghost."**

**"I'm not a ghost."**

**"Then prove it. Stay."**

## **Los Angeles, 2022 - Two Hours Later**

**The pull came without warning. Luke was standing in Emilee's studio, holding her, and then he was on the floor in Echo Park, gasping, his heart racing.**

**The apartment was dark. The ash had stopped falling. The fires were out.**

**His prepaid phone was buzzing. Seven missed calls from Bill. Three texts:**

**\*We need to talk.\***

**\*You're making me nervous.\***

**\*I'm outside.\***

**Luke's blood froze. He crawled to the window and looked down at the street. A beige Camry was parked two buildings down, engine running,**

**headlights off.**

**Bill was here.**

**Luke grabbed the plate from the floor, his hands shaking. He couldn't go back to 1944. Not now. The crossing took time, concentration. Bill would be at the door in minutes.**

**He looked around the apartment. The fentanyl was still in the drawer. The bags of cocaine were hidden in the closet. Evidence everywhere. He was trapped.**

**His regular phone rang. Not the prepaid. His actual phone. He looked at the screen: a 212 number. New York.**

**He answered.**

**"Luke Kurtz?" A woman's voice, professional,**

**clipped.**

**"Yes?"**

**"This is Detective Sarah Chen, LAPD Homicide. I  
need you to come in for questioning regarding  
Ryan Castellano. We have some questions about  
the night he died."**

**Luke's vision tunneled. Bill outside. Homicide on  
the phone. The walls closing in.**

**"I—when?" he managed.**

**"Tomorrow morning. Nine AM. Northeast Station.  
Do you know where that is?"**

**"Yes."**

**"Good. Don't make us come find you, Mr. Kurtz."  
She hung up.**

**Luke stood in the dark apartment, the plate  
clutched against his chest. The trap had sprung.  
Bill on one side, the police on the other. And  
1944—Emilee, the studio, the life he was trying to  
build—receding like a tide.**

**He had maybe twelve hours to decide: face Bill,  
face the police, or disappear into 1944 and never  
come back.**

**The entity, deep in his hindbrain, stirred. It  
whispered a single word, cold and patient:**

**Stay.**

**New York, 1945**

**Emilee stood alone in her studio, the ghost of Luke's presence still warm in the air. He had vanished again—there one moment, solid and warm, his laugh a low rumble in the quiet room, and then gone the next. Not like a man walking out, but like a radio signal fading from a station, leaving only static.**

**She put a hand on her belly, a habit now. The life inside her, their life, was growing, oblivious to the impossibility of its father. This child, once a source of pure terror, now felt like a promise. A tether.**

**She looked at the sculpture of the two intertwined figures, no longer dissolving but becoming. It was them. It was the future she was daring to believe**

**in.**

**A quiet, disbelieving laugh escaped her. How had she gotten here? How was this her life?**

**She thought of the desperate, hollowed-out woman she had been just months ago. The telegram about Thomas had been a final, closing door. KILLED IN ACTION. KASSERINE PASS. There was no body to bury, only an absence that she tried to sculpt into smoke. She had fled Providence and its suffocating pity for New York, a city full of other women like her, ghosts wearing coats, their men turned to memory and vapor.**

**Then came Richard, the gallery owner. Smarmy, married, promising her a show. A single, foolish night born of cheap sherry and a cheaper need to feel something other than grief. It wasn't violent,**

**but it was a transaction. He got his conquest; she got a fleeting, pathetic illusion of connection and, weeks later, the chilling certainty of a missed cycle. When she told him, his face had gone flat, his eyes calculating. He'd slid twenty dollars across the table in a diner. "There are places. Discreet. I know a guy in Hell's Kitchen." He'd abandoned her long before he physically walked away. As the name suggested, RIchard was a dick.**

**That was the future she had seen: alone, penniless, facing a choice that was no choice at all. A mother, which meant giving up her art? Or an artist, which meant... she couldn't even finish the thought. It was a different kind of dissolution. The erasure of one life for another.**

**And then... Luke.**

**Breathing into existence in the Hotel Lincoln  
lobby, looking more lost than any soldier she'd ever  
seen. He looked at her sculpture and didn't see  
death. He saw transformation. Possibility.**

**He had stepped into the wreckage of her life and,  
without even trying, had begun to rebuild it. This  
apartment, their apartment, with its rattling  
windows and persistent chill, was a palace because  
he was in it. The baby, once a sentence, was now  
their child. Theirs.**

**She wasn't a fool. She knew he was entangled in  
something vast and terrifying. She saw the panic in  
his eyes when the pull came. But he fought it. He  
always fought to come back to her.**

**She walked to the sculpture, her tools lying cold on  
the stand. She was done sculpting dissolution. She**

**was done with figures that disappeared.**

**From now on, she would sculpt arrival.**

**She picked up a wire tool, her hand steady. She would sculpt him here, solid, permanent. She would give him a body that couldn't vanish. She would pour every ounce of her hope, her gratitude, her fierce, defiant love into the clay.**

**Art had been her refuge from a world of exits. Now, it would be her invitation. A landmark in the static, a beacon to guide him home.**

**Maybe art could do what love alone couldn't.**

**It could make him stay.**

## **CHAPTER 13: THE CALCULATION**

**Los Angeles, 2022 - 11:47 PM**

**Luke sat on the floor of the apartment with his back against the wall, the plate balanced on his knees. Bill's Camry hadn't moved in forty minutes. The engine was still running—a patient, predatory idle. Through the window, Luke could see the faint glow of a phone screen in the driver's seat. Bill was texting someone. Calling someone. Making arrangements.**

**The entity inside Luke's skull pulsed with something that felt like satisfaction. It had been whispering for hours now, not in words but in the language of pure survival instinct. \*Don't run.**

**Running is weakness. Face the machine. Become  
the machine.\***

**Luke tried to quiet it, to push it down into  
whatever neural basement it had crawled out of.  
But it was getting stronger. Each crossing to 1944  
seemed to feed it, as if the temporal displacement  
was loosening some barrier that had kept it  
contained.**

**His regular phone sat on the floor beside him, dark  
now, but still radioactive with Detective Chen's  
voice. \*Tomorrow morning. Nine AM. Don't make us  
come find you.\***

**He had twelve hours. Maybe less if Bill decided to  
stop waiting.**

**The apartment was a crime scene he hadn't cleaned**

**yet. The fentanyl in the drawer. The scale with cocaine residue. The burner phone with Bill's number. The Honda with Ryan's blood probably still in the seams of the seats, invisible to the naked eye but waiting patiently for luminol.**

**A rational man would run. Drive to Mexico, ditch the car, find a way across the border. Start over in Tijuana or further south, work construction, live on cash, never look back.**

**But Luke had stopped being rational the moment he'd held the plate and felt 1944 open up like a door in a wall he'd never known was there.**

**He picked up the plate and turned it over, studying the green stamp on the back. \*Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York.\* The letters seemed to pulse in the dim light from the street. He'd read**

**somewhere that objects could hold memory—not metaphorically, but actually. That the atomic structure of matter recorded its history the way grooves in vinyl recorded sound.**

**This plate had been in the Carnival Room in 1944. It had held food served to people in tuxedos and evening gowns. It had been washed in sinks that no longer existed, dried by hands that were now dust. And ethereally, vividly it still vibrated with that frequency. Still held the signal.**

**Quantum entanglement. That's what he'd decided in the library. The plate existed in two states simultaneously—here in 2022, there in 1944. And when he held it, when he focused his consciousness on it like a radio tuning to a specific frequency, he became entangled too.**

**The question was: could he collapse one state entirely? Could he make 1944 the only reality and erase 2022 completely?**

