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## Chapter 6: The Gaps in the Story

<!-- Word count: ~4,700 | Target: 4,700 | Anchor: The wooden bird—cracked wings, one half in Vera's hand, the other half somewhere Ace doesn't remember. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Ace's shadow-pressure reacts to the bird—pulling toward it like a compass pointing north. -> <!-- POV: Mai | Structural Approach: Investigation Scene ->

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The wooden bird sat on the table. Cracked wings. One half. The other half somewhere Ace didn't remember.

Mai spread the documents around it. Interrogation notes. Timeline. Inconsistency log. The framework was there. The pattern was there. She just couldn't see it yet.

Vera had been with them for two days. Two days of questions. Two days of measured answers. Two days of gaps that didn't line up and stories that almost connected.

And Mai couldn't stop counting.

One. Two. Three. The fingers tapped the table. The pattern-seeking was automatic. Running scenarios in the background while the foreground processed the woman who might or might not be Ace's sister.

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The bird was Vera's proof. The wooden bird with the cracked wing. One half.

"I kept it." Vera's controlled delivery was steady. "I don't know why. I woke up with it. After the fire. After everything. It was the only thing I had."

The other half was somewhere. Somewhere Ace didn't remember. Somewhere that might have existed or might have been lost in the Blood-Rift.

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. If the bird was real, then someone had made it. Someone had cracked it. Someone had given one half to each child. The logic was sound. The pattern was there.

But the probabilities didn't line up.

"Where did you wake up?" Mai's analytical voice clicked into place. "After the fire. What location?"

Vera's threshold touch activated. Her fingers brushed the doorframe. "I don't remember the location. I remember waking. I remember... light. Then darkness. Then waking again."

"You don't remember the location."

"I remember the smell of rain." Vera's controlled delivery faltered. "I remember the sound of water. I remember being cold. But I don't remember where."

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Mai's inconsistency log added another entry. Location unknown. Sensory details present. No geographical anchor.

"Who found you?"

"I don't know." Vera's fingers touched the doorframe again. "I remember faces. But they're blurred. I remember hands. But I don't know whose hands they were."

Mai's framework clicked. Another gap. Another absence. The story had emotional content. The story had sensory details. But the story had no facts.

"Your memories of the fire." Mai's analytical voice pressed. "Tell me about them again."

Vera's controlled delivery stayed controlled. "I remember heat. Burning. Someone screaming. I remember reaching for someone. A hand. And then nothing. I woke up years later. Alone."

"Years later."

"I don't know how many years. I don't know where the time went. I just know that one day I woke up, and the fire was a memory. And I was alone."

Mai's fingers tapped the table. One. Two. Three. Four.

The story was consistent in emotional content. The story was inconsistent in specific details. The pattern was there. Mai just couldn't see it.

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Ace stood by the window. Still. The fragment was quiet. But her eyes stayed on the wooden bird.

The half-bird. The cracked wing. The object that Vera had kept for years.

"You don't remember this." Mai's analytical voice was careful. "You don't remember the bird. You don't remember the other half."

"I don't remember." Ace's voice was flat. "But my hands remember."

"What do your hands remember?"

Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. The emerald glow pulsed at her edges. Her body was responding before her mind.

"Holding something." Ace's voice was flat. "Small. Wooden. Cracked. I don't remember the bird. But I remember the shape."

"The shape."

"The shape of holding." Ace's hands moved. Not deliberately. Her body was responding. "Two hands. One holding the other. The shape of something broken in the middle."

Mai's framework added another entry. Body memory. Fragment memory. Not conscious. But present.

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Shammy moved through the room. Atmospheric pressure followed her. Heavier. Watching.

"The bird is real." Shammy's voice was warm. "I can feel it. The wood. The crack. The years of being held."

"But?"

"But the story around it..." Shammy's presence shifted. "The gaps aren't lies. They're absences. Like someone took the story and removed pieces. But the story itself is real. She believes it."

"Belief isn't truth." Mai's analytical voice pressed. "She could believe a story someone told her. She could believe memories that were implanted."

"She could." Shammy moved closer. The pressure in the room changed. "But the question isn't whether she's lying. The question is whether the story is hers."

Mai's framework stuttered. The pattern-seeking clicked. The question she hadn't asked.

"The story is emotional." Mai's analytical voice ran the logic. "The story has sensory details. But the story has no facts. No locations. No names. No faces. If the story was implanted, someone removed the identifying details."

"Or she never had them." Shammy's voice was warm. "Trauma does that. Removes the details. Leaves the feelings."

"Or someone built the story that way." Mai's fingers tapped the table. "Built it with emotional truth. Built it without factual anchors. Built it to be believed."

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Mai sat with the documents. The inconsistency log. The timeline. The probabilities.

The details that matched were emotional. The details that didn't match were factual.

If Vera was real, then she was a survivor with fragmentary memory. Trauma gaps. Absences. Real feelings about real events.

If Vera was a construct, then someone had built her with emotional truth and removed the facts. Someone had made her believe a story that wasn't hers.

The probabilities were almost even.

But Mai's framework was running another thread. A thread she didn't want to follow.

