

Prologue: The Gate

The airport was neither crowded nor empty—just active enough to feel impermanent, like the world itself was in transit, suspended in something not quite real.

Meri sat near Gate 32, her fingers curled around a paper cup, half-full and cooling too quickly in the stiff, recycled air. Around her, the quiet clatter of suitcase wheels, the low murmur of conversations, and the soft hum of distant announcements blurred into a gentle, unbroken static background noise that matched the rhythm of her thoughts.

Her flight hadn't begun boarding yet. She didn't mind.

Waiting had always come easily to her.

It was the arrival she couldn't stand—the sudden expectation to engage, to respond, to perform presence. Waiting, by contrast, allowed stillness. It gave her permission to retreat without explanation.

The bench beneath her was firm, upholstered in navy vinyl worn smooth by thousands of restless bodies. Her bag sat upright at her feet like a quiet companion. Every so often, someone passed close enough to brush her coat sleeve or flicker briefly through her peripheral vision—but still, she remained unmoving, adrift in the pressurised stillness of an in-between space.

She watched the crowd shift: a blur of faces and untold stories moving past, each carrying its own invisible weight. People coming and going, tethered to their own sense of purpose, to the narratives they were living—whether they realised it or not. It was always like this. The sameness of it. And that sameness made it easier for her to dissolve into the fabric of things.

She was a watcher. A listener. She had learned how to observe without being seen.

Across from her, a couple murmured soft arguments in French. Two seats down, a man tapped away at his laptop, pausing occasionally to frown and adjust his headphones. A toddler pressed her face to the window, leaving behind cloudy smudges and sticky fingerprints.

Life moved around Meri in quiet choreography.

She turned her gaze to the wide glass windows, where a pale blue sky stretched outward, streaked with lazy clouds dragging themselves across the horizon. On the runway, planes crept forward, engines growling as they prepared to break free—straining, it seemed, to escape the pull of their own inertia. Their metal hulls shimmered faintly in the sunlight, unnervingly fragile for something so massive.

She felt a shift in the air. Subtle. Invasive.

It felt like someone had slipped into her space—not with footsteps, but with air.

A ripple in still water. A presence.

She turned, slowly. Her neck stiffened by instinct.

Across the lounge, a man sat reading a paperback. His face was hidden behind the cover, but something about him tugged at her. The way he sat. The stillness. The complete absorption.

He wasn't just focused—he was gone.

Immersed, yes—but not in the room. The world around him felt like a waiting room for something better imagined.

He looked up briefly when the overhead announcement crackled—words that seemed to carry no meaning for him—yet he still followed the room's movement, attuned to its rhythm though never truly part of it. His gaze swept across the terminal—detached, deliberate—the way one instinctively scans for exits without even realising.

And then their eyes met.

Not because he had seen her.

Not exactly.

Because he was written.

A profile she had once described.

A scar just below his left eye—the same one she'd deleted on a Thursday morning, many moons ago, red pen and all.

Yet here it was again, catching the terminal light like punctuation. Like the period at the end of a sentence, she couldn't unwrite.

The scar hadn't faded in her memory.

She still remembered agonising over its placement—how much to reveal, how much to leave unsaid. It had belonged to a character she'd lived with for months. And then, just like that, she had cut him. Reduced him to a margin note: Too much. Feels unreal.

And yet, impossibly, here he was—passing through Gate 32 like anyone else.

The stranger didn't recognise her. His gaze swept past—just a flicker—but it was enough to still everything around her. In that moment, she existed only in the space between his eyes and her own. A hairline fracture in the surface of reality.

The air felt suspended, as though it had paused to acknowledge the impossibility. The silence folded inward. Her breath came slower, shallower—something delicate was unfolding beneath her ribs.

She watched him stand, tuck the book under his arm, and disappear into the jet bridge—

as though nothing had happened.

As though everything had remained intact.

As though he had never been a character from a story she had erased.

Meri didn't move. She couldn't.

Outside the window, a plane taxied into position. The sky overhead felt lower now, closer, pressing gently against the glass.

There was a weight in the air. Not heavy, exactly. But definite.

A shift. A warning.

The beginning of a storm, maybe. Or something quieter.

A change in the weather.

A change in her life.

Her hand moved, almost without thinking.

She reached for her bag.

Hesitated.

Then unzipped it.

Inside: *Draft Zero*.

Not the version she'd been editing that morning—wrestling commas, questioning motivations, shaping arcs.

No.

The one she had written.

The one she had cut.

The one she thought no one had ever seen.

Before the Cut

from the archive of a draft never titled

She began with a name.

Not a scene. Not an image. Just a name that arrived quietly on a Tuesday, when the fog refused to lift and her coffee sat cooling beside a stack of manuscripts she hadn't yet opened. The kind of name that clung to the edge of her thoughts like steam on glass—formless, but present.

