

SAMPLE WORK

ALONG CAME A CHILD

Draft 13

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Chapter 1

The Alley

The bartender offered to call Ronica a cab three times.

The first time, she pretended not to hear him. The second, she raised her glass and told him she still had half an inch of wine left. The third, he placed her purse on the counter and said the bar was closing, though laughter and music continued behind her.

“You’re throwing me out.”

“I’m helping you leave.”

“That’s the polite version of throwing me out.”

He had the worn face of a man who had stopped caring whether she understood the difference. Ronica hooked the purse strap on her second attempt and pushed through the door into the cold night in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

A cab waited at the curb. She walked past it on principle.

The driver lowered his window. “Ma’am?”

“Not your ma’am.”

She kept going.

After midnight, the city felt like a lie people had agreed to keep telling. Storefronts went dark while light leaked from the apartments above them. Cars claimed intersections at speed. Somewhere, men laughed too loudly. Somewhere else, a woman shouted a name that might have belonged to a lover or a dog.

Ronica tried to remember why she had started drinking that evening.

There was always a reason. That was the arrangement she had made with herself. A date on the calendar. A room she could no longer enter without holding her breath. A memory that arrived without invitation and demanded rent.

Tonight, she had her reason.

She had seen him through a restaurant window two streets from the bar. He sat across from a younger woman who touched his wrist whenever she laughed. The woman wore yellow. Ronica remembered the yellow more clearly than she remembered his face.

Yellow had once been her favorite color.

She turned down a side street to avoid passing the restaurant again. Then another because she thought she recognized someone. Then an alley because she was certain it would cut toward home.

Ten minutes later, she admitted she was lost.

The alley smelled of wet cardboard, rust and old sewage. A streetlamp buzzed overhead, blinking hard enough to make the darkness shift. Ronica pulled out her phone. The screen doubled. She closed one eye and tried to find the map.

She should not be walking alone.

The words did not come from the street. They arrived from behind her eyes, close and male and certain.

Ronica turned too fast and struck the wall with her shoulder.

No one stood there.

At the mouth of the alley, two men passed without looking in. One said something to the other, but the traffic swallowed the sound.

She should not be walking alone.

The thought had not belonged to her. She knew that with the unreasonable certainty of the drunk.

"Enough," she told herself.

Her heels scraped the pavement as she walked faster. Garbage bags leaned against both walls, split open by animals or people. She stepped over a broken crate and nearly went down.

Then she heard it.

Faint. Brief. Not a cat. Not a television through an open window.

A cry.

Ronica stopped.

The cry came again from the far end of the alley, where a metal garbage bin stood beneath the broken lamp.

"No," she whispered.

Ronica moved toward the bin. One step. Another.

"Is somebody here?"

No answer.

The lid stood partly open. A strip of pale cloth hung over the edge. Ronica reached for it and stopped.

Her first thought was that it was a trap.

Her second was worse, that she was too drunk to trust what she saw.

She called 911.

"What is your emergency?"

"There's a baby."

"Where are you?"

“In an alley.”

“What alley, ma’am?”

Ronica looked at blank bricks and overflowing bins. “Near Carson’s Bar. I think east. Or west. I walked for—listen, there’s a baby in a garbage bin.”

The operator’s voice slowed. “Is the baby okay?”

“I heard her. Or him. I haven’t looked.”

“Is anyone else nearby?”

“No.”

“Stay on the line. I need you to check if it’s injured.”

Ronica set the phone on speaker and lifted the lid.

The baby lay beneath a thin blanket, naked except for a diaper barely hanging from one hip and a strip of medical tape around one wrist.

A girl.

She was impossibly small. Pale skin. Her eyes were open.

Black.

Not dark brown. Not shadowed. Black from lid to lid, smooth as wet glass.

Ronica’s hand slipped on the rim.

The baby made a small, furious sound and shivered.

“Is the baby still breathing?” the operator asked.

“Yes. She’s cold.”

“Do you see blood?”

“No.”

“Do not move her unless she is in immediate danger. Cover her if you can.”

Ronica took off her coat and wrapped it around the baby as best she could without lifting her. She placed one hand inside the bin, close enough to offer warmth.

Small fingers closed around her index finger.

The grip was startlingly strong.

“You have terrible judgment,” Ronica whispered. “First a garbage bin. Then me.”

The baby held on.

A window opened above. Ronica looked up and saw a curtain move.

“Did anyone see who left her?” she called.

The window closed.

Anger cut through the alcohol. Someone had heard the crying. Perhaps for minutes. Perhaps longer. They had listened and chosen their own warmth.

The operator kept asking questions. Was the baby responsive? Did Ronica see injuries? How old did she appear? Ronica answered carefully, ashamed whenever she had to repeat herself. She wanted the unseen woman on the phone to understand that she was not careless—only drunk.

The distinction sounded pathetic even to her.

The baby stared up. Ronica saw herself reflected in those black eyes. Wet dark hair clinging to high cheekbones, thick brows drawn over tired brown eyes, mascara smudged beneath one of them. Her mouth, usually quick with a joke or an insult, had softened with fear. A stranger leaning over the edge of darkness.

“I know,” she said. “I wouldn’t trust me either.”

The little hand tightened.

A siren turned onto the street. Relief came first, followed by a reluctance so sharp it embarrassed her. Professionals were coming. They would take over. That was the point.

Still, when red light swept across the alley walls and the baby flinched, Ronica leaned closer as if her body could shield the bin.

The first officer approached with his flashlight raised and his free hand near his weapon. He looked at Ronica, then ahead of her. His suspicion was reasonable. She hated him for it anyway.

“She’s cold,” Ronica said. “Don’t shine that in her face.”

“Step away from the bin, ma’am.”

“I’m the one who called.”

“I understand. Step away.”

Ronica moved back one pace. The baby’s fingers slid from hers.

The cry that followed sounded like accusation.

The young officer leaned over the bin. When the light struck the baby’s eyes, he stumbled back.

“Jesus. It’s a devil child.”

Ronica hit his arm before she understood she had moved.

“Do not call her that.”

The baby began to scream.

The sound cut through the alley, the alcohol and every room Ronica had locked inside herself.

She stepped closer.