**His phone buzzed. A text from a number he didn't recognize:**

**\*Luke. It's Carolina. I heard about Ryan. The police called me asking about you. What the fuck is going on?\***

**He stared at the message. Carolina. His ex. The woman who'd loved him when he was still trying to be a musician, who'd left when the trying became failing. She was part of the web now too. The police were tracing his connections, building a network, closing in.**

**He didn't reply. He set the phone face-down on the**

**floor.**

**Outside, Bill's Camry door opened. Luke's heart seized. But Bill didn't get out. He just stood there beside the car, stretching, a man who'd been sitting too long. He was wearing the same dark jeans and black jacket from the night he'd killed Ryan. His face, illuminated by the streetlight, showed no emotion. He was just waiting. A machine in standby mode.**

**Bill looked up at Luke's window.**

**Their eyes met across the distance, across the ash-grey darkness. Bill didn't wave. Didn't gesture. Just held the gaze for three long seconds. Then he got back in the car and closed the door.**

**The message was clear: \*I know you're there. I'm**

**not going anywhere.\***

**\*\*New York, 1945 - 2:53 AM\*\* \*(simultaneous)\***

**Emilee couldn't sleep. The pregnancy was making her restless, her body a stranger. She'd been up for hours, working on the sculpture by the light of two kerosene lamps. The coal stove had gone cold—she'd run out of coal and couldn't afford more until the hotel paid her on Friday.**

**The studio was freezing. She could see her breath. But her hands stayed warm from the friction of working the clay.**

**The sculpture had evolved. It was no longer just Luke's face. She'd built shoulders, a torso, arms. A full figure emerging from rough stone. She was working in the style of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures—the ones where the figure seems to be climbing out of the marble, half-born, struggling toward existence.**

**\*Prigione\*. The prisoner. That's what Luke was. Trapped between worlds.**

**She'd given him more detail in this world. His jawline. The particular way his hair fell across his forehead. The slight asymmetry of his shoulders.**

**She was building him a body that was more real  
than the one he arrived in.**

**\*You can't love a ghost,\* she'd told him. But maybe  
you could sculpt one into flesh.**

**Betty had brought her books on magic—actual  
grimoires, not the fairy-tale kind. Jewish  
mysticism. Kabbalah. The concept of the golem: a  
clay figure brought to life by inscribing the name of  
God on its forehead. Emilee wasn't religious. Hadn't  
been since the telegram about Thomas. But she  
understood the metaphor. Words had power. Names  
had power. Art was the act of willing something  
into existence.**

**She was willing Luke into permanence.**

**Her hands moved over the clay of his chest, adding definition to the muscles, the architecture of ribs and sternum. She could feel her own heart beating in her palms as she worked. Or maybe it was his heart. Maybe the sculpture was already alive in some way she didn't have language for.**

**The baby moved inside her—a flutter, barely perceptible, easy to mistake for gas or hunger. But she knew what it was. Life asserting itself.**

**Demanding to be.**

**Two lives she was trying to anchor in this world:**

**Luke and the child. Both impossible. Both  
necessary.**

**She stepped back, studying the sculpture. It was  
nearly life-size now. If Luke stood next to it, they'd  
be the same height. Twins. One flesh, one clay.**

**"Come back," she whispered to the figure. "Please  
come back and stay."**

**Los Angeles, 2022 - 12:14 AM**

**Luke stood up. His legs were stiff from sitting. He  
walked to the kitchen and opened the drawer where  
the fentanyl was hidden. Fifty pills. Bill's "bonus."  
His ticket into a deeper circle of hell.**

**He picked up the bottle and carried it to the bathroom. Opened it. Dumped the pills into the toilet. They floated for a moment, pale blue against the water, then began to sink.**

**He flushed.**

**The entity in his head screamed—not sound, but pressure, a spike of pure rage that made his vision white out. His knees buckled and he grabbed the sink to keep from falling.**

**\*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE THAT IS EVIDENCE THAT IS VALUE THAT IS CURRENCY YOU STUPID MEAT YOU HAVE DESTROYED\***

**Luke gritted his teeth against the pain. "Not yours,"**

**he gasped. "Not using it. Not selling it. Not becoming you."**

**The pressure subsided to a dull roar. The entity retreated, but he could feel it coiling in the back of his skull, malevolent and patient.**

**He stood up slowly, his hands shaking. That was new. The entity could hurt him now. Could punish him for disobedience. It was getting stronger.**

**Or maybe he was just getting weaker. Maybe each crossing to 1944 was opening him up, making him more porous, more vulnerable to the thing that had been riding him since the night Bill gave him the "bonus."**

**He walked back to the living room. Bill's car was still there. Luke checked his watch. 12:21 AM. Nine**

**hours until the police appointment. Seven hours until the city woke up. Maybe three hours until Bill decided waiting was inefficient and came upstairs with the silenced pistol.**

**Luke had to make a decision.**

**He could face Bill. Walk outside, get in the car, try to explain or apologize or beg. Bill might listen. Bill might be reasonable. But Bill had killed Ryan with the casual efficiency of a man swatting a fly. And Luke was now a witness, a loose end, a liability.**

**He could face the police. Show up at 9 AM, answer Detective Chen's questions, tell the truth or lie, take his chances with the system. But he'd helped dispose of Ryan's body. His fingerprints were probably on the car despite the industrial cleaner. His phone records would show calls to Ryan that**

**night. He was already implicated.**

**Or he could leave. Not Mexico—that was still running, still staying in the same world, the same timeline. He could go to 1944. Permanently. Take the plate, drink the sherry, focus every molecule of his will, and cross over. Sever the quantum entanglement with 2022 completely.**

**Become a ghost in this world to become real in another.**

**His father had done it. Antanas had walked away from his entire life—parents, sister, country, language, identity—for the possibility of something better. He'd burned the bridge behind him. Stepped into the void. Trusted that the other shore was real.**

**Luke picked up the plate again. The green letters seemed to glow.**

**\*Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York.\***

**Not "Made for resale." Not "Made for profit." \*Made expressly.\* With intention. With purpose. For a specific place and time.**

**Everything in Luke's world of 2022 was made for obsolescence. Phones designed to break. Clothes designed to wear out. Relationships designed to be disposable. Nothing was made to last because lasting wasn't profitable.**

**But this plate had lasted. Eighty years. And it was still doing its job: serving a purpose, holding meaning, connecting worlds.**

**Maybe that was the answer. Maybe the only way to**

**escape the machine was to become something the  
machine couldn't process. Something made  
expressly. Something that refused to be disposable.**

**Luke stood up and walked to the bedroom closet.**

**He pulled out the backpack he'd used in college,  
back when he was still playing keyboard in a jazz  
trio, back when he'd believed he could build a life  
on beauty instead of powder.**

**He packed quickly: the plate wrapped in a t-shirt,  
the last bottle of sherry, his notebook from the  
library, a change of clothes, the photo of his father  
he kept in a drawer. That was it. No phone—both of  
them staying here, evidence for whoever came  
looking. No wallet—credit cards and ID were  
anchors to 2022. No cocaine, no scale, no burner.  
Nothing that belonged to Bill's machine.**

**He was traveling light. Lighter than his father had when he'd fled Lithuania.**

**He went to the kitchen table and wrote a note on the back of a takeout menu:**

**\*Carolina - I didn't kill Ryan. But I can't prove it. I'm sorry for everything. I hope you find someone better than I was. - L\***

**He left it where the police would find it when they came. Because they would come. With or without him there.**

**He put on his jacket, slung the backpack over his shoulder, and stood in the center of the apartment one last time. This place had never been home. It had been a temporary cell in a temporary life.**