It meant nothing.

Still, she wrote it down.

Not on her laptop, not in the margins of any real project, but in the corner of a yellow legal pad she kept near the window—for the things she didn't intend to keep. She circled it once. Then again. A third time, tighter. Her pen pressed deeper with each pass, slicing into the paper more sharply than she meant. The loops narrowed. Constricted.

The name didn't sound familiar. But it felt that way.

She set the pad aside and turned back to her real work—the client's second-act rewrite, waiting on the floor like a dog: loyal, insistent, a little dull. She adjusted her posture, read a paragraph, and marked two lines in red.

But the name returned.

Not loud. Not demanding. Just persistent—like a breath she kept forgetting to take. It moved through her thoughts with strange

familiarity, as though it had once lived there and come back to find the furniture rearranged.

Eventually, she stopped resisting.

At first, she wrote a paragraph—just enough to give the name a body. Then another. A fragment of dialogue. A train station. A woman who didn't turn back. The suggestion of a scar beneath someone's eye, barely visible unless he looked left. She hadn't planned that detail. It surfaced uninvited, casual as memory.

She wrote four pages that night. Not much—but they came too easily.

She printed them and read them while standing at the kitchen counter, the printer still spitting out the last few lines as she leaned into the quiet.

The voice was hers, unmistakably. But it felt borrowed.

She didn't like the feeling it left behind—the way it curled just beneath the skin, unfinished. It didn't feel like a story she was telling, but one she was remembering.

She sat at her desk, looked at the pages again, then opened the file. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She highlighted the text—all of it—then hesitated.

The room held its breath.

And then—she pressed delete.

The screen blinked once. Gone.

A second later, the cursor returned, blinking. Waiting.

She closed the laptop.

The pages remained. She didn't throw them out. Instead, she tucked them into a blank folder and slid it behind old tax forms and banking paperwork. Filed under a word she rarely used—something official, impersonal. She couldn't recall the label now, only that it wasn't where stories belonged.

She told herself it was nothing. Just a stray scene. A warm-up.

But she knew better.

There was weight in that name. A tilt to the dialogue. Something unfinished.

Days passed. Then weeks.

She worked on client manuscripts, scribbled notes, and met deadlines. Her red pen moved through prose as always—methodical, deliberate, unsentimental. She was good at that. It's why people trusted her. She could see where a story strained against itself and make it quiet again.

But she hadn't written for herself in months.

Not since the last time she tried. Not since she sat at this very desk with the intention to begin something that mattered, only to find her hands no longer moved the way they used to. The page looked bigger then. More brittle. Anything she wrote felt like it might crack under its own weight.

And now, there was this name.

This voice.

Four pages she couldn't stop hearing.

It rained again a week later. She stood by the window, mug in hand, watching droplets thread their way down the glass in slow, uncertain rivulets. Somewhere in the kitchen, the refrigerator hummed. A neighbour's wind chime trembled faintly in the distance, though there was no wind.

She thought of the name.

She couldn't remember why she'd chosen it—or if she even had. It had simply... appeared. The way certain people do in life: arriving before their reason does.

She tried writing again. One line. Then another.

"You're not supposed to be here," she had him say.

"Neither are you," came the reply.

That was all.

No exposition. No setting. Just two voices suspended in the dark, speaking into something unfinished.

She didn't know what they meant, only that the moment felt truer than anything she'd edited in weeks.

She didn't print the lines. Didn't delete them, either.

She left the file open. Just long enough for the laptop to fall asleep on its own.

There were mornings when she forgot about it entirely. Then, hours later, a fragment of phrasing would find her again—mid-shower, or halfway home from the market.

The dialogue would return—not urgently, not as a plea to be remembered, but simply existing. Waiting.

She told herself it didn't mean anything. That some characters arrive and go, that not every sentence deserves a second life.

But even now—

Even now, if she let the silence stretch too long, she could still hear it.

The weight of the name she had once circled.

The cadence of a voice that had never fully gone quiet.

She had never written his story.

But somehow—

He remembered hers.

Chapter 1: The Cut

The first thing she deleted that morning was a sentence.

It was a good sentence. Poetic, even. It described a storm breaking over a farmhouse, the language throbbing and dancing, pulling at the reader's emotions like the tightening strings of a violin.

But it didn't belong.

The character hadn't earned that storm yet, and the prose was trying too hard to convince the reader otherwise. The sentiment was there, but the execution was strained. She could hear the faint hum of the writer's intent—a pull toward drama—but it came too soon like a flower trying to bloom before the rain.

She struck it out. Not with a flourish—just a quiet, final line.

She didn't flinch. The sentence was gone. Its absence felt clean. Almost relieving. A small, silent victory.