“Give her to me.”

The officer stared at her.

“Now.”

He did not. The paramedics arrived before either of them could make their next move, guiding Ronica aside and wrapping the baby in a silver emergency blanket.

As they carried the baby toward the ambulance, her eyes stayed fixed on Ronica.

For the first time that night, Ronica felt completely sober.

SAMPLE WORK

Chapter 2

The Sergeant

By two in the morning, Ronica's living room had become a police station with softer furniture.

Two officers stood near the front door. A third examined the coat she had left in the garbage bin, turning it over as if evidence might be stitched into the lining. Across from her, Officer Brady balanced a notebook on one knee.

Ronica held a mug of tea between both hands. She had not taken a sip. The heat gave her fingers something to feel other than the baby's cold skin.

"So you heard the crying at approximately what time?" Brady asked.

"I told you. I don't know."

"Before or after midnight?"

"After. Probably."

"And you were walking home from Carson's?"

"That was the ambition."

His gaze moved toward the empty bottles visible through the kitchen doorway.

"How much did you drink?"

"Enough to make you ask every question five times."

He wrote that down.

Ronica wondered which word he had chosen. *Intoxicated, uncooperative, sarcastic*. Perhaps all three.

"Did you see anyone in the alley?"

"No."

"A vehicle?"

"No."

"Did you touch the child?"

"I covered her with my coat. I didn't lift her."

"Why not?"

Ronica looked into the tea.

Because the last baby she had held had never opened its eyes, she wanted to say.

"I was afraid of hurting her."

The front door opened without a knock.

Frankie entered in a dark overcoat thrown over his work clothes. He was not assigned to the case, but he carried authority the way some men carried cologne. Too much, and into every room.

He and Ronica shared the same dark hair, thick brows and high cheekbones, but where her face revealed every emotion before she could hide it, his seemed built to reveal nothing.

He looked first at Ronica, then at the officers, then at the bottles.

His disappointment arrived before his greeting.

“Brady, Sergeant Malik is keeping the alley. I’m here as her brother, not as command. Finish the statement and leave her a copy.”

The young officer stood. “Sergeant.”

“Ask Malik to preserve traffic and the storefront video from Carson’s to the alley. Hospitals, clinics, churches and shelters—anywhere someone with an infant or medical supplies might have been seen.”

“The baby’s older than a newborn,” Ronica said.

Frankie waited until the officers had left before answering.

“What were you doing out there?”

“Saving a life, apparently.”

“Before that.”

“Walking.”

“Drunk. Alone. In an area where two people were stabbed last month.”

“Thank God you came over to explain the danger after I survived it.”

His jaw tightened. Their father’s jaw, square and hard, offering anger a respectable place to live in.

“Roni, you’re too old for this.”

“I’m old enough to decide how badly I behave.”

He crossed to the kitchen and picked up an empty bottle. Then another.

“Were these tonight?”

“No.”

“That was quick.”

“Because I knew the answer.”

Frankie filled a glass with water and placed it in front of her.

“Drink.”

“You have fulfilled your brotherly duty. You can go back to judging criminals who aren’t related to you.”

“Drink it.”

She took one swallow to make him leave.

He stayed.

Frankie moved through the room, cataloging damage. The house had once belonged to Ronica and Matthew together, yet almost nothing of Matthew remained. His books were gone. The wedding photograph had disappeared from the mantel, leaving a clean rectangle in the dust. Only the bottles had multiplied.

"Have you been working?" he asked.

"I wrote half a review of a restaurant I don't like."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Then ask a question with fewer possible humiliations."

He opened the curtains. Night pressed against the glass. Across the street, a parked car started and pulled away. Frankie watched it until it turned the corner.

"What?" Ronica asked.

"Nothing."

Their father had taught him that word. In Frankie's mouth, nothing meant something he intended to investigate without involving her.

"Was the baby followed?"

"We don't know that anyone followed anyone."

"You watched the car."

"It was parked with the engine off at two in the morning. That does not make it part of a conspiracy."

Ronica thought of the voice in the alley.

She should not be walking alone.

"I heard someone," she said.

Frankie turned.

She described the thought that had not felt like hers, the certainty that the alley had its own voice.

Frankie listened without interrupting. That was worse than mockery.

"You had been drinking," he said.

"Yes. I was there for that part."

"You had seen Matthew. You were upset, disoriented and alone."

"So I imagined a voice, then imagined a baby, then imagined an officer seeing the same eyes?"

"The child exists. That does not make every sensation around her evidence."

Ronica stared at the tea. "You always choose the explanation that requires the least from you."

"And you always choose the one that makes your pain special."

The words landed between them. Frankie looked away first.

He checked the lock twice before reaching for the door.

"Do not go back to that alley."

"I wasn't planning for a picnic."

"I mean it. Whoever left the child may return to see what happened."

"You said there was no conspiracy."

"I said we don't know."

For once, uncertainty sounded like honesty.

"Frankie."

He stopped.

"Check on her yourself."

"There are people doing that."

"Please."

The word felt unnatural between them. Too soft to survive the family habit of sharpening everything.

"Make sure they treat her like a baby," Ronica said. "Not like whatever Brady called her."

Frankie looked back. He seemed ready to refuse, perhaps only because she had asked.

Then he nodded.

"I'll see her in the morning."

"Promise."

"I said I will."

"That isn't the same thing."

He opened the door.

"Good night, Roni."

"Promise me."

Frankie looked over his shoulder.

"I promise."

He regretted the promise before he reached the car. Not because he intended to break it. Because promises in his family rarely stayed promises.

After Nancy died, he had promised their father he would look after Ronica. After the baby incident, he had promised Matthew he would keep an eye on her. But each promise drove a new wedge between them. What began as concern became intrusion, what he called protection, she came to know as control. He treated silence as a warning sign, opened doors without knocking, and pushed his sister a little farther away every time.

Chapter 3

The Blood Sample

Frankie began every morning with black coffee and a smile he did not feel.

The coffee woke his body. The smile, according to a leadership book he had read years earlier, trained the mind to expect a good day. He stood before the bathroom mirror and held the expression for thirty seconds.

After seventeen seconds, his face began to ache.