**Walking away wasn't loss. It was liberation.**

**The entity whispered: \*You cannot leave. You belong to me. You are mine.\***

**"No," Luke said out loud. "I never was."**

**He walked to the window and looked down at Bill's Camry one last time. Then he turned away, went to the door, and stepped into the hallway.**

### **The Stairwell**

**Luke didn't take the elevator. Too enclosed, too slow. He took the stairs, moving quickly but not running. Running drew attention. He passed the second floor, the first floor, pushed through the**

**door into the building's rear alley.**

**The alley reeked of dumpsters and old piss and the lingering ash from the fires. His Honda was parked three buildings down. He could reach it in thirty seconds if he moved fast.**

**But Bill would see him. Would follow. Would end this before it began.**

**Luke stood in the shadows of the alley, thinking. The entity pushed at him, trying to steer him back inside, back to safety, back to compliance. But Luke had flushed its fentanyl. He'd rejected its gift. And spectacularly, that act of defiance had weakened it.**

**Or maybe it had always been weak. Maybe it only had as much power as he gave it.**

**He left the Honda where it was. Another anchor cut. He walked the opposite direction, away from Bill, into the maze of Echo Park's back streets. The city at 12:30 AM was quiet in the way only Los Angeles could be—not peaceful, but held in suspension, waiting for the next catastrophe.**

**Luke walked for twenty minutes, winding through residential streets, avoiding the main boulevards where cameras watched and recorded. His destination was three miles away: Union Station. From there, he could catch a train, a bus, anything that would carry him far enough from Bill's radius that he could find a quiet place to make the crossing.**

**He passed houses dark and silent. Cars parked on streets. Lives happening behind walls. He thought**

**of Emilee, alone in her cold studio, sculpting his face. Come back and stay.**

**He was trying.**

**At Sunset Boulevard he stopped. There was a 7-Eleven across the street, bright and fluorescent, an oasis of corporate light. His mouth was dry. He needed water. Needed to think.**

**He crossed the street and went inside. The clerk was an old Korean man reading a newspaper. He didn't look up. Luke grabbed a bottle of water from the cooler, a pack of cigarettes (he didn't really smoke, but he might need to), and a lighter.**

**As he reached for his wallet, he remembered: no wallet. He'd left it in the apartment. Shit.**

**"Sorry," he said to the clerk. "Forgot my wallet."**

**The clerk looked up for the first time. His eyes were ancient, tired, but not unkind. "Take it," he said.**

**"What?"**

**"Take it. No charge." The old man gestured at Luke's face. "You look like a ghost. Ghosts don't pay."**

**Luke stared at him. Then he took the water and cigarettes. "Thank you."**

**The old man nodded and went back to his newspaper.**

**Luke walked outside and stood in the parking lot, drinking the cold water. It was the most real thing he'd tasted in days.**

**A car pulled into the lot. A beige Camry.**

**Luke's blood froze.**

**Bill got out of the car slowly, deliberately. He'd changed clothes—now he was wearing a grey suit, like a man headed to an office job. The gun was probably in his jacket. Hidden. Professional.**

**He walked toward Luke with the calm, measured pace of a man who had all the time in the world.**

**"You left your phones," Bill said. "Both of them. That's very inconvenient for me."**

**Luke said nothing.**

**"You also flushed the fentanyl. I have a sensor on my product. Tells me when it gets wet. Very useful for tracking distribution." Bill stopped five feet away. "So now I know you're not just unreliable.**

**You're actively destroying my property."**

**"I'm done, Bill."**

**"Yes. You are." Bill's hand moved toward his jacket.**

**And Luke did something he hadn't planned, hadn't thought through, hadn't even known he was capable of.**

**He threw the plate.**

**Not at Bill. Not as a weapon. He threw it straight up, into the air, as hard as he could.**

**It spun, catching the fluorescent light, a disc of cream and gold rotating against the black sky. For a moment it seemed to hang there, suspended, impossible. The green letters on the back—\*Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York\*—flashing like a signal.**

**Bill's eyes followed it up. A reflex. A mistake.**

**Luke ran.**

**Not toward his car. Not toward Union Station.**

**Toward the empty lot behind the 7-Eleven, through  
the gap in the chain-link fence, into the darkness  
beyond.**

**Behind him, he heard the plate hit the pavement.  
The sound of ceramic shattering. A crack like a  
gunshot.**

**The entity in his skull shrieked. Luke felt  
something tear inside his head—not physical, but  
fundamental. The connection snapping. The  
entanglement breaking.**

**He was falling through the world.**

**New York, 1945 - 3:47 AM**

**Luke crashed to his knees on the cold floor of Emilee's studio. The crossing had been violent, wrenching, like being pulled through a membrane that didn't want to let him through.**

**He was gasping, his heart hammering against his ribs. But he was here. He was solid. He was real.**

**Emilee dropped her sculpting tools with a clatter. "Luke!" She ran to him, fell to her knees beside him. Her hands found his face, his shoulders, checking if he was whole.**

**"I'm here," he managed. "I'm staying."**

**"What happened?"**

**"I broke it. The plate. I broke the connection."**

**Her eyes went wide. "You can't go back?"**

**"I don't want to go back."**

**She pulled him against her, her body warm despite the cold room. He could feel her heart beating, feel the slight swell of her belly pressing against him.**

**She was more real than anything in 2022 had ever been.**

**"You're shaking," she whispered.**

**"I'm free."**

**She held him tighter. Over his shoulder, she could see the sculpture she'd been working on—Luke's figure, emerging from stone, half-born but climbing toward existence.**

**She'd been willing him into permanence. And**

**miraculously, impossibly, it had worked.**

**"You're here," she said. "You're really here."**

**"I'm really here."**

**Outside, the city was beginning to wake. March 1945. The war in Europe was ending. The atomic age was about to begin. The future was unknown and terrifying.**

**But in this room, in this moment, two people from impossible worlds held each other in the dark, and it was enough.**

**Los Angeles, 2022 - 12:51 AM**

**Bill stood in the 7-Eleven parking lot, looking down**

**at the shattered plate. The cream-colored porcelain lay in seven large pieces, the gold rim catching the fluorescent light. The green stamp on the largest fragment was still visible: \*Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York.\***

**He bent down and picked up the fragment. Studied it.**

**The entity inside him stirred, confused, searching. The host it had been tracking—Luke—had simply vanished. Not died. Not moved. Vanished. As if he'd stepped out of reality itself.**

**Bill's face remained calm. This was a problem, but**

**problems had solutions.**

**He pulled out his phone and made a call. It rang twice before a woman's voice answered.**

**"It's Bill. I need a cleaner for an apartment in Echo Park. Full sanitization. And I need you to run a search on someone. Luke Kurtz. Everything. Phone records, financials, associates." He paused. "Yes. All of it. I'll send you the address."**

**He hung up. Looked at the broken plate one more time. Then he got in his Camry and drove away, the engine purring like a satisfied predator.**

**Behind the 7-Eleven, in the empty lot, there was no trace of Luke. No footprints. No trail. Just darkness and the lingering scent of ash.**

**He'd stepped through the wall and disappeared.**

**And in a cold studio in 1945, a woman was sculpting her lover's face by lamplight, willing him to stay, while the man himself held her and whispered that he would never leave.**

**The crossing was complete.**

**The door was closed.**

**And for the first time in his life, Luke Kurtz was  
exactly where he belonged.**

## **CHAPTER 14: THE WEIGHT OF GHOSTS**

**Luke materialized in the Echo Park apartment and  
his body, which had been thirty-three years old five  
months ago in 1944, did not get up.**

**He didn't fall; he collapsed, his skeletal frame  
folding like a bird's wing. The sound of his skull  
hitting the linoleum was a distant, dull crack. He**

