Every When: The Last When

by Lenora Vale

The final assignment. The letters, read. The life, chosen.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Prologue: Vienna to Nowhere

The return from Vienna is harder than the return from Paris.

She has been trying to understand why, in the three weeks of the quiet period that follows displacement, and the answer she keeps arriving at is this: Paris was a revelation. She had not known, before Théo, that she could be fully present. Vienna was different. Vienna was the knowledge applied — the deliberate choice to be present, made by someone who understood what it would cost.

You can be surprised by cost the first time. The second time, you chose it.

She sits in the recovery wing with the field log and the personal journal and the compact-mirror device that is her only constant across fourteen assignments, and she thinks about Friedrich Haas conducting the opening of Elise Hartmann's symphony in the Brahms-Saal, his name on the program, his institutional authority placed in service of a thing he believed in. She thinks about the last morning, the pension room, the low candle.

She thinks about thirteen letters she has not read.

The archive is four floors below the recovery wing. She does not go to it.

Moss comes on the third day.

"Vienna," Moss says, sitting. "Strong field log. The thread is verified — the Hartmann score is in the Gesellschaft archive, catalogued, confirmed in the 1927 monograph." She pauses. "The Haas reading happened three months ahead of the projected timeline."

"He decided quickly once he read it," Sera says.

"The earlier TCB trace in the archive," Moss says. "The C-7 note."

"I documented it," Sera says. "Fully."

"Yes." Moss's voice is level. "You did."

Sera looks at her. Moss is fifty-one years old and has been director of the Bureau for nine years. She has the specific quality of attention that Sera has, across four years and thirteen assignments, learned to read: the attention of someone who is managing a gap between what they know and what they're saying.

"Who is C-7?" Sera asks.

A pause. The precise length of a pause that is not surprise but is the calculation of a response.

"That's in the classified file," Moss says. "Above field-operative clearance."

"I'm asking you," Sera says. "Not the file."

Moss holds her gaze for a long moment. Then she stands.

"There's an assignment on your desk," she said. "Pasadena. 1984. Read the brief. We'll talk when you're out of the quiet period."

She goes.

Sera sits with the closed door for a long time.

She goes to the archive.

She does not open the letters.

But she stands outside the archive room for considerably less than eleven minutes.

The Bureau in February

Three weeks in the recovery wing. Then her desk, the view of the gray-glass buildings, New Geneva in February, which was the same as New Geneva in August except for the light coming from a different angle and the particular quality of Bureau winter, which was: indoor, fluorescent, the same as every other day.

She had work.

The field log from Vienna required a supplementary report on the C-7 trace — standard protocol when earlier TCB contact was identified in a target environment. She wrote the supplementary report with the thoroughness of someone who was also, in the writing, building an argument.

The argument: C-7 had been in Paris in 1924. A contact with Gustave Moreau-Delacroix that had downstream effects persisting into 1925. The Bureau archive showed the assignment as Closed.

C-7 had been in Vienna in 1878. The archive showed the assignment as Closed.

She pulled the full archive record on C-7, which extended to the limit of her field-operative clearance and then stopped at a wall that said: *Director-Level Classification. Access requires Director Moss authorization.*

She looked at the wall for a while.

Then she did what she'd been trained to do: she followed the evidence from the outside of the wall, since she couldn't get through it.

The C-7 assignment codes were formatted in the Bureau's standard sequential system. C-1 through C-6 were the first six operatives in the Bureau's second decade — she knew this from the institutional history document that all trainees received, which was thorough and interesting and, she now suspected, also carefully edited. C-7 would have been the seventh operative of that cohort, beginning field assignments approximately forty years before Sera's own entry.

Forty years ago: 2117. The Bureau's records from 2117 were accessible at the institutional level — not classified, just historical. She pulled them.

The personnel records from 2117 listed the Academy's second cohort: fourteen trainees. Each with a subsequent career record. She cross-referenced each record with the C-7 assignment dates in the archive — 1924 Paris, 1878 Vienna — eliminating operatives who could be documented elsewhere during those assignment windows.

Twelve eliminated.

One listed as field-inactive during both windows with no specific location documented: *Director's discretion, operational classification.*

One listed as field-inactive with her records classified above the institutional level.

One name.

She sat with it for a long time.

The name was Kira Moss.

The Conversation

She asked for a meeting. Formal — through the scheduling system, official, the request logged. She wanted this on the record.

Moss's assistant confirmed for Tuesday at nine AM.

Sera walked into the director's office at nine AM on Tuesday with the supplementary report on the C-7 trace and set it on the desk.

Moss looked at it. Then at her.

"You already know," Moss said.