At twenty-four, he thought of Ronica.

At thirty, he stopped.

His Mercedes waited outside beneath a thin crust of frost. The car was six years old and looked new because Frankie washed it himself every Sunday. Their father used to say people revealed character through maintenance. Anyone could buy something. The truth appeared in what remained in good condition after years of use.

Frankie believed that about cars, careers and families.

His sister remained the exception.

The county medical unit occupied the rear wing of an aging public hospital. Paint gleamed in the corridors patients saw and cracked everywhere they did not.

Dr. Brown met him in a small examination room.

The doctor was in his late fifties, with gray hair escaping in several directions and a face lined around sharp, watchful eyes. One corner of his mouth rested slightly higher than the other, as though it had never quite decided whether to smile or disapprove. His voice treated authority as a minor inconvenience.

"Sergeant Gramby," he said. "Or homicide royalty, according to the nurse you frightened."

"How is the child?"

"Good morning to you too."

The baby lay beneath a heat lamp on a padded table, dressed in a donated blue onesie with white clouds. Her eyes were closed.

Frankie approached carefully.

"What is wrong with her eyes?"

"At the moment? Nothing."

"Two officers saw them turn black."

"One officer used the phrase devil child in an official statement. Forgive me if I question the quality of his observation."

“My sister saw it too.”

“Was your sister sober?”

Frankie did not answer.

Dr. Brown took a penlight from his pocket and opened one of the baby’s eyes. The iris was dark brown, nearly black around the pupil, but ordinary beneath direct light.

“Pupillary response is normal. No visible damage. Prolonged darkness can cause extreme dilation, made more dramatic by the color of her irises.”

“Can?”

“Medicine is built on that word.”

Frankie nodded toward the tape on the baby’s wrist. “That?”

“Looks like an IV site. Someone treated her before abandoning her.”

“A hospital?”

“Or a private clinic. Or someone with supplies. The tape is standard, nothing distinctive.”

“Age?”

“Approximately three months. Healthy weight. Mild dehydration. No obvious signs of long-term neglect. She was fed recently.”

“That’s supposed to comfort me?”

“No. It’s supposed to help you investigate.”

The baby opened her eyes.

Frankie expected fear. Instead she studied him with such composure that he felt examined.

“She does that,” Dr. Brown said.

“Does what?”

“Waits for you to say something worth hearing.”

Frankie leaned closer. “What’s your secret, little one?”

She reached up and closed her fist around his tie.

Dr. Brown smiled. “She dislikes the tie. Promising intelligence.”

Frankie freed the fabric and, before he could decide why, lifted her.

He had not imagined holding a baby since Ronica’s pregnancy. Even then, there had been no baby to hold—only the expectation of one, expanding until it filled the family and then collapsing into a grief no one knew how to acknowledge.

This baby was heavier than he expected, warm to the touch. She settled against his chest without protest.

Dr. Brown had told him to wait near the elevators until someone from pediatrics came down, so Frankie carried the baby into the corridor rather than returning her to the padded table. He told himself there was no sense putting her down only to lift her again.

The truth was simpler, she had settled against him and he did not want to disturb her.

Near the elevators, a woman in scrubs stopped. Her face softened as she looked at them.

"She yours?"

"No."

The answer came too quickly. The warmth left the woman's face.

"Abandoned case," Frankie added.

"Poor thing."

Frankie felt a tiny hand curling into his shirt.

The elevator door caught their reflection. The baby rested against his chest, her cheek pressed to his shirt, her face turned toward the nurse's voice, her wide eyes innocent and unguarded—

Black.

Frankie looked down. Brown.

Back at the reflection, but the door opened and the image broke apart.

To Frankie's relief, the woman who stepped out wore pediatric scrubs and carried a folded blanket.

He handed the baby more abruptly than he intended.

"She needs to be examined by Dr. Brown again. Personally. No substitutions."

The nurse settled the blanket around the baby. "Dr. Brown has already entered the order."

"Make sure it happens."

Her eyes lifted to his. "We know how to care for our patients, Detective."

Dr. Brown watched from the far end of the corridor. Years around police had taught him to recognize fear wearing authority.

After Frankie left, Dr. Brown returned to the laboratory and ran the blood for the third time.

One microtube remained from the samples collected when the baby arrived. He separated the plasma, red cells and white cells, then compared each fraction with a pediatric sample awaiting disposal.

The plasma showed nothing remarkable.

The red blood cells behaved as expected.

The white blood cells did not.

Dr. Brown set up a simple test. He placed the white cells beside a thin strip of damaged tissue in a glass dish filled with fluid, then applied a faint electrical signal.

The cells drifted slowly toward the damage, each one moving on its own.

Then the cells rushed forward as a group, reaching the damaged area far faster than anything Dr. Brown had seen. He lowered the signal and tried again. The same thing happened.

Then he increased the strength.

The cells sped up. For a moment, the damaged area seemed to repair itself almost instantly.

Dr. Brown shut off the power.

He wrote in the margin of his private report:

COORDINATED WHITE CELL MOVEMENT.

RESPONDS TO ELECTRIC SIGNAL.

REPAIR RESPONSE ESCALATES AT HIGHER LEVELS.

Dr. Brown called a colleague at the university.

"Hypothetically," he began, "what would make leukocytes coordinate around an injury when exposed to a weak electric field?"

"Electrotaxis can guide migration, but they shouldn't move as one."

"And if a stronger signal made the tissue repair almost instantly?"

The line went quiet.

"Then either your sample is contaminated," his colleague said, "or it was engineered."

Dr. Brown ended the call and opened the county reporting portal. One click would send the sample to the state laboratory. Another would flag it for rare disease review. Either could move the case beyond the county within hours and copy the results into systems he could not control.

His finger hovered over the mouse.

The baby cried in the next room.

Every alarm in the laboratory activated at once.

The monitors screamed.

Then it all went silent.

Dr. Brown removed his hand.

"All right," he whispered. "Old fashioned it is."

He printed the report, sealed the vial with the blood sample and locked both in his cabinet.

Chapter 4

The Graveyard

Ronica visited her mother's grave only when she wanted advice she could not argue with.

