

CHAPTER 1 — The Boxes

The moving truck had barely disappeared down the gravel road before Mara felt it again.

That familiar tightening in her chest.

Not panic. Panic was louder. Easier to name.

This was older.

The feeling that something bad was coming and she had simply forgotten what it was.

She stood in the middle of the living room surrounded by boxes.

BOOKS

KITCHEN

BATHROOM

OFFICE

One box sat by itself near the fireplace.

CERTIFICATIONS.

Mara stared at it too long.

Daniel walked past carrying a lamp. "You want this in the bedroom?"

"What?"

"The lamp."

She looked at him, then at the lamp, then back at the box.

"Sure."

He waited a second.

Not long enough to make it a thing. Just long enough for her to know he had noticed.

Then he nodded and disappeared down the hallway.

Mara kept standing there.

The house was quiet in the way new houses were quiet before they belonged to anyone. No hum of old habits. No familiar creak in the floor. No memory of where to set her keys or how the light moved in the afternoon.

Just walls.

Boxes.

A fireplace they had not used yet.

And that word in black marker.

CERTIFICATIONS.

She crouched and peeled back the tape.

The smell came up first.

Paper. Dust. Old highlighters.

Inside were folders, binders, notebooks, laminated certificates. Years of study stacked in uneven layers.

Trauma-informed coaching.

Somatic healing coursework.

Nervous system regulation.

Shadow integration.

Embodiment facilitation.

Manifestation journals.

Retreat notes in her careful handwriting.

A laminated certificate sat on top.

ADVANCED EMBODIMENT FACILITATOR.

Mara looked at it for a long moment.

Then laughed once.

A dry sound. Smaller than crying.

Embodiment.

She had not felt fully inside her own body since she was ten years old.

Outside, a dog barked twice. Somewhere down the road, someone was hammering. Birds chirped in the trees like nothing had ever gone wrong anywhere.

The world kept offering normal sounds.

Mara sat on the hardwood floor and held proof that she had once tried very hard to become a different woman.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

She ignored it.

Then it buzzed again.

She pulled it out.

A notification from an old healing group chat.

Reminder beautiful souls:

Your nervous system responds to compassion, not criticism.

Mara stared at the screen.

Three years ago, she would have saved it.

Three years ago, she would have posted something about radical softness and inner child repair while privately grinding her teeth so hard at night she cracked a molar.

Women had paid her to teach workshops.

She could still picture the rooms.

Soft music. Diffusers. Cream-colored yoga clothes. Notebooks open on crossed legs.

Women waiting for her to tell them how to return to themselves.

Mara had stood in front of them and said things like, "You have to learn to sit with your pain."

And they had nodded.

Some had cried.

Some had thanked her afterward with damp eyes and careful hugs.

All while Mara could barely feel her own hands.

She put the phone face down on the floor.

The house settled around her.

Daniel moved somewhere in the back bedroom. A drawer opened. Closed. Opened again.

He was trying.

She knew that.

He had packed the kitchen when she couldn't make decisions. He had labeled boxes when her brain went blank. He had driven most of the way here because she said the mountain roads made her stomach turn.

He had believed in the fresh start because one of them had to.

Mara picked up a journal from the box.

The cover read:

BECOMING YOUR HIGHEST SELF.

She almost put it back.

Instead, she opened it.

The first pages were full of her own handwriting.

Triggers.

Patterns.

Abandonment wounds.

Attachment styles.

Forgiveness exercises.

Somatic observations.

Parts work.

Shadow work.

Inner child dialogue.

The handwriting was neat at first. Controlled. Later, the words grew tighter, pressed hard into the paper, as if she had been trying to carve her way out.

She turned another page.

Then another.

Every entry sounded like someone applying for permission to exist.

Mara started to close the journal, then stopped.

A page near the back had been folded over.

She opened to it.

At the top, in blue ink, she had written:

THINGS THAT BRING ME JOY

The rest of the page was blank.

Mara stared at it.

For a moment, she thought she might remember writing it.

A retreat, maybe. Or a course. Some exercise where everyone sat in a circle and named what lit them up, what made them feel alive, what their soul was hungry for.

She waited for the memory to come.

Nothing did.

Only the blank page.