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Chapter 7: Counting Rings

<!-- Word count: ~4,600 | Target: 4,600 | Anchor: Mai's counting—internal, rhythmic, invisible. One. Two. Three. Four. The phone in her memory, ringing seventeen times. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Mai's analytical distance is cracking. Her mistakes are small—overlooking details, misreading patterns—but they're clustering around Vera. She's investigating to control. -> <!-- POV: Mai | Structural Approach: Character Revelation ->

Mai sat alone in the dark.

Documents spread across the table. Inconsistency log. Timeline. Probabilities. The framework that was supposed to make sense of everything.

Not working. Pattern not visible. And Mai couldn't stop counting.

One. Two. Three. Four.

The rings in her memory. The phone that had rung seventeen times.

Night was the hardest. Triad sleeping. Vera in the guest room. Base quiet.

And Mai's framework wouldn't stop running.

The details that matched were emotional. The details that didn't match were factual. Vera's story had gaps. Absences. Things she didn't know, couldn't remember, wasn't sure of.

But the emotional content was consistent. The fire. The reaching hand. The need to find someone.

If Vera was real, she was a survivor with trauma-induced memory gaps.

If Vera was a construct, she was a fabrication with implanted emotional content.

Almost even probabilities. That was the problem.

Mai's analytical distance was supposed to hold. Framework supposed to make sense of things. Pattern-seeking supposed to find truth.

Underneath all of it, though. Underneath.

Afraid.

The phone in her memory. Seventeen rings.

Her family had called once. After she'd stopped answering. After she'd chosen the triad. The phone rang and rang and rang.

She counted every one.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.

Never picked up. Never checked who it was. Just let it ring until it stopped.

And now she was counting inconsistencies in Vera's story. Gaps. Details that didn't line up.

Not because the inconsistencies mattered.

Because she was afraid of what they might mean.

Vera appeared at the doorway.

Mai hadn't heard her approach. But the threshold touch was there. Fingers brushing the doorframe. Grounding.

"You're still working." Soft. Controlled. "It's late."

"I don't sleep much." Automatic. "The framework doesn't stop."

"What framework?"

"Pattern-seeking." Mai's fingers tapped the table. "Probabilities. Logic. It runs in the background."

Vera moved closer. Not too close. Edge of the room. Threshold touch had grounded her, but she still stood at the boundary.

"May I ask you something?"

"You can ask. I may not answer."

"Why do you count?"

The framework stuttered. "What?"

"You count. When you're anxious. When you're analyzing. I've seen it. The finger tapping." Vera held up her own fingers. "One. Two. Three."

Cracked. "It's... a habit. From before."

"Before what?"

"Before the triad. Before I chose this." The analytical voice stayed in place. Like armor that didn't fit anymore. "My family called once. After I stopped answering. Phone rang seventeen times. I counted every ring."

Vera's fingers found the doorframe. "Why didn't you answer?"

"Because I was afraid." Still analytical. Still trying. "Afraid they'd ask me to come back. Tell me I was making a mistake. Say the triad wasn't worth choosing."

"And what did you want?"

The framework didn't have an answer. Probabilities didn't run that scenario.

"I wanted them to understand. See why I chose this." The analytical voice faltered. "I wanted them to count the rings and know I wasn't going to pick up. I wanted them to know I'd already—"

She stopped.

"Did they understand?"

"I don't know." Tap. Tap. Tap. "Never found out. Never called back."

Vera stood at the threshold. Grounding. Boundary.

"You're counting now." Soft. "One. Two. Three. Four. You've been counting since I came in."

The counting stopped.

"You're investigating my story." Measured. "Looking for inconsistencies. Running probabilities. But underneath the analysis—"

"I'm not—"

"You are." Threshold touch grounded her. "Same way I can see you're counting. Same way I can see you're afraid of what my story means."

Mai's analytical distance collapsed. Framework didn't rebuild. Pattern-seeking stopped.

"What if you're real?" Quiet. "What if you are who you say you are? Ace's sister?"

"Then blood calls." Controlled. "And you're afraid of what that means for you."

"I'm not afraid—"

"You are." Closer now. Not too close. But closer. "You're afraid that if I'm real, blood matters more than found family. You're afraid Ace will choose me. You're afraid the triad won't have room for you anymore."

