

# STILLING

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E. K. Phoenix

*Chapter One*

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## *The Light*

*Eli*

He was watching the light change on the water when it happened.

He came to the reservoir most evenings, not for any reason he could name. The walk helped. The water helped. And the late light on its surface was the one thing that, for the past five years, had made him feel the world was still arranging itself for him. That something in it was still worth watching.

The path around the reservoir took twenty-two minutes if he kept walking. He always stopped. There was a place where the bank flattened and a tree leaned out over the water, reaching toward something on the far side it would never reach. Most evenings, he stood there and watched the light change. He had been there in every season. He knew what the ice looked like in February, when the algae came in late July, and how autumn touched the water days before it reached the trees — a quietness, a deepening, something the water seemed to sense first.

He understood this was a form of grief. The ritualized return to a place, the careful attention, the need to find the world still beautiful at regular intervals. His therapist had called it healthy. He had stopped going not because the therapist was wrong, but because she had been trying to help him move forward, and what he needed was to understand what he was carrying. He had never found the language to explain the difference, and eventually he had stopped trying.



*Five Years Earlier*

Wren loved this walk.

She was the kind of child who narrated the world as she moved through it.

“That cloud looks like a boot. Dad, look, a boot-cloud.”

He listened closely, knowing even then that he was living through something he would later want back. With Wren, he knew he was happy. He knew it while it was happening, which he understood now was its own rare gift.

She was five that summer. Old enough to walk the whole path without being carried, young enough that the walk was an event rather than a habit. She had opinions about everything she passed. The tree that leaned over the water was reaching for a friend on the other side, she had decided, and he had agreed with this and never thought about the tree any other way after.

That particular afternoon she had stopped at a place where wildflowers grew along the bank — small things, yellow and white, ordinary — and looked at them with the focused pleasure of someone who has just decided something. Before he could say anything she had picked three of them, carefully, with the deliberate hands of a child doing something purposeful.

He watched her hands. They were already complete — impossibly small, the fingers perfect and certain in their movements, knowing exactly what they were doing. He had held those hands the first time two minutes after she arrived in the world and understood, in that moment, that he had been waiting for them without knowing it. That everything before had been a kind of patient ignorance.

She held the flowers up to him — not just to show him, but close, so he could smell them. He bent and breathed them in. They smelled slightly green, the specific scent of something just picked. She watched him smell them with the satisfied expression of someone who has shared the best thing and had it received correctly.

“For the vase,” she said. As though this were obvious. The blue one on the kitchen windowsill, the one that had always been there, the one that caught the afternoon light in a way that made everything around it look considered. She had watched flowers go into it her whole life. She knew exactly what flowers were for.

They walked home, and Sarah was in the kitchen when they came through the door. She looked at the flowers in Wren’s hands, and her face brightened into the quiet smile Wren had always had the power to conjure.

“Did you get those at the reservoir?” Sarah said.

“For the vase,” Wren confirmed.

Sarah took the blue vase from the windowsill, filled it with water, and set it on the table for Wren. Wren arranged the flowers with the seriousness of someone carrying out a vision. She stood back. She assessed.

“There,” she said.

Then she went to find something else to do, and Sarah set the vase back on the sill, where the three yellow and white flowers caught the late afternoon light.

He stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Sarah rinse her hands at the sink. The flowers were on the sill, held briefly in the late light, and for a moment the whole house seemed arranged around them.

Three days later the flowers were dead. Wren stood at the table looking at them with the focused seriousness she brought to things that didn’t make sense yet.

“I gave them water,” she said.

“I know,” he said.

“They’re supposed to stay.”

He sat down beside her. Outside the window the afternoon was going gold and long. He thought about how to explain it to a five-year-old and decided, after a moment, that the truth was simple enough.

“When you picked them,” he said, “that was the thing. Once they’re picked, they can’t go back. The water keeps them for a while, but it can’t keep them forever.”

She looked at the flowers.

“But not forever?”

“No,” he said. “Not forever.”

She considered this. “Why?”

He looked at the flowers in the blue vase — the bent stems, the petals dry, the yellow gone dull at the edges.

“They’re already done, really,” he said. “They just don’t know it yet.”

She absorbed this with the stillness she brought to information that mattered.

“Oh,” she said.

Not sadly. Not with drama. Just: received. Understood. Moving on.

She moved on. He sat at the table a moment longer, looking at the dead flowers in the blue vase, and felt something he had no word for yet.



### *Present*

He did not think about this constantly. He had learned, without meaning to, that grief was not a place he moved through and left behind. It was something he carried, heavier some days than others, familiar enough on certain mornings that he almost forgot the weight was there. Five years had not healed him. He no longer expected them to. But they had made him functional again, and on evenings like this one, standing at the edge of the water with the light doing something extraordinary to its surface, he was capable of feeling something close to peace.

He did not notice the sky change.

He noticed only that the light had shifted in a way it shouldn’t — not the slow gold of evening but something else, something that belonged to no atmosphere he had ever stood beneath. The water went still in a way water doesn’t go still. And he felt, before he felt anything else, a profound and inexplicable sense of being seen.

Not watched. Seen. There is a difference, though he couldn’t have articulated it then. Watched implies surveillance, indifference, the incidental passing of an eye. This was the feeling of being looked at by something that had come specifically, that had found him specifically, and that found him — not threatening, not useful — genuinely, inexplicably

beautiful. The way you might look at a piece of music if music had a face.

He thought of Wren. He didn't know why. Only that in this moment of being so completely perceived, she was the first thing that rose in him. She always was.

He had time to think: this is the strangest thing.

And then the evening was gone and he was somewhere else entirely.

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