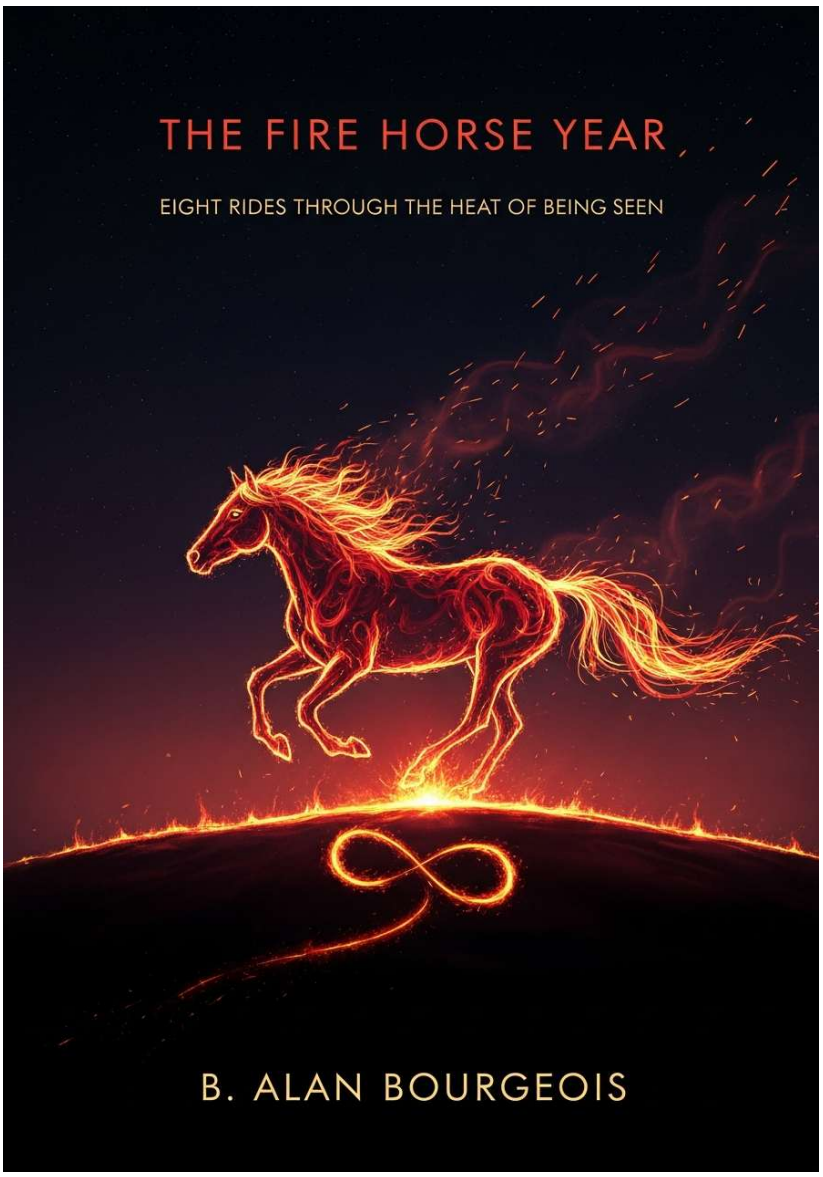

THE FIRE HORSE YEAR
EIGHT RIDES THROUGH THE HEAT OF BEING SEEN
B. ALAN BOURGEOIS

The Fire Horse Year: Eight Rides Through the Heat of Being Seen

by **B. Alan Bourgeois**

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Forward

Some years feel like weather. Others feel like a dare.

Across cultures, the Fire Horse has become shorthand for a particular kind of season—one that favors motion over waiting, courage over caution, and visibility over hiding. Not because the universe rearranges itself for our convenience, but because human beings do. When the pressure rises, we either retreat into safer versions of ourselves… or we finally step forward and let the world react.

That's the thread running through the eight stories in this collection.

Each protagonist is a creative—an artist, writer, performer, builder of meaning—caught at the moment when talent isn't the problem anymore. The problem is what talent demands once it wants to live out loud. The problem is consequence: the cost of being seen, the heat of attention, the pull of envy, the temptation to burn too fast or to hide forever. The Fire Horse isn't a promise of luck. It's a mirror for a choice: keep your work small enough to protect yourself, or risk the kind of creation that changes you in public.

These stories don't argue that magic is real. They argue that *pressure* is real. Community is real. Ambition is real. Fear is real. And when those forces collide, creativity becomes more than craft—it becomes an act of courage with a price tag.

Read these as eight different rides through the same terrain: momentum, visibility, and the discipline it takes not to combust. Some characters choose the spotlight. Some are dragged into it. Some set the rules. Some get burned. But all of them discover a version of the same truth:

Art isn’t just what you make.
It’s what you’re willing to risk to make it matter.
Welcome to the year of movement and fire.

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THE LANTERN CONTRACT

Maren Sloane had learned to paint quietly.

Not because she preferred quiet—she didn’t. She missed the loud, reckless version of herself who used to smear color like a dare, who used to believe that if she made something honest enough it would force the world to look back. But quiet was what remained after the galleries stopped returning her emails, after rent notices started arriving with red ink like a moral judgment, after the city’s arts district turned into a showroom for people who could afford “taste.”

Quiet was survival.

Her studio was a converted laundry room behind a cousin’s deli, where the walls sweated in summer and the ceiling tiles sagged like old apologies. The one window faced a brick wall that had been painted beige and then repainted beige, as if the building had tried to reinvent itself and given up halfway through.

On a Wednesday afternoon in late winter, when the light outside had the watery look of a life that hadn’t decided whether to begin, Maren stood over a blank canvas and waited for a feeling she couldn’t afford to chase anymore.

Her hands smelled faintly of turpentine and onions from the deli. Her fingers carried tiny scars from cutting stretchers and scraping dried paint. She’d sold three pieces in the past year—two to her aunt’s friends and one to a dentist who liked the color “for his waiting room.” None of those sales had felt like being chosen. They’d felt like being tolerated.

Her phone buzzed on the folding chair that served as her office. A notification. A rejection, probably. Or worse—silence, dressed up as hope.

She didn’t pick it up.

Instead she looked at the walls, at the half-finished canvases stacked like bodies in a corner. She’d started them with confidence—burnt orange skies, thick strokes, figures that looked like they were trying to push their way out of the paint. Then something had happened every time: a voice that sounded like reason had asked what the point was.

What’s the point, Maren?

The question didn’t even feel cruel anymore. It felt like weather.

She set her brush down and reached for her coat.

The truth was, she didn’t have a plan. She just couldn’t stand in that room another minute pretending the blank canvas was noble. Outside was movement. Outside at least had the decency to change.

She locked the back door, nodded at her cousin behind the deli counter, and stepped into the city.

# # #

She walked without intention, which is how she found the shop.

