

No Clean Separation

Maven's Origin Story

Written by: Kathleen Fitzgerald

(The Unfrosted Files: Book 18)

(Book 17 - [here](#))

October, 2026

Chapter One - Not Nothing

Porto Dulce in early morning had a particular hush to it that Emily had stopped fighting months ago. Not the hush of a place that was closed, but one that hadn't decided yet whether it wanted to be open. Shutters half-up. The wine shop two doors down airing itself out before the heat set in. A gull arguing with another gull about something that had clearly happened yesterday and remained unresolved.

She was on her second sugar-free Red Bull, barefoot on the balcony, when her iPhone buzzed with a TartTime request from Ana.

That alone was unusual enough to notice. Ana didn't call before nine unless something was already on fire.

"Tell me it's a barbecue emergency," Emily said, picking up. "Tell me someone brought a gas grill to your building and you need moral support?"

"I wish." Ana's face filled the screen, and for half a second the warmth was exactly where Emily expected it and then it wasn't, not all the way. Something underneath it had gone very still. "I need you to look at something. It's probably nothing."

"You don't TartTime me at eight in the morning for probably nothing."

"I TartTime you at eight in the morning for *definitely* something and call it probably nothing so you don't worry before your 2nd Red Bull." A small, tired, almost-laugh. "Crumblin' run for me first. Then I'll show you when you get here. See you in 10."

Juno was still half-asleep when Emily came back inside, sprawled sideways across the bed in the particular way that meant she'd fallen asleep mid-thought and simply stayed there. One hand was still loosely curled around nothing, like it remembered holding a pick even in sleep.

"Ana," Emily said, by way of explanation, pulling her boots on.

Juno cracked one eye open. "Everything okay?"

"Don't know yet."

"You've got the voice."

"What voice?"

"The one where you already know it's not nothing, you're just not ready to admit it yet." Juno flipped onto her back, stretching, unbothered. "Go. Text me when you know which kind of not-nothing it is."

Emily kissed her forehead on the way out and didn't correct her, because Juno was right, and there wasn't a version of this where saying so out loud would have made the morning go any slower toward whatever it was already headed toward.

Ana's office sat two floors above a hardware shop that had been there longer than the company it now shared a building with, and Ana was already standing when Emily walked in, which told her more than anything said over TartTime had.

"Show me," Emily said.

Ana turned her monitor around without preamble. A folder, greyed and renamed, sitting where a folder of shipping manifests should have been. A short text file beside it, formatted with the specific, unbothered confidence of something that had been written by someone who assumed it would be read exactly once and obeyed.

Emily read it twice anyway.

"How many machines," she said.

"Just the two here, as far as I can tell. I caught it fast, I noticed one of the manifests wouldn't open yesterday afternoon, thought it was corrupted, went to flag it for IT first thing." Ana's voice stayed level, the way it always did, but her hands weren't quite still on the desk. "I called the Madrimiga office before I called you. Figured HQ should know before anyone panicked locally."

"And?"

"And that's the part that's not nothing." Ana exhaled. "They already knew. It's not two machines there, Emily. It's most of the building."

Emily looked at the note again - the demand, round and confident and oddly impersonal, the kind of number that existed more to be photographed than to be paid - and felt the first small, familiar click of something settling into place within her filling. Not alarm, exactly. Recognition. The particular quiet that came before she knew she'd be doing this instead of whatever she'd planned for the week.

Ugly, she thought. But familiar.

She'd seen a hundred notes like this one, a lifetime ago, in a building that smelled like burnt filling and bad coffee, and every one of them had taught her roughly the same lesson: panic was the intended first response, and the only useful second one was to stop reading the note and start reading the silence underneath it.

"I need to get to Madrimiga," she said.

"I already checked the train," Ana said, already turning back to her screen, already three steps ahead the way she always was. "Next one's in forty minutes. I can have someone meet you at the station with everything we've got so far — logs, timestamps, who noticed what and when."

"You're not coming?"