Nancy Gramby had been dead long enough for the cemetery workers to level the soil, straighten the stone and grow grass over every sign that a body lay beneath it. The grave looked calm.

Ronica spread a thin blanket on the ground and set a bottle of red wine beside the headstone.

NANCY GRAMBY

1934–1989

BELOVED WIFE AND MOTHER

"Beloved is doing heroic work there," Ronica said.

She poured wine into a plastic cup and placed a second empty cup against the stone. The ritual dated back to the first year after Nancy died, when sixteen-year-old Ronica had sat beside her grave and, as far as she could remember, spoken calmly to her mother for the first time.

"I saw Matthew," she said.

She paused, as though waiting for her mother to answer.

"I know. Happiness is a choice."

Wind moved across the cemetery, carrying wet earth and cut grass.

"He was with someone younger. She wore yellow. I hated her immediately, which is unfair because she probably doesn't know I exist. That seems to be my talent lately. Hating people."

Ronica drank.

"And then I found a baby in the garbage."

The words settled between her and the grave, too strange and too real to take back.

"A little girl. Three months, maybe. She looked at me as if she knew me. I know, that sounds insane."

"Happiness is a choice, Ronica."

The voice came from behind her.

She did not turn.

"That's what she would say," Frankie continued.

Ronica turned.

Frankie stood several yards away holding the baby.

For a moment the cemetery disappeared.

The baby wore the blue cloud onesie beneath a thick white blanket. Her eyes were brown. Ordinary, if ordinary eyes watched with that much attention.

Ronica rose so fast she knocked over the wine.

"You brought her."

"I said I'd check on her."

"You didn't say you'd bring her to a graveyard."

"I looked for you at home. This was my second guess. The bar was third."

She ignored the insult and held out her arms.

Frankie hesitated.

"I'm not drunk."

"It's ten in the morning and you're drinking wine."

"It's ceremonial."

"Of course it is."

The baby made a small sound. Frankie looked down at her. His arms stiffened.

Ronica noticed.

"Give her to me."

He transferred the baby carefully.

Warm weight settled against Ronica's chest. The baby found her face at once.

"Hello again," Ronica whispered.

A tiny hand lifted and touched the silver ring hanging from her necklace.

Frankie looked toward Nancy's stone. "Dr. Brown says she's healthy. Social services found an emergency placement. The caseworker gave me permission to bring her here while I looked for you. Then I take her there."

Ronica stroked the back of the baby's head.

"She has no hair."

"Excellent observation."

"Does that bother you?"

"The child or your analysis?"

"The eyes."

Frankie's pause answered before he did. "They're brown."

"Now."

He looked away.

The baby tugged the necklace again, and memory opened under Ronica's ribs.

She was nine, sitting beneath the kitchen table while Nancy argued with Ronica's father about a newspaper offer in Washington. She could see only their feet: Nancy's bare and restless, her father's planted in polished shoes.

"It's the opportunity you wanted," he said.

"It's not the work I wanted."

"You haven't met the editor."

"I met the man behind the editor."

Nancy stopped when she saw Ronica beneath the table. She crouched and pulled her daughter out.

"How much did you hear?"

"Nothing," Ronica lied.

Nancy smiled with exhausted pride. "Good. Keep that skill. A writer should know when some truths are better left unrevealed."

Ronica watched Frankie adjust the blanket when the wind lifted one corner.

"She likes you," Ronica said.

"She grabs my tie. That's not affection."

"For you, it may be the closest available form."

He almost smiled.

The baby turned her head toward Nancy's stone and went still.

The empty plastic cup beside the headstone tipped over.

"Wind," Frankie said.

"There isn't any."

"There was enough."

Near the cup lay a thin black feather. Ronica picked it up before he noticed. It felt warm despite the cold ground.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

The family word.

She slipped the feather into her pocket.

When Frankie reached for the baby, she clung to Ronica's necklace. The ring swung between them. Nancy had given it to Ronica for her sixteenth birthday, saying circles were promises with nowhere to escape.

Ronica had dismissed the line as sentimental nonsense.

Now, however, she wasn't so sure.

Ronica kissed the baby's forehead before handing her back. The baby's face tightened as soon as their bodies separated, but she did not cry. She watched Ronica from Frankie's arms.

"Thank you," Ronica said.

"For what?"

"For bringing her."

Gratitude made him uncomfortable. He nodded once and walked away through the rows of graves.

Ronica remained beside Nancy's stone, one hand around the ring at her throat. Then she released it and slipped her hand into her pocket.

Whatever warmth had been there was gone.

"You saw that," she told her mother. "Don't pretend you didn't."

In the distance, the baby began to cry.

Ronica followed the sound until Frankie disappeared beyond the trees.

Chapter 5

The Nursery

Donnie was easiest to love when Ronica asked nothing of him.

He arrived after nine with wine. They both knew where the evening would end. By midnight, the bedroom looked as if a storm had passed through it. A pillow lay by the window. The sheet hung from one side of the bed. Ronica's glass balanced too close to the edge of the nightstand.

Donnie lay beside her, breathing hard and smiling.

"What's wrong with you tonight?"

"That is a romantic question."

"I meant it kindly."

"Then you need kinder words."

He moved the glass away from the edge. "You were somewhere else the whole time."

"You didn't complain."

"Give me some credit. I can enjoy the sex and still see that something is wrong with you."

Ronica laughed and covered her face with one arm.

Donnie watched her. He was handsome in a comfortable way, the kind that did not demand attention and therefore often received it. He had known her before the marriage ended and after, through months when she answered every message and months when she vanished.

"Is this about Matthew?" he asked.

She lowered her arm.

"He was with a woman. Younger, prettier, probably emotionally stable."

"Those are three separate accusations."

"She laughed at everything he said."

"Maybe he became funny."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Donnie took her hand. "You left him."

"We left each other."

"You told me you couldn't breathe in that marriage."

"I couldn't."

"Then why does seeing him happy hurt?"

Ronica stared at the ceiling.

"Because he got to become someone else."

Donnie's thumb moved once over her knuckles, then stopped.

“Maybe he just kept living.”

Ronica nearly reached for the wine.

“I stood there helpless.”

“You saved her,” he said.

“I called people. I couldn’t even pick her up.”

