Despite It All, I Made It Through

Volume III

Starting Over

Chapter 1

A New Story

It was Fabiano who had insisted.

A girl they knew from a bar was throwing a party for New Year's Eve, and Fabiano had decided they would go, for reasons Claudio and Tommaso knew and the girl hadn't yet understood. Claudio had gone along without weighing in. Tommaso had said yes because saying no required an explanation, and he didn't have one.

The apartment was packed. Music, smoke, people he didn't know who looked like they knew each other. One of those parties where you end up leaning against a wall with a glass, watching other people live while you wait for midnight to pass and the year to finally change.

Fabiano had disappeared into the kitchen, where the girl from the party was putting away bottles. Claudio was talking to someone.

Tommaso was there, somewhere between the door and the window, with his glass, and he wasn't thinking about anything in particular.

There had been this girl.

Love at first sight. But not like the other times. Someone who was looking at him. They had talked. They had liked each other. It had been as simple as that.

Caroline.

* * *

He doesn't remember what they said to each other that night. He remembers the feeling. Not the kind that swept the ground out from under him, not the dizziness of the other times. This time, a calm. A warmth rising slowly and saying: she's the one, this time she's the one.

A love at first sight that felt certain. Like when you push open a door and you know, without knowing why, that you're in the right place.

* * *

The first morning at her place, Tommaso had opened his eyes in a bedroom he didn't know. Light came in through the window, a real window, not the skylight of the maid's room. He could hear noise in the kitchen. Water running, a spoon against a cup. Caroline was making coffee.

He had stayed in bed, listening. The sounds of someone living. Sounds he hadn't heard in a long time, maybe never like this, in the calm of an apartment that smelled of coffee and morning.

She had come back with two cups. Sat on the edge of the bed. They had drunk their coffee in near silence. A silence that weighed nothing.

Tommaso had told himself he could get used to this.

* * *

The days that followed had the color of beginnings. They saw each other, and everything else had no shape.

The maid's room on the sixth floor no longer mattered to him. He would pass through, pick up a piece of clothing, leave again. Caroline's apartment, yes. The warmth of her bed, yes. Her voice in the morning, yes. Everything else continued to exist somewhere out there, but out there no longer concerned him.

One evening, they had gone to an Italian restaurant in the neighborhood. A small place, a few tables, the owner behind the counter. Tommaso had looked at the menu and ordered in Italian, just like that, without thinking. The owner had looked up. They had talked. Where he came from, how long he'd been living here, what he was having as a main course. The words came out on their own, in this language he hardly spoke to anyone anymore, and Tommaso felt an old emotion rising in him, something that felt like relief.

Caroline was watching him. She didn't understand everything, but she was listening. The sound of his voice when he switched from French to Italian, the gestures that changed, lighter, freer. She had smiled, and Tommaso had seen that smile for the first time. Not a

smile meant to please. The smile of a woman discovering someone and liking what she finds.

He had ordered for her. Pasta whose name she couldn't pronounce, a wine he had chosen without hesitating. The owner had brought them a dessert they hadn't asked for, and Tommaso had said thank you in Italian, and Caroline had laughed.

They had walked home, pressed against each other.

Another evening, a crêperie. Even simpler. A table near the window, the steam on the glass, the noise of the street outside. Tommaso had ordered a ham, cheese, and egg galette, Caroline a sweet one. They had shared both. She had said something that made him laugh — he can't remember what anymore. He remembers the steam, her hand resting on the table, and this feeling that nothing else mattered.

Tommaso couldn't get enough. He had never had this for so long.

* * *

He slept at her place. Went home. Left again. Came back once more. The maid's room was emptying of his presence night after night, like a place you leave without ever deciding to.

And then one morning, Caroline had asked the question. Simply, without making it an event, the way you suggest something obvious.

"Come live here."

Tommaso had said no.

Not a sharp no, not a definitive no. A no from someone who is afraid. He had already done this. Moving in with someone, believing that's it, that the life together is beginning, and finding yourself one day with your things in a bag. He hadn't said this to Caroline. He might not have said it to anyone at all. But the no was there, and behind the no was everything he couldn't talk about, all the doors that had opened and closed again before her.

Caroline hadn't insisted that day.