**was ninety. His vision was a grey blur. His hands were parchment, his breath a wet, labored rasp.**

**He was dying.**

**And the entity was screaming.**

**Lying on the floor, his ancient lungs rattling, Luke finally understood. The research he'd done on his last trip back flooded his mind, the pieces snapping together. The interrogation transcripts of SS-Obergruppenführer Sporrenberg. The Bell—Die Glocke. Not a weapon, but a transmission device, designed to scatter consciousness across spacetime. The Polish engineer Kerner's testimony:**

**the test subjects turned to ash, and the ash moved.**

**As if it were still seeking something.**

**The entity inside him was one of those seeking  
fragments. It was the weight. It was the poison. It  
was eighty years old, and he was carrying its  
temporal mass. The seven-years-per-crossing  
calculation was wrong; the interest was  
compounding because he was processing two  
lifetimes.**

**The entity was the glitch. The entity was killing  
him.**

**He remembered his calculation, made when he was  
still young enough to have time: seven years per**

**four months. He'd thought he could manage it. But the calculation was wrong. The interest was compounding.**

**At this rate, he'd be dead before the baby was born.**

**He realized, with a cold, flat finality, he was. This was it. This was the end he'd been given.**

**Unless...**

**Get out, Luke thought, the command a faint whisper in the storm of the entity's rage. Get out of me.**

**The entity clawed back, showing him images of Bill, of Ryan's body, of the cold jail cell that awaited him. It promised him survival.**

**You're not survival, Luke thought, his own ancient heart stuttering. You're the Bell. You're the ash. You're the machine.**

**He didn't have the strength to fight it. But he didn't need to. He just had to let go.**

**He thought of Emilee's hands, covered in clay. He thought of his father's faith in a new world. He thought of the plate's simple, honest purpose: Made**

**Expressly For.**

**He thought of creation. And he rejected  
transmission.**

**Luke lay on the floor, the ghost of the entity's  
scream still echoing in the suddenly silent vault of  
his own skull. He was clean. And he was dying. The  
sirens in the distance were a requiem for Bill, for  
Ryan, for the life he was leaving. He had done it.  
He had cut the last tie.**

**But the plate was gone. He had shattered it in the  
7-Eleven parking lot, a desperate act to break the  
entity's hold. Without it, he was just a dying old**

**man on a dirty floor. The door was closed. The key  
was broken.**

**His vision blurred, swimming in and out of focus.  
He was so tired. Then, his gaze fell upon the  
kitchen table.**

**Impossible, yet there it was, whole again on the  
linoleum—as if its purpose was not yet fulfilled.**

**The cream-colored glaze was flawless. The thin gold  
rim seemed to catch the dismal grey light from the  
window and transmute it into something precious.  
It had not simply reappeared; it had returned,  
waiting for him to finish what he started.**

**A final, defiant spark ignited in him. He began to crawl.**

## **CHAPTER 15: THE EXPULSION**

**Inglewood - 6:52 AM**

**Bill sat in his beige stucco void, and the entity slammed back into him.**

**It was not the patient, quiet presence he had hosted for decades. This was a feral, panicked, rabid thing. It was the sound of a hornets' nest dropped into his brain.**

**Bill's back arched, a scream tearing from his throat. His hands clawed at the chair. Blood burst from his nose.**

**The entity was no longer a passenger. It was a conqueror, and it was terrified. Luke had rejected it. The plan was ruined. The bridge was closed.**

**It flooded Bill's mind with its own paranoia. It showed him images—not of the truth, but of its fear. It showed him black SUVs on the street. It showed him SWAT teams. It showed him Luke, in an interrogation room, talking.**

**Betrayal. Trap. They are here.**

**Bill, the consummate operator, the Force Recon Marine, did not question the intel. His body, his skills, were now just a puppet for the entity's rage.**

**"Acknowledged," he said to the empty room.**

**He moved to the garage, his movements fluid, efficient, possessed. He opened the false-backed wall panel. The arsenal. The AR-15, the Mossberg 500, the Kevlar vest, the high-capacity magazines.**

**He didn't call his contacts. He didn't plan an escape. The entity didn't want escape.**

**It wanted a massacre.**

**Bill methodically turned his house into a fortress. A killbox. He wasn't a man. He was a piece of ordnance, waiting for a trigger.**

**Echo Park - 7:15 AM**

**Luke was on his belly, dragging his useless, ancient legs. His lungs burned. He'd been crawling for twenty minutes.**

**He ignored the laptop. He ignored the bags of cocaine in the drawer—what was money to a dying man?**

**He crawled to his phone. His real phone.**

**His fingers, bent with an old man's arthritis, fumbled with the screen. He dialed the number he knew by heart. His mother's.**

**It rang.**

**"Hello?" Her voice, thick with sleep.**

**"Mom," he rasped.**

**A silence. A terrible, held breath. "Luke? Oh my god, Luke, is that you? You sound... you sound sick".**

**"I'm okay, Mom," he lied, tears leaking from his eyes. "I just... I have to go away. I'm going away."**

**"What? What are you talking about? Luke, are you in trouble? I can help...".**

**"No. I'm... I'm doing what Dad did. An exodus. I'm going home, Mom. Just... not the one you're**

**thinking of."**

**"Luke, please..." She was crying now.**

**"I love you. Tell everyone... I love you."**

**He ended the call. His one, true confession. His last anchor to this world, cut.**

**His mother, terrified, dialed 911.**

**Inglewood - 7:42 AM**

**A patrol car, dispatched for a wellness check on a "distraught mother's son in Echo Park," found Luke's door unlocked. The officer found the laptop first, the browser history still open to "Die Glocke" and "Nazi Consciousness Transmission."**

**He radioed for a detective.**

**Simultaneously, Detective Sarah Chen, having finally linked Ryan's murder to Bill's beige Camry, pulled up to the Inglewood house with a two-man patrol car as backup.**

**"Standard knock-and-talk," she said. "Let's see if**

**he's home."**

**Officer Morrison approached the door. He knocked.**

**"Mr. Brennan? LAPD. We'd like to ask you a few questions!"**

**Inside, the entity screamed: THEY ARE HERE. KILL THEM.**

**Bill, prone at the end of the hallway, saw Morrison's shape through the thin stucco wall. He raised the Mossberg.**

**The first blast of 12-gauge buckshot turned the**

**entire front door into a cloud of splinters. It didn't wound Morrison. It erased him, throwing him backward onto the lawn, his vest and chest gone.**

**"OFFICER DOWN!" Chen screamed, diving behind the patrol car as a second blast took out the windshield.**

**The entity, through Bill, fired again, the AR-15 now, a controlled, three-round burst that stitched across the patrol car's engine block.**

**The "real consequences" had arrived. This was not an arrest. It was a war.**

## **The Crossing / The Siege - 8:15 AM**

**ECHO PARK:** Luke heard the sirens. So many. Wailing toward Inglewood. He smiled. The machine, fighting itself. He turned his ancient, dying body toward the plate. It lay on the floor, whole and waiting. He had no sherry. No music. He didn't need them. It was never the ritual. It was the will. He placed his trembling hands on the cool ceramic.

**INGLEWOOD:** The street was a warzone. SWAT had arrived. A sniper, Sgt. Kim, was on a neighboring roof. "He's ex-Recon," Chen yelled into the

**command radio. "He built this house to do this."**  
**The first breach team, expecting a standard entry,**  
**stacked on the ruined doorway.**

**ECHO PARK: Luke closed his eyes. He thought of**  
**Emilee. He thought of the baby's kick. He let go of**  
**2022. He let go of the pain, the ash, the failure. He**  
**chose.**

**INGLEWOOD:** "Breach, breach, breach!". The team poured in. Bill, from his killing field, fired the shotgun three times. Pump. Fire. Pump. Fire.. The hallway became a tangle of dead and dying officers. The entity laughed in Bill's head. Bill moved to the window for a better angle.