“You stayed.”

“I almost ran.”

“But you didn’t.”

Ronica sat up and reached for the glass.

Donnie held it out of reach.

“Give me that.”

“In a minute.”

“You’re not my therapist.”

“No therapist would accept this payment structure.”

She tried to smile. It failed.

“I held her today,” she said. “Frankie brought her to Mom’s grave.”

“That is a very Frankie location for childcare.”

“She held my necklace. She looked at me like—”

Ronica stopped.

“Like what?”

“Like she was waiting.”

“For you?”

“I don’t know.”

The doorbell rang downstairs.

Ronica glanced at the clock. 12:47.

It rang again.

Her phone showed four missed calls from Frankie.

“That cannot be good,” Donnie said.

She pulled on a robe. “Stay here.”

“Want me downstairs?”

“Definitely not.”

“I could introduce myself as your spiritual adviser.”

“Get dressed.”

She left the bedroom and stopped in the hallway.

At the far end stood a closed door.

The nursery.

She had not entered it in months. Sometimes she dusted the outside handle. Sometimes, after drinking, she rested her forehead against the wood without opening it.

The bell rang a third time.

Ronica went downstairs.

Frankie stood on the porch holding the baby.

She slept against his chest.

"What happened?" Ronica asked.

"Placement emergency. Temporary. A pipe burst in the county nursery, the infant wing lost heat and every licensed emergency bed is full."

"And the solution became my house?"

"For one night," Frankie said, stepping inside. "The after-hours supervisor approved a one-night emergency safety plan, but a caseworker still has to clear the house. I stay as the supervising adult until the placement team arrives."

Ronica stared at him. "You volunteered to sleep in my living room?"

"I objected for twenty minutes."

"That sounds more like you."

Donnie appeared at the top of the stairs, shirt buttoned incorrectly and one shoe in his hand.

Frankie's expression turned judicial.

"Donnie," Ronica said, "meet my brother, who has arrived at one in the morning with an infant and will still find a way to judge us."

"Sergeant," Donnie said.

"Where's your other shoe?" Frankie asked.

"Somewhere under the collapse of Western civilization."

Frankie did not laugh.

The baby stirred. Ronica reached for her.

Frankie hesitated before handing her over.

The baby settled against Ronica and went still.

"Has she been fed?"

"Eleven. She may need more in an hour. The nurse wrote everything down."

"How do I know if the bottle's too hot?"

Frankie stared.

"That was a genuine question."

He opened the plastic bag and showed her the instructions. "Test it on your wrist. Keep her on her back when she sleeps. Nothing loose in the crib. If she turns blue around the lips or stops responding, call an ambulance."

Ronica's face went cold. "Why would she stop responding?"

"She won't. Those are standard instructions."

Donnie came down with both shoes as the bell rang again.

Ms. Keller entered carrying a county badge, a clipboard and the expression of a woman who had inspected too many homes after midnight. She checked their IDs, tested the smoke alarms and locks, then entered the nursery. A thin layer of dust covered the dresser. She ran one finger across it and looked at Ronica.

"The room hasn't been used," Ronica said.

Ms. Keller wrote something on her clipboard, then inspected the crib and opened the drawers. They were empty. Frankie confirmed that the supplies brought with the baby were downstairs. She called the after hours supervisor from the kitchen and read the case number aloud.

Her gaze stopped on the empty bottles in the kitchen and then on Ronica.

"You are not being approved tonight," she said. "This is not foster approval. It is a one night emergency safety plan, and Sergeant Gramby is the supervising adult. He remains in this house until the placement team arrives in the morning."

Ronica looked at the baby. "May I care for her?"

"While he is present and responsible. No alcohol. No visitors. Call emergency services for breathing difficulty, blue lips, fever or unresponsiveness. I will return at eight."

The arrangement humiliated Ronica because it was reasonable.

Donnie paused at the door beside Frankie.

"She's not as careless as you think," he said quietly.

"You know her from midnight onward."

Donnie chose to remain silent.

After Donnie left and Ms. Keller finished the emergency placement forms, Frankie locked the front door and put his coat over the sofa.

"I'm staying downstairs," he said.

"I heard the part where the state assigned me a chaperone."

"The county assigned the child a supervising caregiver."

The distinction hurt. Ronica accepted it anyway.

She stood in the entrance hall with the baby in her arms and the bag hanging from one wrist.

Upstairs, the room that had once waited for one baby now waited for another.

Chapter 6

Glow

Ronica carried the baby upstairs and stopped outside the nursery.

She opened the door with her shoulder and remained at the threshold. The room still smelled faintly of dust. The lamp beside the crib still worked. Its yellow light revealed a room left untouched after hope had ended.

Pale walls. White crib. Cartoon animals above the changing table. A rocking chair in the corner. Unopened boxes of diapers now too old to trust. A knitted blanket Matthew's mother had mailed before the baby incident, then never asked to have returned.

For two years, Ronica had treated the room as a grave no one else could see.

The baby woke in her arms.

"This is not your room," Ronica whispered. "You're borrowing it. Eight in the morning and we both return to our regularly scheduled disasters."

The baby yawned.

"Do not look pleased."

Ronica laid her on the changing table and unfolded the nurse's instructions.

Four ounces of formula. Burp after feeding. Check diaper. Place on back to sleep. No loose blankets.

She read the page twice.

The first bottle was too hot. The second clumped at the bottom. By the third attempt, the baby was crying while Ronica shook the bottle harder than necessary.

"I know. I'm aware I'm underperforming."

She tested the milk against her wrist, sat in the rocking chair and guided the nipple into the baby's mouth.

The crying stopped.

The baby drank with grave concentration, one hand resting against Ronica's chest. Warm fingers spread over the place where her heart beat.

Pain opened there without warning.

The room held two memories at once. One lived in the untouched crib, the patch on the wall where Matthew had tested five shades of paint, and the drawer filled with clothes no one had worn.

The other was forming now, in milk stains and the unmistakable smell of a baby fart.

"I don't know how to hold both of you," she told the baby.

The baby went still against Ronica, her small face tightening with effort.

“Of course. What goes in must come out.”

