

Chapter 6 The Beginning of Life

When Nothing More Can Begin

At some point in the night, he must have arrived back at the hotel. He didn't remember how, not clearly. A glance at his phone showed nothing—no message, no email. Nothing from Feeny. But she must still have been alive. He would have been informed otherwise.

The night porter told him they'd managed to extend the room for another three nights, just as he'd asked.

He wasn't ready for breakfast. Instead, he stepped out into the street, instinctively searching for the e-scooter—and for a moment, Anika didn't cross his mind. He'd completely forgotten she was on her way to Berlin. The kids, he expected, would only arrive later in the day.

No scooter in sight. Had he walked back to the hotel the night before? He vaguely remembered riding, not walking. Had he taken a scooter from the clinic? But now there was nothing. Maybe some early commuter had already claimed it. Had he swapped out the battery mid-ride? He checked the app. To his surprise, it had logged the swap and even credited him extra minutes. Maybe the night hadn't been as bleak as it felt.

Indeed, at night all cats are gray—but these weren't cats. These were predators, shadows in disguise.

René boarded the next bus toward the clinic. But he got off halfway—he wanted to bring Feeny flowers. She loved flowers. Would they even allow them, given the sepsis?

“Doesn't matter,” he thought. “If I can't bring them into her room, I'll show them to her and leave them in the ward's common area.”

He stepped off at a corner where Google Maps showed a flower stand. Found it: a beat-up trailer painted with crooked hearts and plastic ivy. Somehow, it was overflowing with fresh tulips—not what he expected in winter.

He asked the sturdy woman behind the counter to put together a bouquet that said spring.

“Winter's already over for us,” she said. “Is it for your wife?”

René confirmed.

“Lots of folks buy flowers here for the hospital. How is she? I ask because it helps me pick the colors.”

“She needs a mix. Colors that are serious, and colors that give hope. But not just hope.”

“You're a sensitive man.”

“Flowers are like music—they don't lead us anywhere, they bring out what's already inside. My wife is gravely ill. But she hasn't given up. I want her to feel both—my fear and my fight.”

The woman turned, disappeared into a makeshift back room, and returned with stems—violets, yellows, sprays of green. She arranged them with skill and handed him the bouquet. He smelled it and knew: he had work to do on himself before he could face Feeny. He needed to strengthen his own hope before laying it at her feet.

With the flowers in hand, he listened inward, let the colors hum. Violins. Dissonance. Syncopated rhythm. A movie trailer. Gypsy jazz meets Bronx beat. He thought of August Rush.

The bus ride was crowded—workers rushing to shifts, teenagers doing homework on their laps, secretaries calmly applying lipstick on a shaking ride. René with his flowers, the music still in his mind. Not much time until desks and classrooms and waiting rooms opened. Did doctors at this clinic scramble the same way, prepping their patient folders last minute?

In the introduction to ovarian cancer specialist Sehouli's *On the Art of Delivering Bad News Well*, the duty doctor is described rushing down a corridor toward a patient conversation.

Even here, the pressure was immense. Every time they'd waited outside Prof. Choukri's consultation room—and it was always after a wait—it was clear: time was scarce. And then, suddenly, inside, time slowed. To give bad news well, you had to make space. Allow silences. Let questions echo.

Choukri made time. Sat in silence. Listened. Waited. Felt. Asked. Thought. Sat with them. Sometimes his presence alone was the message.

René had come to understand something strange: that while everyday time was always speeding up—apps, planners, shortcuts, hacks—hospital time expanded. It stretched. It bent into pain. It stopped making sense.

He looked at his digital calendar. His stomach dropped.

"Damn. I forgot Anika—where is she?"

Still holding the bouquet, he called her.

A warm voice picked up: "I'm at your hotel, having breakfast. Are you on your way?"

"Yes—sorry. Yesterday was... rough. I don't even remember how I got back to the hotel. And I forgot this morning completely. I was just out getting flowers for Feeny. Have another coffee—I'll head back now. Haven't heard anything yet from Feeny or the doctors. Maybe I'm not even allowed up to her room yet."

It was the right decision—Feeny was still being wheeled through the hospital for test after test. No messages. No news.

When he entered the breakfast room, he spotted Anika in the back. Her gaze fixed on her coffee.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"I understand," she replied. "That you forgot me... that tells me exactly how much strain you're under. Both of you."

René poured himself a coffee, grabbed a bowl of muesli and fruit, and joined her.

Anika reached for his hand. Gripped it.

"She's going to make it. She's survived so many crises."

"The first assessments were sobering. The later it got yesterday, the worse the tone became. Last I heard, it was critical. These next few hours... this night... maybe today... they'll decide everything."

She held his hand again.

"Have you called the clinic?"

"No point. They don't say anything. You get passed to the head nurse, who passes you to the attending, who's never around. I could text Choukri—but he's on a plane, somewhere

over Siberia, heading back from Seoul. Honestly, the absence of messages is almost calming. Let's wait."

Anika could hear his resolve.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Exhausted. Especially because Feeny was in denial. She didn't want to go back to the clinic. She was tired of it. She just couldn't make herself do it for days. But eventually, she made me call. That helped."

"What do you think will happen?"

"I've been through too much to guess. And like always—I have no feeling for it. No sense. Like you, I just have to hold still and get through the hours. Maybe we'll know more tonight."

"Do you think I can visit her today?"

"I don't even know that. But after we finish this coffee, let's go. Look," he pointed toward the flowers, now standing in a vase near the entrance. "I bought those this morning. You know how much she loves flowers."

"They're beautiful. The mix is perfect. She'll love them."

"We might not be able to bring them into her room," René admitted. "Because of the sepsis, only highly controlled visits are allowed. Even the flowers are banned. But we'll place them in the ward's common room. They have a cabinet full of vases. The nurses take care of watering them. And if Feeny is allowed to leave her room, she'll walk past them. At least she'll see them. We'll tell her they're hers."

"What exactly is sepsis?"

"I'm no doctor. But I googled enough. It's an emergency. The immune system starts attacking the body itself. Organs shut down. The doctors and nurses looked... worried. Very worried."

Anika said nothing. She listened. Trying to hear what she would need to prepare for. Should she inform Bruno?

"Have you told the kids?"

"Choukri asked me to. I booked a larger suite at the hotel. They're on their way. Should arrive this afternoon and come straight to the hospital."

"Let's go," Anika said, picking up her bag, slipping her arm through René's.

They left in silence. René flagged down a taxi. They rode together in the back.

At one point, Anika placed her hand gently on René's thigh.

"It'll be okay. I truly believe that," she said softly.

René heard her. Understood.

But in the quiet of the cab, the thought broke through: What if Feeny doesn't make it? What would he tell the kids?

What would life be, just the three of them?

How does one live without Feeny—the sun around which the rest of them revolved?

He caught himself thinking beyond her—and hated himself for it. Something he'd never allowed before.

But now... death sat between them in the cab. A silent, invisible passenger. Breathing on his neck. Whispering at the edge of his mind.

He felt a jolt. A twitch. Somewhere in his side.

“We’re here. We have to get out, René.”

Anika had felt it—René wasn’t in the cab anymore. His hand in hers, damp and limp, told her he’d traveled far off, into some zone where fear wears the face of love and dread the face of decision. She didn’t need to ask where he’d gone.

While René rummaged through his coat for his wallet, Anika slipped a bill to the taxi driver.

“Keep the change,” she said.

René blinked at her in confusion, as though she’d just intervened in the quiet of a prayer.

“Come on,” she said, nudging him out of the car.

They crossed the street and made their way to the hospital’s gatehouse.

René knew the routine. Line up. Wait. Again. But at least this morning the sky held back its sleet. It was cold, yes, but not wet.

This time, the gatekeeper was someone new—an old-timer, clearly on his second pension, now playing bureaucrat. He took even longer than the last one, copying visitors’ information in the kind of clumsy block letters that seemed drawn with a ruler and a shaking hand.

When it was their turn, he asked for their addresses. Anika gave hers. René slid his German ID through the little round hole in the glass.

The old man squinted at it.

“Where do you live?” he asked sharply. “It says here: No residence in Germany.”

And just like that, René was on the wrong side of the border. As though he were at a checkpoint in Arizona, as though he were one signature away from being turned back into the desert.

“I live in England,” René explained. “Even though my wife’s here, in this clinic.”

“What am I supposed to write down, then? My form doesn’t have a box for ‘homeless’.” He said it half as a joke, half as a warning. “I’ve seen Istanbul, Moscow, towns in Syria no one can pronounce—but a man without a home? That’s new.”

René smiled dryly. “Just write ‘No’ under ‘Street,’ and ‘Residence’ under ‘City.’”

Something about that made the gatekeeper happy. It was a solution. It fit his form. So he wrote, slowly, ceremonially, in slanted uppercase: NO – RESIDENCE– IN GERMANY.

Behind them, the crowd started to growl. Then mutter. Then snarl. They didn’t care why this couple was taking so long—they wanted them out of the line. Looks that had been furtive turned venomous.

“And where are you going? Whom are you visiting?”

René explained: Station 36. His wife. She was seriously ill. He had special permission to arrive before regular visiting hours. The doctor had cleared it—also for family.

The old man picked up the phone. “Station 36?” he repeated.

René insisted.

He dialed once. Nothing. No answer.

He dialed again, deliberately, slowly, entirely ignoring the rising anger behind them. Still no response.

“Same old story,” he grumbled, still holding the phone. “You’re supposed to do your job, but the other side’s off having coffee. And we here? No time even to take a leak.”

He stamped the visitor's pass, hard—a blot of red authority—and slid it across.

Anika accepted it, passed it to René, who showed it to the security guard posted just past the checkpoint. The guard inspected it, waived them through. They were in.

Whether it was relief or resentment, René wasn't sure—but the two of them walked through the inner courtyard with the unmistakable air of the released. Past people in white and green, dashing through the corridors. Past delivery vans and volunteers. Past all the clutter of life and death in a hospital.

René could walk the path to Station 36 blindfolded. Past the little chapel, down the alley, toward the medical library. Halfway down they turned right, toward the wing for gynecological oncology.

There, just before the door, stood the Coffeebike—his favorite post of consolation. The place he'd fetched Feeny her caramel-almond-milk cappuccino on better days.

Not today.

Today, he passed it, Anika's hand in his. Past the people whose eyes seemed to say, We're still here. To the elevator. Third floor. To the locked station door.

He rang the bell.

No answer.

That, too, was familiar.

Eventually someone would open it. A nurse. A porter. Someone rolling laundry bins.

And so it was: a man wheeling out empty water containers opened the door. They entered.

René headed for the nurses' station. A nurse was away. The doctor sat at his screen, eyes on data sheets.

René waited. Didn't interrupt.

Eventually the doctor looked up.

“Mr. Weingarten—good that you're here. The round is finished. We reviewed your wife's data—the labs, the scans, everything from this morning. Strangely, her values dipped during the night but then... they stabilized again by early morning. Prof. Choukri, from Seoul, insisted we increase the broad-spectrum antibiotics before he boarded his flight. He may have been right. That, or... your wife decided she wants to live.”

René couldn't speak.

“It's early,” the doctor continued, “but we think the worst of this crisis may have passed. Of course, she's still septic. All precautions still apply. Only one visitor at a time. Full protective gear. No flowers in the room. And please, keep your stay brief.”

René wished to agree—but the meaning dripped too slowly through the tight mesh of his nerves.

Anika seemed to take in more than he did.

He turned to her, wordless. She hugged him.