It sat between a shuttered travel agency and a nail salon whose fluorescent OPEN sign blinked like a pulse trying to come back. The storefront was narrow, the glass dusty enough to blur the interior into a sepia dream. A small brass plaque near the door read:

KESSLER & SONS — PAPER, INK, LANTERNS

There was no “and sons” visible in the window. There were no lanterns. Just stacks of paper in uneven piles, and an old display case with spools of thread, wooden rulers, and a set of brushes laid out like surgical tools.

Maren stopped because something in her chest did.

The bell above the door gave a soft, tired ring when she entered. The air inside smelled of cedar and dried glue, of pulp and time. It was warmer than it should have

been, as if the shop had its own climate, or its own idea of hospitality.

An old man sat behind a counter, reading a paperback with a cracked spine. He didn't look up right away. He turned a page carefully, as if the page might bruise.

When he finally lifted his eyes, they were pale and sharp.

"You're tracking turpentine," he said.

Maren glanced at her shoes as if she could see the scent.

"I'm a painter," she replied.

"Then you're tracking hunger," he said, and closed his book.

It should have annoyed her. Instead she found herself almost laughing.

"I'm just looking," she said. "I didn't know this place was here."

"It wasn't," the man said. "Now it is."

Maren took a cautious step forward, as if the floorboards might object. The shelves were filled with paper of every texture: thick sheets with fibers visible like veins, thin translucent paper that caught the light as if it wanted to become it, folded stacks tied with twine.

"What kind of paper is this?" she asked, touching a sheet that felt like skin warmed by sun.

The old man watched her fingers.

"Lantern paper," he said.

"For lanterns?" she asked.

"For what wants to be seen," he answered.

Maren frowned. "That's… poetic marketing."

"It's not marketing," he said. "It's warning."

She lifted her hand away, suddenly aware of how intimate it felt to touch anything in here. "Do you make it?"

"I did," the man said. "Before my hands forgot how."

He stood, slowly, and moved behind the counter with the stiff precision of someone who had learned to move

through pain without negotiating with it. His name, Maren realized, was likely Kessler. The plaque had not been subtle.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a flat package wrapped in brown paper and tied with red thread.

“Ivo Kessler,” he said, as if he’d heard her thought. “And no, my sons are not coming back.”

“I’m sorry,” Maren said, though she didn’t know what she was apologizing for.

He nodded once. Not forgiveness. Just acknowledgment.

He slid the package across the counter.

“This isn’t on the shelves,” he said.

Maren didn’t reach for it. “Why show it to me?”

“Because you walked in like you’d already decided you’re invisible,” he said. “And because you smell like you’d like to be wrong.”

Maren’s throat tightened. She didn’t like being read. She especially didn’t like being read accurately.

“What is it?” she asked.

Ivo didn’t answer immediately. He untied the red thread, unwrapped the brown paper, and revealed a stack of sheets—thick, ivory, with a faint golden shimmer running through the fibers. Not glitter. Something subtler, like heat caught in paper.

Maren leaned closer. The surface had a fine tooth that would take paint beautifully.

“How much?” she asked, already bracing for disappointment.

Ivo watched her as if price was the least interesting part of her question.

“You don’t buy this with money,” he said.

Maren huffed. “Then I can’t afford it.”

“You can,” he said, “if you can live with the terms.”

He reached under the counter again and withdrew a small, thin booklet bound in plain gray cover. No title. Just a faint embossed symbol on the front: a circle with a line through it, like a lantern hung sideways.

He set it down.

“The contract,” he said.

Maren blinked. “You sell paper with a contract?”

“I don’t sell it,” he corrected. “I pass it to people who are about to decide whether they will waste their own lives.”

“That’s dramatic,” she said, though her voice wasn’t steady.

Ivo’s face didn’t change. “Read it,” he said. “Here. Or take it and read it later, then come back.”

Maren looked around the shop. No other customers. No cameras she could see. Just paper and the old man and a warmth that made her skin feel too present.

“What’s the catch?” she asked.

Ivo tilted his head slightly. “Visibility.”

Maren scoffed. “You mean… like publicity?”

“No,” he said. “I mean being seen. By the world. By yourself.”

She hesitated. Then she opened the booklet.

The pages were filled with clean, precise type. No decorative language. Just clauses, as if someone had tried to write magic like law.

She read silently.

CLAUSE 1: The Lantern Paper accepts pigment, ink, graphite, charcoal, and blood.

CLAUSE 2: Whatever is created upon Lantern Paper may manifest in the world for a term not exceeding one (1) year.

CLAUSE 3: Manifestation requires public display of the created work, defined as viewing by no fewer than twelve (12) unrelated persons within a continuous period of twenty-four (24) hours.

CLAUSE 4: Works kept hidden, destroyed, or withheld from display will not manifest, and any partial manifestation will fade.

CLAUSE 5: The Creator bears all social consequence arising from manifestation, including attention, envy, reverence, accusation, imitation, and loss.

CLAUSE 6: The Paper does not distinguish between desire and wisdom.
CLAUSE 7: At the end of the term, manifestation dissolves. Physical remnants may remain only if the world has already taken ownership of them.

Maren looked up.

"This is… insane," she said.

Ivo's eyes remained steady. "Yes."

"So what, I paint a car and a car appears?" she asked, half mocking, half terrified.

"If you paint it well enough to convince the paper," Ivo said.

"That makes no sense."

"Most of what matters doesn't," he replied.

Maren stared at the contract again. The words felt heavier than ink. The phrase that landed hardest was the one she hadn't expected:

The Paper does not distinguish between desire and wisdom.

"I'm not religious," she said, because she didn't know what else to say.

"This isn't religion," Ivo replied. "It's consequence."

She closed the booklet. Her hands were shaking slightly.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

Ivo's gaze softened—not kindly, but honestly.

"I want you to stop painting like you're trying not to be judged," he said. "I want you to paint like you're trying to be real."

Maren swallowed. "And in exchange?"

Ivo slid the paper toward her.

"You take it," he said. "If you sign the last page."

Maren flipped to the end. There was a single line:

CREATOR NAME: _____

A blank space beneath it.

No witness line. No date.

Her mouth went dry. "This is a bad idea."

“Yes,” Ivo said again, and something like amusement flickered in his eyes. “And it might save you.”

Maren’s hands moved before her fear could negotiate. She took the pen Ivo offered—heavy, old, with ink that smelled faintly of smoke—and wrote:

MAREN SLOANE

The moment the ink left the pen, the paper stack gave a barely perceptible warmth, like a sleeping animal exhaling.

Maren jerked her hand back.

Ivo tied the brown paper around the stack again and wrapped it with the red thread, as if sealing something alive.

“One more thing,” he said.

“What?” Maren asked, voice thin.

He leaned forward, and for the first time his voice lowered.

“Don’t paint what you think will make you loved,” he said. “Paint what you are willing to lose.”

Maren stared at him, heart pounding.

“That’s… not helpful,” she whispered.

“It’s the only help,” Ivo replied.

She left the shop with the package tucked under her arm, and the bell above the door sounded less tired when it rang behind her.

