

Choice is Yours



Chapter One

Inside the apartment it was no longer warmth, but airlessness. Not the kind of blanket that shelters and soothes, but that overthick, oversoft layer you forget on your body for too long—until, all at once, breathing becomes heavier under it. The radiator clicked in small, patient sounds, as if it had to remind itself, from time to time, that it still had a job to do. The curtains hung in a quiet sadness, keeping the outside world at a careful distance—as if it were truly danger...

Being shut in is not always a closed door.
Sometimes it is only the repetition of days.

It's a strange feeling when you can no longer tell whether your restlessness is in your body or in the walls. At first it's only discomfort. Then it becomes unfamiliar. And then, suddenly, you feel as if the apartment is slightly smaller inside than it was yesterday—as if the corners have slid closer, as if the ceiling has lowered by a centimeter, just to test how much you can bear.

I tried to distract myself. I made tea and watched the water slowly come to a boil in the pot, as if it might track the rise of my own inner temperature. I reached for the mug, then set it down. I reached for my phone, then turned it face-down. I started music, then stopped it a few seconds later, because the sound became too much too quickly. I gave it a personality—like a stranger stepping into the room.

My anxiety didn't strike in a spectacular way. From the outside,

an average-sensitive person might not have noticed anything at all.

There was no single dramatic moment I could later point to and say: that's where it began. It worked in detail, patiently. It tightened an invisible thread beneath my ribs. Then another. It placed a dry spot behind my throat, so that even swallowing became too conscious. And the thoughts—those quick, glittering, too-sharp thoughts—clattered into one another as if there wasn't...

What if my life stays like this?

What if nothing happens now either?

What if I can't calm down?

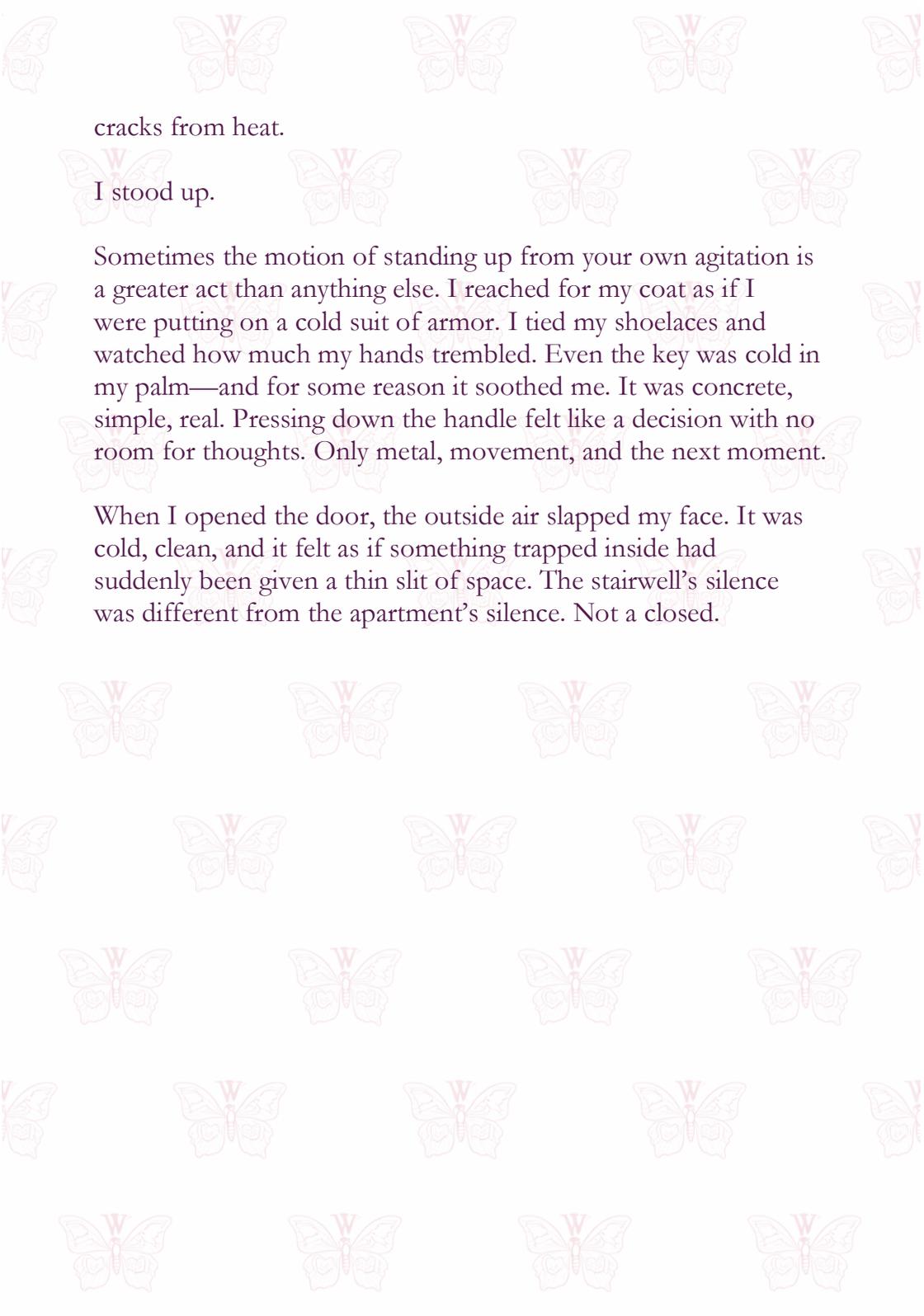
What if I go mad?

