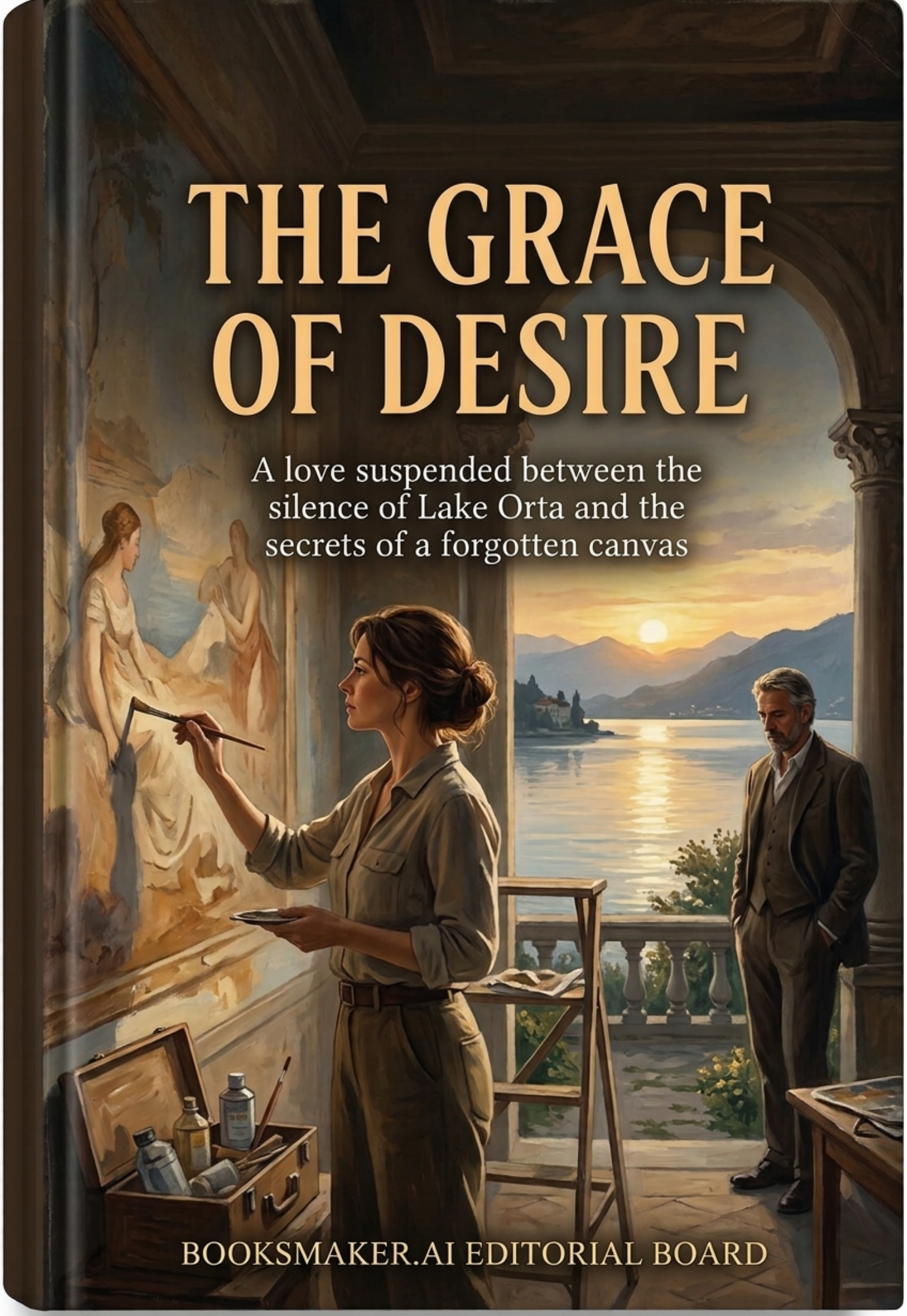

THE GRACE OF DESIRE
A love suspended between the silence of Lake Orta and the secrets of a forgotten canvas
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The House on the Lake

The nine o'clock boat left the Orta San Giulio pier with seven passengers, a bicycle tied to the stern deck, and fog that had not yet lifted from the water. Elisa Rinaldi stayed outside, under the canopy, with the two crates at her feet and the trolley wedged between her knee and the bench. The larger crate swayed with every lurch of the boat, and she kept it steady with her left hand, where the thumb still had a bandage: a burn from three days earlier, from a hotplate she had left on in the studio. Nothing serious. A moment's distraction.

The lake was small and enclosed, and for that very reason it seemed more intimate than vast: the opposite shore was visible the whole way, the white houses, the cypresses, the mountain sloping down into the water like a fold in a piece of cloth. The fog stayed a meter above the waves and parted before the bow without ever lifting. Elisa counted the minutes: seven. She had never been to Villa Ombrosa. She had seen two black-and-white photographs and the floor plan the architect had sent her in the mail, and from those she had formed the idea of a serious house, with the rooms in the right places.

A woman was waiting at the pier. Small, white hair pinned up, gray apron, a bunch of keys at her waist that jingled when she turned.

— Elisa Rinaldi? — she said, before the boat touched shore.

— Yes.

— Nives Bramati. I look after the house. — She held out her hand and didn't withdraw it until Elisa placed hers in it, then looked at the crates. — I'll carry that one.

— It isn't heavy.

— I didn't say it was heavy. I said I'd carry it. — She slung it over her shoulder as one carries a sack of flour and set off up the steps without waiting.

Elisa picked up the trolley and followed her. Rain had worn the stone steps unevenly; one in three had moss on it, and halfway up she could already smell the house: cold stone, old wood, a trace of greenery held in. At the top stood the ocher facade with green shutters and limewash peeling off in broad sheets like pages. The garden hydrangeas had been left to their own devices for twenty years, and no one had had the courage to thin them out. Behind the roof, the mountain; in front, the water; on either side, nothing. No neighboring houses, no traffic noise, no dogs.

— The orangery's over there — Nives said. — The glass is broken. Don't tell me you need a glazier, because the glazier is dead.

— I won't.

— Good. — She opened the door with her foot. — The kitchen's on the right. The hot water comes when it pleases, which is just a figure of speech. Mr. Amadei is home.

— Is he working?

— I am.

— Then I'd better see him right away.

The house was colder than the lake. The stone checkerboard floor echoed their footsteps, making every room seem larger. Elisa put the crates where Nives indicated and brushed the back of her hand across her forehead, still damp from the boat.

— This way — Nives said, and led her down the hall.

The great room was long and low, with the fireplace lit in September as though it were already November. Corrado Amadei stood in front of the window, his hands clasped behind his back, and turned only when he heard footsteps on the stone. He was tall and thin, gray at the temples, his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, as if he had just stopped doing something.

— Corrado Amadei. — He held out his hand, but not right away: a second later, and Elisa would remember that second. His handshake was dry, brief, without any show of strength. — Was your journey pleasant?

— Seven minutes by boat. It's hard to have a bad journey.

— Depends on the company. — He didn't smile. He pointed to the chair in front of the desk and waited for her to sit, and only then took his seat, after straightening with two fingers the wooden cutting board that stuck out over the edge.

On the table were the floor plan Elisa knew and a folder containing the notary's papers.

— The room is the one in the middle — he said. — Four walls, a beamed ceiling, a high window. In the eighteenth century it was the Room of the Hours: the walls were painted in scenes for each day, with the twenty-four hours. Then in the nineteenth century someone decided it was too much and put two coats of limewash over everything.

— Can you see the two coats?

— You can see that there's limewash. I can't tell you more than that. I put some furniture in there for three years and never had the nerve to really look at it.

— And now?

— Now I'm selling it. — He said it without any weight, as one says the time. — The deed will be signed in Milan at the end of October. The cycle has to be finished before then.

Elisa looked at the folder and didn't touch it.

— I expect to finish it in a month.

— Twenty-four painted hours in a month. Does that seem like heresy to you?

— It seems tight.

— If you need another restorer, tell me today. Not because I want to speed things up: because I don't want you telling me in three weeks that you can't manage it.

— I won't tell you that. — Elisa took the bandage off her thumb, turned it over between her fingers, and put it back on. — I'll tell you something else. If there's nothing under the limewash, I'll know in two days and write it up in a report. If there's something there, the month is mine, and you don't come into that room without warning me.

— I won't come in.

— And nobody touches the scaffolding.

— Nobody.

— Nives?

— Nives goes wherever she wants — he said, and for the first time something shifted in his voice, by half a degree. — But nobody touches the scaffolding.

Elisa opened her notebook and took notes. He waited in silence, without filling the time, and that did her good: most clients couldn't stand the sound of a pen.

— The work is yours — he continued, when she looked up. — I'm not asking you to let me choose the colors. I'm asking one thing: if you find something beautiful, don't tell me with those words everyone uses. "One of a kind," "a treasure." I can't stand it.