Outside, the winter air hit her face like a truth.

###

That night, in her cramped studio, Maren unwrapped the paper.

She set one sheet on her worktable like she was laying out a body. The surface caught the lamplight in that faint gold shimmer, as if it remembered fire.

She stared at it for a long time.

Then she did what any struggling artist would do when given something impossible:

She tried to prove it wrong.

She sketched a small orange on the paper—nothing grand. Just a fruit. She painted it carefully, with the attention she used to give to things that mattered. She layered color until the peel looked alive, until the light on it made sense.

When she finished, she waited.

Nothing happened.

She laughed at herself, once, sharply, almost relieved.

Then, from the deli out front, she heard her cousin shout.

“Maren! Did you bring groceries? Because there’s an orange sitting on the counter like it paid rent!”

Maren froze.

She stumbled out of the studio and into the deli, where the smell of bread and meat hit her like normal life trying to keep its authority. Her cousin stood behind the counter staring at a single orange—perfect, ripe, bright.

“What is that?” he asked.

Maren couldn’t speak.

She walked to it as if it might explode. She picked it up.

It was warm.

Not room temperature warm. Sun-warm.

She stared at her cousin.

He stared back.

“You’re doing some witch thing now?” he asked, half joking, half wary.

Maren swallowed.

“It’s… a gift,” she managed.

Her cousin squinted. “Well tell your gift it’s about time it brought something useful.”

Maren forced a laugh and went back to her studio, closing the door behind her.

Her heart hammered against her ribs like it wanted out.

She stared at the painted orange on the paper.

It looked normal. Just paint.

But the real orange existed now.

She picked up the contract booklet with shaking hands and reread Clause 3.

Public display.

Defined as viewing by no fewer than twelve unrelated persons within twenty-four hours.

Her cousin had seen it. One.

But the orange had appeared anyway.

Maybe the rule had loosened for small things. Or maybe the orange was already in the room, and the paper had simply insisted she notice it.

She didn't sleep much.

# # #

Over the next week, Maren tested the paper the way a person tests the edge of a lake they're not sure is safe.

A painted lemon appeared in a stranger's shopping basket at the market.

A small painted candle showed up on her windowsill, lit, though she had no memory of lighting it.

A painted pair of gloves appeared on her hands when she stepped outside in the cold.

Small things. Useful things.

And always, somehow, someone else saw them. A cashier commented. A passerby noticed.

It was as if the paper wasn't interested in private miracles.

It wanted witnesses.

On the eighth day, Maren painted something bigger.

A ladder.

Not a metaphor. A literal ladder, sturdy, tall, the kind she could never afford. She painted it with meticulous care, every rung, every scrape of worn metal, every shadow.

She finished at midnight. Her studio was silent except for the hum of the refrigerator through the wall.

She waited.

Nothing.

Her stomach sank. She stared at the painting, anger rising like bile.

Then she remembered Clause 3.

Public display.

Twelve unrelated persons.

She was alone.

She could hide the paper, keep painting small objects, keep collecting private gifts. She could make her life easier. She could buy time.

But Ivo's words returned like a slap:

Don't paint what you think will make you loved. Paint what you are willing to lose.

She understood the trap now.

Small miracles were seduction.

The paper wanted her to risk something.

The next day, she carried the ladder painting to a small community arts pop-up in a converted warehouse. She didn't have a booth. She didn't have permission. She simply leaned the painting against a wall near the entrance, among flyers and posters and the smell of cheap coffee.

People walked past. Some glanced. A few stopped.

A woman frowned and said, "That ladder looks real."

A man laughed. "Everything looks real if you paint it like you mean it."

Maren stood nearby pretending she wasn't listening.

She counted silently.

One. Two. Three.

By the time she reached twelve, her palms were slick with sweat.

Nothing happened.

She felt foolish, and angry, and relieved all at once.

Then, a sharp metallic sound rang out from the back of the warehouse.

Someone shouted.

"Where'd this come from?"

Maren turned.

A ladder—her ladder—stood upright near the back wall, as if it had always belonged there. People gathered around it, touching it, testing it, impressed.

Maren's breath caught.

It worked.

And because it worked in public, it didn't belong to her anymore.

A volunteer organizer waved at the crowd. "We needed a ladder!" she said, laughing. "This is perfect!"

Maren watched as they carried it away like it was a donation. No one looked at her. No one knew it came from her.

It was both thrilling and devastating.

Visibility, she realized, wasn't just about being seen.

It was about letting go of ownership.

# # #

Two weeks later, Maren met Tessa Muir.

Tessa was a gallery curator with the kind of presence that made people straighten their posture without knowing why. She wore black like it was an ideology and spoke in measured sentences like someone who had learned that the world rewarded restraint.

Maren was at another pop-up, showing a small collection of paintings she'd made on normal canvas—because she still didn't trust the lantern paper enough to use it freely. She had one Lantern piece hidden under the table, wrapped carefully, like contraband.

Tessa stopped in front of Maren's work and studied it longer than most.

"These are… urgent," Tessa said.

Maren swallowed. "Thanks."

Tessa glanced at Maren, then back at the paintings.

"You have talent," she said, as if that was a neutral fact. "But you're hiding something."

Maren's stomach tightened.

"I'm not hiding," she lied.

Tessa's eyes flicked downward, toward the table. She smiled slightly, like a person who had already made their conclusion.

"I run Muir Gallery," she said. "I'm curating a spring show. Emerging voices. Work that actually matters."

Maren almost laughed. Those phrases usually meant a show that would attract wealthy donors who wanted to feel edgy for one evening.

Tessa continued. "If you have anything larger—anything you've been saving—I want to see it."

Maren's mouth went dry.

The Lantern paper under the table felt suddenly heavy, like a secret that could ruin her.

"I'll think about it," Maren said, which was the only thing she could say without collapsing.

Tessa slid a card across the table.

"Don't take too long," she said. "People like you disappear all the time."

Then she walked away.

Maren stared at the card as if it might burn her fingers.

# # #

That night Maren went back to Ivo's shop.

The bell rang. The warmth greeted her. Ivo looked up from behind the counter as if he'd been expecting her.

"You've started," he said.

"It's real," Maren replied, voice tight.

Ivo nodded once.

"It's dangerous," Maren added.

Ivo's lips pressed together. "Yes."

Maren stepped closer. "How do I stop it?"

Ivo's eyes sharpened.

"You don't," he said. "You choose."

"That's not an answer," Maren snapped.

"It is," Ivo said quietly. "You just don't like it."

Maren’s hands clenched. “A curator wants to show my work.”

Ivo tilted his head.

“You want to be seen,” he said, not accusing. Simply naming it.

Maren’s throat tightened. “I want to matter.”

“Then show it,” Ivo said.

“And if I show it, the things I paint become real,” Maren whispered. “And then what? People take them? They accuse me? They worship me? They—”

“Then you learn what kind of fire you carry,” Ivo said.

Maren shook her head. “Why would anyone agree to this?”