What if this is all my life is?

What if it ends today?

It's hard to explain the feeling of "my anxieties are keeping me locked in," because from the outside nothing really shows. Just a person in a warm apartment. I could even be fine. But inside it's as if someone is shutting inner doors. No escape route. No window that truly opens. Every thought runs into the same dead end and comes back again. And the more you try to control it, the more strongly you feel that you are not the one steering.

Then, at some point, the warmth stopped being comfort and began to feel like threatening flames reaching for my life. As if the air in the apartment no longer refreshed, only circulated in circles. As if my own breath bounced back at me, and every new inhale brought the same thing back again. I sat there and felt it all at once: if I stay here, I will fall apart. Not at the end of the world, not in grand drama—just quietly, inside, the way an object



cracks from heat.

I stood up.

Sometimes the motion of standing up from your own agitation is a greater act than anything else. I reached for my coat as if I were putting on a cold suit of armor. I tied my shoelaces and watched how much my hands trembled. Even the key was cold in my palm—and for some reason it soothed me. It was concrete, simple, real. Pressing down the handle felt like a decision with no room for thoughts. Only metal, movement, and the next moment.

When I opened the door, the outside air slapped my face. It was cold, clean, and it felt as if something trapped inside had suddenly been given a thin slit of space. The stairwell's silence was different from the apartment's silence. Not a closed.

Chapter Two

At the edge of the light—where the lamplight thinned and the ruins held their breath—I felt it again: that slight shift in reality, that half-degree tilt that makes the world look the same and yet not entirely trustworthy.

I kept my palm on the iron, because the iron didn't change its mind. The iron didn't improvise. It didn't spiral. It stayed what it was—cold, blunt, present—and I needed that bluntness the way drowning lungs need a surface.

Still, something moved.
Not loudly. Not theatrically. More like a decision made under stone.

A small sound—soft and quick—came from the direction of the darker arches, where the lamp-light couldn't quite reach. At first I thought it was nothing: a pebble shifting, a bird, the wind tugging at something loose. But then the snow—thin, almost polite in its whiteness—answered. A faint scuff. A mark where there hadn't been one.