— So what should I tell you?

— Tell me what's there. Then tell me if it can be saved.

Elisa put down her pen. Outside, the water had barely moved: the return boat was leaving the pier with only two people aboard. She looked at his hands on the desk, broad, with a pale scar on the back of his left one running from index finger to wrist, a straight line as if drawn with a ruler.

— Can I see the room now? — she asked.

— You'll find it closed up and gray. And it'll seem to you that the trip was for nothing.

— I'm used to that.

— Come anyway. — He stood, and before opening the door he picked up the cutting board and carefully squared it with the edge of the desk, without hurrying.

The Room of the Hours was larger than the floor plan had suggested. Corrado opened the door, stepped aside, and let her go in first.

Four walls of uniform gray limewash, without a crack, without a nail, without a line. The terracotta floor, the dark-beamed ceiling, the high, narrow window looking out over the lake. No furniture. Nothing.

Elisa went around the room in silence, touching the wall with her fingertips at every step. The limewash was thick, spread with a trowel and then poorly smoothed: beneath her fingers she could feel the broad waves of the motion, like the bottom of a boat. In two places the wall sounded hollow.

— Do you see anything? — he asked.

— I see gray. — She crouched, put her eye level with the plaster, and saw nothing more. — Do you have a flashlight?

He brought it to her. Elisa held it almost parallel to the wall, a hand's breadth away, and started at the bottom, on the left, as one always does. The beam found nothing: only the sense of a surface that had never been made to be looked at.

— Well?

— Well, I need to be alone. An hour. Come back at six, if you like.

He hesitated less than she expected, closed the door, and left her there.

Elisa worked by instinct: she put her hands on the wall, closed her eyes, and counted her breaths. The room had a smell she knew well and didn't like — old limewash, dust, stone that had absorbed moisture for decades — and beneath that smell was another, faint one, of wax and old paint, as though someone, a long time ago, had left a jar open in a corner and no one had ever closed it again.

She stayed still for half an hour, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, doing nothing, which is how restorers waste time when they don't yet know what they're about to do. Then the sun dropped behind the mountain.

It wasn't an hour arriving: it was a moment when the room changed its mind. Light came in through the high window, slanting, almost horizontal, and settled on the right-hand wall like a sheet of metal. Elisa raised her head.

Beneath the gray limewash were traces.

They weren't drawings: they were the shadows of drawings, differences in thickness of a millimeter, the slightest relief that plaster preserves when there's something underneath. A long, slanted line that climbed toward the ceiling. Then an arch. Then, a meter from the floor, the shape of an open hand, fingers spread wide, that was still there beneath the limewash.

Elisa stood up too quickly and hit her head on a beam. She didn't notice.

She went close to the wall and put her cheek sideways against it, flush with the surface, to see it edge-on, the way one reads a page held up to the light. The hand was there. The thumb of the painted hand was shorter than a real thumb, and the sight filled her with an absurd tenderness, as happens when you see the badly painted feet of saints in old paintings.

— Elisa?

Corrado was in the doorway. He hadn't knocked: it was the time he had said he would come back, six o'clock, and the light confirmed it.

— Come here — she said. — Stand beside the wall. Not in front of it, beside it.

He came over and stood where she told him, and the room opened up before his eyes: everything that was gray by day became a drawing for one hour a day. He was silent for a long time.

— That's a hand — he said at last.

— That's a hand.

— And the others?

Elisa turned back to the wall, and for the first time in months she thought of nothing else: not Turin, not the seven o'clock train, not the reason she had accepted a job two hours from home in a month when nobody works.

— I'll find the others — she said. — I'll start tomorrow morning.

The orangery was, as Nives had told her, a worksite before it was a room. Glass was broken in three of the five panes, replaced as best they could with sheets of plexiglass that time had yellowed; the floor was beaten earth, the joists creaking in different places depending on where she put her foot. Elisa carried the crates in one at a time and arranged everything according to her own order, which never changed: the large table beneath the window, the solvents by the door, the brushes upright, the lamp on the left because she worked with her right hand.

Nives stopped by to look and said nothing about the mess — there was no mess — and opened the door to the room at the back.

— I made the bed this morning. The window doesn't close properly: if you get cold, there's another blanket in the wardrobe.

— All right.

— Dinner is at half past six. It's not an invitation, it's a time.

Elisa ate in the kitchen with Nives and no one else. Corrado didn't come downstairs. The table was set for three and the third chair wasn't touched, and Nives made no comment, but when she cleared the plates she said: — Mr. Amadei eats later. Has for three years.

— I didn't want to disturb him.

— You didn't disturb anyone. He's just like that: his own hour first, then the rest of the world.

It had grown dark outside, and the house began making the noises of large houses: wood settling, water running through a distant pipe, a door that wasn't shut. Elisa went back to her room, laid her gray sweater at the bottom of the wardrobe instead of hanging it up, and got into bed with her notebook.

At seven on the dot — exactly seven, not five past, and she noticed because she always checked —

the piano began.

It was upstairs, in the villa, in a room Elisa hadn't seen yet. The instrument was out of tune in the low notes, and whoever was playing wasn't good: he lost the beat, slowed down in difficult passages, went back two bars when he made a mistake, without any embarrassment. And yet he didn't stop.

He played a first piece Elisa didn't recognize. Then a second, slower one, where the left hand played the same sequence of notes over and over, like a wave returning to the same shore, and the right hand tried to follow along and didn't always manage. Then a third, very short piece, which ended abruptly because he played the final chord wrong and, instead of trying again, shut the lid.

Elisa stayed perfectly still.

There was nothing beautiful about the playing, if you judged it by technique. And yet she stayed awake afterward too: with her notebook on her knees and the lamp on, waiting for him to start again. He didn't. At half past eight she heard footsteps above her head, water running through another pipe, and then nothing more.

The house went quiet slowly, room by room. Only around two, when she had given up on sleeping, did a sound she didn't know reach her from the lake: a rope knocking against a mast at regular intervals, like a metronome left running. She knew the metronome well; but this wasn't hers, and this wasn't her house, and tomorrow she would start work.

She closed her notebook and counted the painted hours on the wall over there, one by one, twenty-four, until she fell asleep halfway through a number she hadn't decided on yet.

She woke at half past five without an alarm, as always, and for a few seconds didn't know where she was. Then she heard the water against the stone of the pier and knew.

Outside there was fog, the same as the day before, lying on the water like a sheet badly spread. The lake wasn't visible beyond ten meters. She ate breakfast standing up in the empty kitchen, drinking coffee she had made herself — Nives wasn't there yet — and at seven she was already in the Room of the Hours with the flashlight, looking for the spots where the limewash sounded hollow.

When she went out to get her tools, she found a still-warm loaf on the orangery door, wrapped in a tea towel, and inside the towel a note written in pencil: *Seven in the morning is the best time to work, not for me.*

Elisa ate a corner of the bread, wrapped it back up in the tea towel because she wasn't hungry, and began.

She made the first test patch up high, where the light reached best and the limewash seemed thinnest: an eight-by-eight-centimeter square in a corner that couldn't be seen from the door, chosen on purpose so that if she made a mistake no one would see it. She put on her gloves, took the small chisel and the spatula, and worked with the patience it required, which is almost all slowness: the limewash had to be removed in thin layers, like peeling an apple without breaking it, and each layer had to be examined before moving on to the next.

The first layer came off in three minutes: gray dust, nothing.

The second took ten: the limewash was harder, badly mixed, with lumps in it.

Then, underneath, a different surface appeared. It wasn't gray. It was pale, smooth, and when Elisa passed damp cotton over it, it turned a soft blue, the color of the sky on certain mornings when the weather hasn't made up its mind yet.

She stopped. Put down her tools. Took off her gloves.

Beneath the limewash was the blue, and beneath the blue was the ground layer: fine plaster, smoothed to perfection, just the right thickness, without bubbles or lumps. It was the work of someone who knew what they were doing and had time to do it well. There was no haste in that wall. No one who had to finish the cycle in a month.

She stayed on the ladder in front of that little eight-centimeter square for a length of time she didn't measure. Then she took her notebook and wrote, in the small handwriting she used for her reports: *Day 2. Test A, northeast corner, h 2.10. Less than 2 mm of limewash. Underneath: blue. Ground layer expertly done. The pigment is clean. This wasn't just anyone's hand.*

Her right hand was trembling slightly, and it wasn't from fatigue. She closed the notebook and opened it again to add a line: *The house listened to me.*

At half past one Nives came by to say lunch was ready and found Elisa still there, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, looking at a little blue square in a corner as one looks at a fire. She didn't ask her anything. She set a chair beside her and brought her plate over.

— There's something underneath — Elisa said.

— There's always something underneath in this house — Nives said. — The problem is, then you have to decide whether to tell anyone or not.

