Chapter 1
Two Years

The parking lot is half empty.

I have parked in the second row from the back for two years because the second row from the back is easy to exit and has a clear sight line to the building entrance. I have been doing it without thinking about it. I have been doing a lot of these observations in this lot without thinking about them: noting the cars that change, the cars that don't, the plates I see twice in a week.

I see the gray sedan at the far end of the row before I reach my car.

Engine off. No driver visible from this angle.

I have seen it twice this week. Tuesday morning, two blocks from my building, parked on the cross street I do not normally take. I took it because the main route had a delay and the cross street cut four minutes. Today, same lot I have been parking in for two years, a row I have never seen it in before.

Different day. Different location. Same sedan.

I do not stop walking. I do not look at it directly. I note the plate range as I pass. I put the bag in the trunk. I get in the car.

I sit.

The building is behind me. The separation is filed. The assessment is submitted with both names in the signature block

and the reviewing officer's initials on it and the record is in the system now, and once they are properly filed they are permanent. Acknowledged or not.

Two years of the threshold. The door open in front of me, my hand on the frame. Eleven days of the form in draft. The question I kept posing: whether I had everything I needed before I took the step.

I did not have everything. I had enough.

The feed tells me threat tiers and border incident rates. It does not tell me about the watcher at the outer gate who does not file a report. It does not tell me about the patient man doing his arithmetic somewhere I cannot see. It tells me what the system knows. The system does not know enough. Four years of watching through a filter I kept treating like a wall. The watching moves from the workstation to the ground now. That is where it should have been from the beginning.

The sedan has not moved.

I pull out of the row without looking at it again and take the long exit, the one that gives me a sight line back to where it is parked as I leave the lot.

It does not move.

I drive home the long way.

I do not log it. I no longer have a log. I note it as I have for four years: observation, assessment, implication, next move. I will tell Thunder when I see him. He is already in Erbil. He went two weeks early and did not say why.

I already know why.

Some decisions do not require explanation between us.

I drive.