"Yes," Sera said. She sat down. "You were in Paris in 1924. You fell for someone in Moreau-Delacroix's social network — or someone who knew him. Your contact with Moreau-Delacroix was enough that he remembered what you said about artists belonging to their cities, a year later, when Théo came into his orbit. He wrote the Buenos Aires letter as a consequence of what you told him in 1924."

Moss held her gaze.

"You created the deviation I was assigned to fix," Sera said.

A pause. "Yes," Moss said.

"And Vienna. 1878. You went back, after 1924 — that assignment came first in the archive ordering, but the years—"

"1878 was my second assignment," Moss said. "I found the Hartmann piano concerto. I tried to advocate for it and failed. I left the note." She paused. "I knew, from my own archive access, that someone would come eventually. I wanted them to have more than I had."

Sera looked at her. "You sent me to Paris," she said. "You knew what was there. You knew the deviation and its source."

"Yes."

"You sent me to Vienna. You knew what had been tried before. You knew the note was there."

"Yes."

"Why?" she said. "Why not send someone else?"

Moss held her gaze for a moment. "Because someone else would have gone in and fixed the thread by the most efficient route," she said. "Which in Paris would have been to engineer Moreau-Delacroix's retraction of the Buenos Aires recommendation without any contact with Théo Aubert at all." She paused. "And in Vienna would have been a direct institutional intervention that bypassed Haas entirely."

"The thread would have been secured either way," Sera said.

"Yes," Moss said. "The thread." A pause. "You understand this work differently than the field charter describes it," she said. "You always have. From your first assignment. You have never fixed a thread by the shortest route. You have always — found the people. The actual people, not just the deviation point." She held Sera's gaze. "I sent you because I thought you would do it the way it needed to be done. Not the most efficient way. The right way."

"The right way," Sera said. "Which involves falling in love in every assignment."

"The right way," Moss said, "involves being present. Fully present. In each place as itself." She paused. "The falling in love is a consequence of full presence, in my experience."

Sera looked at her.

"In your experience," she said. "Paris, 1924. Who?"

Moss was quiet for a moment. "A man named Jean Fournier," she said. "A painter. Not famous — not a deviation point. Simply a person who—" She

stopped. "Who saw me."

"What happened?"

"I came home," Moss said. "Rule Seven."

"And then?"

A long pause.

"And then," Moss said carefully, "I became the director. And I managed the Bureau. And I made sure the operatives who came through here were given the assignments that required what they had, not just what the field charter measured." She held Sera's gaze. "And I sent you to Paris. And Vienna." She paused. "And now Pasadena."

"Why Pasadena?" Sera said. "Of all the assignments in the archive. Why is the fourteenth mine?"

Moss picked up a pen and set it down. The specific gesture of someone who had decided to tell a truth they've been holding for a long time.

"Because Pasadena is the last one," she said. "In the threading sequence for this set of deviations — your fourteen assignments, the chain of causality they protect — Pasadena closes the loop. After Pasadena, the sequence is stable. You could continue in the field, take new assignments. Or—" She stopped.

"Or what?" Sera said.

"Or you could retire," Moss said. "With the full record, the protected chain, and the option of—" She paused again. "There is a protocol," she said. "Not in the field charter. Director-level only. For operatives who have completed a deviation sequence, it allows a voluntary return to a target era — not as an operative. As a resident."

The room was very quiet.

"You can go back," Sera said.

"One time," Moss said. "Permanent. No extraction. The timeline is adjusted around the anomaly of your presence, since the causality chain is already secured." She paused. "You would live in the era you chose. You would not be an operative. You would just be — there."

Sera looked at her. "Have you used it?"

Moss's expression was the expression of someone who has answered this question many times in their own head and is finally saying it out loud. "No," she said. "I became the director instead." A pause. "I tell myself it was because the Bureau needed me here." She paused again. "That's true. It's not the whole truth."

"What's the rest?"

"Fear," Moss said, simply. "That I would go back and he wouldn't — that the person I'd fallen for in 1924 was a person who existed in the context of 1924, and that without the frame of the assignment around it, without the specific quality of being the person I was in that year, it wouldn't—" She stopped. "It's a failure of nerve," she said. "I know that."

Sera looked at her for a long moment.

"Go read the Pasadena brief," Moss said. "And Sera — the letters. In the archive. You should read them before you go."

"I know," Sera said.

She went back to her desk. She picked up the Pasadena brief. And then she put it down and walked to the elevator and rode to the archive floor and went in.

She stood at the archive room door for no time at all.

She opened it.

She sat at the archive table and opened the first letter.

The Letters

She read all thirteen in one sitting.