They sat down together in the lounge. The bouquet lay before them on a boomerang-shaped Formica table—straight out of the fifties. Anika leaned her head gently against his shoulder. For a moment they didn't move.

Eventually René stood, took a vase from the cabinet, filled it in the restroom, and placed the flowers on the lounge table.

“You go first,” he said. “She’ll be thrilled to see you. And I think... I think it’ll help her. She’s at the edge of a beginning.”

Anika eyes lit up. She wanted to see Feeny. She embraced René before heading toward the room.

“You’re not jealous?” she asked, half-playful.

“Of you? Always,” he smiled. “Now go.”

Anika turned the corner. She wasn’t intimidated by the red-letter sign: SEPSIS.

She read the instructions. Gloved herself. Shoe covers. Hairnet. Gown. Everything blue.

She knocked. No answer.

She opened the heavy door.

One bed untouched. The other—occupied.

Feeny lay motionless, a garden of tubes sprouting from her arms, her nose, even her abdomen. Her eyes were closed. Sleeping, it seemed.

Beside her, monitors blinked with rhythmic urgency. A nurse—or was she a doctor?—sat at her bedside, recording numbers into a datasheet.

When Anika stepped in, the woman looked up.

“I’ll be done in just a moment,” she said gently. “Please, take a seat. She’ll wake up soon. I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you.”

Anika dragged one of the plastic stools from beneath the sink and inched it toward the bed. She knew the protocol—no touching, no leaning in too close—but her gaze had never recognized limits. Her eyes, faithful betrayers of rules, fixed themselves on Feeny. Feeny’s own lids were shut tight, sealed like a final word, and yet Anika could see the rise and fall of her chest, just barely, a whisper of breath that made the entire room pulse with presence.

René had told her how hard it was to sit at Feeny’s side, to keep watch, waiting for the smallest flicker of life, the slightest sign that she was still in there. Now Anika understood. She had always known Feeny as kinetic, radiant, full of purpose and voltage. And yet even now, even here—strapped to machines, tubes piercing her flesh—there was still an aura of grace. Even her stillness had intention. Even the faintest movement of her ribs contained a kind of music.

Anika’s eyes drifted to Feeny’s fingers—pale, slightly swollen, each tip clasped in a sensor. She imagined those fingertips on her own body, moving through her hair, down her back, along her ribs, circling her navel, and then—meeting her own. A whisper of connection across the space between skin and memory.

Then, with the gentlest flutter, Feeny’s lashes lifted. A blink, not even fully awake—a soft caress more than a motion. Anika answered with her own gaze, light and tentative, careful not to break the spell. But it was enough. Feeny’s eyes widened. For a second she seemed to forget her restraints, forget her condition, forget the intravenous entanglement that tethered her to the bed. Her eyes were glowing—lit from within by the sight of a familiar face—and though her body faltered back onto the pillow, her spirit had already leapt forward.

She tried to speak, her lips shifting into a smile, thwarted only by the lingering tube at her throat. Anika rose, not touching her but tracing her fingers over the duvet—just above her legs. Feeny responded, lifting her toes beneath the sheets, pointing them toward Anika in a kind of voiceless wave.

It was the first time in days that Feeny felt awake. Fully. As if she had emerged from some other place, some underworld of silence. The light behind Anika's shoulders—sunlight!—made her want to dance, and for a moment, for one glorious moment, she nearly believed she could.

Then the door opened.

The morning round.

A small team entered, discreet and efficient. Leading them—tired, precise, but with a spark in his eyes—was Prof. Choukri, returned from Seoul. He approached with quiet authority, glanced at the monitors, skimmed the data. He wasn't just scanning machines—he was searching for narrative, for signs of reversal.

Anika made a motion to stand.

"You don't need to leave," he said gently. "I've already spoken with Mr. Weingarten in the hall. Stay. It's good for her to have you here. And you can relay the details."

Choukri examined the screens again, then turned his attention to Feeny. He folded back the blanket slightly, checked her abdomen, pressed her forehead.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Weingarten?"

She couldn't answer aloud, but her eyes spoke. They told him: I'm still here. I'm rising.

"No need to worry," he said. "We're pleased with the progress. The sepsis isn't resolved yet, but you've passed the summit. You're descending on the other side."

Feeny and Anika both stared, almost unable to believe.

"We'll remove the intubation," he continued. "The abdominal drain too. Start tapering the artificial nutrition. Keep the antibiotics as scheduled. And let's have physiotherapy this afternoon—we want you mobile again, soon."

The nurse scribbled down the instructions.

"I'll check in once more before I leave for London this afternoon," Choukri added. "Wanted to see you before I go."

Feeny blinked slowly, deliberately.

"You're going to be fine," Choukri said. And for the first time, Feeny smiled.

Anika could barely take it in—the shift was staggering. From lifeless to luminous, in less than an hour.

Once the team exited, the staff moved quickly. Tubes were pulled, monitors muted, needles removed. Feeny sat up slowly, unsteady, reborn. She looked straight at Anika, and this time, she opened her mouth.

"Sorry... Anika... so good... you're here," she whispered, voice cracked and ghostlike.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you like this," Anika said, her voice catching.

"I'm still... a bit dazed..."

"No wonder."

"I feel like I've slept... for days... dreamt... that it was all over."

"And was it?"

"They talk about the light at the end. But I didn't see light. No. I saw... nothing. But it wasn't scary. It was like... being found, even as I got lost. No light. No terror. Just... something."

"But no colors?" Anika asked, teasing gently.

“No... not then. Colors are for life. What I saw was the end of color. But warm. Like a black wool blanket. No pressure, just... room.”

“No fear?”

“I feared the light more, honestly. The light seemed like exposure. The dark—it was like a womb. A return. It invited me. It didn’t push me.”

“And coming back?”

“The dark slipped into light as if... as if the dark had always been the light. That light is only the surface. A shell. The real is under it. I almost resented the return.”

“Why?”

“Because in that dark, I was finally just me. Alone, true, full. Now, I’m adjusting again. To light, to walls, to contrast. Your face. This room. How did you get here?”

“René called. He said things weren’t looking good.”

“I’ve had a hard stretch. René and the kids too. But... it feels like I’m climbing again.”

“He brought you flowers. A burst of color—he couldn’t bring them in, but they’re just outside.”

Feeny’s lips curled. Not wide, not strong. But real.

“I saw them... in my dark. I think he brought them to me there.”

“Once you’re mobile, you’ll see them in the lounge. René’s there now. We’ve been trading visits.”

“Stay a bit longer,” Feeny said. “Your voice—touches me. Even without touch.”

“Distance never scared me,” Anika replied. “People think it’s cold, but for me, it’s always been sacred. I couldn’t have been with Bruno if I didn’t know he’d never ask too much. His vows, his celibacy—it kept us both safe. It made love livable.”

“Say that again,” Feeny said. “Please. That hit me... somewhere deep. Say it again.”

Anika didn’t repeat it. Instead, she stood, walked—against all protocols—toward the bed. She touched her own covered mouth, and gently, with a blue-gloved hand, touched Feeny’s lips.

Feeny reacted as if shocked—eyes wide, body trembling, electricity rippling through her. Her spirit had come back hours before, but now her body followed. Legs moved. Muscles answered.

“You’re my anchor,” Anika said. “Don’t drift too far. Don’t make me lose you.”

Feeny shook her head slowly.

“The dark isn’t a loss. It’s not depth. It’s fullness. And the darker it gets, the more there is of you.”

Anika worried. “Don’t push yourself.”

Again, Feeny shook her head.

“I’m not made of wax. Tell René—it’s time. I want him here.”

“I’ll go. It’s time he had you again.”

They exchanged a long look—one that said more than touch ever could. Then Anika left.

René saw it in her the moment she rounded the corner. The lightness. The steadiness.

“She’s awake,” Anika said. “She’s waiting. And René—it’s real. She’s back.”

“Are you sure?” he whispered, still afraid to hope.

“Yes. It wasn’t easy, the silence, the waiting. You do it all the time—I don’t know how. Sitting next to her, no sound but the machines. But then, she moved.”

René listened, opened up slowly.

“I’ve found in silence,” he said, “a kind of intimacy I never knew before. Not the old kind. Something starker. Just presence. Just her. And I’m pierced by it. I’m undone by her gaze.”

He paused.

“It’s like being in front of that Kapoor installation—St. Sebastian. But this time, I am Sebastian. And she’s the arrow.”

René had come to understand in these years with Feeny, intimacy was least of all a physical act. That too, yes—it could be—but that was not its essence. More truly, it was an exchange of souls, or to put it more simply, of eyes. Often it was no act at all, but presence. Being. And when the physical joined in—the hands, the skin, the internal warmth—they were only additions, echoes of something more elusive. The real thing happened where nothing seemed to happen, where there was nothing to describe, where even language fell silent. Like a melody on a guitar—where exactly does the sound come from? The plucking? The striking of the strings? The hollow body of the instrument? Or simply the harmony between the self and the sound, wherever it arises, wherever it disappears into silence.

Feeny. And always, Not-Feeny. The proximity had always contained her distance. To be with her had always meant, in some way, to let her go. That, René knew, was the intimacy they had practiced long before her diagnosis. And it remained the hardest practice of all.

“René,” Anika said softly, “for all the distance—you should go to her. Give her a little of your closeness. She loves you so.”

“The doctors came while I was with her,” she continued. “Prof. Choukri...”

“I know,” René interrupted. “He came straight from Korea. That man is tireless. It’s beyond belief.”

René stood before Feeny’s door. The large red SEPSIS warning still in place. The door sealed sound. He opened it cautiously, half expecting to interrupt nurses or technicians mid-procedure. But the room was empty.

The second bed, the one opposite Feeny’s, stood made and unused, the cabinet open and sterile. Feeny’s side—her cupboard closed, the signs of an inhabited space—was missing one thing: Feeny. The bed was gone. The tubes, the stands, the screens: off. Silent.

He stood.

Stared.

Disoriented.

Where yesterday she had been, there was now nothing.

Nothing.

He didn’t dare reach for a chair, unsure if one was his to take. Unsure if the void he faced was temporary—or final. He remained frozen in the middle of the room, between one bed never occupied and another, quietly removed. No hum, no light, no beeping. Not even the little things were left behind. No charger. No tissues, which she loved for their soft gentleness. No phone. Not even her laptop.

Gone.

He couldn't bring himself to return to Anika, still waiting in the lounge. What would he say? That Feeny was gone? Would he risk transferring his panic to her? Should he look for a nurse? The head doctor? But what would they tell him—confirm what he already feared?

He thought of the children. On their way. Maybe just minutes away. What would he say when they arrived?

He tried to push the thoughts back. No. Not yet. Not like this.

But he stood in the dead center of a room that had just become the most silent space of his life. Upright, yes—but unmoored.

Then the door opened.

A hospital attendant stepped in. "Should I bring in breakfast?" she asked.

René shrugged. "I... I don't know where my wife is."

"Possibly taken for tests," she said, almost offhandedly.

And yet, the sentence hit him like a defibrillator. He inhaled, suddenly aware of his own breath. Naturally. Tests. Morning rounds. Routine.

"You could ask the ward nurse," she added, with a tone both gentle and pragmatic. "This time of day, many patients are out for their regular exams."

René felt relieved—not at the explanation, but at the casual tone in which it had been offered. Not a consolation, but a possibility. He thanked her, stepped out, stripped off the blue protective clothing, and approached the nurses' station.

Empty.