Ivo’s gaze drifted to the shelves of paper, to the brushes laid out like tools for surgery.

“Because there is a special agony in making beauty that no one touches,” he said. “Because invisibility is a slow death. Because some people would rather burn bright for one year than fade for thirty.”

Maren swallowed.

“I’m not brave,” she said.

Ivo leaned forward.

“No,” he said. “You’re tired. That’s different.”

Maren’s eyes stung. “What happens when the year ends?”

Ivo’s voice softened, almost regretful.

“What you made dissolves,” he said. “Unless the world has already taken ownership.”

“That’s Clause 7,” Maren said.

Ivo nodded.

“And what does that mean?” she asked.

“It means you can’t build a life on the magic,” he said. “You can only use it to change the world enough that the world keeps going without it.”

Maren stared at him.

“This paper isn’t a shortcut,” she whispered.

Ivo’s eyes held hers.

“It’s a spotlight,” he said. “And spotlights reveal more than art.”

Maren left the shop with her mind racing like a horse that had caught scent of fire.

# # #

Maren agreed to meet Tessa at Muir Gallery the following week.

The gallery was bright, white, and too clean. Maren felt like her boots had no right to touch the polished floor. Her reflection in the glass looked like someone who had wandered into the wrong life.

Tessa greeted her with a firm handshake and an appraising gaze.

“You look nervous,” Tessa said.

“I’m broke,” Maren replied. “That’s what it looks like.”

Tessa’s mouth twitched as if she appreciated bluntness. She led Maren through the space, past large abstract pieces that looked expensive because they were large and abstract.

“You don’t need to impress me,” Tessa said. “You need to wake people up.”

Maren’s heart pounded. “That’s… a lot.”

“It’s the job,” Tessa said.

They stopped near a blank wall where tape marks hinted at future placement.

“I want you here,” Tessa said. “Center wall. Not a corner.”

Maren’s breath caught. “Why?”

“Because you paint like you’re afraid someone will stop you,” Tessa said. “That kind of fear is interesting.”

Maren swallowed. “I have something.”

Tessa’s eyes sharpened. “Show me.”

Maren hesitated, then opened her portfolio case. Inside, hidden beneath normal canvases, was a single Lantern paper piece wrapped in cloth.

She unwrapped it slowly.

It was a painting of a streetlight.

Not glamorous. But the light was painted with such intensity that it felt like it was spilling into the room. The surrounding darkness wasn't empty; it held texture, movement, the hint of unseen figures. The streetlight looked like a promise that refused to die.

Tessa stared.

For a long moment, she didn't speak. Then she exhaled like someone who had been holding breath for years.

"This," she said, softly. "This is alive."

Maren's throat tightened.

"I want this in the show," Tessa said. "And I want more."

Maren's skin prickled.

More Lantern pieces meant more manifestations.

More manifestations meant more consequence.

Tessa noticed her hesitation.

"You don't need to be precious," she said. "Let the work be seen."

Maren forced a smile. "Yeah."

Tessa stepped closer. "Are you afraid of success?"

Maren almost laughed at the absurdity. If only Tessa knew.

"I'm afraid of… what comes with it," Maren said carefully.

Tessa nodded as if she understood in a normal way.

"Good," she said. "Fear means you care. Bring me three pieces. Big ones. No more hiding behind small."

Maren left the gallery feeling like she'd just signed another contract, one written in the currency of attention.

###

The first big Lantern piece she painted for the show was a tree.

A massive oak, branches spread like arms refusing surrender. The bark was thick with age. The leaves were

painted with the kind of green that looked like it had never known asphalt.

She painted it in three nights, barely sleeping, propelled by something between obsession and terror.

When she finished, she stared at it until her eyes hurt.

Then she carried it to a small outdoor preview event Tessa hosted for donors and collectors. The painting stood on an easel beneath string lights. People sipped wine and spoke about art like it was a commodity of self-image.

Maren stood near the painting, counting viewers.

Twelve unrelated persons. Twenty-four hours.

She hit twelve quickly.

And then the air changed.

It wasn't dramatic. No thunder. No glow.

It was simply that people began looking around as if they'd forgotten where they were.

"Do you smell that?" someone asked.

"Like… earth," another replied.

A few minutes later, a shout rose from the alley beside the courtyard.

They found it there—an oak tree, impossibly rooted between cracked concrete and a brick wall, pushing up through the city like it had always been there and the city was the intruder.

People gathered, taking pictures, laughing, astonished.

Nyla Trent arrived within twenty minutes.

Maren didn't know Nyla yet, but she recognized the type immediately: a journalist-influencer hybrid, camera always ready, smile always half-weapon. Nyla's hair was perfect in a way that suggested she had never rushed for anything in her life.

Nyla spoke into her phone on livestream.

"Okay, I don't know what's happening tonight," she said, eyes glittering, "but this is insane. A full-grown oak tree appeared in the arts district. Like, appeared. Everyone's freaking out."

Maren's stomach dropped.

She hadn't considered how quickly attention could spread. How the Fire part of Fire Horse wasn't poetic—it was literal.

Tessa approached Maren, eyes shining.

"This is it," Tessa whispered. "This is what people are hungry for."

Maren forced a smile.

"This is… a lot," she murmured.

Tessa squeezed her arm. "Get used to it," she said. "You're not invisible anymore."

Maren watched Nyla's livestream and felt something cold move beneath her ribs.

Visibility, she realized, wasn't a warm bath.

It was a flame.

And flames attract everything—admiration, yes, but also moths, and smoke, and people who wanted to own the light.

###

The next morning the oak tree was on the news.

Not the nightly national broadcast, but local channels, morning shows, blogs. The city's parks department issued a confused statement. People treated it like a miracle or a prank or a protest.

Nyla posted a theory thread titled:

THE OAK ISN'T RANDOM — IT'S A MESSAGE

She speculated about secret artists, about viral marketing, about "a new wave of urban magic."

Maren sat in her studio staring at her phone until her hands went numb.

She couldn't tell anyone the truth.

And yet the truth was making itself public anyway.

That afternoon, Garrick Vale showed up.

He arrived like a storm wearing boots.

Garrick was an artist too—well-known in the local scene, known for loud installations and louder opinions.

He'd been in group shows, had a cult following, had the kind of arrogance that came from being rewarded early.

He walked into Maren's studio without asking, as if the space belonged to anyone bold enough to claim it.

"Well," he said, looking around. "This is depressing."

Maren's heart hammered. "How did you find me?"

Garrick smiled. "Please. Tessa's hosting you. Nyla's sniffing around. Everyone's asking who the hell made a tree appear."

Maren swallowed. "It wasn't—"

Garrick held up a hand. "I don't care how you did it," he said. "I care that you did."

Maren's mouth went dry.

Garrick walked closer, eyes scanning her canvases. He stopped in front of a normal painting—unfinished, dark, a figure half-formed in shadow.

"This is you," he said, almost dismissive. Then he turned to her.

"But the oak?" he said. "That's something else. That's… power."