This is what the letters said — not the full text, which belonged to her — but the shape of them:

Théo's twelve letters, 1926 to 1934, were the letters of a man who had processed love the way he processed music: by working through it rather than around it, finding what was on the other side of the discomfort. The early letters were vivid with loss and vivid with Paris and vivid with the music, which had come fully in the months after her departure — he described the January 1926 sessions as the best work of his life, and she knew they were, and the knowing was both wonderful and breaking. The middle letters were steadier. By 1930 he was writing about the work with the joy of a person who had found the full use of themselves, and also — she had to stop for a moment here — he was writing about a woman he'd met at the club. A pianist named Marguerite. He described her with the care and honesty of a person who had learned, from Sera, to say what was true: *she is not you, and she is the right person for this life, and I think you would like her.* The last letter, 1934, was brief. He had married Marguerite in March. He was happy — the specific word, not performed. He said: *I carry you in the music. I always will. That is not a small place to be.*

She sat with the last letter for a long time.

Friedrich's letter — the single one, March 1882, forwarded via the temporal protocol — was the letter of a man who had been given back something he'd mislaid and was using it carefully. Three paragraphs about the Hartmann premiere. Two paragraphs about the programming committee reorganization. One paragraph about a student composer whose work he was championing against institutional resistance, and the specific quality of satisfaction in the work of it. And then the last paragraph, which was about her: *I have been trying to describe what you gave me, and the closest I can get is this: you made me believe that what I thought, privately, was worth saying in public. That the gap between the interior and the expression was not protective but costly. I am working to close it. Thank you for showing me where it was.*

She read this three times.

She sat in the archive room for an hour after finishing, looking at the thirteen letters laid out on the table.

Then she put them carefully back in their folders and went upstairs and read the Pasadena brief.

The Brief

Pasadena, California. July 1984.

A city of paradoxes, the brief noted: a small, quietly elegant city at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, home to the California Institute of Technology and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which together made it one of the most concentrated repositories of scientific intelligence on Earth in 1984, and which sat in the middle of the Greater Los Angeles sprawl like a specifically arranged exception to all of it.

The deviation: **Daniel Restrepo**, 32, aerospace engineer at JPL, working on the navigation algorithms for a satellite positioning project that the Bureau's archive traced as an early ancestor of the GPS network that became, in the late twentieth century, the infrastructure of global navigation and then — through a chain of dependency that the archive had taken forty years to fully map — the backbone of the data distribution systems that every significant human institution ran on in 2157.

Daniel Restrepo's specific contribution: a correction to the error accumulation model in early GPS positioning that, if not made, would allow an uncorrected flaw to propagate through the system's foundational architecture, invisible until 2019, when a specific set of satellites entered a new orbital phase and the flaw became active, creating a six-hour global navigation blackout with cascading effects that —

She had read far enough. She knew the shape of these chains.

The deviation's cause: Daniel Restrepo was about to leave JPL.

The reason: He had spent three years developing the navigation algorithm that his supervisor, a man named Hartwell, had presented to the lab's review board in April 1984 as substantially his own work. Hartwell had received the resulting promotion. Daniel had received a commendation letter and his unchanged salary. He had, in the Bureau's social record analysis, reached the point of conclusion — the specific moment when a person stops telling themselves that the institution will correct itself and accepts that it won't and starts making other plans.

His other plan: a position with a technology firm in Austin, Texas, where he would work on commercial software, produce no significant scientific contributions, and spend thirty years doing competent work in the wrong field.

The thread: the correction to the GPS error model needed to be in Daniel Restrepo's hands, in a form that could enter the scientific record, by the end of 1984.

The cover: Sera Calloway, recently relocated to Pasadena, freelance science writer. Straightforward — 1984 was close enough to her own era that she could operate with less cover scaffolding than Paris or Vienna. There was no period language to calibrate, no social conventions to navigate. She would arrive in a city that was, essentially, recognizable. The cover needed to withstand the scrutiny of engineers, not aristocrats.

She read the brief three times.

She went back to Moss.

"The cover is closer to the truth than any previous assignment," she said.

"Yes," Moss said. "That's deliberate."

"Why?"

"Because," Moss said, "Pasadena is the last one. And I thought—" She paused. "For the last one, you should be as close to yourself as possible."

Sera looked at her for a moment.

"What if that makes it harder?" she said.

"It will make it harder," Moss said. "It'll also make it real." She held Sera's gaze. "Go."

The Arrival

The displacement.

And then: summer in Pasadena.

The first thing she noticed was the light. She had been in Paris and Vienna, both at their respective Decembers, and the quality of those lights was a specific northern thing — the low, amber, horizontal light of a European city in winter that made everything look like it was being carefully considered. The light in Pasadena in July was completely different. It was direct. Vertical. The kind of light that didn't comment on what it illuminated, just showed everything exactly as it was.