A young woman—no more than sixteen, though legally she had to be eighteen, otherwise she'd be on the children's ward—walked by. Bald. Her lashes gone. He understood why she was on this ward.

A moment later, transporters passed, wheeling another patient—an older woman, hollow-eyed, unspeaking. They moved quickly, efficiently, trying to buoy her with friendly chatter. The corridor buzzed with silent, mortal urgency.

Then the nurse returned.

"Mr. Weingarten? You're looking for your wife?"

He agreed, was hesitant.

"No need to worry. Quite the opposite, actually. She's gone for further checks. A doctor will speak to you once she's back. Best to wait in the lounge. And... thank you for the spring flowers. A few patients have already commented—without knowing for whom they were meant."

It wasn't what she said that calmed him—it was how she said it. Her voice didn't promise, it invited. To stay. To remain here, in this moment, not in the night, not in the fear. To let the day be what it would be.

Only minutes earlier, he'd felt like flinging himself out the window to join Feeny—wherever she was. But now, there was a breath of stillness, just enough to keep him grounded. Not yet hope. But not despair, either. And if Feeny was fighting, so would he. For her. For the children. For all they still were.

The nurse saw how lost he was. She came around the desk, took him gently by the arm, and walked him to the lounge where Anika was waiting.

"Please reassure your friend," she told Anika. "You both have nothing to fear. The doctors told me the patient is improving. They just want to be certain. These are her discharge

tests. Prof. Choukri, before he left this morning, asked us to prepare you—there’s a chance she might spend the weekend outside the hospital. But the attending doctor will explain everything when the tests are done.”

René collapsed beside Anika on the couch. He wished he had her steadiness. She’d been alarmed at first when she saw his face—but calmed almost instantly upon hearing the nurse’s words. She believed them.

René wasn’t so sure. His nerves were raw. Too many times he’d hoped, only to be plunged deeper into despair. Hope had become a trap. But he sat. He stayed. He waited.

Not long after, the attending physician entered the lounge. He looked around.

“Mr. Weingarten?” he said. “Is it alright if I speak in front of your friend?”

René agreed.

“There’s good news. Your wife’s condition turned overnight. We were dealing with a severe case of sepsis. At one point, we were at the limits of what medicine could offer. But the broad-spectrum antibiotics ordered by Prof. Choukri—at the highest dose—seem to have taken effect. Though things looked grim, her body rallied. Her organs are stable. Blood values are back to near normal. She’s pulled through. We expect, if the trend continues, to discharge her by the weekend.”

René closed his eyes.

The room stilled.

He didn’t know if he was breathing. But the world was, again.

René turned toward Anika, as if her face might help him interpret what his ears, still fogged by dread, had only half taken in. Had he heard correctly? The room, the words, the moment—they felt unreal. But then there it was, unmistakably: her smile. Not merely polite, not forced, but the genuine thing—creased lightly into the corners of her mouth, resting softly on her lips. Her pupils, dark and focused, were directed at him with the calm clarity of someone who had just looked into the abyss and found it, surprisingly, receding.

The doctor, already half turned toward the hallway, added matter-of-factly—without solemnity, but not without warmth: “You’ll still need to wait a little. Your wife is still out—ultrasound, then another MRI. We’ll double-check her bloodwork. But from what I’ve heard from the team, she’ll be back in her room within the next hour. As for the potential weekend discharge, Prof. Choukri has asked that you stay nearby—remain in Berlin, just in case. There’ll be a follow-up stay—brief—early next week, likely Monday to Tuesday. But for now—why not invite your companion for a coffee? Go to the cafeteria, take a break. I’ll call you on your mobile when your wife’s back.”

It was as though René had just been shaken awake from a dream that had outlived the night, a long nightmare that had settled into his bloodstream. He straightened himself, rubbed his hand across the back of his neck like a man returning to his body, and said: “Yes. Yes, that’s a good idea.” He turned to Anika. “Do you feel like a coffee? Or something sweet?”

She looked up, her eyes still luminous from the news. “Gladly. Maybe even a glass of champagne—why not?” she said, the curve of her voice almost mischievous, even though the clock had not yet reached noon.

She stood, reached for her coat, and without hesitation, slipped her arm through his. The gesture—quiet, deliberate, familiar—was not just companionship, but an affirmation of their shared witness. They had stood at the edge. And for now, at least, had stepped back.

Together.

On the Ward

The cafeteria in the gynecological oncology wing was not, by any measure, a place built for comfort. Closer in character to a corporate canteen than a reprieve for the unwell, it served its function beneath flickering monitors pumping out stale advertisements. A long glass counter ran its length, its contents uninspired but warm, and the reward—if one could call it that—was payment at a cashier's station manned with quiet fatigue. But it wasn't a hospital room. That already made it a kind of haven. Sunlight flooded in through oversized windows. Through them, one could make out a courtyard planted with ornamental trees, the illusion of a garden hemmed in by concrete. On the other side, distant corridors blurred into obscurity. At the tables: doctors, nurses, techs in uniform, patients and visitors, and in one corner, a trio of construction workers taking their break, still in their dust-flecked gear.

Anika and René found a table, their trays before them, just as Anika's phone vibrated. Bruno. Asking about Feeny. But the conversation veered, something else was on the line. Anika stood, walked a few paces into the hallway, her voice lowered but her tone sharpened.

"Was that your lawyer's advice? Even with what's been said—are you sure you carry no blame in this?" Her voice flared and clipped. "We'll talk tonight. I'm still at the hospital. This hallway isn't a confessional." She ended the call.

Returning to the table, her steps taut, René could tell immediately—something had changed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

She shook her head slightly. "It's Bruno. You know what he brought up in Malta... We haven't had the bandwidth. And now isn't the moment—not with everything happening, not with the kids, not with Feeny... We'll talk. Just not yet."

René understood. He could have taken it on. Wanted to. But Anika had seen it—how near the edge he was. Any more would've tipped him over.

"I promise you—we'll talk. When Feeny's out of the woods. I told Bruno I'd call him tonight from the hotel, when it's quiet."

René understood and, for a moment, focused on the coffee he'd brought for them both. But the stillness lasted only seconds—suddenly, impossibly, Prof. Choukri stood at their table.

"Forgive the intrusion—am I interrupting coffee?"

René looked up, incredulous. "Weren't you en route to London?"

"I should be. But I was called back into surgery. My secretary pushed the flight. I've got a few more signatures to give, then I'll be off. I passed through and saw you. Just wanted to say—I've seen the morning results. Remarkable. Your wife wants out, and she can have it. We're preparing everything. If the night goes smoothly, you can pick her up in the morning. Spend the weekend together. I'd still like her to return for a check-up Monday or Tuesday. But you'll have her home, at least temporarily."

The words were balm. Early Christmas. Or Easter coming late.

"And you?" he asked Anika.

"I'm a good friend of Feeny's."

"How do you know one another?"

"I've been her client for years."

"Fashion?"

"Not exactly—but we can talk about that another time."

Choukri gave a curious, almost playful smile, as if he guessed. Surely, he knew. "And what's your field?"

"I'm an art historian. Right now I'm working on exile artists—women who fled the Third Reich, many through England."

"Fascinating. Would you speak to our Guild for Medicine and Art? It's an interdisciplinary group—physicians, researchers, artists, scholars. These bridges matter. Culture needs them. Medicine needs them. So do our fractured societies."

"I'd be honored," said Anika, unsure how her exile studies had landed her here, but willing.

"Good. René, would you connect us?"

René agreed. The professor turned to leave—but then paused. "Don't forget to see the ward doctor—he'll walk you through the details." And then he was gone, climbing the stairs toward his office.

"Wow," Anika said. "What a presence. What conviction."

"He gets breathless sometimes, frustrated even—but he listens. That's what sets him apart—he listens when it counts."

"Want something to eat?" René offered.

She shook her head. "I'm full on good news."

"Let's find the ward doctor, then. Will you come?"

"Where else should I go."

The doctor took his time. Explained. Walked them through every form, every caution. Gave René his personal number. Any temperature spike, even mild—he wanted to know. This wasn't discharge; it was parole. A cautious release. Feeny's case had too few precedents. There were no standard protocols. Every step forward was experiment and faith.

As they parted, he said simply: "Call me. Any time."

They left. "Time to celebrate," said Anika. René smiled and went to Feeny's room.

The "Sepsis" sign was gone. They could enter together. No masks. No gloves. No blue gowns. He knocked. Opened. Stared.

There she was, sitting upright, a book in her lap. No tubes. Only a small IV port remained. She looked up at them—radiant.

"Surprised?" she grinned.

"You give me every reason," René said, stepping forward. He kissed her.

"Was it hard for you," Feeny whispered, "being so close without touching me?"

He kissed her again. That said enough.

She must have sensed his darker thoughts.

"Don't worry. I think I've made it. We're back. Even from that horrible distance. We're back."

"Yes," René murmured, half to himself. "Forgive me if it takes me a little while to catch up."

She touched his cheek. "The only thing that matters is you're here. You, the kids. And Anika—who came all this way for me."

“Absolutely,” Feeny said, turning to Anika.

“The kids are on their way,” René added. “Yesterday, Choukri said they should come.”

“It was that bad?”

“I think they were deeply worried.”

Feeny answered thoughtfully: “When it’s bad, I don’t even know it’s bad. I shrink down—to what I see, hear, taste. Nothing more. Honestly—I was deep in. In the tunnel. I wasn’t sure I’d come back.”

Then, with a half-smile: “And I’m sorry. I should’ve listened to you sooner. I didn’t want to return to a hospital bed. To feel like a patient again.”

“I know,” René said. “That’s why I didn’t push. But I’m grateful you made the choice yourself.”

“Will they really let me out this weekend?”

“Yes. We just spoke with Choukri and the doctor. If tonight goes well—you’re out tomorrow. Just a check-in Monday or Tuesday.”

“That’s fine,” Feeny said. There was joy in her eyes, but also the faintest disappointment. She had hoped to leave the hospital not just in body but in story.

“The kids are nearly here. I’ll look for a place for us, not far from the clinic.”

“You’ll find something. You always do.”

René stepped out. Anika remained.

On his phone, a message from the kids: We’re on our way from the station.

He wrote back quickly: No need to worry. Just heard—Mama can spend the weekend with us outside the hospital.

Alina squealed in reply. Jan responded more calmly—but René could read his son’s joy between the lines. Jan was like him: cautious with hope. Alina, more like Feeny, celebrated every upward turn like a victory.

Both kids were clearly so electrified that René’s phone—usually kept on silent—began to buzz insistently. Alina’s voice burst out of the speaker like an unscheduled parade. She was beyond herself, ecstatic. The idea that they would actually be allowed to pick up their mother from the hospital the next day was more than her system could contain.

Jan took over—calmer, or maybe just less performative—and asked the practical question: Did Dad already find a place to stay?

Not yet, said René. “But how about this,” he added, improvising as he often did in the past twenty-four hours, “you’re on the bus from the station, right? Use that time. Browse a few listings. Pick something you like. Then we’ll look together when you’re here.”

“Will do,” Jan replied, and in the background, René could hear Alina’s joy—a laugh that didn’t end, a sound so high it might’ve splintered glass.

On the bus toward the university clinic, both kids, Alina and Jan, had their faces pressed to their respective phones. Alina searched with her usual flare for the eccentric: places with punch, edge, a touch of the artistic or at least something non-ordinary. Jan, ever the pragmatist, looked for breakfast. Or failing that—a bakery. And a butcher. A place that smelled of yeast and meat and routine. Both wanted wellness. A sauna if possible. Something vaguely Scandinavian.