Maren felt her skin prickle. "What do you want, Garrick?"

He smiled wider. "Partnership," he said. "Collaboration. You and me. We could own this city."

Maren stared at him.

"I don't even own my rent," she said flatly.

Garrick laughed as if she'd told a charming joke.

"You will," he said. "If you're smart."

Maren's pulse pounded. "I'm not interested."

Garrick's smile thinned.

"Don't be stupid," he said.

Maren met his eyes. "Leave."

For a moment, Garrick looked like he might argue. Then he leaned in slightly, voice dropping.

"People will come for your secret," he said. "If you don't control it, they will."

Maren's throat tightened. "It's not a secret I can sell."

Garrick’s eyes flicked to her worktable, to the cloth covering the Lantern pieces.

Maren’s stomach turned.

Garrick’s gaze returned to her face.

“Be careful,” he said softly, and the softness was not kindness—it was threat disguised as advice.

Then he left.

Maren locked the door and leaned against it, shaking.

# # #

Two nights later, Father Calder Rusk came to the deli.

He was a community figure the way certain men became community figures: by speaking loudly enough that people mistook volume for leadership. He ran a neighborhood outreach program, held weekly meetings, gave speeches about morality and “the soul of the city.”

Maren had seen him before. She’d never spoken to him.

Her cousin called her out front.

“Uh,” he said, low. “There’s a priest-looking guy asking for you.”

Maren’s stomach clenched.

Father Calder stood near the counter with his hands folded like he was about to deliver forgiveness. He wore a dark coat, collar turned up. His eyes were alert, appraising.

“Maren Sloane,” he said, voice smooth. “Thank you for coming.”

“I didn’t know you knew my name,” Maren replied.

Father Calder smiled as if the world was small and he had always been in charge of it.

“It’s a small community,” he said. “And lately you’ve become… a point of conversation.”

Maren’s jaw tightened. “If this is about the oak tree, I don’t know what—”

Father Calder held up a hand. “I’m not here to accuse you,” he said. “I’m here to invite you.”

Maren blinked. “Invite me to what?”

“Our outreach program,” he said. “We feed families, provide supplies, help with rent when we can. The neighborhood is struggling, Maren. You know that.”

Maren nodded slowly.

Father Calder leaned forward slightly.

“And now,” he continued, “a miracle appears in the arts district. A tree, where there was only concrete. People are calling it a sign.”

Maren’s stomach dropped.

Father Calder’s eyes gleamed with something that wasn’t faith. It was opportunity.

“I believe,” he said, “that gifts are given for a reason. And I believe you’ve been given one.”

Maren’s hands clenched. “You don’t know that.”

“I know what people are saying,” Father Calder replied gently. “And I know this: the neighborhood needs hope. The neighborhood needs food. The neighborhood needs resources.”

He paused, letting the words settle like weight.

“If you can make beauty appear,” he said, “then you can make help appear. Supplies. Medicine. Shelter. Imagine what you could do.”

Maren’s throat tightened.

“You want me to—what? Paint groceries?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Father Calder smiled. “If that is what your gift allows,” he said. “Yes. Or paint… something bigger. Something transformative.”

Maren stared at him.

“And if I don’t?” she asked.

Father Calder’s smile didn’t leave, but his eyes hardened.

“Then you will have chosen yourself over your community,” he said. “And people will see that too.”

Maren’s chest tightened.

Visibility costs something.

This was the cost.

Father Calder placed a hand on the counter, fingers splayed like ownership.

"You have an opportunity," he said softly. "To be a light. Don't hide it. Don't waste it. God doesn't bless hoarders."

Maren swallowed. "I'm not—"

Father Calder lifted his hand again, gentle but final.

"I'll leave you with this," he said. "If what happened is real, you will be held responsible for what you do with it. That's how gifts work."

Then he turned and walked out of the deli as if he'd already won.

Maren stood there feeling like the air had gotten heavier.

Her cousin stared at her.

"What was that about?" he asked.

Maren forced a smile.

"Nothing," she lied.

But it wasn't nothing.

It was the world beginning to demand its share.

###

The spring show approached like a deadline with teeth.

Maren painted two more Lantern pieces.

The second: a fountain.

She painted it in a public park, set up like a street artist, letting strangers watch. She counted viewers as she painted, feeling exposed, raw. When she displayed the finished piece at the park's small open-mic art night, a fountain appeared two hours later—water clear, cool, startling in a neighborhood where summer heat often hit like punishment.

People cheered. Kids splashed. Nyla posted a smiling video and called it "hope with a pulse."

Maren watched from a distance, sick with awe.

The fountain didn't belong to her.

But the attention did.

And the attention was starting to circle her like wolves.

The third Lantern piece: a small house.

Not a mansion. Not a fantasy. Just a modest home with warm windows, a porch, a sense of safety. Maren painted it because she wanted it. She wanted a place that didn't feel temporary.

She displayed it privately, alone, in her studio.

Nothing happened.

She panicked, then realized why.

No public display.

Clause 3.

So she wrapped the painting again and hid it under her worktable like a shame.

The paper did not distinguish between desire and wisdom.

Her desire wanted safety.

Her wisdom knew she couldn't summon it in secret.

###

The night of the gallery show arrived.

Muir Gallery filled with people who wore confidence like perfume. Donors. Critics. Other artists. People who didn't buy art to feel something—they bought art to signal something.

Maren's Lantern pieces hung on the central wall: the streetlight, the oak tree, the fountain. Each one labeled with her name.

MAREN SLOANE

Seeing her name on the wall felt like being naked in public.

Tessa approached her with a glass of champagne.

"Smile," Tessa murmured. "They're watching you."

Maren swallowed. "Is that supposed to help?"

"It's supposed to be true," Tessa said.

Nyla Trent appeared almost immediately, camera in hand, smile bright.

“Maren!” Nyla said, as if they were old friends. “We need a quick interview. People are obsessed with your work. Like, obsessed.”

Maren forced a polite smile. “It’s just painting.”

Nyla laughed. “Okay, humble queen,” she said, then leaned in, voice lower. “But seriously—are you trying to say something? Because the tree, the fountain… people are reading this as activism.”

Maren’s throat tightened. “It’s… about life,” she said, which was true and useless.

Nyla nodded as if she’d just received a profound statement.

“Love it,” Nyla said. “One more question.”

Maren braced.

Nyla’s eyes sharpened.

“Did you expect the results?” Nyla asked softly.

Maren’s stomach dropped.

Results.

As if Nyla had seen the manifestations and was asking for confirmation.

Maren kept her face neutral with effort.

“I expected… reactions,” she said carefully.

Nyla smiled wider, satisfied.

“Perfect,” she said. “That’s all I need.”

She moved away, already posting.

Maren exhaled shakily.

Then she felt it—the shift in the room, subtle but real.

People’s attention began turning from the paintings to the door.

A murmur rose.

Someone whispered, “He’s here.”

Maren turned and saw Garrick Vale enter.