But there was a moment—a fraction of breath—when she felt it. The ache of cutting something beautiful. A sentence that might've lived, if only it had arrived at the right time. She felt it the way a musician feels a wrong note struck with perfect clarity: graceful, but wrong.

Editing, after all, wasn't about what she loved. It was about what belonged.

She edited the way some people prayed. Not for clarity—but for absolution.

Meri liked beginnings. The control of them. The precision.

Beginnings could be shaped. Trimmed. Corrected. The beginning of something felt like an offering—you could stand at the edge and decide where everything might lead.

Endings, though—endings tried too hard to matter. They floundered under the weight of their own importance.

The steady rhythm of the clock in her office ticked on as October arrived in Nevada City like a held breath.

It was the kind of morning that began in whispers—the world caught between sleep and waking, undecided and soft around the edges.

Outside her second-story window, pine trees stood cloaked in fog, their outlines blurred—like the world was still settling on its final form. Mist drifted in slow ribbons between the branches, curling over the narrow road that wound past the edge of the forest.

From her window seat, she could just make out the rooftops of neighboring homes, muted and half-erased in the fog.

A chimney coughed faintly into the morning air. Somewhere, a dog barked once, sharp, then gone.

The entire street held the strange, suspended stillness of a scene waiting for its cue.

The leaves had just begun to turn—flashes of rust and gold breaking through the evergreen hush. A few brittle ones tumbled past the porch, their quiet descent barely perceptible.

A breeze slipped in, lifting the edge of a curtain like the beginning of a thought—just a flicker, a tease of something.

Sunlight crept along the porch, slanting in at an angle that softened everything—the world gently smoothed at the edges.

The light stretched across the floor like a slow-moving animal, cautious, uncertain whether to fully enter. It was the kind of light that felt like an invitation—one that could be rescinded at any moment.

She liked that light. It gave the room a sense of suspension—caught between one world and the next, neither night nor day, but something in between.

Inside, the house exhaled its silence.

It was hers—entirely. Not a place inherited.

Not her parents' modernist compound in the hills with its sharp lines and hollow echoes. She and her sister, Celeste, had agreed to sell that house after the funeral. Too much light. Too much grief is embedded in the angles. Too many memories carved into steel and glass.

This house was different. She had chosen it—after Columbia, after the weight of other people's expectations, and after her quiet refusal to follow their path.

She didn't want to build with beams and blueprints like her parents. She wanted to build with sentences. With silence. With shape.

This was her architecture.

She found it on the edge of town, where the paved street surrendered to pine needles and gravel. A cottage with a slanted roof, peeling grey paint, and a porch that caught the rising sun.

She had stepped through the front door, stood in the stillness, heart slowed, and thought: Here. This is where things begin again.

She was beautiful, though she rarely thought about it. The kind of beauty people noticed late, almost surprised by it. She wore it the way she wore her solitude: with quiet conviction.

But the real sharpness came from her mind. Her precision. That quiet intensity that made her presence feel like a room suddenly clearing.

Her real work—her obsession—was editing. Not line breaks or surface corrections. She was a developmental editor. The scalpel.

She tore stories down to their structure and rebuilt them from the marrow. She listened for tension. For silence. For the threads that hummed just beneath the prose.

Every story needed that tension—that delicate pull between words and what they couldn't quite say.

Light pooled in her upstairs study, a quiet room shaped by routine and thought. Manuscripts were stacked with intention, their margins dense with questions and half-resolved arguments.

Her red fountain pen rested beside a chipped mug—the one with a crescent-shaped fracture near the handle. The coffee inside had long gone cold, but she liked the way the warmth lingered.

It reminded her that some things stayed, even after their source was gone.

The manuscript in front of her was speculative fiction. The author had a spark, promising, but inconsistent.

The story followed a woman in a near-future world where memories could be altered by state decree—an intimate rebellion tucked inside a political premise.

The concept wavered at times, but the voice held something. Meri had heard it in the opening pages and knew—this one could become something. She liked the cadence, the rhythm of the words.

But there was a hesitation in the execution. A gap between the character's potential and what the prose could make her.

Meri had to decide: pull the woman forward, or cut her loose.

Her cursor hovered. She struck a line of dialogue—too clever, too self-aware. In the margin, she scribbled: Let silence speak.

Then her phone buzzed.

A message from her assistant:

The author wants to fight for the character you cut—Page 42. Should I set a call?

She replied without hesitation:

No call. My cut stands.

The character had been charming. Memorable, in a way that lingered.

But he didn't serve the story. He drew attention away from the woman and the mystery of forgetting.

He made the silence less haunting.

He wasn't necessary.

He was a distraction.

Her fingers moved across the keyboard.

Derails tension. Cut.

She stood, stretching—bare feet on the cool floor, her body waking at the edges while her mind tried to pull the pieces together.

