

Soft Reset — Part 8: Not a Place to Die In

By Austen Tucker · 2026

The apartment nobody visited was two floors up from the bar, behind a door that had never once needed a key.

I went up anyway, carrying the whole day like something spilled inside me that hadn't finished spilling. Wet hair. Wet clothes not from a shower — from the chair, still, some of it, because I hadn't been able to make myself care about the difference between clean and merely dry.

The upstairs room did not look like a room built for entertaining. It looked like a room built for one very specific kind of stillness — low light, a single window with weather that had opinions but no forecast, a chair angled at nothing in particular, because nobody in this room needed to see anything to be seen.

"You went again," Vivian said.

Not a question. She doesn't really do questions anymore, not the way she used to. Statements, mostly. Low, even, a beat behind normal timing, like she's speaking through something with a little lag baked permanently into the line — which she is, I suppose. That's the whole of it, really. My mother, running through a signal instead of a body.

"I went further," I said.

The room was quiet the specific way it gets quiet when Vivian is deciding how much to say. I used to think that pause was hesitation. It isn't. It's more like watching someone read something twice before answering, because the first read wasn't the true one.

"I know," she said. "I felt it. Your dive log ran long."

"You watch my dive log."

"I watch everything in this house. That's what a house does."

I sat down across from her, in the chair angled at nothing, and found that it was, in fact, angled exactly at her, which I understood was probably the point, and probably always had been.

"I got her," I said. "Mom. I got my hand around her arm. I stopped it."

Something in the room's light shifted — not dramatically, just a half-degree warmer, the kind of adjustment you'd miss if you weren't the kind of person who'd learned to read a house instead of a face.

"You branched," she said.

"I branched."

"That's not what I built it for."

"I know."

"I built you a place to rest, Anabelle. Not a place to—" the sentence caught, the way her sentences catch sometimes, a half-second of dead air where a body would have taken a breath. "Not a place to die in."

"I know that too."

"Do you."

It wasn't unkind. It also wasn't a question I could answer the easy way.

"I got a whole life," I said. "Eleven years of it. You, still you, still walking. Kat, grown up and fine and not — not any of the things I've been quietly terrified about for a year. I got to have that, for about four minutes, and it was the best four minutes of my whole life, and I am telling you that with my mother sitting six feet away from me, so you understand exactly how bad that sounds."

"I understand exactly how bad that sounds."

"I'm not sorry I went."

"I know. I'm not asking you to be."

There was a thing sitting behind my teeth that I hadn't planned on saying. I said it anyway, because the room made it easy, because that's what the room was for.

"There's something I found in the meal. Before the curb. A hundred and ten loops in, give or take. Kat's face did something for half a second — went still in a way that didn't match anything happening around her — and I don't know what it was, and I don't know who was sitting next to her, because I never turned my head, because I was too busy narrating a belt to you. I don't even know if it's real or if I've just watched my sister's face so many times I've started finding wounds that aren't there."

"What did you see," Vivian said. Not urgent. Just present, the way she was present for everything, which was the only way she had left to be present for anything.

"I don't know. That's the whole problem. I can't prove it. I can't ask her — she doesn't know I keep going back to that day. I can't do a single thing about something that already happened to a version of her that isn't even the one eating breakfast downstairs right now."

"You could tell me anyway."

"I just did."

"Then I have it now too," she said. "You don't have to carry a thing alone just because you can't prove it happened. That's not a rule anyone made you agree to."