"Someone has to keep this office upright while the big one catches fire." Ana managed, somehow, to make that sound like good news. "Besides. You don't need me for the part that's about to happen. You need me for the part after, when everyone's exhausted and nobody can remember whose job it was to call the insurance company."

Emily almost smiled. "I'll take logistics over expertise most days."

"That's because you've never watched me solve a staffing crisis." Ana handed her a printed itinerary like it was a parting gift. "Go carefully."

Emily took the stairs two at a time, already composing the text to Juno in her head - *not nothing, work trip, tell you more tonight* - already feeling the particular weight of the red fedora she hadn't packed yet, because this didn't feel, not yet, like a fedora kind of case.

It would.

Chapter Two - First Look

Madrimiga announced itself the way big cities always did - not with any single thing, but with how little any single thing seemed to matter. The station alone was larger than Porto Dulce's entire old quarter, frosting-tiled and hollow-sounding, full of PopTarts moving with the particular purpose of tarts who had somewhere to be and no time to notice anyone who didn't.

The company's headquarters sat six blocks north, a converted warehouse with the local flag - red, gold, a looping violet swirl at its center that Emily didn't look at twice - hanging limp over the entrance in the windless heat. Inside, the lobby had the specific, controlled chaos of a building where everyone was working very hard and accomplishing very little.

A frosted tart in a logistics vest intercepted her before she'd made it ten steps. "You're the investigator, Ana's friend?"

"Emily." She didn't offer a card. "Who's running point here?"

"Depends. Officially, me. Practically, whoever's closest to a working computer." He led her past a cluster of tarts arguing quietly about a shipment that had left before anyone could confirm whether it should have. "Third floor. That's where it's worst."

It was worse. Rows of computers dark or frozen mid-render, a scatter of printed manifests being updated by hand because no one trusted the system to hold what they typed into it. Someone had taped a handwritten sign to the server room door that just said DO NOT TOUCH, which struck Emily as both completely reasonable and roughly a day too late to matter.

She sat down at the nearest working machine and pulled up what they had.

The note was the same shape as the one in Porto Dulce, just larger. More zeroes, same tone, the particular confidence of something written once and never revised because the writer didn't care how it landed.

Ransomware. Ugly, but familiar.

She knew the genre: countdown clocks designed to produce panic faster than thought, payment instructions usually polished to a shine. This one had the shape right. The demand was there. The threat was there.

Something about it just sat slightly wrong, the way a word looks misspelled before you can say which letter's out of place.

She didn't chase it yet. Not enough to chase. Just enough to note, the way she used to note things in case files that turned out, months later, to be the only detail that mattered: *come back to this*.

By late afternoon she had a rough shape of the damage, a growing list of questions nobody on-site could answer, and the specific exhaustion that came from reading the same ugly file from six different angles without once feeling closer to understanding it.

She texted Juno around six, local time. *Longer than a day. Staying through at least tomorrow.*

The reply came fast enough that she pictured Juno setting down whatever she'd been holding to send it. *Figured as much. You left the fedora.*

I know.

Ana's heading your way tonight. I'm sending it with her.

Emily looked at that for a moment longer than it probably deserved.

You didn't have to do that.

I know, Juno sent back. Go do the thing you do.

Ana showed up at the hotel just after ten that night, backpack slung over one shoulder, looking like someone who'd made a decision somewhere around hour two of the train ride and hadn't questioned it since.

"You didn't have to come," Emily said, opening the door.

"You didn't have to leave your hat behind, and yet." Ana held out the bag. "Juno packed it like she already knew."

"She usually does."

Ana stepped past her into the room without waiting to be invited, already scanning the mess of printouts spread across the desk with the specific look of someone recalibrating a to-do list in real time. "Okay. Catch me up. And then tell me what you actually need, not what you think I'll say yes to."

Emily almost smiled. "Same thing, usually."

"Exactly my point."

Chapter Three - Graded

"Fedora's on the desk if you want it," Ana said, already deep in a floor plan she'd pulled up on her own laptop, not looking up. "Juno figured you'd be needing it about now."

"She's usually right about that." Emily didn't reach for it yet. There'd be time.