It didn’t take long before links to potential apartments started to arrive via WhatsApp—like suggestions for another kind of recovery.

When René stepped back into Feeny's hospital room, it was like walking into a scene from a different play entirely. Anika was giving Feeny a back massage—nothing dramatic, but still, it was Feeny lying on her stomach, and comfortably, which, only days ago, would have been unthinkable. Her abdomen had been too swollen, too tender. And now? Now she was purring with delight.

Anika's hands moved with familiarity—as if Feeny had once taught her how to touch, how to read skin. As if healing, too, were something women passed between themselves, like stories, like scarves.

René smiled. Sat. The second bed was still unoccupied. The “Sepsis” sign was gone. Even the silence had shifted.

“Anika,” he said, half playfully, “can I convince you to stay with us this weekend?”

He turned to Feeny. “What do you think?”

“It would be a gift,” Feeny said without hesitation. “You’d get even closer to the kids. And if I’m tired—if I can’t keep up—you’d be there to keep the tempo going.”

“I don’t want to impose,” Anika replied, almost shy. “Bruno wouldn’t mind if I stayed longer—but I’m sure he wouldn’t be sad to see me come home either.”

“How lovely,” Feeny smiled, “that you don’t want to leave him alone.”

“No, no—you misunderstand,” said Anika, catching herself. “He supported me coming here completely. When I told him I was heading to Berlin, he said: ‘Stay as long as you need.’”

“Then,” said Feeny, “unless I relapse, let’s play family this weekend. One big, loving, dysfunctional, wonderful family.”

There was something in Feeny’s voice again—an ownership of it, a sharpness of self. The woman René knew was back, if not fully, then in flashes: her decisiveness, her mischief.

“How about a round of cards?” she proposed.

René and Anika exchanged glances. Was she serious?

Feeny adjusted her bed with practiced fingers, swung her legs over the edge, clutched the back of her hospital gown together with one hand, and shuffled—wobbly but determined—to the little table by the window.

“In the top drawer of my case,” she said to René, “there’s a deck of cards. Front pocket.”

René retrieved them.

“Only good thing about this crowd,” Feeny said, dealing with flair, “is that we all know how to play.”

Nothing worse, she added, than lying in bed with no one to play with, no thoughts to chase. “Time,” she mused, “is the most excruciating part of illness. Not pain. Not nausea. Time. And what redeems it? Being together. Playing.”

“Block and pencil should be with the cards,” she added. “Anika, could you grab them?”

Feeny scribbled the names. “Points or money?” she asked. “Let’s make it fun. Loser tosses coins into the kitty. We’ll blow it together once I’m sprung.”

She pointed toward an empty perfume box with a red poppy printed on its side.

Anika brought it.

“René, could you get some coins from my wallet?” she asked.

Before long, the game was on. Hospital walls vanished. They were somewhere else—somewhere warmer.

So deep were they in the game that no one heard the knock. The door creaked open and there they were: Alina and Jan. They had timed their arrival perfectly, agreeing to meet at the station and come to the hospital as a team. They already had an apartment picked—one they wanted their parents to approve before booking.

They stood there, in the threshold, stunned.

There was their mother, not barely conscious, not gaunt or unconscious or fading—but playing a card games. Commanding it, in fact. She gestured, she laughed, she teased. The image shattered whatever had been bracing their nerves.

Feeny rose—less gracefully than before, but with open arms.

“Not too tight,” she warned.

Jan waited his turn. When they embraced, it was unhurried, full-bodied, unspoken.

Alina had already slipped to the table, greeting Anika, hugging her Dad.

“You got here fast,” said René.

“Fast and a lot less anxious than when I boarded the train,” said Alina, sharp as ever.

“You wild one,” René said, nudging her.

Jan and Feeny returned to the table, arms linked.

“Let’s put the cards away,” said Feeny. “Let’s talk. Tell me everything. School, the trip—go on.”

And they did. About their days. The change in plans. The understanding teachers. Alina, who’d had to cancel a solo piano piece at her school’s open day—an event she’d been rehearsing for—and how her teacher had helped find a replacement. Jan’s plans, too, had shifted, though less dramatically.

Feeny listened with the kind of gratitude only someone recently pulled from the brink can feel. The world—its mess, its detail, its rhythm—was returning to her. Sepsis had almost stolen her organs, yes. But it had stolen her place, her role. And now, here it was: restored.

Another knock. A rolling meal cart. The unspoken signal: visiting hours over. The day ending.

“It’s dinnertime,” Feeny said. “And truth be told, the card game wore me out. Thank you—for everything. And sorry if I fade too fast. I’m not quite myself yet.”

“Not yourself?” Anika said. “You’re astonishing.”

The kids agreed. René too. The contrast with their expectations was enormous. Hope made flesh.

“I’m glad,” René said. “Sleep well. Tomorrow we’ll text. Figure out the next steps.”

Feeny gave him a warm look.

René kissed her. The children hugged her. Anika leaned down, whispered: “Thank you—for letting me witness this day.”

The goodbyes were like New Year’s wishes. A new beginning had shown its face.

Back at the hotel, René arranged the apartment—with the extra room for the kids. They ordered pizzas, planned a movie. No grown-ups.

René kissed them both goodnight. Thanked them.

“Of course, Dad,” Jan said. “We came because we had to.”

“Good thing it wasn’t worse.”

“Better this way,” Jan said, ever the realist.

Alina’s mind was still in the hospital. Still with Mum.

“Why does she have to be alone now?” Alina asked, her voice somewhere between demand and plea.

“The doctors want to keep observing her overnight,” René explained with the caution of someone trying not to puncture a bubble too soon.

“And she needs rest,” Anika added. “We were a full squad today. That takes a toll—your mum needs a little space to catch her breath. But if she keeps getting stronger, she’ll be with us this weekend. All of us.”

Alina glanced sideways at Anika, still feeling her out. There was something about her—too polished, too composed? Or maybe too close already to her mother. But whatever the hesitation, there was also a growing hunch: this woman mattered. Not just a visitor, not just another adult hovering around the periphery of Feeny’s illness. Someone Mum liked. Maybe even needed.

Jan, meanwhile, had drifted into practical retreat. He was already flipping through movie options on his phone, not just out of habit but to signal: the evening now belongs to you two. He and Alina would bow out, give the grown-ups their time. Let them talk, decompress. Grieve in that special way grown-ups did—with tired jokes and long silences and drinks that didn’t help but still had to be poured.

And anyway, it wasn’t every night he got pizza in bed—real pizza, not that gelatinous nonsense from the boarding school kitchen. And free. Dad-paid pizza. Bliss.

Alina hesitated. She wanted more time with Anika—wanted to see how she laughed, how she sat, how she looked when no one was watching. What kind of person was this, who got to sit at Mum’s bedside? Mum, who lately had hoarded her energy like a dying star, letting almost no one in. “Friendship,” Mum once told her, “isn’t something you keep for yourself. It’s something you give. And I’m too tired to give right now.”

So what did it mean that Anika was here?

“Come on,” Jan said. “The pizzas are en route. We should be under the covers before they ring.”

Alina gave in. “Okay. You’re right.” Even if she still had questions.

They disappeared up the stairs.

Down at the bar, Anika settled onto a high stool. René took the one next to her. He looked at her, gently. A long look, the kind you can only give someone who knows you without needing a full sentence. Then, slowly, he let his head rest on her shoulder. Neither of them spoke.

The bartender, reading the room like a seasoned diplomat, approached with a grace that barely brushed the air. “Would you like something to drink?”

Neither replied. Anika merely raised her chin—a silent promise she would answer, soon—but she didn’t move. She didn’t want to disrupt the weight René had given her, the head on her shoulder that now held more than fatigue. It held days of fear, and doubt, and watching a woman he loved disappear into tubes and charts and pain, only to reappear, flickering, like a figure stepping back from the edge of a cliff.

She felt the heat of him on her skin. Or was it moisture? His sweat or his tears, or both, seeping into her blouse. She put her arm around him and held him close, softly, like you hold someone who's come a long way.

And she thought: How much can a person bear—not just once, but for years? When does strength become numbness?

She had not lived through Feeny's illness like René had. She had not sat day after day beside the monitors, feeling her breath sync to the beeping of machines. But she had felt it. The echo of it, at night, in dreams, when she woke beside Bruno and found no comfort there. She had cried for Feeny without warning, on trains, in cafés, in her bathtub, as if her own body kept remembering something her mind had tried to forget.

Even now, Feeny hovered before her eyes—shadowed, slow-moving, dragging herself back toward her bed, past the cart of untouched food, one hand on the frame, the other clutching her gown. She could see the pain ripple through her back as she pulled herself up, inch by inch, until she collapsed onto the mattress like a swimmer out of breath. The image played over and over—like a vision from a life she hadn't lived but somehow inherited.

Then the nurses. Always the nurses.

The dark turned to grey, the grey to fluorescent light. The sound of distant heels on the linoleum. The shift-change ballet. First the night nurse, bone-tired but smiling. Blood pressure cuff in one hand, clipboard in the other. "How was your night?"

"Okay," Feeny would say. "So far okay."

The tube. The tunnel. A narrowing shaft of nothing, tighter and tighter, colder and darker, like being swallowed by the very absence of self. "Okay," she'd say again, even if it wasn't.

The morning nurse. The charts. The lists. No transitions, just a blur of time sliced into protocols.

And then—the voice. A voice that broke through all that.

"I'm happy for you," said the nurse. "You're going home. At least for the weekend."

Feeny blinked. Still coming up from the fog. "Really?"

"Yes," said the nurse, then hesitated, "Though I have to admit... I'll miss you."

A strange thing to say. Tender. Too honest for a hospital corridor.

"You're one of the patients that gives me energy," the nurse added. "You remind me why I do this. You have something in you—it's hard to name. But I walk out of this room a little less tired than when I walk in. And that's not nothing."

Feeny looked at her. First surprised. Then moved. Then, curiously, like a fellow professional.

"Come closer," Feeny said. "Let me say something too."

The nurse leaned in.

"You may think you're just doing your job," Feeny said. "But you're not. You're doing something holy. I'm surrounded by machines, numbers, cold facts. And then you come in. With a smile, yes. But also with hands that hold, eyes that see. Don't discount what that means. Some mornings, I didn't have anything left—not even for myself. And then you'd arrive, and I'd feel like maybe I wasn't vanishing."

The nurse listened, her eyes beginning to well.

"I've been afraid," Feeny went on. "Afraid I was just more work for you. Another drain on an exhausted system. But you—you never made me feel that way."

"That's why I chose this path," the nurse said softly. "Not because I couldn't be a doctor. I wanted to be one. But life..." she paused, "...my mother had ovarian cancer. We didn't get many years."

Feeny lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I watched her die. And I watched the nurses who helped her live until she couldn't anymore. I wanted to be like them. I still do. That's why I'm here."

Feeny reached for her hand. "And I'm grateful you are."

"I'll prepare the discharge forms," said the nurse, gently clearing her throat. "The doctor will sign them. And then you're free."

Feeny turned towards the window, slowly. Free.

Almost.

On the Move

"Yes, I'd like a Prosecco—and please bring two," Anika said to the bartender, turning to René.

"It's as if you read my mind," he replied. "If Feeny had anything to offer us tonight, it would have been an invitation to Prosecco."