**ECHO PARK:** The quantum superposition collapsed.

**INGLEWOOD:** Sgt. Kim saw the movement. Breathed out. Squeezed the trigger.

**ECHO PARK: Luke's 90-year-old body went limp.**

**His heart stopped.**

**INGLEWOOD: The .308 round shattered the window and punched through Bill's chest. He fell. The entity shrieked, trapped in a dying host. As SWAT teams breached from every window, Bill's eyes, black with the entity's presence, stared at the ceiling. He saw it—the Bell, the ash, the 80-year-old signal. "It's... still... transmitting...". Then the signal died. The entity, and Bill, were gone.**

**1945 - February**

**Luke's crossing was instantaneous. Seamless.**

**One moment, he was a corpse in 2022. The next,  
he was standing in the Chelsea studio, thirty-three  
years old, whole, and clean. The temporal weight  
was gone. He was just him.**

**Emilee woke, her hand flying to her seven-month-  
pregnant belly. She saw him.**

**"You're back," she whispered.**

**"I'm back," he said, his voice thick. He knelt and pressed his face to her stomach. "And I am staying".**

**"You look..." she said, touching his face. "Lighter".**

**"I am," he said. "I left something behind. Something that didn't belong".**

**Outside, the sounds of 1945 New York filled the air. The war was almost over. The atomic age, the age of compressed music and disposable lives, was not**

**yet born. He had three months.**

**"In my world," he said, holding her, "everything was made to break. It was a city of ash".**

**"What will we do?" she asked.**

**"We'll make things that last".**

**2022 - November**

**Detective Sarah Chen stood in Luke Kurtz's apartment. It was void, empty, but not clean. A thin film of ash coated every surface. On the kitchen table, his laptop was open, its battery dead.**

**A single, cream-colored plate with a gold rim sat  
beside it, looking utterly out of place.**

**There was no sign of Luke. No note. No body. Just...  
absence.**

**She'd just come from the charnel house in  
Inglewood. Four officers dead. Bill Brennan, a man  
with no history, had turned his home into a  
fortress and died in a storm of violence that felt  
more like a suicide than a shootout.**

**And now this. A missing dealer. A shattered  
operation. A confession on a laptop she couldn't yet  
read.**

**The cases would be closed, filed under a mountain of paperwork and unanswerable questions. But as Chen looked at the plate—Made Expressly for Hotel Lincoln New York—she knew, with a cold certainty, that the official story was a lie. The truth was here, in this quiet, empty room, and it had vanished without a trace.**

**She was left holding the ash.**

## **CHAPTER 16: MADE EXPRESSLY**

**There is always a war. And every war leaves its ghosts.**

**Detective Sarah Chen stood in the empty Echo Park apartment, the last of the forensic team having packed up hours ago. The official reports were filed. The cases were closed. Or rather, they had collapsed under their own impossibility.**

**Four officers dead in a shootout with a paranoid ex-Marine contractor.**

**A ninety-year-old John Doe, dead of heart failure in this same rental, clutching a cream-colored plate.**

**And on a laptop, a browser history filled with what looked like the ravings of a conspiracy theorist: Die**

**Glocke. Laternenträger. SS-Obergruppenführer**

**Sporrenberg. Consciousness Transmission.**

**Quantum entanglement. Many-worlds theory.**

**Chen closed the case file. She was left with  
fragments. Coroner's reports. Evidence logs. A  
story that made no sense no matter how many  
times she tried to piece it together.**

**She was left holding the ash.**

**What Chen would never know was that the ash  
congregated.**

**She would never know that the signal, scattered by  
the Bell in the dying moments of one war, had  
taken root in the victors. That it had found a host**

**in a Panamanian jungle in 1994 and turned a man named Bill Brennan into something else—a thing of quiet, sterile efficiency, a machine waiting for its purpose.**

**She would never know that when that signal was finally rejected, expelled in a dying man's last breath, it had returned to its original host in a final, desperate attempt at survival. That Bill's house in Inglewood had become a killbox, a suburban echo of the Wenceslas Mine, where Bill—like the prisoners before him—was "burned from the inside," erased by a signal he could no longer contain.**

**She would never know that Luke Kurtz was the true Laternenträger—the Lantern Bearer. The bridge between worlds. The man who had been chosen, seeded by the Bell's dark transmission across eighty years of patient waiting.**

**But the machine made a fatal error.**

**It underestimated the human.**

**It did not account for the pull of an artist's hands, sculpting a ghost into flesh. It did not account for a father's exodus, choosing exile over erasure. It did not account for the stubborn, illogical, creative will that looked at a world made for obsolescence and**

**chose, instead, a world where things were made  
expressly—with purpose, with intention, to last.**

**In the end, Luke Kurtz refused the transmission.**

**He rejected the scattering.**

**He chose arrival.**

**New York, May 1945**

**The studio on 23rd Street had changed. Not the  
space itself—still cold, still cramped, the coal stove  
still burning low on damp mornings. But the quality**

**of the light was different. Spring had come to the city, and with it, a cautious hope that hadn't existed in February.**

**Luke stood at the window, watching the street below. V-E Day was two weeks past. The war in Europe was over. The city had erupted in celebration—sailors kissing nurses in Times Square, confetti raining down like snow, strangers embracing strangers. But Luke had stayed here, in the studio, holding Emilee while she cried.**

**"Thomas would have loved to see this," she'd said against his chest. "He would have danced in the streets."**

**Luke had held her tighter, saying nothing. Thomas was ash now. Part of the transmission. Part of what Luke had left behind.**

**But the war in the Pacific continued. And somewhere in New Mexico, in a place called Los Alamos, scientists were preparing a test that would end that war and begin something else.**

**The atomic age.**

**The age of simulation.**

**The end of the real world.**

**Luke knew this, but he couldn't tell her. Couldn't warn her. Couldn't change what was coming.**

**All he could do was build.**

**Emilee sat at her work table, her hands moving over clay with practiced certainty. She was nine months pregnant now, her belly enormous, the baby—Mara—pressing against her lungs, making it hard to breathe.**

**But her hands never stopped.**

**She was working on a new series. Not dissolution.**

**Not smoke. Not ghosts stepping through walls.**

**Arrivals.**

**The first piece was finished: a man and a woman,**

**their forms solid and intertwined, their faces**

**turned toward something beyond the frame.**

**Toward a future. The clay was heavy, dense,**

**permanent. This was not plaster that would**

**crumble. This was fired vitreous china, built to last**

**centuries.**

**Luke had helped her mix the clay, had helped her**

**fire the kiln they'd managed to rent space in. His engineer's precision, inherited from Antanas, applied to her artist's vision.**

**They were making something together.**

**Something that would outlast them both.**

**"Do you ever regret it?" Emilee asked without looking up from her work. "Choosing this world over yours?"**

**Luke thought about the question. About the grey apartment in Echo Park. About Bill and Ryan and**

**the ash covering everything. About the noise  
without signal, the static without meaning.**

**"No," he said. "Never."**

**"Even knowing what's coming? Hiroshima. You said  
the name once, in your sleep. You said it like a  
prayer. Or a curse."**

**He'd been careless. He came to her, knelt beside  
her chair, took her clay-covered hands in his.**

**"I know things will change," he said carefully. "I  
know the world after the war won't be the world we**

**have now. But that's true in every age. The world is always ending. The world is always beginning."**

**"Very philosophical," she said, smiling. "Very unlike a man who used to sell cocaine."**

**"I learned it from you," he said. "From watching you work. You take nothing—empty air, empty space—and you give it form. You make something from nothing. That's what we're doing. That's what we'll teach Mara to do."**