"Okay. Walk me through what we actually know, because what I know is 'bad' and that's not specific enough to be useful."

Emily gave her the short version - the spread, the timeline, the growing list of things nobody on-site could answer. Ana listened the way she always did, cutting straight past anything that didn't matter yet.

"And here's the note," Emily said, turning the screen. Ana read it in silence, down past the demand, past the countdown, past the line that sat in the middle of it doing nothing in particular except existing where it didn't quite belong.

Every system is graded. Yours failed the curve.

Every system is graded, Maven thought, watching the cursor blink in the empty field where a grade used to be. *Yours failed the curve.*

Her other hand didn't stop moving. Two windows open side by side - one rewriting a semester's worth of marks into something that would make headlines by Monday, the other quietly finishing a process no one would notice until later. The grades were loud on purpose. Loud was the point. Loud was what seven years of being told to sit down and be grateful had taught her a distraction was supposed to sound like.

She hit enter on the grades first. Somewhere, a server took the change and didn't question it, the way servers never questioned anything that arrived with the right credentials attached.

Then she hit enter on the other one.

Every system is graded, she thought again, and meant it differently this time — not about herself, not about the number the district would eventually put in front of a judge like it meant something. About the Flick cameras. About the hallway her aunt walked down every morning on her way to a classroom that didn't need surveillance bolted above the door to feel safe, only the district had decided otherwise.

Someone was always grading someone.

Tonight, for once, it wasn't going to be her.

"Emily."

Ana was still looking at the floor plan. "Where do you want to start?"

Emily reached for the fedora after all, settling it on without ceremony, the way she always did when the thinking needed to turn into doing.

"Start with who's still got working credentials," she said. "Whoever built this didn't just get in. They got in clean. I want to know how clean."

Chapter Four - The Back Door

By mid-morning the third floor had stopped pretending it was fine. Someone had given up on printed manifests altogether and switched to a whiteboard instead, half-covered in handwriting that got worse the further down the day it went. Ana had commandeered a corner of it for herself - names, times, who still needed to be told what - and was working through it with the brisk, unbothered efficiency of someone who found chaos mildly insulting and intended to correct it personally.

Emily hadn't moved from her computer in three hours.

"You're doing the thing again," Ana said, without looking over.

"What thing."

"The thing where you go completely still and I'm supposed to assume it's productive."

"It is productive." Emily didn't look up either. "I think I found something they didn't mean to leave behind."

That got Ana's attention. She crossed over, coffee in one hand, setting another sugar-free Red Bull on the desk. "Define 'something.'"

"A door." Emily turned the screen. "Buried under three layers of obfuscation, but it's there. A recovery function. Something that would let whoever built this get back in clean, undo it, selectively, machine by machine."

"Why would they build themselves an undo button? Isn't the whole point that you don't get one unless you pay?"

"That's what's bothering me." Emily sat back. "For a while I thought this might be some derivative of NotCrumbya. Same disguise. Same kind of damage."

"But?" Ana asked.

"But NotCrumbya wanted destruction. This wants proof."

Ana frowned at the screen like it had personally inconvenienced her. "Okay. So how do we open your mystery door?"

"That's the part I haven't solved." Emily tapped the field waiting for input - thirty-two characters of nothing, demanding something specific it wasn't going to name. "It wants a key. Not a password. A generated one, built from something, fed through an algorithm, spat out the other side. If I can figure out what it was built from, I can rebuild it myself."

"Built from what, though?"

"That's the question." Emily rubbed her eyes. "Whoever coded this wasn't being careless here. They weren't careless about getting in - they're good at that, scary good. But this part feels like it was bolted on fast, by someone who assumed nobody would ever find it to ask."

She stared at the number again - thirty-two characters, waiting - and let her mind go loose the way it used to in the Bureau, back when the trick was never to chase the answer directly but to let it wander into the room sideways.

Her eyes drifted, unfocused, toward the window.

The flag was still hanging there, six floors down, limp in the heat. Red. Gold. That looping violet swirl at its center she hadn't looked at twice on the way in.