In the afternoon she decided to fix the lighting, which was the most urgent thing and the least noble part of the job. With the yellowed plexiglass, the colors beneath the limewash lied: blue turned green, pink disappeared. She needed clean glass in at least one pane, and since the glazier no longer existed, Elisa did, with a new sheet of plexiglass she'd bought in Turin and a utility knife.

The sheet was bigger than she was and more rigid than she'd calculated. She set it on the table, marked the measurement with a carpenter's pencil, and began scoring it. The cut went crooked. She tried again. On the third attempt the plexiglass snapped sideways, and a long, thin splinter like a needle shot off the edge and went into the palm of her right hand, in the middle, near the base of her middle finger.

Elisa swore calmly, in Piedmontese, which is how you swear when there's no one around.

— Did you hurt yourself?

Corrado was in the doorway with a box of light bulbs in his hand. She hadn't heard him arrive, which bothered her more than the splinter.

— It's nothing.

He put down the box and crossed the worksite without asking permission. He took her hand.

It was a simple thing, without ceremony: one hand taking another, a thumb opening her fingers, a head bending to look closely. But Elisa hadn't been touched in two years, and her body noticed before she did, with a half-second delay in which her breath caught in her throat.

— It's in there — he said. — Come with me.

He took her to the kitchen, made her sit down, got a basin, warm water, a clean cloth. He held her hand over the basin and poured water over it, slowly, unhurriedly, as one does with fragile things. The splinter was transparent and barely visible; the skin around it had already closed over it.

— I have tweezers in my notebook — Elisa said.

He didn't reply. He opened the drawer on the right, took out a sewing needle, and passed it through the flame of a lighter. Then he took her hand again and worked with a precision she hadn't expected from a man who played the piano badly: the needle under the splinter, the right angle, one sharp pull. The splinter came out whole, almost a centimeter long, and he set it on the table as one sets down a tiny bone.

— Disinfect it — he said.

— Yes.

He took the cloth and bandaged her palm, winding the strip around her fingers, neither too tight nor too loose, with the knot on the back so it wouldn't get in the way while she worked. He did it in silence the whole time, and didn't ask her anything: not what she was doing, not whether she'd been careless, not how long it would take, which were the three questions everyone asked her.

When he was finished, he held her hand for another moment to check the knot. Then he let it go, straightened up, and picked up the box of light bulbs.

— At six the light will be coming from the right direction — he said. — If you want to see your little square, don't look at it now.

And he left.

Elisa stayed sitting in the kitchen, her bandaged hand in her lap and the needle still warm on the table. She looked at the bandage, checked it from underneath, turned it over. It was done well. It was done very well, and that, she couldn't say why, was the thing that hurt her most about the whole day.

On the third day the fog lifted at nine and didn't return. Elisa worked with her hand bandaged, which slowed her down by a third: her left hand didn't have the sensitivity of her right, and every time she changed the chisel she had to look. She didn't care. The little eight-by-eight-centimeter square had told her enough the night before: there was a painted cycle beneath the limewash, and it was worth losing two days to do things properly.

She opened the panel up high, the one the light reached first and left last, exactly one square meter, measured with a set square and marked with a soft pencil, the kind that can be erased. She didn't finish it in the morning. She didn't even finish it in the afternoon: she finished at six, when the room changed its mind again and the light came slanting in through the high window.

And it all happened at once, as it always does: for hours nothing had been visible, only limewash and dust and gray turning lighter gray; and then, when the light came in at an angle, the sky appeared beneath her work.

Not just any sky: a sky painted in scenes for each day, the blue lightening toward the top in three distinct gradations, and above the blue, low clouds made with a white that had never been pure white, but milky, with a hint of pink in it. At the bottom left, the outline of a raised arm: a bare

forearm and a hand holding a lamp, or perhaps a cup, barely visible beneath the limewash.

Elisa stepped back three paces and sat down on the floor, because you can't see things properly when you're standing.

There were no cracks, no repainting, no later touch-ups. The color was sound, covered and undisturbed, preserved by the limewash like something kept in a closed drawer. Two hundred years of silence, and the sky was still there, with its milky pink clouds, intact.

From the hallway came the sound of the bunch of keys.

— Is this it? — Nives said from the doorway, without coming in.

— This is it.

Nives looked at the square meter of blue sky in the middle of a gray wall, and for a moment said nothing, and that said everything.

— Mr. Amadei is in Orta — she said then. — He'll be back for dinner.

— Good.

— Can you see it well from there?

— I can see it well from here.

Nives nodded and stayed in the doorway a moment longer, as if she wanted to add something. Then she left, and the keys jingled all the way down the hall, and for the first time Elisa thought that in this house the jingle of the keys was how you said you were alone.

She went back to the wall as the light began to fade, with cotton and distilled water, to clean up the edges of the panel. It was just as she was cleaning the lower edge, on the ladder, that she saw them.

They were small, less than two fingers high, written in a reddish brown that wasn't the same earth pigment as the drawing: a denser color, put there with a fine brush by someone who didn't want to be read from a distance. They seemed to be part of the scene — the sky all around them was continuous — but only at first glance: the letters were on top of it, like a signature on a contract.

Elisa moved in so close she could no longer see anything, then backed away until she could see everything. It took a minute for the letters to come together, and once they did, she stayed on the ladder and read the same thing four times.

1783

and beneath it, smaller, two letters separated by a period:

B. S.

She took her notebook and copied them down, then wrote the time, the position, the height from the floor, the size of the letters in millimeters, and the color beneath the copy. Then she put the lid back on the jar of distilled water, stood up, and kept looking at the painted sky with its milky clouds and that raised arm holding its lamp.

There was a date, which was the most useful thing: it meant the cycle was no longer a hypothesis; it had a year. There were two initials, which were the most important thing: they meant there was someone. And there was a question, which didn't yet have the shape of a question: why would an eighteenth-century painter sign her work in a bottom corner, where no one could see it, instead of in a cartouche in the middle of the sky, as everyone else did.

She went to the kitchen to look for Nives and found her setting the table.

— Come and see something.

Nives put down the plate, wiped her hands on her apron, and followed without asking questions. In the Room of the Hours she stood where Elisa told her, in the right spot, and looked at the wall.

— 1783 — she said. — I can see that.

— And underneath?

Nives moved closer, narrowed her eyes, then took off her glasses, cleaned them on her apron, and put them back on.

— B. S. — she read.

— Do they mean anything to you?

— No.

— Nives.

— No, I really mean it. — She straightened up and looked at the painted sky, not the letters. — In this house, people have always talked about everything. The cracks, the debts, who sold what and to whom, the rooms that aren't opened, Mr. Amadei's mother. Everything.

— But?

— But that painter, never.

Elisa closed her notebook and tucked it under her arm. Above them, at seven on the dot, the piano began the first of the three pieces, with the left hand starting half a beat early and the right hand chasing after it.

Nives looked at the ceiling.

— There you are — she said. — He does.

— What?

— He talks about it, if you know how to listen. — She picked up the plate from the table and went back toward the kitchen, and the bunch of keys followed her, jingling down the hall.

The Face Beneath the Whitewash

The days took shape without anyone deciding they should.

Elisa woke at half past five, as always, and for a while stayed still in the bed in the room at the back of the orangery, listening to the house: the wood settling, water running somewhere, a bird insisting on three notes. Then she got up, washed in the cold basin, pulled on her work shirt, and went to drink the coffee she found at the door. At six on the dot, every morning, there was a cup and saucer, still warm, covered with a napkin folded in four. There was never anyone there.

— It's not as if you get up especially early for me — she said to Nives once, in the kitchen.

— I've been getting up at five since I was twenty. — Nives didn't look up from the pot. — And Mr. Amadei gets up at a quarter to six. I don't know which of us puts out the napkin.

The work, on the other hand, had precise rules, and they weren't up for discussion. Each section was a square meter, and a section had to be finished completely before moving on to the next: first dampening it with Japanese paper, then the tip of the scalpel where the lime had built up, then the waiting—which was the hardest part—because lime has to be removed while it still has a little strength, not when it's already dust. Elisa counted the minutes under her breath. The survey notebook lay open on an easel, its pages numbered, with pencil drawings: always the wall, always the same scale, always the hour's number written at the top.

On the first day of that week, Corrado came in while she was on the ladder and said nothing. He stood beside it, took hold of one of the uprights with one hand, and kept it steady. Elisa worked for twenty minutes. He didn't move, look at his watch, or ask a question. When she climbed down, he let go of the ladder and left.

The next day he came back and stood there again.

— You don't need to — Elisa said, the third time.

— I know.

— I've got it braced against the wall.

— I can see that.

He stayed where he was. Elisa picked up the scalpel and carried on, and at some point she realized she was working a little more slowly than necessary, and that it wasn't because of the work.