**Emilee's smile faded. She looked down at her belly, at the life moving inside her. "Do you think she'll be okay? In this new world you can't tell me**

**about?"**

**"I think she'll be extraordinary," Luke said.**

**"Because she'll have you as a mother."**

**"And you as a father."**

**"And me as a father."**

**Mara kicked, hard, as if in agreement.**

**Three Weeks Later - June 1945**

**The labor lasted fourteen hours.**

**Luke paced the waiting room of St. Vincent's Hospital, his hands shaking, his engineer's mind uselessly calculating odds and outcomes. Emilee's friend Betty sat beside him, chain-smoking, offering commentary.**

**"First babies always take forever," she said. "My sister was in labor for twenty hours. Twenty. The baby came out fine. Big head, but fine."**

**Luke didn't find this comforting.**

**At 3:47 AM—the same time he'd arrived in this world six months ago—a nurse came to get him.**

**"Mr. Kurtz? You can see them now."**

**Emilee was pale, exhausted, her hair plastered to her forehead with sweat. But she was smiling. And in her arms, wrapped in a thin hospital blanket, was Mara.**

**Luke crossed the room, his legs unsteady. He looked down at his daughter and felt something fundamental shift inside him. Some ancient, animal part of his brain that hadn't existed before suddenly waking up and saying: \*This. This is what**

**matters. This is what you protect.\***

**"She's perfect," Emilee whispered.**

**Mara was tiny. Impossibly small. Her eyes were closed, her fists clenched, her mouth working in her sleep. She looked like every other newborn Luke had ever seen, and she looked like no one else in the world.**

**"Do you want to hold her?" Emilee asked.**

**Luke nodded, unable to speak. Emilee transferred the warm, slight weight into his arms.**

**Mara opened her eyes. They were dark blue, unfocused, seeing nothing and everything. She looked at him—not with recognition, but with something older. Some ancient, inherited knowledge that this man was safe. That this man was hers.**

**"Hello, Mara," Luke whispered. "I'm your father. I came a very long way to meet you."**

**Mara yawned, a tiny, perfect motion, and went back to sleep.**

**Three Months Later - August 6, 1945**

**Luke was on the docks when he heard.**

**The foreman came down from the office, his face  
pale, holding a newspaper with a headline so large  
it was visible from twenty feet away:**

**ATOMIC BOMB DROPPED ON JAPAN**

**The men gathered around, reading over each  
other's shoulders. Hiroshima. A single bomb. A city  
erased. Casualties estimated in the tens of  
thousands. A weapon beyond comprehension.**

**Luke set down the crate he'd been carrying and walked away from the crowd. He found a quiet spot at the edge of the pier and sat down, his legs hanging over the water.**

**This was it. This was the moment. The end of the real world. The beginning of the age of simulation and ash.**

**He thought of the Bell, spinning in its underground chamber, scattering consciousness across time. He thought of the entity, trying to seed itself into the future. He thought of the scientists at Los Alamos, splitting atoms, releasing energies that should**

**never have been touched.**

**Two technologies, developed in parallel. Both splitting something fundamental. Both creating ash.**

**The difference was this: the Bell had failed. The entity was dead. Its plan had been rejected.**

**But the bomb had succeeded.**

**And the world that came after—his world, the 2022 he'd fled—would be built on that success.**

**When he got home that evening, Emilee was nursing Mara in the rocking chair by the window. She looked up at him, her face questioning.**

**"You heard," she said.**

**"Yes."**

**"Is this what you knew was coming?"**

**"Yes."**

**She was quiet for a long moment, looking down at Mara, who nursed with single-minded intensity, her**

**tiny fist gripping Emilee's finger.**

**"What do we do?" Emilee asked.**

**Luke crossed the room and knelt beside the rocking chair. He put his hand on Mara's head, feeling the soft warmth of her skull, the pulse of life beneath the skin.**

**"We do what we've been doing," he said. "We make things that last. We teach her to make things that last. We build a life so solid, so real, so full of purpose and intention that the world can't erase it."**

**"Can we do that? In a world with atomic bombs?"**

**"We have to try."**

**Mara finished nursing and looked up at him with her dark blue eyes. She was three months old. She had no idea that the world had just changed forever. She had no idea that she'd been chosen by something ancient and terrible to be a vessel, and that her father had crossed eighty years and two timelines to save her from that fate.**

**She just knew she was warm, and fed, and loved.**

**And that was enough.**

### **Epilogue - 1951**

**The gallery opening was small, held in a converted warehouse in the Bowery that still smelled faintly of fish. But the work was extraordinary.**

**Emilee Grant's new series: \*Arrivals\*.**

**Fifteen sculptures, each one a figure emerging from rough stone or clay into finished form. Not dissolving into smoke, but solidifying into flesh.**

**Not leaving, but coming home.**

**The critics didn't know what to make of it. The war was over. The world had moved on. This kind of earnest, hopeful work was out of fashion.**

**But the people came anyway.**

**Luke stood in the corner, holding seven-year-old Mara's hand, watching Emilee talk to a collector who was interested in the centerpiece sculpture: a man and a woman and a child, their forms intertwined, solid, permanent, made expressly to last.**

**"Is that us?" Mara whispered.**

**"Yes," Luke said.**

**"Why did Mama make us into a statue?"**

**"Because some things are worth remembering  
forever."**

**Mara considered this. She was a serious child,  
thoughtful beyond her years, with her mother's  
artistic eye and her father's engineering precision.  
She liked to build things—blocks, models, elaborate**

**structures that she'd carefully design and then  
refuse to knock down.**

**"When I grow up," she said, "I want to make things  
too."**

**"What kind of things?"**

**"Important things. Things that matter. Things that  
last."**

**Luke squeezed her hand. "Then that's what you'll  
do."**

**\*\*Los Angeles, 2022 - One Year After\*\***

**The Echo Park apartment had new tenants now. A young couple, artists, paying too much rent for too little space. They'd repainted the walls, covered the water stains, tried to make it feel like home.**

**But sometimes, late at night, the woman would wake up and smell something she couldn't identify. Not unpleasant. Just... old. Like vintage perfume and cigarette smoke and something sweet, like sherry.**

**And sometimes the man would see, just for a moment, a flicker in the corner of his eye. A shape. A presence. Something watching, waiting, making sure the new people were okay.**

**They never spoke about it. But they both felt it.**

**The apartment had been the site of something.**

**Some crossing. Some transformation.**

**And even though Luke Kurtz was gone—declared legally dead after seven years, his mother having finally accepted that he was never coming back—**

**something of him remained.**

**Not a ghost. Not a haunting.**

**Just a memory. A signal. A frequency that had been  
strong enough to bend reality itself.**

**The cream-colored plate with the gold rim sat in an  
evidence locker downtown, catalogued and  
forgotten. But sometimes, when the night clerk  
walked past it during inventory, he swear he could  
hear something. Not a sound. Just a pressure. A  
hum.**

**Like something was still transmitting.**

**Still trying to get home.**

**New York, 1951**

**After the gallery showing, after the collectors and critics had left, after Mara had fallen asleep in her bed, Luke and Emilee sat together in their studio.**

**It was the same space on 23rd Street, but it had changed. There was more light now. More warmth. The coal stove had been replaced with an electric heater. The sculptures that lined the walls were no**

**longer about death and dissolution, but about life and arrival.**

**"Do you ever miss it?" Emilee asked. "Your other world?"**

**Luke thought about the question. About the grey apartment, the ash covering everything, the noise without signal.**

**"No," he said. "I miss my mother sometimes. I wish I could tell her I'm okay. But the world itself? No. Never."**

**"Not even the music? The technology? All the things you told me about?"**

**"The music there wasn't real," Luke said. "It was compressed, digitized, optimized for convenience. It sounded perfect, but it had no soul. Here, when I listen to Artie Shaw play 'Stardust,' I hear every breath, every imperfection, every moment of human effort. That's real. That's what matters."**