She carried the baby to the changing table and failed at the diaper twice. During the third attempt, the baby urinated, soaking the clean cloth and part of Ronica’s sleeve.

“You waited for the moment,” Ronica said. “That is personal.”

The baby blinked.

While searching her coat for a tissue, Ronica found the black feather from the cemetery. She placed it on the dresser.

The feather curled toward the crib.

No window was open. No air moved.

Ronica picked it up with two fingers, crossed the room, opened the window and threw the feather into the rain.

When she returned, the baby was staring at the empty doorway. Her pupils widened until her eyes appeared entirely black.

“No,” Ronica whispered.

She did not know whether she addressed the baby or herself.

The baby looked back at her. Brown returned.

Ronica lifted her and began singing the only lullaby she remembered. Nancy had sung it badly, replacing forgotten lyrics with whatever words fit. Ronica did the same.

Halfway through the second verse, the baby relaxed.

The sound of Ronica’s own voice in that room made her cry. She kept singing.

Around three, she gave the baby a tour of the house.

“This is the kitchen. Here is the desk where I used to write every morning. Here is the window I pretend not to watch from when my brother drives away. And here”—she opened the cabinet—“is the life I have not been managing.”

Four bottles of wine waited inside.

The baby made a dissatisfied sound.

“Judgment already. You and Frankie will get along beautifully.”

Ronica took out a bottle. Her hand stayed around its neck.

Pouring it away would be theatrical, she told herself. One dramatic gesture could not turn her into a sober person or a suitable mother. She had spent years mistaking intensity for change.

She put the bottle back.

Then she wrote the time of the feeding on the nurse’s sheet and set an alarm for the next one.

A promise, she thought, could begin as something that small.

At three thirty, the baby slept on her back in the crib while Ronica sat in the rocking chair. She took one photograph.

She almost deleted it. Keeping the image felt like a claim.

Ronica saved it in a folder with no name.

Then she returned to the kitchen, took out all four bottles and poured them down the sink.

The act was small enough to prove nothing.

It felt like a beginning anyway.

At eight sharp, Frankie came upstairs from the sofa with a wide smile and eyes well rested.

Ronica met him in the nursery doorway and did not invite him farther.

"Her name is Glow," she said.

He looked at the baby, then at his sister.

"No, it isn't."

"It is until someone gives her a worse one."

"What kind of name is Glow?"

"The kind chosen at four in the morning by someone who had not slept."

He reached for the baby.

Glow began to cry before he touched her.

Ronica held on for one extra second. Not long enough to be called refusal. Long enough for both of them to feel it.

Then she let go.

The crying followed Frankie to the car.

Ronica stood at the window and watched them leave.

Chapter 7

The Foster House

Three days after Glow left, Ronica knew the foster family's morning routine.

The father drove away at six forty-five in a dark green van. The oldest boy, Marcus, took out the trash before school. Tanya opened the curtains at eight and closed them whenever Ronica parked too near the house.

Ronica knew she had crossed a line.

Knowing did not make her leave.

Frankie had refused to tell her where Glow was placed. Social services would not speak to her because she was neither family nor an approved guardian. Dr. Brown confirmed only that the baby had been discharged and would return for a follow-up appointment.

So Ronica gave Frankie a reason to visit the foster home.

The stuffed elephant from the nursery, she told him. It had been meant for the baby she had lost, but she wanted Glow to have it.

Frankie called the gesture unnecessary.

The following afternoon, Ronica watched him leave the police station carrying the elephant in a paper bag.

She followed his car.

Now, on the second morning of surveillance, she sat beneath a broad maple tree with bad coffee cooling between her hands and told herself she was not spying on strangers. She was verifying.

The house was small and chaotic. Muddy shoes crowded the porch. Two bicycles lay across the front yard, and a plastic basketball hoop leaned toward the street.

Five foster children lived there besides Glow. Frankie had offered the number as proof of experience. Ronica heard only exhaustion.

That Saturday, the green van returned at nine thirty.

Children spilled from every door. Two girls argued over a towel. A younger boy dragged a swimming bag larger than his body. The father circled the vehicle collecting cups, shoes and something wet enough to drip.

Ronica searched for Glow.

Marcus stepped from the rear holding her against his chest.

No carrier. No visible car seat. A child holding another child.

Ronica opened her door and forced herself to remain seated.

Watch, she told herself. Confirm. Call someone if necessary.

Tanya came around the van. She was broad-shouldered, tired and moving too fast. The youngest child ran toward the street. Another dropped a bag. Tanya shouted, caught the runner by the shirt and turned toward Marcus.

“Bring the baby inside.”

“I have the bags.”

“Leave the bags.”

Glow began to cry.

Tanya reached for Glow with one arm while holding the youngest child with the other. Marcus shifted the baby toward her. For a second, Glow sat awkwardly between their bodies, crying.

Ronica was out of the car before she chose to move.

“Support her neck.”

Tanya turned. “Excuse me?”

“Her neck. Hold her properly.”

Tanya shifted Glow against her shoulder, still gripping the youngest child’s shirt with her other hand. “Who are you?”

“The one who found her.”

Recognition hardened the woman’s face. “You’re the one who’s been sitting across the street.”

“I wanted to make sure she was safe.”

“You have been watching my house?”

The father approached. “Tanya, give me the baby.”

Ronica saw Glow’s face over Tanya’s shoulder.

The baby’s eyes found hers.

The crying stopped.

“She knows me.”

Tanya stepped back. “You need to leave.”

“You drove her without a car seat.”

“The seat is in the middle row. Marcus took her out after we stopped while I got the others.”

“He’s a child.”

“And you’re trespassing.”

One of the younger girls began to cry. The other children gathered by the porch and watched.

The father took out his phone.

Ronica moved toward Glow. “Let me hold her.”

“No.”

“She wants me.”

Tanya's face softened with sympathy.

"You have too many children to watch."

The softness vanished.

"You know nothing about my family."

"I know what I saw."

"What did you see? Six happy children coming home from a morning at the public pool? You saw me keep one from running into the street while taking the baby from Marcus. You saw what you came here to see."

Glow cried again. Ronica reached for the edge of the blanket.

Tanya turned her shoulder away.

