

Chapter 1

and have a kitchen with more than one working burner," he'd add, tapping out scenarios as easily as if they were laying bricks to build another life, brick by brick, in the air between them. Yet now, there was no Willem to build anything with, no future to construct or remodel, only pasts to turn over and over, like stones in a river being slowly smoothed by the relentless flow of what had been.

The joy of those early times—their shared struggles and triumphs, the sense of embarking on the vast adventure of life together—had been true and real. But so, too, had been the pain, the scarcity, the fears for the future. He'd not trade his current sorrow for a return to that time, would he? Yet the yearning for even a moment of that past, to see Willem walking through the door of their Lispenard Street apartment with a smile, was a physical ache, a hunger no amount of success, recognition, or material wealth could sate.

He opens his eyes and looks around the room, at the wooden bust Richard made for him, at the scale models of the buildings that had defined significant portions of their lives, feeling as though these objects were the closest things to talismans he had. They were carvings of grief, yes, but also of love, of years spent together, a testament to the irrefutable fact that Willem had lived, they had loved, and he, despite everything, was still here, still living.

With a sudden clarity, he realizes that escaping this pain, this relentless grief, isn't what he truly desires. What he seeks, painstakingly, through tears and sleepless nights, is a way to live with it, to honor it alongside every joy he'd ever experienced with Willem. Because to deny the pain would be to deny the profoundness of their love, the life they'd shared, however briefly.

He resolves then, with a heavy but steady heart, to call JB, to reach out to the friends who, despite his pushing away, still hover at the edges of his life, ready to be there for him. Because Willem's absence has taught him the unbearable lightness of being, but also the undeniable force of the ties that bind, however strained or stretched they may be.

Maybe one day, these realizations, these steps taken back towards the world, towards those who remain, will amount to something like healing. Or maybe they won't. But either way, he'll keep trying, in honor of Willem, and in defiance of the solitude that threatens to consume him.

He moves to his desk, the resolve steeling his spine, and picks up his phone before he can change his mind. Scrolling through his contacts, he finds JB's number, the action mundane yet momentous, and presses call. As the line rings, he whispers into the silent room, "For you, Willem. Always for you."