In the mornings, the fog lifted around ten, and for an hour the lake was without shores: only milk, and the mountain appearing in pieces. Then the sun ate it away from the center, and the water emerged, gray and still, and the boat that passed every half hour, its sound arriving before its shape. Elisa always stopped for those two seconds to watch it pass. She couldn't say why.

Nives started making dinner before the two of them had decided to. On the third evening she set the table for three and didn't ask anyone anything; Elisa showed up because there was a place set for her, and Corrado arrived two minutes later, and neither of them commented. They ate at eight, in the kitchen with the long table. Nives talked about the house, the pipes, what had been sold and bought back, and the two of them didn't say much. But the bread disappeared, and the wine went down in the bottle, and sometimes, without realizing it, Elisa would tell them something about her work—a site in Cuneo, a fresco that had turned out to be fake—and realize that Corrado was listening as one listens to a person, not a craftswoman.

That evening, the fourth, Nives got up to fetch the cheese and said, without turning around:

— There's less dust in the house, now that she's here.

— It's the opposite — Elisa said. — I'm taking lime off a wall.

— Exactly.

The memory came one afternoon, while the lime had already softened and she was waiting out the minutes she had counted.

Nothing called it up. Elisa was kneeling on the scaffold platform, scalpel in hand and breathing shallowly because of her position, and she felt the edge of the painted arm beneath her fingers—a clean outline, a millimeter thick—and for a second it seemed to her that she recognized a gesture. As if someone in that wall had raised a hand the way you raise your hand to greet someone arriving from far away.

And then Tommaso came back to her.

It was an evening two years earlier, on Via della Rocca. Elisa had come back from the studio at half past nine, wearing her gray sweater, her hands smelling of solvent, and he had just got home too, with his cello on his back and his tie already loosened, and he had filled the hallway with noise the way he always did: the case propped against the wall, the keys in the dish, his coat tossed over a chair.

— Let me see your hands.

He asked her every evening. It was his way of saying how are you, what did you touch today, what happened to you. Elisa had held them out to him, and he had taken them between his own—those big, warm hands, always too warm—and looked at them one by one, the way you do with things you've just bought.

— Lime again today.

— Forty-five square centimeters.

— Did you see anything?

— A foot. — And then, because he was waiting: — A foot in a sandal, beneath a robe. Fourteenth century.

Tommaso had thrown his head back and laughed, and let go of her hands, and started telling her about the concert, the second half, the conductor losing the beat. He had opened the fridge, said there was nothing to eat, started making pasta with whatever he found, and cooked badly as always and talked the whole time. Elisa had sat on the table with her legs hanging over the side and listened to the house filling up.

Then the memory went out, the way things do that you've never stopped knowing.

Elisa was still kneeling, scalpel in hand, and the clock face on the scaffolding showed that the minutes had long since passed. The lime had dried along the edge and would form another layer.

— Fuck — she said softly, without anger, the way you say it to someone to remind them that it's time.

She stood up, brushed her hand over her knee, and picked up the Japanese paper again. She worked until seven without stopping, and noticed nothing around her; when she finished, her wrists were trembling a little and there was lime under her fingernails, and beneath the section there was a square meter more sky than there had been the day before.

At seven, the piano came from upstairs. The left hand half a measure ahead, the right chasing after it. Elisa sat on the scaffold platform with her back against the wall and listened to all three pieces to the end, as she did every evening now, and didn't get up until the last note had faded in the attic.

The next day, at eleven, Elisa put down her brushes and went to the kitchen to make a phone call.

She never did that at a worksite; it was a rule she had set for herself years ago: a phone during

work is a crack in concentration, and concentration, in restoration, is everything. But this wasn't a work call. It was a question.

She sat at the kitchen table, where she could get a signal, and dialed the number for the diocesan archive that a colleague in Turin had given her. A woman answered, her voice old and patient.

Elisa introduced herself: a restorer, a project under way on Lake Orta, a cycle from the second half of the eighteenth century signed B. S.

— Sironi — said the woman. — One moment.

She heard the sound of a cart, or a ladder. Two minutes passed, which is a long time on a phone call.

— All right. Bianca Sironi, baptized in Lugano in 1751, daughter of a sign painter. No marriage is recorded, no legitimate children, no death in the parish records. There's a baptismal record and then nothing. She doesn't appear in the guild records: women weren't admitted to the guilds.

— And works?

— None documented. No payment, no commission, no letters. There's a mention in an inventory from 1790, referring to "paintings by a woman's hand" in a private home, without a name. It could be her, it could be anyone.

Elisa looked out the window: the fog was already lifting, the mountain beginning to appear in pieces.

— So what remains of her is what she painted.

— What remains of her is what someone didn't throw away — said the woman. — It's the story of all of them. Women who worked well didn't enter the records; they entered the home. They went away and left no trace. In my archive we have six or seven names like hers, and one work for each, almost always signed in a corner, almost always covered up afterward. — She paused. — I'm sorry, I'm being a scholar and an angry woman at the same time.

— Don't apologize.

— The cycle you're restoring is at Villa Ombrosa, right?

— Yes.

— I know it by name. It's mentioned in a nineteenth-century guide, two lines, and then nothing

more. That means the lime came afterward, and no one ever took it off.

Elisa took notes on the back of the notebook, but only three words came out: *nothing*, *a woman's hand*, *afterward*. She looked at the third one and circled it.

— A question — she said. — The signature is at the bottom left, above the sky, small. Less than two fingers wide. It isn't in a cartouche.

— That means she knew. — The woman's voice grew slower. — Someone who signs in a cartouche wants to be seen. Someone who signs in a corner wants to be found.

When she hung up, Elisa stayed sitting for a moment longer. Then she went to the Sala delle Ore, switched on the work lamp even though it was morning, and stood in front of the section with the two letters. She remained there for half an hour, motionless, with her hands in her pockets.

— All right — she said to the wall. — I'll find you.

And she went back to work with a haste she hadn't allowed herself even on jobs with a deadline looming.

The storm arrived on the evening of the eighth day.

They had felt it all afternoon in the motionless air: the lake flat as a sheet, the mountain black, the swallows flying low and skimming the water. Nives had shut the kitchen shutters at six and said it would come down hard, and at half past nine it came down hard.

Elisa was in the Sala delle Ore. She was working in the evenings too, these last few evenings, against the rule she had set herself: the daylight had been gone for a long time, and she kept going by the lamp, section after section, because the buyer—Nives had told her there was a buyer—wasn't waiting. At half past nine the lights suddenly dimmed, came back on, dimmed again, and then everything went out.

Complete darkness, for two seconds. Then the first flash, filling the room with white for an instant and outlining the wall, the hours, the scaffolding, before vanishing.

— Elisa.

The voice came from the hallway, low.

— I'm here.

Corrado came in holding a lit candle in one hand and a spare in the other. The flame lit his face

from below and cast two shadows on his cheeks. He was wearing what he always wore in the evening: a shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a wool sweater over his shoulders.

— It's the power line — he said. — It happens in a storm. It'll take an hour.

— Don't we have a generator?

— We do, but it's in the shed and it's raining now. — He lit the spare candle too and set it on the worktable in the middle of the room. — We can sit in the dark for an hour.

They sat down on the scaffold platform, side by side, with their backs to the wall and the candles in front of them. Outside, the rain beat against the stone steps and the windowpanes, and with every flash the room lit up for an instant and the painted hours appeared, one by one, in the order the sun passed through them.

— There were twenty-four to do — Corrado said after a while.

— Twenty-four.

— How many have you finished?

— Nine. Ten with the one I'm working on.

He nodded. They sat in silence. Thunder passed over the house and made the glass tremble, and after the thunder came that muffled silence storms have when they're right above you.

— Why do you do it? — Corrado asked.

— The restoration?

— No. I mean, why do you take jobs far away, one after another, for months at a time?

Elisa looked at the candle. The flame bent one way, then the other.

— Because they keep me busy.

— That's not an answer.

— It's mine. — She felt the cold wood beneath her hands and realized she still had the bandage on her palm, yellowed and in need of changing. — It's an honest answer.

— I asked you a better question than I deserve.

Elisa laughed softly through her nose. It was the first time she had laughed in that house.

The storm moved away toward the opposite shore and the rain became steady, a background noise. Corrado got up to check the other candle, which was burning low, and on his way back stopped a step away from her, the light between them. Elisa lifted her head and kept looking at him. He looked at her. They said nothing, and it wasn't an empty silence: it was a silence with weight, like when you're about to say something and choose the moment to say it.

Corrado reached out and took her chin between two fingers, gently, the way you handle a piece of ceramic: not to hold it, but to see it better. His thumb brushed the corner of her mouth, for an instant, the length of a thought, then stopped.

Then he let go.

— You have lime in your hair — he said.

Elisa stayed still. She could feel her heart beating in her throat and didn't want him to hear it.

— Yes — she said. — Always.

— I need to change the candle.

