Despite It All, I Made It Through

Standing

Volume II

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Chapter One

Paris

The train arrived at dawn.

Tommaso doesn’t remember the exact time. Just the light. An early morning light, still pale, coming through the windows of the carriage, a color he didn’t recognize. Ligurian light is different: honest, direct, falling on the sea and the cliffs without apology. This light was softer, grayer, filtered through a sky he didn’t understand yet.

He had stepped off the train with what he had on him. Almost nothing.

The station was enormous. He didn’t know stations could be that big. He had known the ones on the Ligurian coast, human-scale buildings where you could see the exit from the platform. Here, he couldn’t see it. He saw hundreds of people walking in every direction with the easy confidence of people who know where they’re going.

He only knew that Thierry was supposed to come for him, that he was somewhere in this crowd, in this city that wasn’t his.

Thierry was there.

He had found him. Or rather, Thierry had found him, because a young man standing in the middle of a Parisian train station looking like he’d just fallen from the moon, you notice that. They had greeted each other. The memory blurs at that point, the way it often does when too much is happening at once for any of it to register properly.

What Tommaso remembers is the city through the car window.

Paris.

It wasn’t the beauty that struck him. Not yet. It was the size. The sheer scale of everything. The avenues wide as rivers, the buildings rising so high you had to tilt your head back to see the top. People everywhere, noise everywhere. He came from a coast where the houses pressed against each other along narrow lanes, where you recognized people in the street, where the sea was always there to remind

you where you were. Here, no sea. Just this enormous city that kept going in every direction without ever stopping.

Where am I? What am I doing here?

He would repeat this to himself dozens of times in the days that followed. Walking through streets he didn’t know, trying to decipher the sounds of a language that eluded him, looking up at a sky that was nothing like the one he’d left behind.

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Thierry and Nathalie lived in a Parisian apartment. Walls, a kitchen, a bathroom, a door that closed. For a boy who had slept on a beach the week before, it might as well have been a palace.

They were wonderful. It has to be said, and said clearly, because it’s true and because what comes next might suggest otherwise if you’re not careful. They took him into their home, into their life as a couple, into their daily routine, without asking for anything in return. Nathalie prepared the meals, Thierry tried to help him find his way in a city that

looked nothing like anything he'd ever known. They opened their door to him. Another door opening, in a life where so many others had closed.

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The problem was Tommaso.

He was eighteen, fresh out of the institutions, and no one had taught him how to live in someone else's home. He smoked at the living room window, ash falling onto the ledge. He'd burned the carpet one evening with a cigarette he hadn't put out properly, a black mark in the light fabric that no one could ignore. And there had probably been other things, those small carelessnesses that pile up in a shared space and end up weighing more than goodwill.

One month. Nathalie had lasted one month. She had welcomed this stranger into her living room, fed him, put up with him, stood by him, and after a month she had simply told Thierry what he already knew: they needed to find a solution.

It wasn't a throwing out. Just a woman who needed her home back, and a brother who

understood.

Thierry had looked for a room, found a room, paid the first month’s rent and the deposit. The quiet gesture of someone who helps without making a scene and without making you feel like a burden, even when you’ve burned the carpet.

Years later, Tommaso would think about that gesture. And he would tell himself that in this life where so many people had closed doors, Thierry had opened one more.

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Before he could think about working, the city imposed itself.

You don’t discover Paris. It hits you. Tommaso walked. That was about all he knew how to do in this city where he understood nothing and knew no one: he walked. Legs, at least, worked in every language.

And he had discovered the metro.

This is no small thing for a boy who had grown up between villages where the buses came when they felt like it. The Paris metro was an underground

world where people ran, shoved, crammed into carriages that left without waiting for them. Nobody looked at anybody. Everyone knew exactly where they were going and how fast they needed to get there. Tommaso stood on the platform, eyes raised toward a map of multicolored lines that meant nothing to him, while the stream of passengers flowed around him like a current around a stone.

He came from a world where people said hello in the street. This one ran by different rules, and no one had explained them to him.

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French was a wall.

Not an impassable wall. More like one of those walls you walk along without finding the way through, hoping the gap exists somewhere. Tommaso caught words on the fly, scraps of sentences, sounds he tried to reproduce with the accent of the Ligurian coast. The results weren’t always happy. People looked at him with that polite patience Parisians show a foreigner doing his best, a