The framework stayed cracked.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm looking for family too." Vera's control faltered. "And I'm afraid of what I'll find. Afraid Ace won't want me. Afraid I came all this way for nothing. Afraid I'm not who I think I am."

Mai's analytical distance tried to rebuild. Couldn't. The fear was too present.

"You don't know who you are." Barely analytical now. "Gaps. Absences. Things you don't remember."

"I know I'm someone. I know I'm looking for my sister. I remember dying. I remember the fire."

"But not the village. Not your parents. Not the day before."

"I remember enough." Cracking. "Loving someone. Being loved. Reaching for a hand in the fire."

"Is that enough?"

"I don't know." Quiet. "But it's what I have."

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. Pattern-seeking clicked. Logic tried to rebuild.

Underneath the analysis, though. Something she'd been avoiding.

The details she was counting. Inconsistencies she was tracking. Clustering around one thing.

Not Vera's story. Vera herself.

Mai was investigating the person. Not the story. And the investigation was an attempt to control something she couldn't control.

If Vera was real, Mai had to face it. Blood family. Replacement. Not being enough.

If Vera was a construct, Mai could dismiss her. Disprove her. Remove the threat. Easy.

But the probabilities were even. Neither could be proven.

"You're investigating to control." Vera's voice was soft. "You're counting to hold something together. But the counting isn't helping, Mai. It's making it worse."

"How do you—"

"Because I do the same thing." Threshold touch. "I tell myself the story over and over. The fire. The reaching. The name. But I don't remember the village. I don't remember the day before. And I tell myself the emotional content is enough. But underneath—"

Stopped.

"I'm afraid it isn't."

Mai's framework stayed cracked.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid I'm not real." Control broke. "Afraid the memories aren't mine. Afraid someone built me. Afraid I'm a story someone told, and the story is all I—"

She couldn't finish.

Mai's framework couldn't process that. Probabilities didn't run that scenario.

"You feel real." The analytical voice tried. "Your emotions are real. Your fear is real."

"But are my memories?" Threshold touch. "Is the fire mine? Is the reaching hand mine? Or did someone give me those memories and tell me they were mine?"

Mai didn't have an answer.

Shammy appeared at the doorway. Pressure shifted. Heavier. Grounding.

"You're both counting." Warm. "Mai's counting inconsistencies. Vera's counting memories. And both of you are afraid the counting won't give you what you want."

Mai's framework tried to rebuild. Shammy's presence grounded her. The analytical distance came back.

But the fear didn't go away. Just held.

"The story has gaps." Analytical again. Barely. "Emotional content consistent. Factual details missing. Matches trauma. Also matches constructed memory."

"Then how do you tell the difference?"

"Details that don't match." The framework clicked. "Trauma removes details. Doesn't add them. If Vera's story has details that shouldn't be there, too consistent, too clean, too perfect—constructed."

"Are there details like that?"

The framework ran. Clicked.

"The handwriting." Click. "Your handwriting matches Ace's. That shouldn't happen. Trauma doesn't give you handwriting. That's a skill. Learned behavior."

Vera's fingers found the doorframe. "I've always written like this. Since I woke up. I don't know why."

"That's the kind of detail that shouldn't be there." Tap tap tap. "If your memory is constructed, someone gave you handwriting that matches. Fingerprint. Sign of construction."

"Or a sign of something else." Shammy's voice, warm. "Sign the memories are real. Handwriting from shared learning. From childhood. From before the fire."

Both scenarios. Probabilities still even.

Morning came. Framework kept running. Counting kept going.

But Mai saw something she hadn't seen before.

The inconsistencies she was counting. Details she was tracking. Clustering around Vera. Not the story. The person.

Investigating to control.

And the control was cracking.

The phone in her memory. Seventeen rings. The call she never answered.

Still counting. Still afraid. Still holding something together that wanted to come apart.

What would break if she stopped?

The framework ran the probabilities. Pattern almost visible.

Vera's story had emotional truth. Factual gaps. Handwriting matched. Memories transmitted. Fragment received.

And Mai was afraid that if Vera was real, the triad wouldn't have room for her anymore.

Blood calls.

But Mai was still counting the rings.

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