He wore a tailored jacket and the kind of confidence that didn’t require permission. He moved through the gallery like he owned the air.

He approached Maren with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Congratulations," he said. "You're famous."

Maren's jaw tightened. "I'm working."

Garrick laughed softly. "So am I."

He leaned closer, voice low.

"You think you can keep your secret?" he murmured. "In a city this hungry?"

Maren's pulse pounded. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Garrick's eyes flicked to her paintings.

"The oak," he said. "The fountain. Don't insult me with innocence."

Maren swallowed.

Garrick straightened and raised his voice slightly, enough for nearby listeners to hear.

"This is beautiful work," he said, smoothly. "Truly. And inspiring."

Maren felt her stomach twist. This was performance.

Garrick continued, smiling.

"I hope," he said, "that you'll use this attention wisely. People are already calling you… a miracle worker."

Laughter, soft and uneasy, from those listening.

Maren's throat tightened.

Then Father Calder Rusk appeared at the edge of the crowd.

Maren's blood went cold.

Father Calder moved toward her with the calm assurance of someone arriving to collect what he believed was owed. People recognized him. They made space.

He stopped in front of Maren and smiled warmly, as if they were allies.

"Maren," he said, loud enough for several people to hear, "this is a beautiful night."

Maren forced a tight smile. "Father."

Father Calder turned slightly, addressing the nearby listeners.

“I’ve been telling everyone,” he said, “that gifts like this—talent like this—are meant to serve.”

Maren’s stomach dropped.

Father Calder’s eyes met hers briefly, warning threaded through kindness.

“We have families in this neighborhood,” he continued, “who can’t afford medicine, who can’t afford rent. Imagine what could happen if art didn’t just decorate walls, but fed people.”

A ripple moved through the crowd—the delicious discomfort of moral theater.

Maren’s skin burned.

Tessa stepped closer, sensing danger.

“This is an art opening,” Tessa said smoothly. “Not a fundraiser.”

Father Calder smiled at her, polite.

“Everything is a fundraiser,” he replied, “if you have a heart.”

Maren’s mind raced.

Visibility costs something.

This was the bill.

Garrick watched, amused.

Nyla’s camera pivoted like a predator sensing blood.

Maren could feel the room’s appetite—people didn’t just want art; they wanted a story. A conflict. A hero and a villain. They wanted to consume her.

Tessa leaned toward Maren, whispering through her smile.

“Don’t let them trap you,” she said.

Maren’s pulse hammered.

Father Calder turned back to Maren.

“Will you help?” he asked softly, but the softness was a knife. “Will you use your gift for your community?”

Maren’s mouth went dry.

If she said yes, she became property.

If she said no, she became selfish villain.

She suddenly understood what Ivo meant about social consequence: attention, envy, reverence, accusation, imitation, loss.

The Paper did not distinguish between desire and wisdom.

But Maren could.

She took a breath and stepped forward, letting the room settle.

Her voice, when it came, was steady.

"I will help," Maren said.

Father Calder's smile widened—victory.

Maren held up a finger slightly, not aggressive, just firm.

"But not the way you're trying to make me," she continued.

Father Calder's eyes narrowed.

Maren turned toward the crowd, toward Nyla's camera, toward Garrick's smirk, toward Tessa's careful gaze.

"I'm not a miracle," Maren said. "I'm an artist. And artists don't exist to be owned."

A murmur rose—some approving, some offended.

Maren continued, feeling her fear burn into focus.

"I'm going to do one thing," she said. "One piece. One choice. Something I can stand behind. Something that's worth being seen."

Father Calder's smile faltered. "Maren—"

Maren cut him off, not rudely, but decisively.

"And when I do it," she said, looking him in the eye, "it will be public. It will belong to the community. Not to you. Not to donors. Not to critics. Not to influencers. Not to rivals."

Garrick's smile tightened.

Nyla's eyes gleamed.

Tessa exhaled slightly, relief and worry mixed.

Father Calder's face hardened. "You're making a mistake," he said.

Maren met his gaze.

“Maybe,” she said. “But it will be mine.”

Then she stepped back.

The room erupted into conversation, the way crowds do when they smell narrative. Nyla moved closer, camera raised, ready to frame Maren’s defiance as content.

Maren turned and walked toward the back of the gallery, away from the lights, away from the hunger.

Her hands were shaking, but her mind was clear.

One piece. One choice.

Something worth making real.

For exactly one year.

# # #

That night, Maren returned to her studio and pulled out the last Lantern sheet.

She stared at it under the dim lamp. The gold shimmer in the fibers looked like embers waiting for breath.

She thought of painting money. Food. Medicine. A thousand practical miracles.

She thought of painting herself a home. Safety. Relief.

She thought of painting a wall of fire around herself so no one could touch her again.

The paper did not distinguish between desire and wisdom.

But she could.

She remembered the oak tree in the alley, how quickly it became public, how it belonged to everyone, how kids climbed around it like it had always been there. She remembered the fountain, the laughter, the water in summer.

Those things were not hers.

But they mattered.

She remembered Father Calder’s speech, how he’d tried to turn her into a tool. She remembered Garrick’s threat, Nyla’s lens, Tessa’s hunger for meaning.

Visibility costs something.

The question was: what was worth paying?

Maren set the Lantern paper on the table and began to paint.

Not an object.

Not a symbol.

A place.

She painted a long, open hall—simple, sturdy, warm. Tables. Chairs. A kitchen line. A shelf of books. A corner with canvases and brushes. A small stage. A bulletin board filled with flyers for job listings and poetry nights and childcare swaps.

She painted people too—not faces, not portraits, but silhouettes in motion: cooking, reading, talking, laughing, resting. A child sleeping safely on a couch while adults worked nearby. An older woman teaching someone to sew. A man holding a guitar. A teenager practicing dance.

It wasn't a church.

It wasn't a gallery.

It wasn't a charity run by a single man with a microphone.

It was a community home—a place built for dignity, not spectacle.

Maren painted it with everything she had. She painted it like a vow.

When she finished, the painting looked like warmth you could step into.

Maren sat back, exhausted, breath shaking.

Then she wrapped the painting carefully.

If she displayed it publicly, it would manifest.

But where? How? The paper didn't conjure things in convenient places. The oak had appeared where the city needed it. The fountain had appeared where people were thirsty.

If she wanted a community home to appear, she needed the world to see it where it mattered.

She thought of the abandoned lot two blocks from the deli—a fenced-off rectangle of cracked concrete and

weeds, where trash collected and kids cut through because it was faster than walking around.

The lot had once been a neighborhood center decades ago, before funding disappeared and developers circled like buzzards.

It was the perfect place for something to return.

Maren didn't sleep.

###

The next day she went to Tessa.

Tessa met her at the gallery, wary but attentive.

"This is risky," Tessa said after Maren explained.

"I know," Maren replied.

Tessa studied her. "If this becomes public spectacle, it will blow up. It will be political. It will be ugly."

"Good," Maren said, surprising herself. "Let it be ugly. The neighborhood is already ugly when no one looks."