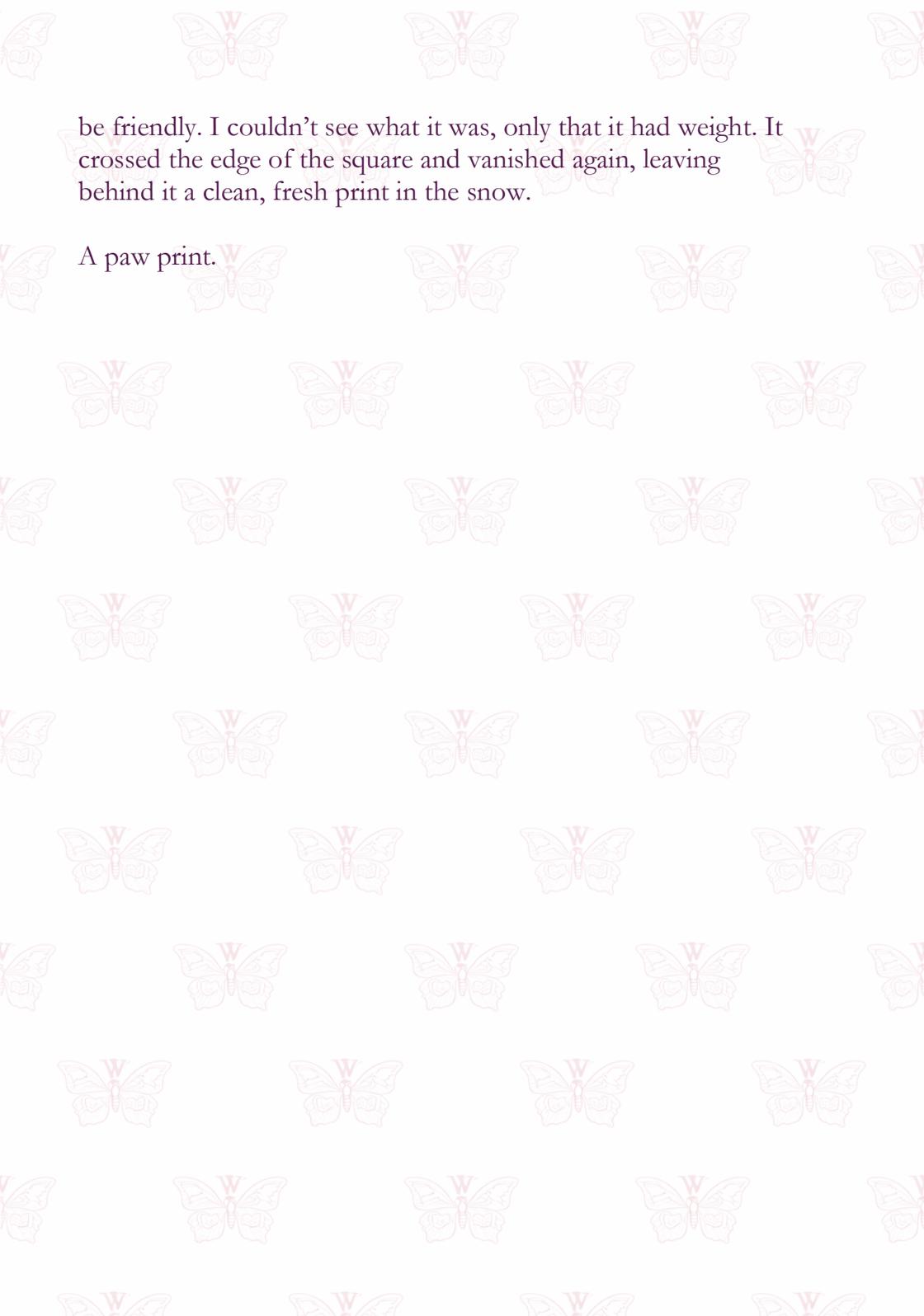
I stood up.

The bench protested with a short metallic sigh. My legs were stiff from sitting, my shoulder still carried the heavy memory of fear, and yet my body moved as if pulled. Not by curiosity alone. By something deeper: the need to name what I was hearing, to drag it out of the fog where it had power.

A shadow slid between stones—too fast to be sure, too quiet to

be friendly. I couldn't see what it was, only that it had weight. It crossed the edge of the square and vanished again, leaving behind it a clean, fresh print in the snow.

A paw print.





To be continued

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