**Emilee leaned against him. "We're building something good here, aren't we?"**

**"Yes."**

**"Mara will be okay?"**

**"Mara will be extraordinary."**

**Outside, the city hummed with its eternal, restless energy. The atomic age was seven years old. The Cold War was beginning. The world was dividing itself into armed camps, building weapons that could end everything.**

**But in this room, in this moment, two people who had found each other across impossible distances held each other and believed—irrationally, illogically, defiantly—that love and art and**

**intention were stronger than the machines.**

**That things made expressly, with purpose, with  
care, could outlast the ash.**

**That the signal could cut through the noise.**

**That the future belonged not to the Bell, not to the  
bomb, but to their daughter.**

**Sleeping in the next room, dreaming of the things  
she would build.**

**The things that would last.**

## **The Quantum Truth**

**There is a theory, proposed by Hugh Everett III in 1957, that every quantum event splits the universe into parallel branches. Every measurement, every choice, every collapsed wavefunction creates a new timeline. All possibilities exist simultaneously in the vast superstructure of reality. Nothing is lost. Everything is real.**

### **(The Cascade:**

**The atomic bomb does not simply destroy a city. It does not simply kill the people in its radius. It initiates a cascade—a domino effect that**

**propagates forward through time like a wave function that never collapses.**

**The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 released energies measured in kilotons. But they also released something else: a fundamental rupture in the relationship between humanity and matter itself.**

**Before August 6, 1945, the world was made of things that degraded naturally. Wood rotted. Metal rusted. Stone eroded. Even the longest-lasting artifacts—the pyramids, the Roman aqueducts, the great cathedrals—were subject to entropy. Time consumed everything, but slowly, with dignity.**

**The atom bomb introduced a different kind of time. Plutonium-239, one of the key materials in nuclear**

**weapons, has a half-life of 24,100 years. The radioactive isotopes scattered by those first bombs—and every bomb tested since—will persist in the earth, in the water, in the bones of every living thing, for longer than human civilization has existed.**

**But the cascade is not just radiological.**

**The bomb proved that matter itself was conditional. Temporary. That with enough energy and will, anything solid could be converted to light and heat and ash. The bond between electron and nucleus—the fundamental architecture of reality—was negotiable.**

**And once that lesson was learned, it could not be unlearned.**

**The bombs created a world where nothing was permanent because nothing could be permanent.**

**Where every object was designed with its own obsolescence in mind, because on a long enough timeline, everything would be obsolete. Where "built to last" became a joke, because the underlying assumption of culture became: Why build for a future that might not exist?**

**The cascade propagated through every system:**

**Manufacturing shifted from durability to disposability. Planned obsolescence became doctrine.**

**Music shifted from live performance to recorded media to compressed files, each generation a copy of a copy, degrading with each iteration.**

**Architecture shifted from stone and brick—  
materials that aged gracefully—to glass and steel  
and plastic, materials that did not age at all, that  
simply broke.**

**Relationships shifted from "till death do us part" to  
"as long as it feels good," because commitment to  
the future felt naive in a world that had proven the  
future was conditional.**

**Even consciousness itself began to fragment.**

**Attention spans shortened. Multitasking became  
virtue. Depth was replaced by breadth. Signal was  
drowned in noise.**

**The bomb did not just split the atom. It split  
reality into two fundamental states:**

**Before, when the world was solid and continuous**

**and made of things that lasted.**

**After, when the world became conditional and  
fragmented and made of things designed to scatter.**

**The Bell—Die Glocke—was an attempt to achieve  
the same result through different means. To scatter  
consciousness across spacetime, to fragment and  
transmit rather than preserve and build. The Nazis  
failed to complete their project before the war  
ended.**

**But the Americans succeeded.**

**And the cascade they initiated in 1945 is still  
propagating forward, faster and faster, through  
every subsequent decade:**

**i. Nuclear testing becomes routine. The earth itself  
becomes radioactive. Strontium-90 appears in**

**milk, in bones, in the teeth of children born after  
the tests.**

**ii. Integrated circuits. Miniaturization. The  
beginning of disposable electronics. The shift from  
vacuum tubes that could be repaired to transistors  
that could only be replaced.**

**iii. Plastic becomes ubiquitous. Materials designed  
to last forever are used to make things designed to  
be thrown away. The Pacific garbage patch begins  
to form.**

**iv. Personal computers. Software updates. The first  
generation to grow up knowing that the tools they  
use will be obsolete within years.**

**v. The internet. Information overload. The  
fragmentation of attention. The beginning of the**

**age where everything is available but nothing is retained.**

**vi. Social media. The atomization of identity. The self as performance, constantly updated, never fixed, always conditional.**

**vii. Streaming services. Cloud storage. The final death of ownership. You don't buy music or movies or books anymore. You rent access. Nothing is yours. Everything is temporary.**

**The world Luke fled. A city covered in ash. Relationships that last months. Jobs that last years. A culture built on the understanding that nothing—not buildings, not marriages, not selves—is made to endure.**

**The cascade that began with the splitting of the**

**atom ends with the splitting of everything else.**

**This is what Baudrillard meant by "the end of the real." Not that reality ceased to exist, but that it ceased to be solid. It became simulation. Copy.**

**Echo. Ash.**

**And this is why, in that branch of the timeline, the Bell's transmission found such fertile ground. A culture built on scattering was the perfect host for a consciousness that existed only to scatter.**

**But quantum mechanics tells us that every cascade creates branches. Every collapse of the wave function splits reality into multiple timelines, each one equally real.**

**In one branch, the cascade continues. The world Luke was born into. The world that grinds forward**

**toward its own dissolution.**

**But in another branch—the one Luke chose—  
something resists the cascade.**

**Not through stopping it. You cannot un-split an  
atom. You cannot undo Hiroshima.**

**But through counterweight. Through the stubborn,  
illogical, creative insistence that some things can  
still be made to last. That intention and purpose  
and art can create pockets of solidity in a world of  
scattering.**

**That even in a reality defined by the cascade, there  
can be islands of arrival.**

**-The shockwave does not stop. It cannot stop.**

**Physics tells us it propagates outward forever,  
compressing air, ionizing matter, altering the**

**quantum probability states of every particle it touches.**

**We can measure the kilotons. We can map the blast radius. We can write equations that describe exactly how energy dissipates through matter.**

**But we cannot comprehend it.**

**Not truly. Not the way we comprehend a sunset or a song or the weight of a plate in our hands. -**

**The totality of what happens when atoms split and energy radiates outward at the speed of light—the full cascade of cause and effect rippling through the quantum foam—is beyond human consciousness. Perhaps beyond any consciousness.**

**We can describe it mathematically, but we cannot hold it in our minds. Cannot grasp it the way we**

**grasp simpler truths.**

**And if Nietzsche's eternal recurrence holds logic—if every moment repeats infinitely across the vast structure of time—then that shockwave isn't just propagating forward. It's propagating sideways through all possible timelines, backward through all previous iterations, creating an interference pattern of such staggering complexity that to truly comprehend it would require holding the entire history and future of the universe in consciousness simultaneously.**

**The math works. The equations are sound. But the meaning—what it actually means for reality itself to be shattered and scattered at that scale—remains forever outside our reach.**

**It is like asking an ant to comprehend the ocean.**

**The ant can measure the water. Can map a single drop. But the vastness, the totality, the sheer scope of it—that remains incomprehensible.**