Tessa's eyes sharpened. "And you're sure?"

Maren thought of the contract. Of Clause 7. Of the one-year term. Of the certainty of disappearance.

She nodded. "It's worth it."

Tessa exhaled.

"I can get people," Tessa said. "I can get press. I can get viewers."

Maren swallowed. "I don't want it to be about me."

Tessa gave her a look that was almost tender.

"It will be about you," Tessa said. "Because the world doesn't know how to look at a miracle without demanding a face."

Maren's stomach tightened, but she didn't back down.

"Then I'll give them a face," she said. "And then I'll make them look past it."

Tessa nodded slowly.

"Where?" she asked.

Maren named the abandoned lot.

Tessa's jaw tightened. "That's going to start a war."

"Then let it," Maren said.

Tessa looked at her for a long moment. Then she smiled, small and fierce.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s light it up.”

# # #

They organized the unveiling for Saturday afternoon.

Tessa called it an “installation preview” to keep it within the language that donors and critics respected. Nyla called it something else entirely online:

THE ARTIST WHO MAKES THINGS REAL IS DOING IT AGAIN — THIS TIME IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The post went viral.

Maren wanted to hate Nyla for the sensational framing, but she couldn’t deny that Nyla’s reach was gasoline.

People came.

Not just art people. Neighborhood people. Families. Teens. Elderly residents who remembered the center that used to stand there. Skeptics who came to prove it was fake. Believers who came because they needed something to believe in.

Father Calder showed up too, of course, standing near the edge with his outreach volunteers like he was ready to claim credit no matter what happened.

Garrick arrived with a camera crew of his own, pretending he was documenting “the movement.”

Maren stood inside the fenced lot, the painting on an easel facing outward.

She could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

Tessa stood nearby, calm as a knife.

“You ready?” Tessa asked quietly.

“No,” Maren said. “But I’m doing it anyway.”

Tessa nodded. “That’s the definition.”

Nyla stepped forward, phone raised, speaking to her audience.

“We’re here,” Nyla said, voice bright, “because last time this happened, an oak tree appeared. And then a fountain. And now Maren Sloane is unveiling a new piece right here in the neighborhood.”

Maren winced at hearing her own name spoken like a brand.

But the crowd was watching now.

She counted automatically: twelve viewers, twenty, fifty, a hundred. Easily.

Tessa touched Maren’s elbow.

“Unwrap it,” she murmured.

Maren inhaled, then pulled the cloth away.

The painting caught the daylight and seemed to glow from within. Not supernatural glow—human glow. Warmth rendered in pigment.

The crowd went quiet.

Someone whispered, “That’s… beautiful.”

A child said loudly, “I want to go there.”

Maren’s eyes stung.

She felt the moment shift, like the air deciding to hold its breath.

Then nothing happened.

Seconds passed.

Maren’s stomach dropped. Doubt surged—had she misunderstood something? Painted too big? Too complex? Too—

A low rumble rose from beneath the concrete.

The crowd murmured, startled.

The fence vibrated slightly.

Maren’s breath caught.

Cracks spidered across the concrete slab.

Weeds shook as if a wind moved through the ground.

A gasp rose from the crowd as the cracked concrete began to lift—slowly, impossibly, like a lid being opened.

Then the structure emerged.

Not in a violent eruption. In a patient unfolding.

Walls rose like memory returning. Beams set themselves into place with soft, resonant thuds. Windows

appeared, warm light spilling through them even in daylight. A door formed at the front with a sign above it—not painted, not decorative, just words carved simply into wood:

THE LANTERN HOUSE

Maren's knees almost buckled.

People screamed. Laughed. Cried. Ran forward, then stopped, uncertain whether touching it would break the miracle.

Nyla's voice shook on camera.

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh my God, it's real."

Father Calder stepped forward, eyes wide with something hungry.

"This is—" he began.

Maren turned toward him, voice steady even as her body trembled.

"This is not yours," she said loudly.

Father Calder's jaw tightened.

Maren faced the crowd.

"This is for the neighborhood," she said. "For everyone. For one year."

A murmur rippled—confusion, awe, suspicion.

"One year?" Nyla repeated, catching the words like bait.

Maren felt the contract's weight pressing on her tongue.

She hadn't planned to say it. But honesty felt like the only weapon she had against ownership.

"Yes," Maren said. "One year."

The crowd surged with questions.

"What happens after?"

"Why one year?"

"How did you do it?"

Maren raised her hands slightly, not to silence them, but to steady herself.

"I'm an artist," she said. "I made something because this neighborhood deserves it. I don't want your theories.

I don’t want your worship. I don’t want your anger. I want you to use it.”

Tessa stepped forward beside her.

“We’ll work out programming,” Tessa said, voice carrying. “Meals. Workshops. Nights for music, writing, painting. This will be community-run.”

Father Calder’s voice cut through.

“And who decides that?” he demanded. “Who’s in charge?”

Maren looked at him.

“Not you,” she said.

The crowd reacted—some cheers, some nervous laughs, some murmured agreement.

Father Calder stepped closer, eyes hard.

“You can’t drop a building into a neighborhood and pretend you’re not responsible,” he said.

Maren felt her fear flare—but it didn’t take control. It became fuel.

“I am responsible,” Maren said. “That’s why I’m here. That’s why I’m not hiding.”

She looked around, meeting eyes.

“And you’re responsible too,” she added. “If you want this to matter, you have to show up. You have to build something inside it.”

Her voice cracked slightly on the last word.

Build.

Because she knew what was coming.

One year.

A time limit written into magic like law.

She looked at the Lantern House again—at the warm windows, the sturdy door, the promise sitting impossibly in the middle of a neglected lot.

And she felt grief rise alongside joy.

Because she already loved it.

And she already knew she would lose it.

Visibility costs something.

This was the cost.

And it was worth paying.

# # #

The Lantern House became the neighborhood's heartbeat within weeks.

People filled it as if they'd been waiting for permission to gather. There were meal nights where elders taught kids how to cook real food. There were art tables where teenagers painted without apology. There was a shelf of donated books that grew faster than anyone expected.

The city tried to intervene, of course. Inspectors arrived with clipboards and confusion. Lawyers asked who owned the building. Reporters came hungry for scandal. Garrick posted theories about "collective manifestation art" and insinuated he had been part of the concept. Father Calder held meetings and attempted to position himself as moral guardian of the space.

Maren resisted all of it by doing the most radical thing she could:

She showed up.

She cleaned floors. She served food. She listened. She let people yell at her when they were afraid. She let people thank her when gratitude overflowed into tears. She taught kids how to mix colors. She painted murals on the interior walls—on normal paint, not Lantern paper—so that when the building disappeared, the idea wouldn't.

Nyla filmed the whole thing, and to Maren's surprise, Nyla's lens softened over time. She still chased narrative—she couldn't help it—but she began focusing less on Maren as miracle and more on the people inside the House. The neighborhood became the story.