She looked at it a third time now.

"Ana."

"Mm?"

"The flag downstairs. The swirl in the middle, does that mean something? Is that just decoration, or is it actually *from* somewhere?"

Ana glanced out the window, then back, visibly recalibrating what kind of question this had turned into. "It's old. Older than the company, older than the building. Some kind of regional pattern - you see it on pottery, embroidery, half the pastry work in the old quarter. Why?"

"Because I think I just found where somebody's imagination ran out."

She pulled up an image of the flag, isolated the swirl, and started mapping it - rotations, node points, the places where the pattern folded back on itself. It was the kind of thing that would never occur to a machine to generate and would occur, almost embarrassingly easily, to whoever had grown up seeing it stitched onto a tablecloth their whole life. A *local* shortcut. Something that felt arbitrary enough to be secure and familiar enough to never have to write down.

Culturally random. Not mathematically random at all.

She built the string from it, thirty-two characters, drawn letter by letter from the swirl's geometry the way you'd trace a path through a maze and typed it into the waiting field.

Nothing.

"No?" Ana asked.

"No." Emily sat back, more frustrated with herself than the field. "I was so sure—"

And then she wasn't frustrated anymore. She was looking at the keyboard.

"Ana. Pull up a European keyboard layout. Not ours. Theirs."

Ana didn't ask why, just did it, fast, sliding her own laptop across. Emily compared the two side by side, and there it was: three characters in her reconstructed string that didn't exist in quite the same place, or at all, on a standard layout. Whoever had built this had typed the swirl's pattern into existence on a keyboard that wasn't Emily's, with symbols that weren't Emily's, and she'd been reconstructing the shape right while getting the alphabet wrong.

She fixed the three characters. Typed it again.

The field blinked, accepted, and opened.

"There it is," Ana breathed, leaning in.

The first machines across the building began reporting back, one by one, clean.

Emily sat very still for a moment, watching the recovery spread quietly through the network the same way the attack had - fast, confident, assuming no one would ever notice the door was there at all.

They weren't careless about getting in, she thought. They were careless about getting back out. Because getting out was never the point.

"Okay," Ana said, already reaching for her phone to start the calls that would turn *the system's fixed* into *everyone needs to hear that, in order, right now*. "That was either the smartest thing I've ever watched you do, or the luckiest."

"Can't it be both?"

"It can absolutely be both." Ana was already dialing. "Go tell the building manager. I'll handle everyone who actually matters."

The first machines across the building began reporting back, one by one, clean.

The hallway was clean too, in its own way, stripped of the small red blink that used to sit above every door, so steady for so long that no one noticed it until it was gone. Maven's aunt noticed first, on her way in before first bell, the way you notice a sound has stopped rather than that it ever started.

By midmorning there were tarts on ladders. By noon there was a tech from the district on the phone with someone from the company that made the Flick cameras, saying words like *bricked* and *unrecoverable* in the specific flat tone of someone who already knew how the rest of the day was going to go.

By the time the number came back, it had stopped being about the cameras at all.

\$100,000. Replacement units, labor, emergency vendor fees, a contract rider nobody remembered agreeing to that charged extra for anything done on short notice. The district superintendent read the figure out loud in a meeting Maven's aunt wasn't important enough to attend, and somehow the number traveled home with her anyway, secondhand, slightly wrong, entirely large enough to matter.

"A hundred thousand," she said at dinner that night, not to anyone in particular. "For Flick cameras."

Maven, across the table, said nothing.

She hadn't expected the number to feel like anything. She'd expected relief, maybe — the particular quiet of a thing finally stopped. What she got instead was the number itself, sitting there between them, bigger than anything she'd meant to cause and somehow, infuriatingly, still smaller than what taking them down had meant to her.

She didn't know yet that the number would end up in a file with her name on it.

She just knew, for one evening, that the hallway was quiet, and that was supposed to have been enough.

By the time the recovery finished spreading, Ana had already put a number of her own on the whiteboard — hours of downtime, not dollars, the only currency that mattered to her today — and was crossing it out in favor of a smaller one.