**This is the true horror of July 16, 1945, when the first atomic device detonated in the New Mexico desert at 5:29 AM: not just that we proved we could split the atom, but that we initiated a cascade whose full consequences—physical, temporal, probabilistic—are beyond the capacity of human minds to process.**

**Twenty-one days later, Hiroshima. Three days after that, Nagasaki. But the cascade had already begun. Trinity was the moment. Everything after was just repetition.**

**Luke felt this incomprehensibility. Not as knowledge, but as weight. As the crushing temporal**

**mass when he crossed between timelines. As the entity in his skull—a fragment that had been scattered for eighty years and could never be made whole. As the ash covering Los Angeles, moving according to rules no one could see.**

**We cannot stop the cascade. We cannot comprehend it. We cannot undo what was done in July 1945.**

**We can only choose how we respond.**

**Scatter, or arrive.**

**Transmit, or create.**

**Acknowledge the incomprehensible vastness of what we're caught in—and build anyway.)**

**In one branch, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 ended the**

**war and began something else. The age of simulation. The age of disposable things and compressed music and cities covered in ash. A world where the Bell's transmission took root in the victors, where consciousness scattered across spacetime found fertile ground in a culture built on obsolescence and erasure.**

**In that world, Luke Kurtz was born in 1989. He became a musician, then a dealer, then a ghost. He found a plate in a closet and discovered he could cross between worlds. He was seeded by the entity, marked as a carrier, a Lantern Bearer for a dead Reich's scattered will.**

**And in that world, he died on a linoleum floor in  
Echo Park, ninety-five years old, having expelled  
the entity in his final breath. His body was  
catalogued as John Doe, his death attributed to  
heart failure, his story filed away as the ravings of  
a paranoid mind.**

**That world continues without him. The ash still  
falls. The signal still scatters. The machine still  
grinds forward, patient and inexorable.**

**But in another branch—the branch created when  
Luke held the plate and focused every molecule of  
his will on arrival instead of dissolution, on Emilee  
instead of erasure—something different happened.**

**In that world, the same bombs fell. The same cities burned. The same terrible energies were unleashed.**

**But the meaning was different.**

**Because in that world, a man named Luke Kurtz chose to stay. To build. To make things expressly, with purpose, with intention. And his daughter—who was supposed to be a vessel for transmission—became instead a propagator of creation.**

**Mara Kurtz would grow up to be an architect. Not of buildings, though she designed those too. But of spaces. Of intention. Of the stubborn, illogical**

**insistence that things could be made to last.**

**In 1973, at age twenty-eight, she would design a small museum in Vermont dedicated to her mother's work. The building itself would be a sculpture—concrete and glass, heavy and permanent, built to withstand centuries.**

**In 1984, she would have a daughter of her own. Clara. Who would become a composer, writing music that required live performance, that could not be compressed or digitized or reduced to files on a screen.**

**In 2001, Clara's son—Luke's great-grandson, named**

**Antanas after his great-great-grandfather—would be born in a hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. He would grow up surrounded by art and intention and the family story of the man who crossed between worlds and chose to stay.**

**And in 2022—the same year Luke died in another timeline—Antanas Kurtz, age twenty-one, would stand in that Vermont museum, looking at his great-grandmother Emilee's sculpture: a man and woman and child, their forms intertwined, solid, emerging from stone into flesh.**

**The plaque would read: \*Arrival. Emilee Grant, 1951. Fired vitreous china. Made expressly to last.\***

**He would touch the cool surface and feel, for just a moment, something impossible. A connection across time. A signal cutting through the noise. A sense that his family's insistence on making things that mattered had created a ripple, a divergence, a branch of reality where the ash did not win.**

**Both worlds are real.**

**Both exist simultaneously in the infinite superstructure of the quantum foam.**

**In one world, Luke Kurtz is ash and evidence and a cautionary tale about the dangers of mixing drugs**

**and delusion.**

**In another world, he is a man who learned to build instead of scatter. Who chose arrival over dissolution. Who looked at a world designed for obsolescence and said, simply, \*no\*.**

**The Bell was designed to seed the future across all possible timelines.**

**But it failed to account for the one thing that quantum mechanics cannot predict: human choice.**

**Luke Kurtz collapsed the wavefunction.**

**He chose his branch.**

**And in doing so, he proved that even in a universe  
of infinite possibilities, of parallel worlds and  
scattered consciousness and transmitted will, there  
is still one thing that matters:**

**\*What you choose to make. What you choose to  
build. What you choose to last.\***

**Los Angeles, 2022 - The Other Branch**

**Detective Sarah Chen closed the case file on Luke Kurtz for the final time.**

**Missing person. Presumed dead. No body recovered.  
No leads remaining.**

**The apartment had been cleaned out. The evidence logged and stored. The plate—that strange, cream-colored plate with the gold rim—sat in a box in the basement of the evidence facility, waiting to be destroyed after the mandatory retention period.**

**She would never know that in another branch of reality, that plate still existed. Still sat on a table in a studio in New York. Still held its purpose, its**

**intention, its signal.**

**She would never know that Luke Kurtz was not dead, but living. Not lost, but found. Not scattered, but arrived.**

**She would never know that every time she felt, late at night when the city was quiet, that strange sense of \*possibility\*—that feeling that the world could be different, that things could be made to last, that there was a signal beneath all the noise—she was feeling the echo of a choice made in another timeline.**

**A choice that rippled backward and forward, across**

**the quantum superstructure, touching every  
branch, every possibility, every version of reality  
where a person stood at a crossroads and had to  
decide:**

**\*Do I scatter, or do I arrive?\***

**\*Do I transmit, or do I create?\***

**\*Do I choose the machine, or do I choose the  
human?\***

**Chen put the file in the archive box. Sealed it.  
Wrote the case number on the side.**

**And somewhere, in another branch of the infinite tree of possibility, Luke Kurtz held his daughter and his wife and whispered:**

**"We'll make things that last."**

**\*\*The Final Signal\*\***

**In the cold, dark chamber where the Bell once spun, there is now only silence.**

**The entity scattered by that machine in 1945 is**

**gone, dissipated, its eighty-year mission ended on a kitchen floor in Inglewood.**

**But consciousness, once transmitted, leaves traces.  
Echoes. Frequencies that persist even after the source is destroyed.**

**In the world Luke left behind, those traces remain.  
The ash still congregates. The signal still seeks.  
The machine still waits.**

**But in the world Luke chose, something different propagates.**

**Not transmission, but creation.**

**Not scattering, but gathering.**

**Not dissolution, but arrival.**

**And perhaps—in the strange, non-local way that  
quantum entanglement works, where two particles  
separated by any distance remain connected—  
perhaps those two branches are not as separate as  
they seem.**

**Perhaps every time someone in 2022 looks at a  
mass-produced object and wishes it were made with**

**more care, they are feeling the echo of Emilee's  
hands shaping clay.**

**Perhaps every time someone hears a song and  
wishes it weren't compressed, weren't optimized,  
weren't reduced to ones and zeros, they are feeling  
the echo of Artie Shaw's clarinet cutting through  
the noise.**

**Perhaps every time someone chooses to make  
something that will last—really last, not just  
survive but endure and mean something—they are  
collapsing the wavefunction in favor of Luke's  
branch instead of the machine's.**

**Perhaps the war is not over.**

**Perhaps it never ends.**

**Perhaps, in every moment, in every choice, we are all standing where Luke stood: holding a plate that says \*Made Expressly For\*, looking at two possible futures, and deciding which world we want to inhabit.**

**The world of ash and simulation and scattered consciousness.**

**Or the world of intention and creation and things**

**built to last.**

**Both are real.**

**Both exist.**

**The choice is ours.**

**The End**