That, Maren realized, was the only protection against being consumed: redirect the gaze toward what mattered.

Tessa coordinated volunteer committees and kept the wealthy donors at arm's length.

Garrick grew angrier as the months passed, because the spotlight wasn't his.

Father Calder grew more desperate, because the moral authority wasn't his either.

And Maren… Maren lived inside a strange double-time: every day felt urgent and temporary.

People assumed the Lantern House would last.

They wanted to believe miracles were permanent.

Maren knew better.

She began leaving small, quiet seeds—systems, schedules, community boards, partnerships with existing local groups—anything that could remain when the structure did not.

The building wasn't the miracle.

The miracle was what it forced people to do together.

###

On the anniversary of the unveiling, the Lantern House held a final gathering.

Maren didn't call it "final" publicly. She called it an anniversary celebration. A year of light.

The room filled with people. So many people.

Food. Music. A teen dance group performed in the corner. A small choir sang something that made Maren's chest ache. Kids ran through the halls like the building had always been theirs.

Father Calder stood near the back, watching, quieter than he'd been in months. Garrick didn't come—perhaps because he couldn't bear to witness something he couldn't take.

Nyla filmed, but this time she didn't narrate. She let it be.

Tessa stood beside Maren near the entrance.

"You did it," Tessa murmured.

Maren swallowed. "We did it."

Tessa nodded. "You know what happens tonight?"

Maren nodded once.

Tessa's eyes softened. "Are you okay?"

Maren almost laughed. “No,” she said honestly. “But I’m proud.”

Tessa squeezed her hand briefly.

Later, as the gathering wound down, Maren stood alone in the main hall and looked around.

The murals on the walls were bright, messy, alive—painted by dozens of hands over the year. Names were written in corners. Messages. Promises. Jokes.

This, Maren thought, was Clause 7.

Physical remnants may remain only if the world has already taken ownership.

The world had taken ownership here—not of the magic, but of the meaning.

She felt tears burn behind her eyes.

At midnight, the air changed.

Maren felt it like a tide pulling back.

The lights in the Lantern House flickered—not failing, but loosening.

People began noticing. A hush spread.

“What’s happening?” someone whispered.

Maren stepped forward, voice steady.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s just… time.”

The walls began to soften—not melt, not collapse—fade, as if the building had been made of light all along and the light was deciding to return to wherever it came from.

People gasped, cried out, reached for one another.

Maren watched the fear ripple through them and felt the urge to reassure—to promise permanence, to pretend magic was kind.

But courage was choosing the right fire.

And the right fire, she realized, was truth.

“It was always one year,” she said quietly, loud enough for those closest to hear.

A woman began sobbing. A child asked, “Why?”

Maren knelt slightly and looked the child in the eye.

“Because miracles aren’t here to replace us,” she said. “They’re here to wake us up.”

The building continued fading.

The murals, painted with normal paint, clung to the walls for a moment longer—like stubborn memory. Then even they began to dissolve, but not completely. Not the way the oak tree had vanished, leaving nothing.

This time, something remained.

As the Lantern House faded, the concrete slab beneath it reappeared—but cleaner than before. The lot was no longer fenced. The weeds were gone. The ground felt… prepared.

People stood in the open air, shocked, holding each other.

And in the center of the lot, where the building had been, there remained a simple structure:

Not a full hall.

Not a miracle house.

A foundation—real, poured concrete. And a sign staked into it, carved in plain wood:

COMMUNITY CENTER — COMING SOON
BUILT BY THE NEIGHBORHOOD

No magic glow. No spectacle.

Just a beginning.

Maren's knees weakened. She pressed a hand to her mouth, stunned.

Tessa stared, breath shaking.

Nyla lowered her camera for the first time all night, eyes wet.

Father Calder stepped forward slowly, reading the sign, and for a moment his face showed something human—something like humility.

The crowd stood in silence.

Then someone laughed through tears.

"It left us a blueprint," an older man said softly.

A woman near him nodded. "No," she replied. "We built it."

Maren felt the truth of that settle into her bones.

Clause 7.

Physical remnants may remain only if the world has already taken ownership of them.

The world had.

Not because Maren commanded it.

Because people had stepped into the light and refused to go back.

Maren looked at the foundation and realized what Ivo had meant.

You can't build a life on the magic. You can only use it to change the world enough that the world keeps going without it.

The Lantern House was gone.

But it had left something behind that no contract could dissolve:

a shared belief, a shared plan, a shared "we."

Maren exhaled, shaking with grief and relief and pride.

She had been seen.

And she had survived it.

# # #

Two days later, Maren returned to Ivo Kessler's shop.

The bell rang softly.

Ivo looked up from behind the counter, eyes calm.

"You chose," he said.

Maren swallowed. "I did."

Ivo studied her face. "And?"

Maren felt the ache in her chest, the hollow where the Lantern House had been, and the strange fullness where something new now lived.

"It hurt," she said honestly. "It still hurts."

Ivo nodded, as if pain was proof.

"But it was worth it," Maren added.

Ivo's eyes softened slightly.

"Then you learned," he said.

Maren glanced at the shelves. "Is there more paper?"

Ivo didn't answer immediately. He leaned forward.

“Do you want more magic?” he asked.

Maren thought of the attention, the accusations, the pressure. She thought of the way her name had been swallowed by other people’s needs. She thought of the way she’d almost disappeared inside their gaze.

Then she thought of the foundation in the lot. The sign. The fact that the neighborhood was already meeting, already planning, already arguing about budgets and building permits like people who believed something could happen.

She shook her head slowly.

“No,” Maren said. “I want more courage.”

Ivo watched her for a long moment. Then he nodded once.

“That’s rarer,” he said.

Maren exhaled.

“What happens to the paper?” she asked.

Ivo’s gaze drifted to the back of the shop, to something Maren couldn’t see.

“It waits,” he said. “For the next person who smells like hunger.”

Maren almost smiled.

She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the small gray contract booklet. She placed it on the counter.

“I’m done,” she said.

Ivo didn’t take it.

“It was never yours to return,” he said gently. “The contract isn’t paper. It’s a choice you already made.”

Maren’s throat tightened.

She nodded, then turned to leave.

At the door she paused and looked back.

“Ivo,” she said.

He lifted his eyes.

“Thank you,” Maren said.

Ivo’s expression didn’t change much, but his voice softened.

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “Thank the part of you that refused to stay invisible.”

Maren left the shop and stepped into the city.

The air felt different—not easier, but clearer.

She still had rent to pay. She still had doubts. She still had a studio behind a deli.

But when she passed the abandoned lot—now not abandoned—she saw people standing around the foundation, talking, planning, arguing like builders.

She saw the sign.

BUILT BY THE NEIGHBORHOOD

And she realized something that startled her with its simplicity:

Visibility hadn't saved her.

It had demanded her.

And in answering, she had finally become real.

Maren walked on, paint under her fingernails, heart steady as a drum.

A horse in her chest.

Fire in her hands.

And this time, she didn't try to hide either.