Chapter Five - Big Enough

By evening the building had the specific exhausted calm of a fire that had actually gone out, rather than one that had simply run out of things to burn. Computers back online. Manifests reopening. Somewhere below, a delivery truck had already pulled out on schedule, as if nothing about the day had happened at all.

Emily wasn't finished.

"You're doing the thing," Ana said, dropping into the chair across from her.

"I'm doing the thing." Emily scrunched her face. "The recovery worked. That's not the same as this being over."

"Feels pretty over from the building-manager's chair."

"It would." Emily turned her screen around. "I pulled the tradecraft apart while the recovery was spreading. The lateral movement, the credential chaining, the way it moved through the network once it was in. I've seen this signature before. Not the ransomware shell. Underneath it."

Ana leaned in. "From where?"

"Old case files. Years back. Attributed to something that was never cyber at the time — bio-attacks, infrastructure sabotage, nothing digital." Emily sat back. "This is the first time I've seen it show up as code."

"So whoever this is, they're branching out."

"They're expanding." Emily said it flatly, without drama, because that's exactly how it had felt going through the files - not a revelation so much as a confirmation of something she'd half-suspected since the first ransom note's strange, indifferent tone. "Same organization. New continent. New tool."

Ana was quiet a moment, turning that over. "Why here? Why Madrimiga?"

"Because Madrimiga's big." Emily shrugged. "This isn't a careful, targeted hit. It's a company large enough to matter, in a city large enough to matter, in a part of the world they haven't operated in before. You don't creep into new territory with a small test case. You go somewhere the win actually counts for something."

"That's either very smart or very arrogant."

"With this group, it's usually both."

Closing in took less time than Emily expected, mostly because the infrastructure hadn't been built to survive discovery. It had been built to work once. The recovery backdoor that had let Emily undo the damage left fingerprints of its own — a handful of access logs, a narrow

window of outbound traffic, routing through infrastructure that had clearly been stood up fast and not maintained with any real care.

"They built this to work once," Emily said, tracing the traffic back through three hops before it thinned out. "Not to last. Not to hide forever. Just long enough to prove the thing worked."

"Prove it to who?"

"That's what I'd like to know." She kept working. By midnight she had a location — not a face, not a name, just a building on the edge of the city's industrial quarter, leased two months earlier under a shell that wouldn't survive five minutes of real scrutiny. "There. That's where it ran from."

Ana looked at the address like it had personally wronged her. "So what do we do with that?"

"We go find out who's inside," Emily said, reaching for the fedora. "Before they realize we know where to look."

Interlude - The Anomaly

"We go find out who's inside," Emily said, reaching for the fedora. "Before they realize we know where to look."

Someone had already found out once before, a long time before this.

Aliciya was fourteen, at a different school in the same district, and she noticed the grades before anyone made the connection to anything else. Not because she was looking for trouble, which she wasn't, but because she'd always had a habit of noticing when a pattern didn't behave the way a pattern should.

The district-wide grade changes had made the local news for a week, framed as mischief, a prank that had somehow arrived during the same ugly week the district's Flick cameras failed. Everyone her age had an opinion about it. Most of them thought it was funny.

Aliciya thought it was sloppy.

Not the hack itself, that part was clean, almost elegant, the kind of thing she'd have respected if she'd let herself. It was the timing. The grade changes had rippled through the district's systems in a pattern that didn't match how a prank would actually move. Too even, too synchronized, like something designed to draw every eye in the building toward one door while a window, somewhere else entirely, opened and closed without anyone checking it twice.

She mentioned it, once, to a teacher who didn't follow what she meant and didn't ask her to explain further. She mentioned it again, differently, in a forum post under a handle nobody could trace back to her, phrased as a question rather than an accusation: *has anyone looked at what else happened that same night?*

Someone had, eventually. A district investigator, weeks into tracing the grade changes, found the post buried in a thread about something else entirely, followed the question instead of dismissing it, and went looking for a second intrusion nobody had thought to connect to the first.