The next morning, René was awakened by the beep of his phone. Feeny had written that the attending physician had already signed off on her weekend discharge; she was free to leave the hospital. René forwarded the message to Anika and the children, suggesting they skip breakfast and pick up Feeny from the hospital to go brunch together. He suspected this might be optimistic—between the doctor's note and the actual discharge papers, there would likely be a delay—but he was so stirred by Feeny's message that he couldn't wait to get her out of the clinic.

The children's and Anika's reactions were equally enthusiastic. Just minutes later, they all met in the hallway. René had already ordered a taxi, which was waiting at the hotel entrance. Soon they arrived at the hospital entrance. At this hour, there was no line at the porter's booth, and René quickly convinced the sleep-deprived porter that the larger family group was there solely to pick up his wife from the clinic. The porter didn't even bother to fill out any papers or call the ward; there were no other security personnel present to check. They smoothly passed the first hurdle and made their way to the gynecological oncology wing. Via the elevator—large enough to transport a football team, designed for at least two mobile beds—they reached the ward, and there, in front of the glass door, Feeny was already waiting, dressed for the outdoors with her rolling suitcase in hand. René could hardly believe that she not only held the doctor's letter triumphantly in her hand but also her discharge papers.

Proudly waving them, she embraced the children, Anika, and René, exclaiming, "Come on, let's go! Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, not yet, we set off to see you right away," fibbed Anika.

Jan chimed in, "I'm so hungry!"

"Well then, let's find a nice café where you can get some nourishment," said Feeny.

Alina added, “I was already looking out for an organic café on the way—there are bowls there, you’ll love it,” she said to Feeny.

Feeny hugged her, took her by the hand, and René ordered another taxi to take them to the suggested café.

“I can hardly believe it,” said Feeny. “Last night, after you left, I felt completely drained, and the fever seemed to have returned. But the night nurse took my temperature several times, checked my blood pressure, and later the attending physician confirmed again, as he passed through the room, that I was still on the road to recovery.”

“After all you’ve been through these past weeks, I’m not surprised,” said René.

“I’m so glad you’re feeling better, Mamutschka,” said Jan.

In the café, the menu made its rounds, and Alina was proud when she saw the superfood bowls.

“Can we share one?” she asked Feeny.

“Absolutely—and if we’re still hungry, we’ll order something sweet afterward.”

“What a great idea,” said Anika, turning to Jan. “Would you share one with me too?”

Jan was a bit shy, but René stepped in, “Sure, I can have something heartier with Jan later if he’s still hungry.”

Jan was satisfied, as he could order white sausages with a large butter pretzel and hoped to share half of another dish with his father afterward.

“What do you have planned for the rest of the day?” asked Feeny.

“We wanted to see how you’re feeling and let that guide us. But first, we thought we’d go to the hotel so you can drop off your things in the room, and then we can decide together how to spend the rest of the day.”

Everyone agreed.

“Please let me take care of the bill,” said Anika. “I’m so happy to be with you as a family.”

Feeny spoke up and thanked Anika, “Yesterday, when I woke up and saw you standing before me, I thought I was dreaming,” she said. “And then René and you kids—what a dream!”

They strolled through the courtyard gate of the hotel, where they had rented the family apartment for the weekend, spacious enough for the children and Anika as well. René helped Feeny check in while the children explored the courtyard. Despite it being winter, the sun shone over Berlin, and whether windy or calm, it felt more like an early spring than the beginning of winter. After René and Feeny returned from the room, the question arose: what to do with their time together now?

Jan had an idea. “Look, there are rental bikes in the courtyard—the sun is shining, shouldn’t we take a little bike tour through the city?”

“Great idea,” said Feeny. “I’m not sure if my legs will cooperate—at the hospital, it turned out that the pain in my right leg was due to a vein narrowing, which might be related to my illness. But honestly, I’ve felt little of that since I started walking up and down the room and hallway yesterday. I even did a few exercises on the ergometer at the end of the hospital corridor—and felt better doing that than lying in bed.”

Jan was excited; Alina was less enthusiastic, as she wasn’t much of a cyclist, but for Mum’s sake, she’d get on the bike. René wasn’t an avid cyclist either—Jan was—while Feeny

had been accustomed to cycling in her hometown since she was a young girl. Anika didn't seem averse to cycling either; her brothers had taught her early on. On one such tour, she had even lost one of her front teeth and endured her brothers' mockery. She wasn't thrilled about the idea of cycling in winter, but she sensed that Feeny wanted to test herself and hoped to alleviate her leg stenosis with the pedaling motion.

Approving glances were exchanged, and René asked if they could rent five bikes for the afternoon.

At the hotel reception, they handed him the keys and gave a brief introduction to the bikes. Billing would be by the hour, and the price was more than reasonable. And so the journey began. Jan had quickly put together a small tour—a bike route along the Spree, then to Bernauer Straße, because he wanted to see the remaining section of the Berlin Wall. It was astonishing how many people were out and about along the Spree this December afternoon—on foot, by bike, on scooters. The most astonishing thing, however, was that Feeny was cycling along with the others, as if she had been training on the ergometer all week for this tour. She loved riding ahead with Jan beside her, as far as the occasionally narrow path along the Spree allowed. Anika followed Feeny, and René and Alina brought up the rear. Halfway through the route Jan had planned, they stopped. René spread out the picnic blanket he had borrowed from the hotel along with the bikes on a wide staircase leading down to the Spree. They sat down; they had no snacks, but they passed around the water bottles attached to the bikes, which Jan had filled before departure.

"I wouldn't have believed this would be so much fun," Feeny said to the group.

"And to see you so fit," added René.

"Yes, Mamuschka, you impress me," said Jan, and Alina agreed.

"Now, don't exaggerate," Feeny interjected. "I'm trying to keep up with you, but the fresh air and movement, especially your company, help me. The past few days were pretty tough; I lay alone in the room and saw little besides the ceiling and walls. Because of the sepsis, I didn't even have a roommate. Sure, I had peace and could sleep through the night—no snoring at night, no visitors during the day—but there were lonely moments, lying in bed and not being able to look beyond the bed rail. I wasn't even allowed to leave the room, or rather, I couldn't with all my tubes."

Despite her bond with René, she was certain of herself as a woman, even as a businesswoman. And yet, she found herself more and more frequently having imaginary conversations with him—what would he have done, what would he say now, in this or that decision? Not that she had ever really consulted him much; her independence was not a performance. It wasn't that he made her feel he had all the answers. He rarely offered unsolicited advice on her company, never presumed to steer it for her. She knew from talks with Talon, his business partner, that René's strength lay in how he accompanied entrepreneurs rather than lectured them. His maxim: better to invest wrongly than to be proven right by advice. He was the opposite of a teacher. Still, there were moments she wished he had taken more interest in her work. He read pitch decks from strangers, gauged their odds, spotted their blind spots, discussed strategies with young entrepreneurs as if they were equals. Always as a peer, never with condescension. And yet, sometimes, a little condescension might have helped. A little assertiveness, even. When it would have saved her

time, money. But another of his mottos: experience can't be taught, only lived. And he wasn't wrong. But that didn't make it less bitter.

Had she pushed herself too far? Was that why she was ill? The business, the kids, the man—her life had not been a restful one. Was she even allowed to think such things? And round she went in her own loop, then turned again to his ear: "Hey, you're still asleep," she whispered. His head turned slightly toward her. She dared to reach for him the way she rarely did, the way she had taught others in her studio to do—professionally, gently, deliberately.

Predictably, he woke as if bitten by a tarantula. They hadn't had sex in months, maybe years. She couldn't even remember the last time. She couldn't. It wasn't that she was exhausted, drained by chemo, or sick of herself. It was the objectification. The clinical procedures. The thousandfold magnification of her body. Her womanhood, that private agency, was something the illness had slowly robbed her of. She was prodded, imaged, drained, diagnosed—her sense of time, her sense of space commandeered by others.

But these past days had brought her back to herself. She knew now how close she had been to the edge—not standing above it, but bending toward it, pulled from below. There, every step had demanded a decision: right or left, up or down. She had stopped choosing. She had learned to simply step, no longer caring about the sides, the options, the illusions of direction. Every step became her own, not borrowed, not balanced against anything. The less she looked outward, the more she saw her feet. Not in a mirror. In herself. Not from above, but through her own body. She didn't feel herself from outside but from the very limbs she walked on. Her skin, her toes. Even the daily injections—those miserable blood thinners—became markers of being alive. Still unpleasant. But still felt. Still hers.

She craved self-perception. And René, without her saying a word, had felt her awakening.

She touched him, slowly. His thighs, the space between. She curled toward him. She warmed his skin. She kissed his earlobes. Her message was unmistakable: I'm alive. I'm here. I love you.

He responded. Surprised by her. Moved. Mistrustful of the moment. He had long given up hope of being that close to her again. He feared the crash that often followed. He had approached her too often, only to be met with silence, avoidance, even resentment. Not because they were no longer who they once were. But because the cancer had twisted them both. Her more visibly. Him, more quietly. It had disfigured the intimacy.

But not today.

Today, she shone.

Her eyes sparkled with every movement. Her mouth found his. She reached for him, dispelled his doubt. She took away his crutches. And he followed her.

"You are wild," he murmured.

"Wrong," she said. "I'm just myself. I don't always get to be. But they haven't pulled my teeth yet."

"Or your fur, or your claws, or your grip."

She pulled him closer.

"Let's stay here a little longer. The coffee can wait. Anika will handle the kids."

He ran his hand through her hair. Even what little of it remained—a few centimeters, post-chemo—curled around his fingers. He was grateful. Even that was a luxury. Often, she

had no hair, no brows, no lashes. He held her. For the first time in a long time, they could be close without fear of pain.

She pinched his backside.

“Hey, even if you’re awake now, we should join the others for breakfast soon. But first, let me say again: I love you. Not just because you stuck it out with me. But because I never imagined any other life. That I could fall so deep in these past days and still feel held—by you, by the children we made together. What a privilege. Let’s hope I still get some more time to live, to relive what we just shared.”

René listened. Amazed by the honesty, the clarity.

“I’ll get ready,” she said. “I don’t know how you feel, but I’d like another bike ride today. A real one.”

“Let’s ask the kids first. And Anika.”

“Come on, out of bed—the day is waiting!”

She was already in the shower.

When Feeny and René arrived at breakfast, Anika was already deep in conversation with Alina and Jan. She was telling them about her discoveries in Poland, tracing the footsteps of forgotten artists. The kids had heard bits and pieces about the arts and fashion from Feeny, but Anika’s world was new. Exciting. To Jan, it sounded like the plot of an entire Netflix series.

“Kids, I’ve already booked bikes for all of us,” Feeny announced. “Jan, could you find a way to get to Wannsee with them? By bike, certainly. Then we can ride to the lake together.”

Alina was stunned. Anika looked at Feeny, unsure if she’d heard correctly. She touched her own legs, felt a weight, a pull in her belly. After yesterday, who was the patient again? She? Or Feeny?

Jan lit up, pulled out his phone, and opened the train app to see how they could reach Wannsee by bike. They had ridden part of the way the day before, but now they all wondered—was Feeny really ready for a full ride? And why Wannsee?

But she meant it. Clearly.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I feel great. The sun may be gone and the cold has returned, but the air and the movement yesterday did me wonders. The pain has vanished completely. I just want to see Wannsee. Winter memories are rising in me. I think of Lake Starnberg, of the times René and I paddled in an inflatable boat, then later our wedding on that same lake. The kids know this. But you, Anika—you should understand why lakes mean so much to me. Wind. Water. Freedom. That’s why I got my sailing license with René. Even if Wannsee isn’t Starnberg, which to me is the most romantic of Munich’s lakes, it’s still a lake. Forest-wrapped, dreamy. It has that odd shine of something hidden. René and I walked its shores more than once. The wooded side gives it a secret shape. Like something enchanted.”

