

CHAPTER 5 — BASELINE PASS

They treated the cabin like it was a crime scene and a riddle at the same time.

Not the dramatic kind—no yellow tape, no shouted orders—but the quiet, methodical kind where every movement was chosen and every choice carried weight. Baseline meant one thing here: confirm what could be confirmed without turning confirmation into a demand.

Mai set her clipboard on the table again. She didn't write. She used it like a boundary marker, a reminder that she could record later, away from the site, when words couldn't become bait.

Ace walked the perimeter of the room in slow increments, stopping at each corner, each seam, each spot where the floor met the wall. She didn't touch the walls. She didn't tap. She didn't make the room answer.

She listened with her body.

Shammy stood in the center again, eyes half-lidded. The air around her remained stubbornly flat. Normally, even an old room had its own currents—heat rising, cold pooling, pressure shifting with movement. Here, every motion felt like it was being politely accepted and then forgotten.

Mai moved to the window and looked outside, not because she needed to see the trees again, but because she needed a reference point that wasn't inside the cabin's curated neutrality.

The clearing was unchanged.

Too round. Too neat. Too deliberate.

Mai's mind whispered threshold again, and she shut it down before it could become a word.

Ace's voice cut through the quiet.

"Floor's wrong," she said.

Mai turned her head, careful not to spin quickly as if startled. "Explain 'wrong.'"

Ace crouched near the doorway to the back room and pointed—not at a specific board, but at the pattern of wear.

"Listen," Ace said.

Mai frowned. "I'm listening."

Ace shook her head once, irritated at her own inability to translate sensation into clean language.

"No," Ace said. "Listen with your feet."

She stood and took one step forward. The board under her boot gave a soft, muted creak.

Then she took the same step back.

Same creak.

Same pitch.

Same duration.

She repeated it once more, and the sound was identical again.

Mai's brow furrowed. She stepped into the same spot and shifted her weight. The floor answered with the same tiny sound—too consistent, too rehearsed.

It wasn't that the floor couldn't creak. It was that it creaked like an actor hitting their mark.

Shammy's eyes opened fully.

"The room is performing," she said softly.

Ace's jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Mai swallowed.

A cabin's sounds were never consistent. Wood responded to weather, to humidity, to the weight of a person, to time. This floor sounded like it was imitating wood rather than being wood.

Mai's pen-hand twitched again. She forced it still.

"We note it later," she said. "No on-site commentary beyond necessity."

Ace didn't argue, but her gaze flicked to the shelf.

The folded paper was still there.

Still tucked behind the tin.

Still waiting.

Mai made herself not look at it too long. She didn't want her mind to start treating it like the axis of the room.

"Back room baseline," Mai said.

Ace nodded and moved toward the doorway again. She paused before crossing, checking Shammy's posture the way she'd checked it earlier.

Shammy gave a small nod. Aligned.

They entered the back room together.

The bedframe still sat against the wall. The wardrobe still stood, door closed. The corners were still too clean.

Mai walked the line of the wall without touching it, eyes scanning for markings, scratches, anything that looked like language trying to become physical.

Nothing.

Ace approached the wardrobe again and stopped. She didn't open it this time.

Mai noticed her restraint. That mattered. Ace had never been the type to resist the urge to test a

space. This file was already changing her, and they'd been inside the cabin less than an hour.

Shammy leaned down again, inhaling. Her expression tightened.

"Still no scent," she murmured. "It's like... time isn't allowed to leave residue."

Mai nodded. "Or residue is being curated."

Ace's eyes flicked to Mai. "That's already a story."

Mai's lips pressed together. She didn't apologize—apologies were emotional punctuation, and this case didn't need punctuation. She simply adjusted.

"Then," Mai said, voice flat, "residue absent."

Ace nodded once, satisfied.

They moved back into the front room, and Mai immediately felt the difference—not in temperature, not in light, but in her own nervous system.

She was starting to anticipate.

That was dangerous.

Anticipation was a form of interpretation.

Mai forced her shoulders down and took one deliberate breath in through her nose, out through her mouth. Not a meditation. A reset.

Ace went to the door and looked at the frame.

"What?" Shammy asked quietly.

Ace's fingers hovered near the edge of the wood, then stopped. She didn't touch.

"The door," Ace said. "When we came in, I thought it wasn't fully latched."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And now?"

Ace stared. "Now it looks fully latched."

Mai felt the urge to say: Maybe you misjudged the angle. Maybe the light changed.

She didn't. Those were stories too.

Instead, she asked the safe question again.

"Are we all seeing the latch in the same position?" Mai asked.

Ace's gaze remained fixed. "Yes."

Shammy nodded. "Yes."

Mai exhaled slowly.

Shared perception. Still.

But the fact that they needed to keep asking that question was its own warning.

Mai turned to the table and finally wrote a second line on her page:

Baseline includes: consistency checks required.

She kept it vague on purpose.

Ace's gaze flicked to her writing, then away. She didn't comment.

Shammy shifted slightly, her long fingers brushing the back of the chair without grasping it. A reflex, maybe, a human imitation of grounding.

Her fingers froze.

Mai saw it.

Shammy's eyes were on the chair now, fixed, almost accusing.

"What?" Mai asked.

Shammy swallowed—an unnecessary physical act for someone like her, but she did it anyway.

"The chair," she said.

Ace looked. "It moved?"

Shammy shook her head. "No."

Mai's pulse ticked faster. "Then what?"

Shammy's voice dropped further, as if even volume mattered.

"It didn't move," she said. "But it feels like it... wants to be moved."

Ace's mouth twisted. "That's a sentence the file would hate."

Shammy's eyes tightened. "I know."

Mai didn't correct Shammy. She understood what Shammy meant: objects here weren't inert. They were invitations. They were suggestions disguised as furniture.

Mai stepped carefully to the chair and stopped a foot away, staring at it the way you stared at a button you shouldn't press.

She did not touch it.

She did not move it.

She did not test the temptation.

Instead, she did something else—something that felt almost childish in its simplicity.

She looked at Ace.

She looked at Shammy.

And she said, calmly, neutrally:

“We do not participate.”

Ace stared at her, and for a moment something in Ace’s expression softened—approval, maybe. Respect. A recognition that Mai’s discipline was holding the line.

Shammy let out a breath that sounded like relief.

They continued the baseline sweep without touching anything that felt like it wanted to matter.

They confirmed the structure, the rooms, the absence of smell, the curated neutrality, the unnatural consistency of sound. They did it slowly, without making the cabin answer.

And through it all, the folded strip of paper remained behind the tin on the shelf, quiet and patient.

Not calling.

Not whispering.

Just existing in the most dangerous way possible:

As a piece of potential meaning, placed perfectly where a human mind would itch to complete it.

When the baseline pass ended, Mai didn’t announce it like a victory.

She only said, very quietly:

“Baseline complete.”

Ace nodded, eyes still scanning. “Nothing’s started yet.”

Shammy stared at the corners again, listening for a breath that didn’t exist.

Mai looked once—only once—at the folded paper on the shelf.

It hadn’t moved.

Which meant the cabin hadn’t needed to.

Not yet.—

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