Ronica should have stopped. Instead she caught the blanket, then the baby, pulling Glow against her chest as Tanya shouted.

Marcus dragged the younger children toward the house. The father shouted into the phone.

"What is wrong with you?" Tanya yelled. "Give her back."

"She needs someone who loves her."

Tanya stared at her. "You think I don't?"

Police sirens answered from the road.

An officer ordered Ronica to release the baby. She tightened her hold. He took her arm while a second officer lifted Glow away. Ronica resisted until her wrist was twisted behind her back and the baby was gone.

Ronica was handcuffed and placed in the rear of a patrol car. The door remained open while officers took statements.

Marcus stepped toward them. "She wasn't falling."

No one listened.

He raised his voice. "The baby wasn't falling. My mom had her. That lady grabbed her."

Ronica heard him clearly.

Shame entered where certainty had been.

Tanya approached after the officer finished questioning her. Glow rested against her shoulder, one small hand gripping the collar of her shirt.

"You think I don't know what people say about foster families," Tanya said through the open door. "They think we collect checks. They think we can't love children because some of them leave. You looked at me for half a minute and decided your love was real and mine was temporary."

Ronica wanted to defend herself. Instead she looked beyond Tanya.

One girl pressed a towel to another child's scraped knee. Marcus had gathered every abandoned bag. The father stood with an arm around the boy who had run toward traffic.

The household was chaotic.

It was also a household.

"I found her," Ronica said, and heard how little the words proved.

"That matters," Tanya replied. "But it doesn't make everyone who came after you less important."

The officer shut the door.

As the car pulled away, Ronica saw Tanya kiss Glow's head. The gesture was automatic, practiced and real.

Glow lifted her face from Tanya's shoulder and found Ronica through the window. For a moment, they held each other's gaze.

The scene pressed in on her.

Tanya's anger.

Marcus's guilt.

The children's fear.

Ronica rested her forehead against the glass.

She could not explain it, but something was coming for the baby. Something no one else could see yet.

Glow needed protection.

Chapter 8

The Choice

The holding cell allowed four steps in either direction.

Ronica counted until the number became punishment.

Four to the wall. Turn. Four to the bars. Turn.

The paint opposite her carried initials inside a crooked heart, a date from eleven years earlier and a sentence beginning I SWEAR I DIDN'T before ending where the writer had either lost interest or been released.

She sat on the narrow bench.

For most of her adult life, Ronica had believed she was one decision away from becoming someone else. The sober version. The working writer. The daughter who had visited her father before he died. The wife who had found a way back to Matthew before grief taught them to live apart.

Now she wondered whether there had ever been another version. Perhaps there was only this one, making different excuses.

She had followed a police officer to a confidential foster placement. Watched strangers from her car. Entered their yard. Taken a baby from an approved guardian.

Any reasonable person would call that dangerous.

Ronica pressed her palms against her eyes.

Glow's face appeared in the dark.

Do not let go.

Had she imagined the words? Alcohol could not explain them. She had not drunk since the night Glow slept in her house.

The possibility that the voice was real frightened her.

The need beneath it frightened her more.

Keys moved beyond the bars.

Frankie appeared with an officer, dismissed him and opened the cell.

"You know," he said, "I will not always be here to pull you out when you put your head where it doesn't belong."

Ronica remained seated. "How is she?"

"The booking sheet lists trespass and harassment. The district attorney will decide whether to add interference with custody of children charges, and your first question is still about that child."

"How is she?"

“Fine. Social Services is reviewing the placement because you almost turned a front yard into a crime scene.”

“They should remove her.”

“The family did nothing criminal.”

Ronica looked away.

“You saw a tired woman in a difficult moment,” Frankie said, “and made her a monster because you needed one.”

“She was careless.”

“So were you the night you found her in that alley.”

“I wasn’t responsible for her.”

“Exactly. Yet one night with her convinced you that you understand responsibility better than a woman raising five other children.”

Ronica stood. “That family gets paid to keep children at the minimum level the county allows. You told me yourself.”

“I said the system works with what it has. I did not say Tanya doesn’t care.”

“Then why did Glow stop crying when she saw me?”

“Children do that.”

“She knows me.”

“She spent one night with you.”

“She knows me.”

Frankie studied her.

“This is about the stillbirth.”

The cell contracted around her.

“Don’t.”

“You’re placing everything you lost onto this child.”

“I said don’t.”

“She cannot fix what happened.”

Ronica crossed the space between them. “I know that.”

“Do you?”

“She is not my dead baby. She is not Matthew. She is not Mom. She is not a sign sent by the universe to make my pain important.” Ronica’s voice broke; she kept going. “She is a child someone threw away, and every adult who touches her keeps deciding the least terrible option is good enough.”

Frankie said nothing.

"I almost left her in that bin because I was afraid. I let you take her because I told myself responsible people knew better. Maybe Tanya loves her. Maybe I was wrong about the yard. But I am not wrong about this. Glow needs someone who will keep choosing her."

"Like who?"

The question came quietly.

Ronica looked at him.

"Me."

Frankie laughed once, without humor. "You're single. You drink. You don't have regular work. You were arrested today for trying to take her."

"Then tell me what must change."

"People don't rebuild a life because they had a dramatic afternoon."

"No. They rebuild it because the next morning comes and they choose again."

"You can't adopt a child because you feel called."

"Then tell me the process. Background checks? Home inspections? Classes? Court? Sobriety tests? I'll do all of it."

"And when it becomes difficult?"

"It's difficult now."

"When she wakes you every night? When she gets sick? When your writing doesn't pay? When you want to drink and there's no one to take her?"

Ronica held his gaze.

"Then I ask for help before I fail."

His face softened, though he fought it.

"You have never been good at asking."

"I'm asking now."

Frankie studied her. She had called him from bars before. After missed deadlines, broken promises and nights she wanted him to clean up without asking how the mess had been made.

This was different.

She was not asking him to get her out of trouble. She was asking what trouble she would have to walk through.

Frankie looked toward the open cell door. When he spoke again, his voice had returned to procedure.

"Tanya has agreed not to press for the harshest charges, but the district attorney still decides what happens. As a condition of release, you stay away from her house. You do not contact the family or interfere with the placement."