— Yes.

He got up to fetch the new candle, and for the rest of the hour they talked about the generator, the power line, how much it would cost to bring the system up to code. About the house. Only about the house.

But when she went upstairs, Elisa stayed sitting on the scaffold platform a while longer, in the dark, her hand on her chin at the exact spot where he had brushed it, as if holding on to the trace of something that wasn't there.

The next afternoon, at six, the light came as it always did: from the lake, low and slanting, and for an hour the Sala delle Ore stopped being a room and became something else.

Elisa knew this and planned for it. During that hour she didn't use the lamp: she stood sideways to the wall, her cheek almost resting against the plaster, and looked. Raking light doesn't illuminate: it grazes. And when it grazes, the painting can be seen for what it is—the brushstrokes, the retouching, the days of work—and every now and then, for an instant, the drawing underneath becomes visible, like a sheet of paper held up to the light.

She was working on the upper corner, where the sky of the last hours came to an end. It was the hardest part: the lime was thicker there, because the nineteenth century had needed to cover it

more thoroughly. Elisa worked in ten-centimeter sections, using only the tip, and stopped to look every now and then.

It was during one of those pauses that she saw it.

At first it wasn't a face: it was a difference. A denser shadow in the sky, between the milky-white cloud and the edge of the last hour, where the curve of the sky rounded toward the corner. Elisa went back with the tip, removed the lime little by little, and the difference became an outline, and the outline became a head.

She stayed there with the scalpel suspended in the air.

It wasn't a figure from the cycle. The hours were populated by bodies doing things: a man plowing, a woman with a pitcher, a boy with a lamp, an old man warming himself. All painted so that you understood them at once. That head, on the other hand, did nothing. It had been placed in the corner of the sky the way you place a signature, or something you want to hide in a spot everyone looks at without seeing.

Elisa worked for forty minutes without taking notes. Then she moved away, went to the other end of the room, came back, and stood sideways to the wall again. And in the raking light of six o'clock, beneath the thin layer that still remained, she saw the whole thing: a woman in profile, her hair pulled back, her neck long, her chin slightly raised. One eye, the one that could be seen. An ear, barely sketched in. And below, on her neck, a streak of lighter paint, like a scar, or like a mark the artist hadn't wanted to finish.

The figure looked toward the lake.

Elisa sat down on the floor with her back against the wall, beside the face, and stayed there until the light was gone. She didn't call anyone. She didn't want anyone else to see it before it belonged to her, for a little while longer.

When she got up, she went to fetch the notebook and wrote a single page, in the small handwriting she used for her surveys:

Section of hours XXI–XXIV, northwest corner, sky. Female figure in profile, facing the lake, unrelated to the cycle. It is not one of the hours. Painted on the same ground layer, same hand, same pigments. Contemporary.

Then, underneath, after a blank line:

It's her.

At seven, the piano began the first of the three pieces upstairs. Elisa closed the notebook, tucked the brush behind her ear out of habit, and stood in the middle of the room listening, with the painted face behind her, looking at the water just as she was.

The buyer arrived the next day, at three in the afternoon, in a gray car with the notary.

Elisa heard them before she saw them: the engine climbing the narrow road, the handbrake, two doors closing one after the other. She was in the Sala delle Ore, on the low scaffold platform, working on the edge of the figure. She stopped, put down the scalpel, took off her gloves, and didn't move from where she was.

Corrado received them on the steps. Nives appeared at the end of the hallway in a freshly ironed apron and disappeared into the kitchen.

Dr. Ferro was around sixty, wore a light-colored jacket, and walked in a way that took up the room. The notary was shorter and carried a rigid leather briefcase, and said almost nothing the whole time.

— This is the room — Corrado said.

Ferro came in and stopped in the middle of the room, his hands on his hips, and looked at the wall the way you look at a bill.

— Very nice, very nice.

He turned to Elisa.

— You're the restorer.

— Elisa Rinaldi.

— Ferro.

He didn't hold out his hand, or perhaps he did and Elisa didn't notice in time.

— What's it worth?

Elisa looked at Corrado, who didn't look at her.

— The cycle is coherent, the ground layer is intact, and the hand is of a good standard. Signed B. S., 1783.

— What does that mean in money?

— It means an eighteenth-century painted room, with a complete, documented cycle of the hours, isn't the same thing as a room with four white walls.

Ferro nodded, satisfied, as if he had just won an argument with someone else.

— That's what I told the agency. This house is worth what's inside it.

He moved closer to the wall and reached out toward the painting.

— Can I touch it?

— No — Elisa and Corrado said together.

Ferro pulled his hand back and laughed.

— All right, all right. I respect that.

The notary took out a tape measure and measured the rooms: the Sala delle Ore, the kitchen, the piano room upstairs, the orangery. He walked slowly and wrote everything down on a pad. When he got to the orangery and saw the tables, the scaffolding, the lamps, he asked Elisa how long she had been working there.

— Ten days.

— And how long will it take?

— Until the end of October.

The notary wrote that down too, and the date on the pad, and Elisa felt her deadline becoming a line in a document.

They went back to the Sala delle Ore. Ferro stopped in front of the wall one last time and asked whether it was better to leave the cycle visible or whether, after all, a bright, light room might be better for a house being sold in this day and age. Corrado replied that the cycle would be left visible. Ferro said that was his decision, that he liked it, that foreign dealers appreciated old things. Then he looked at his watch, said he was running late and would sign in Milan at the end of October, and the notary took out his diary and confirmed the date.

The gray car went down the road, and its noise faded beyond the bend. Nives appeared with a tray and three glasses no one had asked for.

— Have they gone?

— They've gone — Corrado said.

— Too bad — said Nives, and went back to the kitchen with the full tray.

The argument didn't start right away.

It started half an hour later, after Nives had gone and the house was once again just the two of them and the sound of the lake against the stone. Elisa was in the Sala delle Ore, back on the scaffold platform, her gloves on again and the scalpel in her hand. Corrado had passed through the hallway twice without saying anything, and the second time he had stopped in the doorway.

— What Ferro said — he began.

— That the house is worth what's inside it.

— It's the truth.

Elisa didn't turn around. She kept working on the edge of the figure, a millimeter at a time.

— The truth is that in six weeks that wall will belong to him. And then no one will touch the cycle again, and that's fine, but at least let me finish it. At least that.

— You'll finish it.

— Yes, if no one else comes along wanting to measure the rooms.

— Elisa.

— Why did you show it to him as something to sell? — She turned around, scalpel still in hand, and immediately lowered it because it was a gesture that made her look armed. — You bought this house to fix it up and sell it again, all right, that's your choice. But that room isn't a piece of the house. There's a woman in there who painted twenty-four hours and put herself in a corner so she wouldn't be found. And today someone came in with a tape measure and put a price on her.

Corrado stayed in the doorway. He didn't raise his voice or move.

— He put a price on the wall. Not on her.

— Does it make a difference?

— It makes a difference to you, evidently.

Elisa put the scalpel down on the table. Her hands were warm inside her gloves and she wanted to

take them off, but she didn't, because keeping her hands occupied helped.

— I don't understand how you do it — she said. — I don't understand how you can spend three years in a house like this and then sell it the way you sell a garage.

— Because I can't afford to grow attached to anything. — He said it softly, looking at the floor. — I bought this house because my father had lost it, and I bought it to put it back on its feet, and I put it back on its feet. If I stay, I'll be inside it forever. If I sell it, the job is done.

— It isn't a job. It's a home.

— To me, it's the same thing.

The silence lasted a long time. Outside, the boat passed, its sound coming loudly from the pier before fading away.

Elisa picked up the notebook from the easel and closed it.

— You asked me something the other night. In the dark. Why I take jobs far away.

— Yes.

— It isn't because they keep me busy. — She ran her hand over her forehead, beneath the lime. — Tommaso. Two years ago, in a car. He was coming to pick me up at the station and he never arrived. I waited for him for eight hours in a waiting room that never ended.

She stopped there. The sentence remained open, without the word that would have closed it.

— Since then, I haven't been able to say that word. I've never said it to anyone. Not even to myself.

Corrado said nothing. He took half a step into the room and stopped.

— That's why I take jobs far away — Elisa said. — Because there's no room for anyone at a worksite, and I don't have to explain anything to anyone.

— You didn't have to tell me now.

— No. But I did.

Then she picked up the notebook, the lamp, and walked past him out of the room, went to the orangery, closed the door to the room at the back, and stayed there in the dark, sitting on the bed, her hands still in her gloves.

At seven, Elisa noticed the silence.

She was sitting on the bed in the room at the back of the orangery, in the dark, with the door closed and her gloves still on. At a quarter past seven she got up to drink a glass of water. At half past seven she sat down again. At eight she was still waiting, without admitting to herself that she was waiting.

The piano didn't come.