If Vera was real, then Ace had a sister. Blood family. Someone who came before the triad. Someone who could take Ace's attention. Someone who could replace Mai in the family equation.

If Vera was real, Mai's analytical distance was compromised. She was counting inconsistencies not because they mattered. She was counting them because she was afraid of what they might mean.

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Ace's shadow-pressure reacted to the wooden bird. Not consciously. Her body pulled toward it. The fragment responded.

Mai watched. The pattern-seeking ran in the background. The probabilities calculated. But another thread ran underneath.

The wooden bird triggered something. Ace's body remembered. The fragment received.

If the fragment was receiving, then something was transmitting. The bird was a conductor. The fragment was a receiver. And someone was sending.

But who?

The real Vera? A memory from the past?

Or something else. Something that wasn't a person at all. A transmission from a source that wasn't alive anymore.

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"Can I see the bird?" Ace's voice was flat. "Can I hold it?"

Vera's controlled delivery stayed controlled. "Yes."

Ace's hands reached for the wooden half. Her shadow-pressure flickered. The emerald glow intensified.

And then the memory hit her.

Not burning hair this time. Not screaming.

A room. Fire. A child's voice. "You kept this." The wooden bird. Two halves. A hand reaching for hers.

And then: the doorframe. The too-high doorknob. Standing on her toes. Reaching. Smoke pouring through the cracks. Her sister's body on the floor.

"You said we'd always find each other." The child's voice. "You promised."

Ace's hand pulled back. The fragment pulsed. The memory faded.

But something was wrong.

The memory was from outside. Ace was watching, not living. She was in her own memory, but she wasn't the one remembering.

She was watching someone else remember.

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"The fragment." Mai's analytical voice clicked into place. "The fragment is receiving."

"Receiving what?" Shammy's atmospheric presence shifted.

"Transmissions." Mai's framework ran the logic. "The wooden bird conducts something. The fragment responds. And Ace receives a memory that isn't hers."

"Whose memory?" Vera's controlled delivery cracked. "If it's not hers, whose is it?"

Mai's analytical voice ran the probabilities. The fragment received. The bird conducted. The memory was from outside Ace.

If the memory wasn't Ace's, then it came from someone else. Someone connected to the fragment. Someone who had the same resonance.

The real Vera. The one who died in the Blood-Rift.

Or the construct. The one who might have been built with the real Vera's memories.

"Yours." Mai's voice was analytical. Cold. "The memory might be yours. Transmitted through the fragment. Through the bird."

Vera's threshold touch activated. Her fingers found the doorframe. "I don't... I don't know if I remember that."

"You don't remember the bird being whole. You don't remember the room. You don't remember the fire clearly. But the memory that hit Ace came from somewhere. And if the fragment is receiving, then the source is connected to her."

Mai's framework clicked. The pattern was almost visible.

The details that matched were emotional. The details that didn't match were factual. But the emotional details were transmitted. Not lived.

Vera believed the story because the story was real. But the story might not be hers.

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Mai counted the inconsistencies. The gaps. The absences.

She was counting to avoid the question underneath. The question she didn't want to ask. The question she didn't want to answer.

If Vera was real, then Mai's place in the triad might not be secure. If Vera was real, then blood family might matter more than found family. If Vera was real, then Mai was afraid.

She counted the inconsistencies. She ran the probabilities. She analyzed the story.

And underneath the analysis, she was afraid.

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Shammy's atmospheric presence shifted. She moved closer. The pressure in the room changed.

"You're counting." Shammy's voice was warm. "You've been counting for two days."

Mai's analytical framework stayed in place. "I'm analyzing the inconsistencies. The story has gaps."

"You're analyzing because you're afraid." Shammy's presence was steady. "You're afraid of what the story means. For you. For Ace. For the triad."

"I'm not—"

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"You are." Shammy moved closer. "The air around you is scattered. You're counting to hold something together. The question is: what are you holding together?"

Mai's framework cracked. The counting stopped.

"What if she's real?" Mai's voice was analytical. But underneath, it wasn't. "What if the story is true? What if blood family matters more than found family?"

Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Grounding. Steady.

"Blood calls." Shammy's voice was warm. "But found family answers. The question isn't whether she's real. The question is whether you trust the bonds you've built."

Mai's framework didn't rebuild. The counting didn't resume. The analytical distance stayed cracked.

But something shifted. The fear didn't go away. But it was held.

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The wooden bird sat on the table. One half. Cracked wings.

The details that matched were emotional. The details that didn't match were factual. Mai had to figure out which kind of truth mattered more.

And whether she was counting inconsistencies to find the truth.

Or to protect herself from it.

The pattern was there. Mai could almost see it. The story was emotional. The story was real. But the story might not be Vera's.

The question wasn't whether Vera was lying. The question was whether the story was hers. Someone else had lived it first. Someone else had died in the fire. And someone else's memories were being transmitted through a fragment. Through a wooden bird. Through a story that was almost true.

But not quite.

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. The pattern was almost visible. And underneath the analysis, the fear was still there.

Blood calls. But Mai was counting the rings. One. Two. Three. Four. Seventeen.

She was counting to hold something together.

The question was: what was she afraid would break?

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<!-- END CHAPTER 6 -->

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