“Granted, Lake Wannsee—with one shore a dreamscape, the other its opposite. Cursed, I’d say, rather than enchanted—that’s where the villa stands in which, over sixty years ago, the Wannsee Conference took place. The one that determined the so-called Final Solution, the systematic murder of the Jews,” Anika added.

“Was Hulda affected by that too?” asked Jan, who recalled Anika’s story over breakfast.

“No, not directly. Hulda was already safe in Kenya by then. But had she not gone into exile, she would almost certainly have been murdered in one of the camps, like many of her family members and so many other Jewish men and women.”

“So close lie enchantment and damnation—separated and yet connected by a body of water,” said René. “I, too, have fond memories of Lake Starnberg. From Munich, it was often our destination, as a family or just the two of us. Especially, of course, I think of our wedding day, which we celebrated by the lake. It was in Ammerland, on the eastern shore, late winter—February 1992—under a radiant blue sky and snow all around.”

“Really? Ammerland? How on earth did you end up in such a far-flung place?”

“It must have been the romantic in me,” said Feeny.

“Incredible,” said Anika. “So there’s another thread connecting us to you—not through me, though, but through Bruno’s story, which he once told me,” Feeny said. “His grandfather’s and father’s family were evacuated from the Saarland near the end of the war—and they ended up in Ammerland. Their first impression on arrival in Starnberg was bitter disappointment. After a long journey across half of Germany—or as his grandmother insisted on saying, across the Reich, because she refused to accept that the Saarland had been re-annexed by Hitler—they stepped off the train together with other Saarland families. She could never forgive the fact that over ninety percent of the Saarlanders had voted for that re-annexation on January 13, 1935. She would have much preferred independence—ideally to remain French—rather than being part of Hitler’s empire.

There they stood on the platform in Starnberg, smelling the scent of boiled potatoes wafting from the soup kitchen. For a moment, Bruno said, his grandmother caught herself questioning her harshness toward the Reich. The next moment, she and the others had to hear—and experience—that word had spread: this train had unloaded a shipment of ‘Saar-French.’ And so the soup kitchen lids were slammed shut, the Hitler-hostile riffraff shooed away, cursed at, and beaten back from the food line.

The family was lucky. A handcart was waiting outside the station for them—Bruno’s grandfather, a village scribe back home, had made contact through the local official in Ammerland, who had asked the village carpenter to take care of his fellow scribe and his family. When the carpenter saw the commotion on the platform, he pushed through with a sign bearing the name ‘Recktenwald’ in big black letters. Bruno’s grandfather spotted him, and with his help, the family made it through the crowd to the wagon. Their host apologized for the rude reception of his fellow citizens, loaded them and their meager luggage onto his cart, and whisked them away.

Bruno also told me that, years later, as a sixteen-year-old, he returned with his father to visit the carpenter’s family—partly because one of his cousins had fallen in love with the carpenter’s son, married him after the war, and now they had children. But the true reason for Bruno’s father’s visit wasn’t nostalgia or kinship. It was the grand house next to the carpenter’s field.

In that large villa on the village street lived three younger ladies, all just a few years older than Bruno’s father—none of them married. The eldest was a well-known author in Bavaria who published hefty historical novels and lived in a lesbian relationship with her partner, who posed as a housemaid and officially lived in the old gatehouse by the entrance. The next-youngest sister was a private scholar, spending most of her time doing research at

the former Imperial Patent Office in Munich, which since 1919 had been the Reich Patent Office. And the youngest—she was the one who captivated Bruno’s father.

Though he was already close to the woman who would become Bruno’s mother, during the evacuation they were apart, and a friendship bloomed between him and the youngest sister. He was charmed by the cultural sophistication of the sisters, the bookish, enchanting young woman, and the house itself, bursting with books and art. Bruno recalled that, during a visit to Ammerland at age sixteen, he was allowed to sleep in a room filled with early-20th-century nursery furniture. Above his bed hung paintings that, his father explained, were originals by Kandinsky, Marc, and Heckel. At the time, the names meant nothing to him—but when he told me this story, I must have frozen, recognizing the weight of the memory. And by then, he himself had come to understand under which images he once fell asleep.

Since then, he’s always wanted to show me the place where, he says, he spent perhaps the happiest days of his youth in Bavaria—the sisters had their own little private beach on Lake Starnberg, even a boathouse, and Bruno spent hours rowing, reading, being spoiled by the youngest sister. And in the evenings, he marveled as he discovered that his father, though happily together with his mother, also maintained other friendships that seemed to bring him deep joy.”

“Then you were nearly surprise guests at our wedding!” joked Feeny, and René smiled with the two women—while the children listened with wide-eyed curiosity.

“Let’s go, then,” urged Feeny. “We’ve a thousand reasons to travel to Ammerland together someday—but for now, we’ll follow the enchanted shore of Lake Wannsee!”

During the long ride along the lake, Feeny had the chance to pedal beside Anika while René rode ahead with the children.

“Any developments on the allegations against Bruno?”

“Not really. I spoke with him on the phone from my room last night—he would have loved to come to Berlin with me, but he had to stay in Eichstätt. The head of personnel, along with a priest who also has training in psychotherapy, wanted to speak with him. Supposedly, long before his time as bishop, during a youth trip through Turkey, he brought a mixed group to a Turkish bath one evening—boys and girls together, nude, like in a sauna. One of the girls was under eighteen, and she later filed a complaint with the diocese, claiming that Bruno had come too close to her physically.”

“And now?”

“No idea. Bruno neither wants nor is able to outright deny it—he knows he bore responsibility for the group, even if he no longer recalls why that girl joined them that night. He remembers having explained in advance what the bath involved, and that no one was required to come. Still, he knows—and owns—that, from today’s point of view and with today’s standards, he should have acted differently.”

“What happens next?”

“That’s unclear. He’s retained a lawyer, but the lawyer says that with the unending wave of abuse cases in the Catholic Church, the chances of getting through this unscathed are slim. The question is whether there are other accusations—and, if it remains a one-time incident, where the case will be tried: Turkey or Germany. Both are possible.”

"I feel for him—and for you. But if this was a youth trip, was he even officially responsible?"

"Yes and no. It wasn't an official event by the parish or deanery. It grew out of a band—Friday-night rehearsals, guys and girls, plus a choir—and they wanted to spend the money they'd earned at gigs on a group trip. Bruno was the drummer. But his superiors believe that a clergyman has no private life, no personal time—he is always on duty, always bound to the Church's moral code, in every moment of his life."

"Does Bruno see it that way?"

"No. He believes in the human right to a private sphere. That's what he says he's always tried to convey to his students as a professor of moral theology and philosophical ethics. And if he did wrong, I'm sure he'll take responsibility—even if it costs him professionally, personally, financially. The young woman who came forward also deserves understanding—if she was led into something that harmed or traumatized her, especially if she still carries it years later. The question is: how much of that trauma is Bruno's doing? He denies her version. But after his lawyer advised him to admit guilt, no matter how the facts fall, he was also encouraged to seek a victim-offender reconciliation."

"Oh no—what a burden you both have to carry."

"Well, you know, if you bind yourself to an institution like Bruno did—if you dedicate your whole life to it—then you can't complain when its demands catch up with you."

"Aren't you being a bit harsh with him?"

"I don't think so. On the contrary, he chose a partner who he always wanted to challenge him. That's essential for both of us."

"Still—don't you ever question that he lives, works, and draws you too into a structure of inner and outer constraints?"

"When you love someone—you know this as well as I do—you don't try to change them. You try to understand. You accompany them critically, support them along the path they choose, so long as it's right and bearable. In the end, they must decide for themselves. I can only be a mirror—one in which they see themselves more clearly than they would without it."

They cycled along the lakeshore, the road sloping gently upward. The children, already ahead with René, had reached the top of the hill and were waiting for the two women, deep in conversation, to catch up.

"How are you two holding up?" René asked.

"As you can see," Feeny snapped playfully, "we were far too deep in discussion for me to spare a thought for my legs or any other part of my body."

She rode up to René and pressed herself against him briefly—a silent thank you for the freedom he'd given her to speak with Anika, and a sign of how much she was enjoying the ride. He nodded, signaling that he understood—and that he, too, was glad to be out with the kids, relaxed and happy, dashing ahead and trying to test themselves against Daddy and his stamina. The descent was easier. Anika and Feeny resumed their conversation.

"Did I already tell you I made a new friend?"

"Not that I remember. Where, and who?"

"In the hospital. She was in the bed next to mine during one of my earlier stays—not this last one, I had to be isolated then because of the sepsis. I mean before that. She was wonderful to talk to. We understood each other instantly."

“What’s her name?”

“Lina. I think she’s beautiful. Beautiful for her age, and proud—despite having lost her hair from chemo. But it’s not just that. She’s been through so much with this illness, and yet she hasn’t lost her humor or her hope.”

“Is that why you admire her?”

“Yes. She’s barely older than I am, but already has a 23-year-old son, nearly done with his dual-degree studies and already working at a major international company. More importantly, he cares for her tenderly. In a way, I feel she’s ahead of me—even, unfortunately, in the progression of the disease.”

“How so?”

“I don’t quite understand all the details—but from what I’ve gathered, she loves her work and tries to hold onto her job at the travel agency as long as possible. Because of that, she spent the first two years after her ovarian cancer diagnosis being treated at the small local hospital. They did what they could, until they couldn’t anymore. Then they referred her to Berlin, to the European Center for Gynecological Oncology. Despite all that, she still prefers being treated at home in Hanover. She trusts her local doctors more than those at the Charité in Berlin.”

“From what you’re saying, I sense that her decision troubles you.”

Feeny gave her a look that said yes—it cut straight from the heart. “You have to understand, Anika—when I was diagnosed, they gave me two to three years at most. The only reason I’m still alive is because I had surgery in London by one of the top surgeons in the field—and then, throughout the course of the illness, I was treated by first-rate oncologists, leaders in research, people who know the newest protocols and have experience with the most complex cases. That’s why I’m still here. And it hurts me deeply to see that Lina either doesn’t recognize the threat, or won’t see the chances she might have—if she were to trust those specialists.”

“Are you that sure?”

“If I didn’t have that kind of trust—I might as well give up,” said Feeny. “I had to learn in the first months, the first years, that my life was no longer primarily in my own hands—maybe barely affected anymore by what I did or didn’t do. And when I think of Lina, one of the bitterest lessons I had to learn was this: what I consider right—food, habits, what seems good or reasonable—that didn’t count anymore. I had to re-evaluate my judgment, become more self-critical. Instead of trusting only in myself, I had to trust my doctors. I had to learn to listen to them.”

“Can’t you talk to Lina about your experience?”

“Not really. She sees herself as more experienced. More self-determined. She can laugh at herself. She faces her future with confidence—maybe because she’s already been through hell. Just after she got the diagnosis, her partner left her. Not her first husband—he died not long after their two children were born, and she raised them on her own. No, this was her second partner. When her son left for university and her daughter was already out of the house, he moved in with her. And it seems they had a good life. She talks about him with great intensity. But the night after she told him about the cancer—he never came home again. Not a word. No goodbye. No explanation. Just gone.”

