The Space Before Yes

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The first thing I noticed was not the machine.

It was the silence.

Not real silence, of course. No public building ever held real silence. There was always the hum of air vents, the soft electrical buzz behind walls, the scrape of shoes against polished floor, the distant cough of someone pretending not to be nervous. But this was the kind of silence people created when they were afraid to say the wrong thing in a room built to hear them.

Everyone in the Civic Identity Verification Center stood in line as though waiting for judgment.

Which, in its own government-approved way, we were.

The building sat on the edge of downtown, tucked between an old post office and a glass bank tower that reflected the morning sun so harshly it made the sidewalk look wet. The city had spent millions renovating the place, turning what had once been a public records office into a cathedral of compliance. White walls. Gray floors. Frosted windows. Cameras in black half-domes hanging from the ceiling like watchful insects. Every sign had the same clean blue lettering.

VERIFY YOUR RECORD. PROTECT YOUR RIGHTS. PRESERVE PUBLIC ORDER.

Reading sample — continued

That last phrase had appeared on nearly every screen in the country for six months.

Public order.

I had lived long enough to know that whenever people in power said order, they usually meant obedience. And whenever they said protection, someone was about to lose something.

Reese Bell stood beside me with her hands in the pockets of her faded denim jacket, her shoulders squared, her chin lifted just enough to tell the world she had no intention of apologizing for taking up space.

She was five foot five, maybe five foot six if the boots had a good heel, though she never admitted to either measurement. Stocky in the way of someone who had worked with her hands most of her life. Strong neck. Broad shoulders. Short salt-and-pepper hair clipped close on the sides. Face lined by sun, laughter, irritation, and survival. She wore a black button-down shirt, dark jeans, and boots old enough to have stories of their own.

To anyone passing too quickly, Reese could be read as a man.

To anyone looking more carefully, Reese could be read as a woman.