That's how the Flick cameras got attached to a name, Maven Thorne.

Aliciya never found out that her three sentences, typed once and forgotten, were the thread that pulled the second hack out from under the first. By the time anyone traced the post back far enough to matter, she'd stopped checking the account.

She didn't think about any of it again for years, not really, not in any way that stuck. Not until long after she'd stopped being the kind of fourteen-year-old who noticed things for free and started being the kind who got paid for it. By then the story had become something else entirely: a name in a file, a tart nobody could quite pin down, three cases closed without a single charge.

Aliciya never made the connection between that long-ago post and the PopTart the name belonged to now.

She had no reason to. It was one thread, among thousands, that she'd pulled on once, let go, and never saw land.

The industrial quarter was quiet in the specific way certain neighborhoods get quiet right before something in them stops being quiet at all.

Chapter Six – Empty Room

The building looked exactly like what it was supposed to look like, not quite *nothing*. A warehouse on a street of warehouses, corrugated siding, a loading dock nobody had used in weeks judging by the dust. If Emily hadn't already known what was inside, she'd have walked past it without a second thought, which was, she suspected, precisely the point.

"Back door," Ana said quietly, nodding toward a side entrance half-hidden behind a dumpster. "Unless you want to try the front and introduce ourselves."

"Back door."

It wasn't locked. That alone told Emily something. Not carelessness, exactly, but the particular confidence of tarts who didn't expect to still be there by the time anyone came looking.

They weren't.

The space inside was mostly empty, a scatter of folding tables, a few blank monitors still humming, cables trailing toward a server rack that had clearly been important enough to bolt to the floor and not quite important enough to take when everyone left. Papers littered one table, already half-shredded by hand rather than machine, like whoever did it had run out of patience before they ran out of pages.

"They knew," Emily said.

"Knew what?"

"That we were coming. Or close enough to it." She crossed to the server rack, crouching to check the drive bays. Empty. Pulled clean, recently - the dust pattern on the shelf didn't match the dust everywhere else. "This isn't a raid. This is walking into a room someone left on purpose."

One monitor was still on.

It took Emily a moment to realize it wasn't idle - a single window sat open on the screen, text blinking, waiting. Not code. A message, typed and left, the way you'd leave a note on a kitchen table for someone you knew would eventually come looking.

Congratulations. You found the empty room.

Ana read it over her shoulder. "That's not ominous at all."

"It's not meant to be ominous." Emily kept reading. There wasn't much else. No gloating, no threat, nothing that read like it was trying to be anything other than exactly what it said. "It's meant to be polite. Like losing this room doesn't cost them anything."

"Does it?"

"No." Emily tilted her fedora back a bit. "That's what bothers me. This was never the operation. This was a test of whether the operation could stand up somewhere new. They already have their answer."

A second line appeared on the screen as she watched, typed live, somewhere else entirely, by someone who was clearly still connected and in no hurry at all.

Europâte's a big market.

Then the connection dropped, clean, and the screen went dark along with everything else in the room.

Ana exhaled slowly. "Okay. So we didn't catch anyone."

"No."

"We didn't stop anything, either, not really, not the part that matters."

"No." Emily stood, looking around the stripped room one more time, the particular hollow feeling of a space that had already said everything it intended to say. "We recovered the data. We closed the building. That's real. It helped a company that didn't deserve what happened to it."

"But."

"But whoever's actually behind this isn't in a cell tonight. They're probably already somewhere else, doing the same math on a different city."

Ana was quiet for a moment, looking at the dark screen like it might still have something left to say. "That's a strange kind of winning."

"It's the only kind this group gives out." Emily picked her way back toward the door, her fedora low, the particular weight of the night settling into something she recognized from a lifetime of cases that had ended exactly this way. Closed, correct, and somehow still unfinished. "We did the part we could do. That has to be enough for tonight."

She didn't entirely believe it as she said it.

Neither, from the look on her face, did Ana.

Chapter Seven - Across the Pond

They didn't talk much on the walk back. The industrial quarter gave way to narrower streets, then wider ones, then the particular hush of a city sleeping without entirely trusting it was safe to.