“She was left alone—not only without her kids, who were away at school and whom she didn’t want to burden, but now without the man she’d lived with for years, the man she might have spent many more with. Gone. And with him, that future. Vanished without a trace, though he left behind traces in her—scars from a life they’d built together. And still, she remains herself. Still facing her illness. Like most women struck with this disease, she’s stage three—her prognosis no better than mine. She still doesn’t understand why he left. And when I sit with her and she talks about him, I feel the same emptiness staring back at me that stares out from her. A shadow of fear falls over me—that René, the children, my friends, might just as suddenly disappear.”

“Lina and I sit together sometimes and cry. It helps—but it also breaks your heart.”

The road sloped upward, deeper into the woods.

“Feeny, it’s like this bike ride—going uphill together. I could cry with you.”

“That’s not why I’m telling you,” Feeny said. “It’s because I can’t share all this with René. I feel like I already ask too much of him. But with you—I can open up. You were the first client who saw me with the scar on my belly, and you gave me back trust in my wounded body. I haven’t forgotten that. You kept coming to me. You didn’t turn away. I felt like I still had that force in me, that presence. Or at least, your trust gave me that feeling again.”

They pushed harder on their pedals. Anika looked over at Feeny, astonished that she was managing the climb—astonished, too, at the depth of what she’d just revealed.

“I knew about your illness,” Anika said, “because you were open enough to share it. But your personality always eclipsed it. After your first big surgery, when I was finally allowed to see you again, I didn’t even notice your scar. I just saw your hands, your fingers, your skin, your warmth. I felt you closer to me than ever before. Like I was more in you, and you in me.”

They continued uphill into the forest until it opened into a clearing, and then a small village came into view.

Smiling, Anika said, “You won’t believe it—but I’ve been here before. More than once, in fact. When I was first researching National Socialism, I wrote my master’s thesis on a sadly forgotten writer who had a relative living here. That man still had some of the writer’s documents. The writer’s name was Edlef Koeppen.”

“Never heard of him,” said Feeny. “What did he write?”

“He became famous for a pacifist novel called *Higer Command*—a semi-autobiographical critique of World War I. He was innovative, too. Around the same time as Döblin’s *Alexanderplatz*, he developed a montage style to expose propaganda and fictional narratives.”

“This bike ride leads me into the past too,” said Feeny. “I think that’s the shore where the hotel once stood—where we celebrated our wedding.”

Feeny looked around for René, still riding between the two children, whom they’d overtaken earlier. She stopped. Anika did the same. When René and the kids caught up, Feeny got off, leaned her bike against a white gate across from a pier that stretched from a hotel restaurant out into the lake.

“Come,” she said to René, the children, and Anika. “Let’s walk out onto the pier. I want to tell you what this place brings back for me.”

The boards wobbled slightly. Alina delighted in peeking through the wide gaps in the planks, spotting fish darting in the clear lake water. Only Jan disrupted the idyll—he tossed pebbles into the water, scattering the fish.

“Oh no,” Alina complained, and made as if to push Jan into the lake—at which Feeny turned sharply.

“Kids!”

René gave them a stern look too—but once the two started giggling, then laughing uncontrollably, the adults couldn’t help but laugh along.

“Like here,” said Feeny, “in the middle of a frozen lake scene, we took our wedding photos in February 1992—me in a long blue Bavarian wedding dress with gold shoes, René in a velvet-green jacket and matching trousers. Our best friend and witness took the pictures. I wouldn’t have believed, even last week, that I’d relive those memories with you today.”

She hadn’t finished speaking when Jan hurled a larger stone into the lake—splashing them all.

Instead of scolding him, Feeny burst into laughter. She clutched her belly, which still hurt—but the pain dissolved into her face, and the laughter overtook every trace of it. René saw the tension lines around her mouth, but he too started grinning—and then laughing. The moment was absurd, unexpected, wonderful. If anyone had told him, years ago, that he’d be standing on a pier with Feeny, her children, and a close friend—after everything they’d been through—he’d have called them mad. Thank God we can’t see the future. Life is fragile. And sometimes indestructible.

Feeny pulled Anika close, kissed both children, and gave René a long, heartfelt embrace.

“You’ve given me something I’ve wished for. When René and I celebrated our wedding at the lakeside hotel, I dreamed of a long life together. And today, I can say: I’ve had a life that made me as happy as I could ever have dreamed. It’s not about how many days we have—it’s about the seconds we get to be this happy. My life has been full of surprises. And maybe it still holds more surprises—like today’s.”

Jan tossed the rest of the stones into the lake. Some splashed. Others skipped across the surface.

By evening, they reached the station. The wait wasn’t long. A commuter train arrived and took the tired group—with their rental bikes—back to Berlin. From the station, it was a short walk to the hotel.

“Mamutschka, do you know how many kilometers you biked today?”

“No—tell me!”

“More than eleven!” said Jan proudly, showing his phone where he’d tracked the ride. “Over twice as far as yesterday.”

Back at the hotel, René took out his phone and called Bruno. That evening, after the kids had gone to bed, Anika and Feeny had told him about Bruno’s precarious situation. René didn’t feel able to judge the matter—he didn’t know the details, didn’t understand everything he’d heard—but he wanted Bruno to know he trusted him, and that he was standing by him.

When Bruno saw René’s number light up, he picked up immediately. René stepped into a side room, away from the noise of the hotel lounge.

“Oh man,” René said, “you must feel like hell, don’t you?”

“What angers me most, René, is myself—because, as I see it, I have no excuse. I made a mistake back then—or rather, several. And like with so many personal failings, it’s no defense that you only come to recognize the error after the fact. Maybe even that you can only recognize it with time. But I should have seen far enough even then to realize it wasn’t right to take underage kids on that trip, to put them in a situation where they could be physically or emotionally hurt. And this woman—who’s now come forward—very likely was.”

“Be that as it may,” said René, “I don’t know the legal details, and it sounds like you yourself, after so many years, can’t recall everything exactly. From what I understand, you never approached the girl yourself, and she wasn’t harmed by you directly. I just wanted to call because Anika hinted at why you weren’t able to come to Berlin.”

“Yes—and I feel awful about that. Especially now, when Feeny’s struggling. I would have liked to be at your side—with Anika.”

“Instead, you’ve got to take care of yourself—and I can tell you Feeny agrees with me: that’s more important right now. And it’s important for Anika too—that you focus on getting through this as cleanly and clearly as you can. And listen, Anika is with us. And we’re grateful. In times like this, families tend to turn in on themselves. You need someone from outside the circle. Feeny also asked me to tell you that she’s feeling better—and to thank you. Thank you for thinking of her, and for letting Anika be with us, especially now, when you probably need her more than ever.”

“I don’t know what to say. It means a lot, to have friends like you.”

“And we feel the same about you—and Anika. That’s why I’m calling. So you can tell me: how are you really holding up, and what’s next?”

“The whole matter with the accusation—it’s going to drag on, no doubt. I spoke with my lawyer today. His advice was to keep going the way I’ve started: be honest. Acknowledge what happened. Admit that I failed in my duty of supervision. That much I can accept. But then he added something else.”

Bruno paused.

“He said the woman is now accusing me not just of negligence, but of being directly involved in the assault. She claims I lathered her with soap in that Turkish bath, rinsed her with water, and that I—my hand—penetrated her. Deep inside. I swear to you, René, I did not do this. And yet... my lawyer is advising me to confess to it anyway. To admit guilt. Because, according to him, I might get a more lenient sentence. He says if I deny it—if I stand by my innocence—then there’ll be a trial, a confrontation, maybe even psychological evaluations. And if no witnesses can be found to support either side, it could end in a prison sentence. Without parole.”

“And his recommendation is...?”

“To accept a simplified procedure. To plead guilty—even if I didn’t do it. To minimize the public fallout. Avoid the drawn-out legal process. Get it over with faster. Less press. Less exposure.”

“That may be pragmatic, even logical—but to me it’s morally absurd. It turns justice on its head.”

“You’re telling this to a moral theologian,” Bruno said with a bitter laugh. “I think the same. Should I abandon my principles—truth, justice—just to save my neck from a noose I

don't belong in? And still... I keep thinking about her. The woman. Why would she say something like that?"

"Is there anyone who could speak to what actually happened? Witnesses?"

"I've started trying to track some of them down. People who were on that trip. I'm digging into my memory, doing online searches, giving my lawyer names. We'll see if anything turns up."

"Whatever you need, you've got my support. That much I promise."

"You might actually be able to help. The police came yesterday. Several officers. They confiscated all my devices—my phone, my laptop. That's why you couldn't reach me on my cell today. Only the landline still works. Do you happen to have an extra laptop?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I just bought a new one. Funny story—I had an interview with a startup team at a hotel in Poland, and the next morning, I left my laptop in the room. Didn't realize until I got to airport security and reached into my bag. Total panic. I needed a machine that week, so I ordered a new one with overnight delivery. But the hotel later sent back the old one. So now I've got a spare—and you're welcome to it."

"That's perfect. Please send it back with Anika when she returns. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"I won't keep you any longer. Focus on the more important thing—be there for Feeny. Tell her I'm thinking of her, and send love to Anika and the kids. I hope Feeny gets through these days."

"I will. And you take care of yourself. Let's hope we're all together again soon."

"Did Bruno tell you the story?" Anika asked after René hung up.

"It's a mess," René said. "Let's hope he finds witnesses to clear his name. His lawyer's advice may make strategic sense, but to me it feels like a perversion of justice."

"Bruno knows he made a serious mistake—but I can't believe he did what this woman claims. He was careless, yes, bringing minors along that night. But that he exposed himself among them, or that he violated a girl like that—I can't imagine it. That's not the man I know. And if he had done it, I believe he'd be the first to admit it."

"I think so too," René said. "He's someone who empathizes deeply. You could hear it in his voice—he doesn't deny her pain. Even if he insists it wasn't caused by him."

"The fact that this resurfaced—right when we were all in Malta—it puts our own worries in perspective. What you and Feeny are going through, as partners, as a family, puts everything else in a different light."

"That may be," Feeny said softly, "but pain can't be ranked. Whatever hits you—hits with full force. Maybe our own suffering makes us more open to that of others. I know what it means to be drawn into it. To be part of it."

"I often ask myself," Feeny continued, "who feels more helpless—the one who's suffering, or those around her? I feel so wretched sometimes. Not because of my own illness—but because of what I see in the faces of my children, in René, in you, Anika, in Bruno, in others. Just because I carry something I can't shake. And yes—often I suffer more from the pain I cause those I love than from the pain in my own body. The metastases press on me—I feel them. I bloat. I ache. Some days I can barely walk. But then I look into the faces of the kids—or the sadness in René's eyes, or yours, Anika—and my own pain disappears. I

never thought I'd be able to sit on a bike again—and yet there I was, perched on the saddle, my legs spinning, and with Jan beaming beside me, they moved as if on their own.”

Back at the Clinic

Professor Choukri approached Feeny's bed with his usual brisk, purposeful stride, followed by his entourage—senior physician, junior doctors, nurses, and a cluster of med students.

“You look recovered,” he began. “How did you spend the weekend with your family?”

He had advised her to stay near Berlin and the clinic, not venture too far. The senior and junior doctors looked on, skeptically. They were surprised by their chief's directness, even more by his optimistic tone. After all, they had all quietly agreed the previous week that Feeny had been one of the likelier candidates not to make it to the weekend. Her recovery struck them as premature, almost suspicious.