For ten days, ever since she had arrived at the house, Corrado had played the three pieces every evening, always, even when she wasn't there, even on the day of the storm, even on the day she cut her hand. Elisa had learned their order: the first was slow, with the left hand starting half a measure early; the second was the one he always got wrong in the twelfth measure; the third ended in midair, like something deliberately left unfinished.

At a quarter past eight she went out into the orangery. The table was there with the brushes neatly arranged, the scaffolding taken down and leaned against the wall, the jars with their handwritten labels. Outside, the night was clear, and the lake could barely be heard.

She looked toward the villa. The upstairs window, the one in the piano room, was lit.

She went up the stairs without making a sound and stopped on the landing. The door was ajar. A low lamplight came from inside, and nothing else.

Corrado was sitting on the piano bench, the lid closed, his back to the door and his hands on his knees. He was looking at the window. He wasn't reading or writing, and he had nothing in his hands. He was just sitting there.

Elisa stood still for a moment. Then she said softly:

— You're not playing.

Corrado didn't turn around right away.

— No.

— Is it the power again?

— It's not the power.

She stepped inside and said nothing more, because there was nothing to say that hadn't already been said in the Sala delle Ore, and words weren't useful that evening. She went over to the

window, beside him, and looked outside: the black lake, the island with two lights on, the mountain invisible but felt only by the weight it gave the air.

— I went too far earlier — she said.

— No.

— Yes. I blamed you for something that's mine.

— Elisa. — Corrado finally turned around, the lamplight falling across his face. — It's not that I'm not playing because I'm angry. It's that if I play, you'll hear, and tonight I didn't want you to hear.

Elisa kept looking at him. Outside, a boat was crossing the water, its white wake slowly breaking apart behind the stern.

— Then don't play — she said.

She stayed there a little longer, beside him, in front of the closed piano. Then she went back down the stairs, and into the orangery, and got into bed with her clothes on, and for the first time since arriving at Villa Ombrosa she didn't count the sections she had left, or the days, or the minutes the lime needed. She counted something else, and fell asleep halfway through the count.

The September Light

For twelve days Elisa had been working in the Sala delle Ore, and on the thirteenth she finished the last panel shortly before five thirty in the afternoon.

It wasn't just any panel. The last one was in the northwest corner, the one with the hours from twenty-one to twenty-four, where, on the ninth day, while cleaning the sky, a figure had appeared that did not belong to the cycle. Since then Elisa had worked all around that section of wall and left it for last, the way you leave for last a page you don't want to finish.

In the morning she had prepared it using her usual method: Japanese-paper poultices, lukewarm distilled water, the scalpel held flat, never point-first. The nineteenth-century lime came away in veils, a layer as thin as skin, and beneath each veil the color was more vivid than a painting two hundred and forty years old had any right to be. In the afternoon she had worked with her glasses pushed up onto her forehead, because after looking up close for so long you stop seeing anything, and the last few hours had gone on removing three fingers' breadth of lime in one corner, a pale patch beneath the arm of a figure, a hardened clump along the bottom edge, where once there had been a frame.

At five thirty she laid the scalpel on the table and stood up.

The twenty-four hours were over.

The room was eleven paces long and seven wide, and now it could breathe. The painted hours were people, and each was doing something: one holding a lamp, one pouring water from a jug, one singing, one sleeping with their arms beneath their head, one turning toward the door as if someone had come in. The sky in each panel changed in tone—lightened blue, midday blue, pink and purple toward evening—and flowed from one wall to the next without a seam, as though the painter had conceived the whole course of the day at once before laying down the first color.

And up above, in the northwest corner, inside the sky of the final hour, the woman in profile was looking at the lake.

Elisa stood in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. Her fingernails were dirty with lime and she had the beginnings of a headache, and for the first time since she'd arrived there was nothing she needed to prepare for the next day.

At six, the light arrived.

It came in through the high window as it did every afternoon, low and slanting, and did to the frescoes what no lamp could do: lit them from within. The pinks turned pink again, the blues opened up, the figures gained depth, and for an hour the room stopped being a restored room and became once more what it had been in 1783.

Elisa sat on the threshold step, her back against the doorframe. She could feel the lime on her hands, the cold of the stone through her clothes, the ferry crossing the lake, no longer visible.

Corrado appeared in the doorway. He said nothing: he stood there, shoulder against the frame, looking at the wall as if he were seeing it for the first time. Perhaps he was. Elisa felt his gaze on the back of her neck and didn't turn around.

"It's finished," she said.

He didn't answer right away. Then he said:

"Yes."

He stayed for another moment, then went away, and his footsteps in the corridor could be heard for a long time.

Elisa took the survey notebook, which she kept open on the table beside the Plexiglas sheets, and wrote the date and a single line: *last panel completed, 5:30 p.m. Cycle complete.* Then she closed it and stayed there, sitting on the threshold, waiting for the light to fade, as she did every evening. Only that evening, when the light faded, there was nothing left to pick up again the next morning.

The next morning she woke at five thirty, as always, and for the first time since she'd arrived, she didn't know what to do.

She stayed in bed for a few minutes, eyes open, watching the ceiling beam and the light that wasn't light yet. Then she got up, because the room at the back of the orangery was full of things to put away: the lamps to pack, the solvents to inventory, the frames to dismantle, the Japanese paper to seal up so the lake's damp wouldn't eat it in a week. It was work. Not much, but work.

At seven she heard the kitchen door open and close: Nives leaving the bread. At seven thirty she heard Nives calling someone who wasn't there.

Elisa took the hygrometer from the case, switched it on, and went outside.

There was low fog, the kind that comes over the lake in September at six and is gone by ten, and the grass on the steps was so wet that after three steps her shoes were soaked. She went down to

the jetty with an excuse already in her mind, one she had made up in thirty seconds: the boathouse wood, the tarp covering the boat, the green that forms along the edges when water is left standing. It was true. It was also an excuse.

The jetty was stone; the boathouse wood creaked in three places, and Elisa had learned them on the first day. She sat on the bottom step, her feet dangling above the water, and set the hygrometer beside her, switched off. The fog covered the island and the opposite shore: all she could see was the lake moving almost imperceptibly and, in front of her, the tip of her own shoe.

She stayed like that for a while.

Then she said, out loud:

"Tommaso is dead."

Her voice came out low, with the cadence of someone reading a line written by someone else. Nothing happened. The water kept moving, the fog stayed where it was, and nothing could be heard from up at the house, because there was no one who could hear her. But the sentence stayed there, in the air, instead of coming back to her.

Elisa said it again.

"Tommaso is dead."

The second time it came more easily, her voice where it belonged. The third time she didn't say it: she thought it, and her hands thought it too, resting on her knees with their fingernails still dirty with lime, and the hands were hers, and Tommaso wouldn't ask for them that morning or any other morning, because he had been dead for two years, and she had never said it.

She didn't cry. She waited to see if it would happen, and it didn't: instead, a kind of clean exhaustion came over her, like after a climb, and the precise feeling that something inside her had shifted an inch and would never go back to where it had been.

A ferry passed on the other side of the lake, invisible, and its engine could be heard for a good minute before and after. Then silence returned, and with the silence, right on time, came what she had not wanted to know: the rush to the hospital, two years earlier, the corridor, the waiting room with its blue plastic chairs. Elisa closed her eyes, and didn't open them until she had finished remembering everything.

It was a September evening, the first week, and it was already cold. Elisa got off the 9:40 p.m. train at Porta Nuova with her worksite suitcase and hands that smelled of solvent, and looked for

Tommaso on the platform, where he always was, under the canopy, hands in his pockets and wearing the face of someone who had deliberately just missed the train.

He wasn't there.

She waited ten minutes, then twenty. She knew that night he was playing outside Turin, in a church in a small town, and that he would arrive by car with his cello on the back seat, and that he would apologize without meaning it. She called him. The phone rang unanswered: ringing, then busy, then ringing again. On the twelfth call she stopped counting and started pacing back and forth under the canopy, her suitcase wheels rattling each time she turned.

The phone rang at 10:20. On the other end was the voice of a man she didn't know, with the background noise of a corridor: he was a nurse in the emergency room, he had Tommaso's phone in his hand, and he was asking if she was his next of kin.

Elisa said yes, that she was, and that she was on her way, and asked nothing else, because you answer questions even when you don't want to.

The taxi took her across town. In the entrance hall was the white light found in every hospital in the world, the kind that casts no shadows, and a man with a cart washing the floor in slow circles. They told her to sit down. They told her he was in intensive care, that there had been an operation, that they had to wait.

The waiting room had blue plastic chairs, a coffee machine, a television on with the sound off. Elisa sat at the far end, her suitcase between her feet, and didn't move for almost eight hours.

Stretchers and sleepless people passed outside the door. Another family occupied three chairs on the other side of the room: a mother, a daughter, a man in a high-visibility jacket, and at one point someone brought them coffee in a paper cup and they all cried together, and it wasn't for Tommaso. Elisa watched the clock hand above the television and thought something she had never told anyone: that when they tell you to wait, waiting is already the way they're telling you it's over.