Ronica nodded.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I will leave them alone.”

SAMPLE WORK

Chapter 9

The Recovery Meeting

Three days after her release, Ronica walked toward a church basement near Mulberry Street with the meeting address open on her phone.

Frankie's Mercedes appeared twice in the reflections of shop windows, always half a block behind. By the time she reached the church, it had parked across the street.

She pretended not to notice.

A paper sign was taped to the glass door.

RECOVERY MEETING. ALL ARE WELCOME.

A gray haired woman opened the door from inside.

"Meeting starts in ten."

"I may be in the wrong place," Ronica replied.

"Most people say that the first time."

The woman touched Ronica's elbow without holding it.

Ronica looked back toward the street. Frankie's car remained beneath a dead streetlamp, its windshield reflecting the cloudy afternoon.

"You only have to stay for today," the woman said.

"That sounds suspiciously like a slogan."

"You're already here. What do you have to lose?"

Ronica could have offered several answers.

Instead, she stepped inside.

The basement smelled of burnt coffee and old carpet. Metal chairs formed a circle around people who did not look ruined enough to frighten her or healed enough to impress her.

A man in work boots read sports scores on his phone.

A woman arranged sugar packets into careful rows.

A young mother bounced a sleeping child against one shoulder.

The gray haired woman moved past Ronica without looking back. She left the final chair empty.

Ronica took it.

People introduced themselves one at a time. Some spoke for several minutes. Others gave only their names and the number of days since their last drink.

Ronica counted the chairs instead of listening.

Twelve.

Eleven occupied before her.

One door behind the coffee table.

Her turn came too quickly.

"I'm Ronica," she said.

The room waited.

She rubbed her thumb across the edge of her phone.

"I don't know whether I'm done drinking." Her voice sounded steadier than she felt. "But I know why I need to stop."

No one applauded.

The gray haired woman nodded once, and the introductions continued.

After the meeting, Ronica reached the stairs before someone called after her.

She turned.

The room had emptied except for a man folding chairs, the young mother arranging her child's bag and the gray haired woman, who was looking directly at Ronica and offering her a cup.

"I don't drink coffee," Ronica said.

The woman held out the cup anyway.

Ronica accepted it but did not drink.

"I'm Lucille."

"Do you wait until people are leaving to introduce yourself?"

"I wait until they've decided whether they're coming back."

"And what did I decide?"

Lucille leaned against the table.

"Why did you come?"

"I said why."

"You said you know why you need to stop. That isn't the same thing."

Ronica stared into the coffee. A thin skin had already formed across the surface.

"There's a child."

Lucille waited.

"She isn't mine."

"Do you want her to be?"

"Yes."

The word came too quickly. Ronica tightened her grip on the cup.

Lucille looked toward the empty chairs. "And someone told you they won't place a child with a woman who drinks."

"Among other charming observations."

"Were they wrong?"

Ronica looked at her.

Lucille's expression did not change.

"No," Ronica said.

"Good."

"Good?"

"Truth saves time."

Ronica gave a sharp laugh. "You're very good at making people feel better."

"I'm not trying to make you feel better."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"Find out whether you want to change or only want the consequences to change."

Ronica looked toward the stairs again.

Lucille lifted her own cup and drank.

"How long have you been sober?" Ronica asked.

"Fourteen years."

"And before that?"

Lucille rubbed one thumb along the seam of the cup.

"I stopped when I was pregnant. Started again when my daughter was six months old. Stopped when my husband threatened to leave. Started again when he stayed. Stopped after I drove into a mailbox with my daughter in the back seat."

Ronica's eyes dropped to the coffee table.

"She wasn't hurt," Lucille continued. "That became my excuse."

"How old was she?"

"Four."

Ronica swallowed.

"The next time, I left her alone in the apartment while I went to the store for a bottle. I thought I was gone ten minutes. It was closer to three hours."

"What happened?"

"She woke up and knocked on a neighbor's door."

Ronica pictured a small girl standing alone in the hallway, calling for someone who had promised to be there and wasn't.

"Did they take her?"

"For a while."

"And you got her back?"

“Eventually.”

The word held no triumph.

“Did she forgive you?”

Lucille looked down at the coffee in her cup.

Ronica let the unanswered question remain between them.

“How did you do it?” she asked.

“I stopped asking whether I was a good person.”

Ronica frowned.

“I asked whether I had done the next thing I was supposed to do. Wake up. Call someone. Go to work. Tell the truth. Go to a meeting. Go home without buying alcohol.”

“That sounds small.”

“It was.”

“And that was enough?”

“For a few days. Then I did it again.”

Ronica looked toward the young mother. She had finished fastening the carrier and was pulling a knitted hat over the sleeping child’s head.

“I’m afraid they’ll never give her to me,” Ronica said.

Lucille nodded.

“I’m afraid I’ll do everything they ask, and they’ll still decide I’m not safe.”

“They might.”

Ronica stared at her. “You really have no talent for encouragement.”

“You asked me to tell the truth.”

“I did not.”

“You came here. It amounts to the same thing.”

The young mother carried her child toward the stairs. Ronica stepped aside to let them pass.

When the door closed above them, the basement became quieter.

“What if I get her?” Ronica asked.

Lucille waited.

“What if they trust me, and one night I want a drink more than I want to be the person they believed I was?”

“There will be nights when you want the drink.”

Ronica pressed her lips together.

“What do I do then?”

“You call someone before you take it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you call before the second one.”

Ronica shook her head. “That sounds too easy.”

“It isn’t easy. It’s simple. People confuse the two.”

Lucille took a paper napkin from the table and wrote a phone number on it.

“Keep this.”

Ronica took it.

“Call before the first drink,” Lucille said. “Not after the last.”

“What if I call and still drink?”

“Then at least someone will know where you are.”

Ronica folded the napkin once.

“You aren’t going to tell me I can become the woman that child needs?”

“No. I’m going to tell you that tomorrow’s meeting starts at seven.”

Ronica slipped the folded napkin into her coat pocket.

“And if I don’t come?”

“Then the meeting will start without you.”

Nothing in Lucille’s voice suggested that Ronica was special enough to be saved or hopeless enough to be abandoned.

That felt like a relief.