Ana peeled off at the hotel lobby. "I'll call the office. Let them know it's over - the part that's over, anyway." She hesitated. "You're going to sit with this a while, aren't you?"

"Probably."

"Don't sit with it alone too long." Ana squeezed her arm once, brief and sure the way she did everything, and headed for the elevator.

Emily didn't go up right away. She found a chair in the empty lobby bar instead, ordered a tequila she hadn't earned yet, and let it sit in front of her, untouched, while she turned the night over.

The cell was gone. The files were clean. Ana was already three calls deep into getting Madrimiga HQ back on its feet before she'd even made it to the elevator, and by any measure that mattered on paper, this was a win.

It didn't feel like one.

She kept turning the shape of the thing over, looking for the part that made sense of the rest. A ransom note nobody really wanted answered. A recovery path built for the attackers' own convenience, not the victim's. Lateral movement sharp enough to own the whole network in hours, wrapped around extortion machinery that barely worked. None of it added up to a crime committed against this company.

It added up to a company that had simply been standing where something larger needed to prove itself.

She'd been so sure, somewhere underneath the case, that this was about her. Two years of near-misses back in Popolis. An ocean between them now, and here was Maven's fingerprint anyway, in a place Emily had thought belonged to another life, like distance had never meant anything at all. It would have been almost flattering, in the ugly way these things get flattering - to matter enough to be followed.

She didn't matter at all.

Maven hadn't come here for her. Hadn't thought of her. Didn't know, in all likelihood, that Emily and Juno were anywhere on this side of the water. The Syndicate hadn't crossed an ocean to find anyone. It had simply gone looking for the next place big enough to be worth owning, and Madrimiga had answered.

This wasn't a grudge. It wasn't a hunt. It wasn't even really about the thing it had broken.

It was a demonstration. A line of business, opening in a new market, with Ana's company as the ribbon they'd cut to prove the doors worked.

Europâte's a big market.

That was the whole of it. That was all she'd ever been circling.

Her phone buzzed once, Juno, a photo of the harbor going gold at the edges, no caption. Emily looked at it a long moment before she answered, because there was something almost unbearable about how ordinary it was, how little it had to do with any of this, and how much she needed exactly that right now.

There was no edge to the threat anymore. No side of the water it respected. It hadn't followed her here, it simply hadn't noticed she existed, and somehow that was so much colder than if it had.

She wasn't going to spend the next however-many years waiting to be found.

She was going to build something that didn't require her to matter to it at all.

Coda — Hearing Room

The hearing room had been cold in the particular way rooms get when no one in them wants to be there.

Maven was thirteen, sitting very straight because someone had told her sitting straight would help, and it hadn't. The district's lawyer used the word *malicious* four times. Nobody asked her why. Nobody asked what the Flick cameras had been watching, or who they'd been watching it for, or whether a hallway full of them was a thing a school needed in the first place. The number was the only part anyone wanted: \$100,000. It got said slowly, like weight mattered more when you gave it room.

Her mother didn't come. Her aunt sat two rows back and didn't reach for her hand once.

Afterward there was a list. Every place that might have taken her, eventually, in some later year when enough time had supposedly passed - internships, apprenticeships, the quiet rooms where tarts like her got handed real problems to solve - closed itself politely, one letter at a time, over the better part of a decade. Nobody said *because of the cameras*. They didn't have to.

She got good at knowing, before she opened them, which envelopes were which.

By twenty-one she'd stopped opening them at all.

The offer, when it came, didn't look like one. No hearing room, no number spoken slowly. Just someone who'd clearly read the file - all of it, the parts that made the papers and the parts that hadn't - and who didn't ask her to explain herself, or apologize, or promise she'd changed.

You're wasted, the letter said, *sitting outside of things*.

She read it twice. Then she picked up a pen, because for the first time in eight years, someone had asked her a version of the right question, not *why did you do it*, but *what else could you do*. She found, sitting alone at a kitchen table nobody else was coming down to, that she still very much wanted to answer it.