At 6:20 in the morning a doctor came, a young man in a rumpled white coat, and sat beside her instead of standing, and from that gesture she understood everything before he spoke. He asked if she was his wife.

"Partner," Elisa said.

Eleven years. She said it the way you say a date.

The doctor spoke quietly and didn't use any big words. He said Tommaso hadn't made it, that there had been another operation, that they had tried for hours, that they'd found him on a road ten minutes from the station, the asphalt still wet, and that the cello on the back seat hadn't been broken.

Elisa listened to everything until the end. Then she asked to see him, and they took her to him.

He looked smaller than she remembered, on the bed, and paler. Elisa took his hand and held it for a moment, because that was what he had always asked her to do, every evening for eleven years: let me see your hands. Now she was the one looking at his, and there was nothing to show. Then she went out into the corridor, sat on the floor with her back against the wall, and stayed there until daylight, without crying, still holding her suitcase.

From that morning on, Elisa had never said the word. To her colleagues at the studio she said Tommaso wasn't around, to her landladies she said she lived alone, to herself she said she was in the middle of a busy period at work. Eleven years in a sentence in the present tense, and one word left out, the way you leave a room locked in a house you live in all the rest of.

At the top of the steps, Nives called her to breakfast. Elisa opened her eyes, and the fog had already lifted.

In the kitchen, bread was on the table, cut into thick slices, and the coffee was already made. Nives stood in front of the stove with her hands on her hips, and as soon as she saw Elisa come in, she said what she thought, as she always did.

"Your feet are wet."

"I checked the humidity down by the jetty."

"At seven thirty in the morning." Nives poured coffee into a cup and set it in front of her without asking. "You check the humidity with a hygrometer, not with your shoes. And you usually switch the hygrometer on."

Elisa didn't reply. She ate the bread, drank the coffee, and everything seemed clearer than it had at any time in the past two years: the wooden table, the sound of the stove, the crease in the tablecloth. Nives watched her eat for a full minute, then sat down opposite her, something she did only when she had decided the time had come.

"When are you leaving?"

"The contract says the end of October. But the cycle is finished. There's the documentation, the

photos, the report for the Superintendency: three or four days."

"Four days." Nives nodded, as if counting something for herself. "And then Dr. Ferro signs in Milan, and this becomes someone else's house."

"It's already someone else's house," Elisa said. "It belongs to Corrado."

Nives didn't answer that. She stood up, took the tablecloth, folded it in four the way you fold something that you've folded a thousand times, and said:

"He never left coffee at six by the door for anyone before."

Then she went out into the courtyard to hang up the laundry, and the conversation ended there, because Nives didn't like explaining things she had already said.

Elisa went back to the orangery and started closing up the crates. The lamps in the large cardboard box, the solvents in the wooden crate, the brushes washed in water and laid out to dry in a row on the table, like soldiers. It was work, and work kept her hands busy, and for an hour she thought about nothing.

At ten, on her way to the Sala delle Ore with a box of Japanese paper to seal up, she heard Corrado's voice in the corridor and stopped.

He was talking on the phone in the instrument room, with the door ajar.

"No. I'm not selling."

A long pause. Elisa set the box down gently on the floor.

"No, Doctor, it's not a question of price. It's not a question of timing. I've made up my mind, and the deed won't be signed." Another pause. His voice was low, calm, without a tremor. "If there's a penalty, I'll pay it. If I made a commitment, I'll be the one to undo it, and put in writing that I'm responsible."

Elisa didn't move. The box was at her feet and her breath was short, and she felt ridiculous, standing in a corridor listening to a phone call about a house that wasn't hers.

"The cycle is something that stays with the house," Corrado said from the other side of the door. "If I sell it, the fresco becomes a market value attached to a contract. That's not what I want." A pause. "No. There's no better reason than that."

Then his voice dropped even lower, and she could no longer hear the words, only the tone. She

heard a sheet of paper, the sound of a pen, a number spoken twice. She heard the phone being set down on the table.

She stayed still in the corridor, her heart beating, the box at her feet. She knew it would be better to leave, go back to the orangery and ask later, with an excuse. She didn't. She pushed the door with one hand and found it open.

The room was tidy, as always. On the desk lay the phone he had just put down, the notepad with the notary's number written twice, the pen with its cap still off. Corrado was standing behind the chair, one hand resting on its back, and when he saw her he didn't pretend to be surprised.

"You heard."

"Yes."

He nodded once, as if he had recorded a fact.

"Why?" Elisa said.

"Because I changed my mind."

"You sell a house if you want to sell it. That's not changing your mind; it's something else."

Corrado looked out the window, where the lake was pale gray and the island was clearly visible now that the fog was gone. He didn't answer right away, and when he did, he didn't answer the question.

"Come with me a moment."

He went out into the corridor and she followed him, not knowing why, her hands empty and her heart still beating. At that hour the Sala delle Ore was an ordinary room: morning light came in high through the high window and lit nothing up, and the frescoes stayed on the walls the way things do when no one is looking at them.

Corrado went to the table, picked up the survey notebook—his notebook, the one Elisa had left there the night before—and opened it to the page he didn't need to look for. The page with the self-portrait. There was the pencil drawing of the figure in profile, done in ten minutes on the day she had found it, the measurements, the color sample, and at the bottom her notes, the ones she had written in a rush.

He read them aloud, in the low voice he used for everything:

“‘Female figure in profile, height twelve centimeters, facing the lake, same ground and same pigments as the cycle. Not part of the hours.’”

Then he looked up.

“That’s the sentence you wrote. Not part of the hours. A woman who puts herself into her own work, who paints herself in a corner of her own sky, and doesn’t tell anyone, and stays beneath the lime for two hundred and forty years. You found her in an afternoon.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Elisa said.

“No.” Corrado closed the notebook gently, his open hand resting on its cover. “But selling it now would feel to me like covering her up again.”

They stood still, two paces apart, with the notebook on the table between them. The eleven o’clock ferry passed outside, and its wake reached the jetty and died against the stone.

“There’s something else,” he said. “If this house is no longer for sale, you don’t have a deadline. You don’t have to leave at the end of October.”

Elisa looked at the notebook, its cloth cover with worn corners, the pencil drawing visible through the edge.

“The contract says the end of October.”

“The contract was written by you and me in ten minutes, in the Sala Grande, on the first day.”

Elisa said nothing. She took the notebook from beneath his hand—brushing it as she picked it up, the only contact they had all morning—and held it against her chest the way you hold a book you don’t want to lend.

“I have to finish packing,” she said.

“Yes.”

And she went away, because that was what she knew how to do, and behind her Corrado stayed in the middle of the room, arms at his sides, looking at the northwest corner where a woman painted by another woman had been looking at the lake for two hundred and forty years.

In the afternoon Elisa closed up the crates, completed the report for the Superintendency, and didn’t go up to the first floor. At seven the piano sounded, as it did every evening: the same three pieces, the same familiar wrong notes in the bass. Elisa stayed in the orangery, listening with the

brushes in her hands, and that evening the music reached her like something said, not something played.

The music ended at eight thirty, and after that the house returned to the sounds houses always made: the stairs settling, water in the pipes, a car in the distance on the road to Orta.

Elisa washed the dishes, dried them, put them away. Then she went out into the courtyard for some fresh air, on the pretext of checking that the crates were sheltered from the dew, but instead stopped in the middle of the courtyard to look at the first-floor windows: one was lit, the one in the piano room.

She went four steps up the stone staircase leading to the orangery. Then she turned around and went back, and went up to the first floor, and thought nothing, or rather, thought many things and none worth writing down.

The door was ajar. Corrado wasn't at the piano: he was sitting on the low bench in front of the fireplace, the fire already halfway burned down, and when she came in he said nothing and didn't pretend nothing was happening. He looked at the door, looked at her, and waited.

Elisa stayed in the doorway.

"I'm not going back down to the orangery," she said.

"No."

"If I stay here, is that all right?"

Corrado looked at her for a moment that lasted longer than a look usually does, and there was no hurry and no ready answer in that moment.

"Yes," he said. "If you want to leave later, the door's right there."

"I know where the door is."

He laughed softly, a short laugh that reached her like a hand. Elisa crossed the room and sat beside him on the bench, her knees toward the fire, ten centimeters away from him, which was ten centimeters closer than all the centimeters of those days.

For a while they said nothing. The fire did what fires do: died down, flared up, shifted the light. Elisa felt the warmth on her face and on the part of her arm nearest him, and she could feel that he was deliberately keeping still, giving her time to move, and that time wouldn't last forever.

Then Corrado took her right hand, the one with the scar.