The window creaked open a little wider. A soft breeze stirred a lock of hair from her face. She stepped into the hallway and paused at the mirror.

A flicker.

Movement—or the suggestion of it. Not quite a figure. More like an absence shifting.

She stilled.

Nothing.

The house held its breath with her.

Then let it go.

A sound—

Did she hear a knock?

She listened. Nothing followed. Just the hush of morning and the faint ticking of the kitchen clock.

Too early for visitors.

She moved, cautious, down the stairs. Each step creaked underfoot—not loudly, but enough to remind her how quiet the house had become. The scent of lavender and lemon oil still lingered—yesterday’s attempt at reclaiming order, at pretending everything was fine.

It hadn’t worked.

She reached the door and opened it.

No one.

Just the street—misted over, hushed and pale, the world holding its breath in the half-light. No cars. No footsteps. Just stillness.

And then—

The envelope.

It lay on the doormat. Thick. Cream-coloured. Stark against the dark weave of the coir.

No stamp. No return address. Just her name.

Handwritten.

A style she couldn't quite place—but felt sure she'd seen before. Somewhere older than memory.

She stared at it, uneasy.

She hadn't opened the front door since yesterday's lunch delivery. She hadn't even walked past it. No footsteps, no knock, no sound—nothing had drawn her attention.

It could've arrived anytime yesterday afternoon. She'd been upstairs most of the day, sealed inside her work, caught in the kind of focus that narrows the senses.

Or maybe she'd simply missed it.

Still, the sight of it now made her pulse tighten.

She bent down and picked it up.

The envelope was heavier than expected. Not dramatically—just enough to register. The weight felt deliberate, burdened with more than just paper.

When her fingers touched the surface, she paused.

The paper was warm. Not unpleasantly so—just... noticeably warm. Probably from the morning sun that reached the porch for a brief window each day, even with the fog.

But still—it surprised her.

That kind of warmth didn't come from fleeting exposure. It lingered. It held.

As though the envelope had been there longer than she realized.

As though it had been waiting.

Her fingers brushed the surface.

The grain was familiar. A subtle texture—just rough enough to catch the pads of her fingertips. She knew this paper. Not in a vague, reminiscent way. Precisely. Intimately.

She had chosen this stock once. Years ago. Back when she cared about permanence. When she printed drafts that felt like confessions. When paper mattered.

It had been expensive—thick, uncoated, with that quiet ivory tone that made even mistakes look intentional. She had used it sparingly, only for work that meant something.

Private. Precious. Meant to last.

Her throat caught, tightening around a breath she hadn't fully taken.

This was that paper.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, slow and careful, as though any sudden movement might disturb what had already been set in motion.

The envelope remained in her hand, heavier now, not with weight, but with implication.

She crossed the room, each step quiet but deliberate, and sat down.

The envelope rested in her lap like a held breath. A sealed moment, waiting to unfold.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she peeled open the flap.

Inside—

Her manuscript.

She froze.

Not in shock.

In recognition.

The one she had buried. The one she had promised never to touch again. Never to show. Never to reopen—not even in idle thought. She'd left it behind like a sealed room in a house she no longer entered.

But this wasn't quite that version.

She flipped through the pages in a rush, not reading—just scanning. Letting the paper flick past her thumb in soft, staccato bursts. The sound was intimate. Insistent.

The manuscript wanted something. Not just attention—acknowledgment.

Already, her eyes caught things that didn't belong.

A scene at a train station—restored. She had excised it in the second draft, cut it clean, certain it had tipped the tone too far into sentimentality. But here it was, untouched. The cadence of the dialogue was exactly as she remembered, but the context had shifted. Subtly. Enough to feel wrong.

A chapter she'd compressed into a paragraph now sprawled across six pages.

Drawn-out moments she didn't remember writing.

Intimate glances.

Conversations that edged too close to memory—too close to things she had never intended to publish.

And the characters.

Names she had once struck through in red ink had returned.

Not just resurrected—but rewritten. Speaking again. Moving with purpose. Carrying stories she had already chosen to silence.

She paused, her heart tightening with each beat.

This wasn't her original manuscript.

It was hers. And it wasn't.

A hybrid. A revision by invisible hands. Someone—or something—had sifted through her discarded drafts, her abandoned lines, her redacted margins, and rewoven them into this.

A new thread, stitched from the ones she had tried to unravel.

It read like a version of her book that remembered everything she had tried to forget.

She turned the pages more slowly now. Every sheet felt like a breach—a reclamation of something she had let go.

Page 42.

Her fingers stopped.

And there he was.

The character she had deleted. The man she had removed with finality.

The scar beneath his left eye caught the lamplight across the room, described exactly as she had once written it.

He wasn't just present.

He was alive again.

As if he had never been erased.