But Feeny, as if the pitch of his voice had struck something exactly right, answered with a spark in her eyes:

“They were wonderful days. Short—but intense. And so good to hug the children again. And my husband. And a dear friend. You'll never believe it, but on Saturday they talked me into a short bike ride through the city. It felt so good on my leg—the pulling pain nearly vanished. So on Sunday we rented bikes again, took the train out into the countryside, and visited Teufelsberg, including the Forest Museum and all that amazing graffiti and street art.”

“You mean to say,” Choukri said, raising both eyebrows, “you climbed Teufelsberg? On foot or by bicycle? And toured the Cold War listening station? Saw the artworks?”

“Yes. I'd wanted to see the street art for a long time. My son told me we covered eleven kilometers that day. And I felt fantastic.”

Professor Choukri furrowed his brow, looked up, and then burst out laughing.

“You see?” he said, turning to his team. “We discharge her, and she starts doing cartwheels and rejoicing in life. Just last week, half the staff here didn't think Frau Weingarten would make it to the weekend—and now she's cycling across Brandenburg like she's training for the Tour de France.”

Feeny appreciated his candor. She had felt, with full clarity, just how narrowly she had skimmed past death. In the past few days, there had been moments when she asked herself: Do I want to go on? Can I go on? Or is this enough? What had kept her going was the thought of seeing her children again, of holding René. That alone had helped her summon strength one more time—not to let go. Had Anika and René not taken turns sitting by her side, she felt sure she wouldn't have managed it. At least, that's how it felt to her. And so now she looked with quiet pride into the joyful eyes of a doctor who understood not just numbers and drugs and charts, but people. His face had shed all its fatigue, all its clinical reserve.

He took her hand, congratulated her—and the whole team. The others behind him relaxed; their expressions softened.

“Let's take the bandages off,” he ordered. “Check her bloodwork again—we'll do another ultrasound.” Then, turning to Feeny: “Would you mind uncovering your abdomen? I'd like to palpate the lower belly and check the kidneys.”

Feeny pushed the hospital gown upward while the nurse kept her private parts covered. Choukri palpated gently at first, then with the professional confidence of long habit. He lifted her slightly to each side to reach beneath her, examining the kidneys.

“Your belly’s softer today. If the stabilization holds and the labs match up, you can go home tomorrow.”

Home. Feeny could have hugged him. The word sounded like magic in her ears.

“I’ll come by again this evening during rounds. By then, we’ll have the full lab panel from last week, and I can better assess the trajectory and talk to you about next steps.”

Feeny gave a slight nod, though the words trajectory and next steps stirred some apprehension. Still, she felt she’d made it—again. Even knowing that each day now was another tiny goodbye in a shortened life, she was simply grateful to have lived the weekend so freely, so joyfully—and to have made the hospital staff laugh, even loudly.

After the medical team had said their goodbyes and breakfast was done, Feeny was already waiting for her visitors. As she expected, it was Alina who burst through the door before René could even knock. She leapt onto the bed, and Feeny pulled back the blanket to embrace her.

As Jan, René, and Anika entered the room, Feeny asked Alina to pick out the outfit she’d like Mama to wear. Alina didn’t hesitate. She opened the closet and started sorting through drawers. She chose well: a velvet-black top and red-and-black leggings that looked like fireworks. Feeny and René had bought the pieces together in a Versace outlet—Feeny the firework-patterned pants, René the matching shirt and black trousers. He always liked that combination—it reminded him of their New Year’s Eve parties, when they both wore them.

Alina seemed to have matched not only her mother’s taste, but Anika’s as well.

“Are those pieces from your own collection?” Anika asked.

Feeny smiled. “Not quite famous enough for that. They’re Versace—but he’s a big inspiration for me. I love how he merges luxury with elegance without slipping into bourgeois kitsch—he manages that with bold, sometimes brazen, patterns. I’ve always had a thing for baroque menswear. And René loves color.”

Anika added, “The antique elements—those mythological symbols—Versace borrows them from Greek mythology. They always remind me of Crete.”

Feeny pointed to her sleeve. “If you look closely, you’ll see the Medusa head—such color, such sensuality and power.”

Anika and René could see her eyes light up. Alina listened with wide eyes, while Jan was more interested in the blinking machines and monitors behind the bed.

“But Versace wasn’t the only fashion designer to meet an unhappy end.”

“Why?” asked Anika.

“He was shot outside his home in Miami Beach.”

“Wasn’t he Italian?”

“He was. But he lived in the U.S. He’s buried in Milan, in the Cimitero Monumentale—same place as Verdi, his passionate conductor Toscanini, and the poet Alda Merini.”

“And when you say he wasn’t the only one—you’re thinking of...?”

“Another major influence on me: Yves Saint Laurent. In fact, he might mean even more to me. His partnership with Pierre Bergé, his homosexuality—he brought androgyny

into women's fashion. Where Versace was playful and opulent, Saint Laurent was sleek, masculine, elegant. I fell in love with his style partly because he drew so much from Morocco—my favorite country too.”

“In Marrakesh, he and Bergé bought a house and a garden in 1980, originally created in the 1920s and ‘30s by the French artist Jacques Majorelle. Like Majorelle, who painted Moroccan scenes—landscapes, buildings, people, daily life—and brought that variety into the garden with exotic plants, pools, pavilions, fountains—so too did Saint Laurent draw inspiration from it. They cared for it together. Whenever I’m in Marrakesh, I go there. Even if it’s full of tourists, there are always shady corners to let your thoughts wander—about color, about form.”

“But what I love most is the gravestone of Yves and Pierre. And when I want to be really sad—but also feel held in that sadness—I read the love letters Paul wrote to Yves after his death. The first lines always bring tears to my eyes. They comfort me. They cool me, like the fountain near their graves.”

Alina held her mother’s arm. She was used to her stories—how they never really ended—but she could also feel the emotion behind this one. Feeny sounded sad, yes, but also radiant. Alina hadn’t followed every detail, but somehow, she knew she’d picked the right clothes.

“I can see it now,” Feeny said, laughing gently. “I’m boring you with all this fashion talk. How about we play a round of Rummikub at the table by the window?”

“Oh yes!” Jan shouted, already hunting for the game.

“Look by the nightstand,” Feeny directed.

She changed into her festive New Year’s outfit, and the family settled around the table. Feeny still had the room to herself, so there were enough chairs for everyone. They played for hours. Lunch was delivered mid-game. The children were given tea and hot cocoa.

By late afternoon, Feeny asked if she could rest for a bit. The family said their goodbyes and went off in search of the hospital café on the ground floor.

Feeny drifted off into sleep and didn’t notice Professor Choukri returning to her bedside. When he spoke, she woke slowly and was surprised to find him alone.

“I’m not here for rounds yet—I wanted to ask you something. We’ve had a request from an international consortium building a global database for ovarian cancer patients. The goal is to help doctors and clinics share patient profiles, medication, outcomes—to make individualized therapies possible.”

“You agreed weeks ago to take part in the study, so the team wanted to know: would you be willing to share your experience on camera? A short film. They’d come to you in Munich and also film here in Berlin. Maybe members of your family would speak too. It might encourage others to take part. We could use more support.”

Feeny, still a little slow to follow her doctor’s line of thought, understood enough to see that his efforts—toward better treatment, and toward wider awareness—were something she could support.

“Do you really think I’m the right patient? Especially after these past few weeks, when I’ve felt so low?”

“Therapy,” he said, “as you now know just as well as I do, rarely means recovery when it comes to ovarian cancer. We’re already content if patients can live a life worth living—however long that may be.”

“I can’t even begin to tell you how important this past weekend was to me. The conversations with my friend, the time with my husband and kids... What would you give for two days like that? Everything was worth it. We laughed so much—you wouldn’t believe the look on my husband’s face when I got on that bike. And even my son was impressed, seeing me ride up those forest paths without a word of complaint. And honestly, with each pedal stroke it got easier. The scent of the pine trees, the damp green meadows, the perfume my husband wears—I can still smell it. Because scents, I think, live more in memory than in the nose.”

“Shall I give the film crew the go-ahead?”

“Yes, please. I feel confident now—not just that I’ll be biking again in the coming days, but that I might even start walking normally. Maybe even try jogging again. Start reentering life.”

“That’s the impression I have as well. But let me give you a word of advice—off the record, outside of rounds. I’ve looked at your numbers. Overall, they’re acceptable. I don’t see an immediate threat, not in the next few days or even weeks. But there are signs in the labs—subtle signs—that the disease is accelerating. In my view, it’s too early for drastic intervention. We always have to weigh things carefully: if we intervene too early, I’ll be putting you back in bed, making you sick for days, weeks, maybe even months. When otherwise, you might be living your life—seeing your family, doing your work, flying around the world, dressing people, making life richer for them and for yourself. But if we act too late, we could miss the moment entirely, and then we lose control of the dynamic. So my suggestion is: let’s stay close. If you develop a fever that lasts more than a couple days, especially if it reaches 37.9 or higher, or if you have persistent pain—sharp and unrelenting—call us. There will always be a bed ready for you.”

“Are there still options?”

“There are always options. And I’ll tell you the moment I believe we’re running out. But we’re not there yet. By the way—since we’re talking about public appearances—would you be willing to join me as a guest on my podcast? Every three weeks I sit down with someone interesting, and we talk about what drives us to do what we do, and how we do it.”

“You’re flattering me,” said Feeny. “Yes, I love what I do. And sure, I’ve got a strong sense of self. But I don’t know that I’d call myself a ‘personality’.”

“In my eyes, you’re not just an extraordinary patient—one of the few long-term survivors—I’d call you a role model. The way you live your time. When I get tired in my practice, when I find it hard to summon energy for the next patient—and then I see your name on the list—I feel your presence before you’ve even stepped into the room.”

“We don’t need to pat each other on the back,” Feeny said gently. “I know how demanding your work is. And for my part—well, I get nervous every time I have an appointment with you. That’s why I like having my husband with me. Because after the first wave of bad numbers, the harsh truths you don’t sugarcoat—there’s a point where I start to switch off. I don’t want to, but I do. I click out. And still, your honesty grounds me. When you

say what you just said now—I feel a little more secure stepping into tomorrow. And the next week after that.”

“Thank you for your willingness. I’ll be in touch. I’ve got to get back to surgery—but I’ll see you tonight for evening rounds.”

Feeny sank back into her pillow.

It takes courage to step into the public eye—but it can also bring a kind of clarity. She had the sense that sharing her illness publicly might help her understand it better, not just face it but fight it, and maybe help others learn to live with it too.

She held on to what Choukri had said—weeks, maybe months before another round of chemo or a major surgery. That likely meant she could continue with her current immunotherapy for the time being—more tolerable, less invasive. She thought: maybe when I’m discharged, I’ll start jogging again. Or take a trip with the family. Make use of the time. Get strong for what’s next.

She knew René wouldn’t easily find time—his work kept him bound, and one of them always had to be home for the kids on weekends. But maybe Anika would come with her. The travel, the fresh air, the movement—it would do her good.

One side effect of her ongoing immunotherapy, while not dangerous, had been deeply unpleasant: all her nails—fingers and toes—had become infected and partially detached. But she remembered something from their trip to Croatia in late summer: after just a few days of sun, wind, and seawater, the infections had faded considerably. They’d flared up again after returning to Germany.

As she was turning this over in her mind, the door opened. The medical team stepped in.

After briefing his staff on a few clinical details, Professor Choukri turned to Feeny and delivered the words she had longed to hear:

“Tomorrow you’re going home. I mean truly home—not just to a hotel in Berlin, but to Munich or England, wherever you’re staying. The attending physician will prepare your discharge summary. We’ll see each other again in a few weeks—please schedule an appointment with my secretary.”