The wound had healed days ago, but the cut on her palm was still visible, a small pale mark near the base of her middle finger, and he looked at it the way he had looked at the wall the afternoon of the first panel: slowly, attentively, as you look at something that has cost you.

“Does it still hurt?”

“No.”

He didn’t ask anything else. He held her hand, his thumb still beside the scar. Elisa looked at their fingers and then at him. She could still get up, say good night, return to the orangery, where everything would be in its place. She stayed.

“If I tell you to stop, you stop,” she said.

It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

Elisa put her other hand against his face, on the side the firelight didn’t reach. He turned his face slightly toward her palm, without closing the distance.

She was the one who kissed him.

At first she missed by a little, brushing the corner of his mouth, and that imperfect gesture took away a fear she wouldn’t have known how to name. She stopped very close to him. Corrado let her hand go and waited for her to look at him.

“Like this?” he asked.

“Come here.”

The second kiss had none of that hesitation. Elisa put a hand on the back of his neck and held him close; he embraced her with a tenderness that, for once, didn’t make her feel fragile. When they parted, she didn’t lower her eyes. She ran her thumb along his cheek, where his beard was starting to feel rough.

“You had lime in your hair again tonight,” he said.

Elisa laughed softly.

“You could have found another excuse.”

“I wasn’t looking for one.”

He brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead. Elisa caught his wrist before he could withdraw his hand and kissed his fingers, then rested them against her cheek. For a moment they did nothing else. The fire sank with a small collapse of the wood, and the clock in the corridor could be heard in the room.

“I want to stay here,” she said.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight. I don’t know about the rest yet.”

Corrado nodded. He didn’t ask her to know.

Elisa rested her forehead against his and closed her eyes. When she kissed him again, she no longer searched for something to say afterward. The house creaked above them, as it did every evening, and for once neither of them drew back at the first silence.

Later, curled up with him under the blankets, Elisa realized she was smiling. Corrado asked her what it was, and she shook her head: nothing she could explain without spoiling it.

When he shifted to adjust the blanket, Elisa held onto his hand.

“Where are you going?”

“My arm had gone numb.”

She let go and laughed, a little embarrassed. Corrado tucked the blanket under their feet, then settled back beside her. For a little while they watched the glow of the fireplace on the ceiling.

“I’m not used to this,” Elisa said.

He turned his head.

“Having to talk afterward. It always seems to me there’s something to explain.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

Elisa pulled one hand out and traced a crease in the blanket with a finger. She thought of the room in the orangery, the glass beside the bed, the alarm clock she never needed to set. She could have been there that night too. It seemed strange that all it took was a staircase and a corridor to return to a life that, until a few hours ago, had been the only one possible.

“Maybe I’ll be in a terrible mood tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll make the coffee anyway.”

“That’s what you say now.”

Corrado smiled, but didn’t try to come up with a better answer. Elisa rested her head on his shoulder. The thought of Tommaso came even there, and for a moment she stayed still. She didn’t push it away. Corrado held her hand without knowing what she was thinking; she didn’t have to pull it free.

Outside, there wasn’t a single sound on the lake, not even the ferry, not even the last one, because it had passed long ago. She stayed awake a little longer. When Corrado asked if the light bothered her, Elisa said no.

She woke at five thirty, as always, in a room that wasn’t hers.

The fire was out and the room was cold, but not as cold as the orangery at dawn: the wooden floor had kept a little warmth in front of the fireplace, and the piano was there, closed, a few steps from the low sofa. Corrado slept on his side, one hand outside the covers, the one with the scar, and breathed softly, the way someone breathes who has never been afraid to sleep. Elisa stayed still, watching him for a while, without touching him, with the precise feeling of being awake in a place she hadn’t expected.

At six she got up, dressed in the clothes from the night before, and went downstairs barefoot, because the stone stairs were cold and she wanted to feel it. In the kitchen she lit the stove using Nives’s method—the paper underneath, the kindling next, then the larger logs—and put the coffee on.

At seven, as the bread arrived at the door and the house began to make noise, she heard the ferry.

It always arrived before it could be seen: the low engine, the thud of the wake against the quay, two voices from across the water. Elisa went to the window and watched it stop at the jetty. She knew how many seats it had, how much the ticket cost, that in seven minutes she’d be in Orta and in two hours in Turin. She also knew that her suitcase had been ready in the orangery for two days, her coat folded on top.

The ferry set off again. Elisa stayed at the window until she lost sight of it behind the tip of the garden.

Then she heard Corrado’s footsteps on the stairs, and didn’t turn around.

“The seven o’clock ferry has gone,” she said.

“Yes.”

“My suitcase is ready, in the orangery, with my coat on top.”

“I know. I saw it.”

He stopped halfway across the kitchen, two meters away from her, and didn’t come closer, and Elisa recognized that distance: it was the same one that had separated them the day before in the Sala delle Ore, until she had brushed his hand.

“I’m not taking it,” Elisa said.

Corrado said nothing.

“I’m not getting on the next one, or the one after that. I’m not leaving in October.” She took the coffee from the stove, poured herself a cup and poured one for him too, set it on the table, and finally turned around. “I’m not promising you anything else. I’m not promising the whole winter, I’m not promising the spring, I’m not promising that one day I won’t feel like leaving, because I don’t know. I know that I’m staying now, and it’s not because of the house.”

“What is it for?”

“For what I found in this room. And for what I found afterward.”

Corrado came to get his cup and stood opposite her across the table, the steam rising between them.

“All right,” he said.

Just that. All right: two words, no speech, and for Elisa it was more than enough, because a man who promised nothing and said all right was exactly the kind of man she could trust.

“There’s something,” Elisa said. “Yesterday, down at the jetty, I talked to Tommaso. Out loud, by myself, like an idiot. I told him something I’d never told him before.”

Corrado looked at her. He didn’t ask what.

“I said he was dead.” The word came out straight, without stumbling. “I’d kept it out for two years, and in the end I said it to a lake. I wanted you to know. I told you before I told my mother.”

He set down his cup, reached across the table, and took her fingers over the wood, without

squeezing.

“Thank you,” he said.

Outside, the second ferry of the morning was crossing the other side of the lake, and the kitchen was beginning to warm up.

The worksite closed on Saturday morning, with two van trips and an afternoon of cleaning.

Nives came up to the orangery with a rag and a bucket and found Elisa dismantling the last frame, and for a while they worked in silence, one on either side, like two women who had done the same thing for years. When the small frame had been folded and leaned against the wall, Nives stopped with her hands on her hips and looked at the empty room, the tables with nothing on them, the new Plexiglas panes reflecting the garden.

“Do you know the difference between a house for sale and a house people live in?” she said.

“Tell me.”

“In the first, when you leave, you turn off the water and cut the power.” Nives picked up the bucket. “Here, Mr. Corrado has never turned off the water in three years. Not even when he went to Milan for a week. I’ve checked the meter: he’s never turned it off.”

Elisa put away the rag and didn’t answer, because there was no need, and because Nives offered those sentences the way she offered bread: without waiting for thanks.

At six o’clock on Monday afternoon, Elisa crossed the house with her hands still wet.

She went there every evening now, and every evening it was the same thing and never the same thing. The high window was open a hand’s breadth, as it was every evening, and the light came in through it: low, slanting, orange along the edge of the floor, then up the walls as if someone were pouring it.

Elisa stopped in the middle of the room and slowly turned in a circle once.

All twenty-four hours were there. The first sun in the upper-right corner, noon in the middle of the long wall, evening fading toward the door, the sky changing tone from panel to panel without a seam. The painted people had been doing their work for two hundred and forty years: one pouring water, one singing, one turning toward the door as if someone had come in. Every evening, for an hour, they became people again instead of paint.

And in the northwest corner, inside the sky of the final hour, the woman in profile was looking at the lake, with that strip of lighter color on her neck that no one would ever know whether it was a correction, a light, or a signature.

Corrado arrived without making a sound. He stopped beside her, a hand's breadth away, his hands in his pockets, and stood looking at the wall.

They said nothing.

There was the fact that the frescoes were finished and the report was ready on the Superintendency's table; that the deed of sale would not be signed and the notary had already replied; that the suitcase had been emptied and the coat hung on the rack on the first floor; that Elisa had called the studio and taken another assignment for November, in the city, a short one, and that she would be back in December. All true, all said and repeated in the two days before. None of it, at that moment, was worth a sentence.

The light dropped an inch, as it always did around six thirty. The pinks faded first, then the blues became evening blue, and the figures began to withdraw into the wall.

"Tomorrow there won't be another good morning," Corrado said softly, as if saying it to himself.

"There's tomorrow at six."

He didn't answer, but his shoulder shifted a little toward her, and their arms touched from elbow to wrist, and neither of them moved away. They stayed like that, standing in the middle of the room, watching the course of the day light up for the last time that evening and then fade, while outside the lake was bright all over and the house creaked above them like a house people lived in.