The San Gabriel Mountains were immediate — the dry, brown-gold summer range rising behind the city like a parenthetical, the mountain air descending in the evenings to make the heat briefly tolerable. The city below them was a mixture of architecture that had been accumulating since the 1890s without anyone requiring coherence: Arts and Crafts bungalows and Spanish Colonial revival and mid-century modernist and the occasional building that had simply given up on having a style. It was, in the specific way of Southern California, both beautiful and cheerful about its own contradictions.

The safe address: an apartment in South Pasadena, one bedroom, a small yard, a landlord who lived in Arcadia and came by once a month. The Bureau's 1984-era logistics had pre-placed furniture, a used Toyota Corolla with a working radio, a California driver's license, and a contact in the Caltech communications department who could verify her credentials as a science writer without being asked to explain them.

She put her bag in the apartment and turned on the radio.

The radio was playing Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time," which the Bureau's cultural briefing had flagged as currently popular, and which she listened to for the full three minutes forty-five seconds with the radio on the kitchen counter while she unpacked, because it was 1984 and the song existed and she was here.

She wrote in the new personal journal: *The light is extraordinary. I am going to have to be careful with the light.*

She was, she recognized, in the mood to be careful with things.

JPL

The Jet Propulsion Laboratory was on the edge of Pasadena where the city met the foothills — a campus of buildings that had the functional, serious quality of a place where the actual work of the actual future was being done, without any performance of grandeur about it. The buildings were mid-century utilitarian, the parking lot was full of aging American sedans, and the lunch trucks outside the main gate at noon served the best burritos in the San Gabriel Valley.

She had a press credential visit arranged through the Caltech contact — a tour with the public affairs office, standard for science writers covering the JPL navigation project. The navigation project was receiving some public attention in 1984 because the first GPS satellites were operational, the technology was emerging from classified military application into broader scientific discussion, and there were writers who saw it as a story.

She was one of those writers. She was also looking for a specific engineer.

She found him in the navigation lab on the second floor of Building 230, in a room full of workstations and whiteboards and the smell of cooling computer equipment and coffee that had been made some time ago and not replaced.

He was at a whiteboard.

The brief had described him accurately in the physical particulars — tall, Colombian-American, the solid build of someone who'd grown up doing physical things before ending up in front of whiteboards — and had been silent on everything else, which she'd come to expect. The brief never told you the thing that mattered, which was how a person occupied their own presence.

Daniel Restrepo occupied his with a specific and slightly disheveled intensity. He had the whiteboard marker in one hand and was looking at what he'd written with the expression of a person who had just realized that the thing he'd written was wrong in an interesting way. The wrong-in-an-interesting-way face was, she had learned across fourteen assignments,

one of the most reliable indicators of a person worth knowing.

The public affairs officer introduced them. Daniel turned from the whiteboard.

He had dark eyes and a face that was easier to read than he probably knew — the kind of face where the thinking was visible. He looked at her with the assessment of someone who dealt with press carefully and was deciding how carefully.

"Science writing," he said. "Which publications?"

She named two — both pre-established in the cover. One had published a piece under the Sarah Calloway byline in the Bureau's logistics archive. The piece was real; it had been written by a Bureau research assistant and filed in the archive three months before her arrival.

"The navigation project," he said. "You know what you're looking at?"

"I have the technical background," she said. "Orbital mechanics, positioning algorithms. Enough to ask the right questions."

He looked at her for a moment. "Most journalists who come through here ask about the space program," he said. "The rockets. They're not interested in the navigation layer."

"The navigation layer is what makes everything else useful," she said.

He looked at her with a recalibrated expression.

"Yes," he said. "Come back Thursday. I'll walk you through what we're doing."

She thanked the public affairs officer and left.

She sat in the Toyota in the JPL parking lot for a few minutes. Through the windshield: the San Gabriel Mountains, dry and gold and permanent. The radio played something she didn't recognize. The July heat came through the glass.

She wrote in the journal that night: *He is smart in the specific way of someone who has been making things work in conditions that don't acknowledge what it costs him. Familiar type. Familiar problem.*

Thursday

Thursday she came back.

He walked her through the navigation project with the specific quality of someone who had been explaining a complex thing to non-technical audiences for long enough to do it accurately without either condescending or losing them. She asked questions that were more technical than he'd expected, which she watched register in small adjustments — the recalibration of his read on her, upward.

At the break they got coffee from the cart in the courtyard and stood in the July shade.

"Where are you from?" he said.

"Originally?" She gave the cover — she'd grown up in San Francisco. Relocated to Pasadena for the access to the tech community. Was based here for the next few months.

"San Francisco to Pasadena," he said. "That's usually the wrong direction for science writers."

"Where should I be going?"

"Silicon Valley," he said. "That's where everything's happening." He said it with a slight flatness that suggested he had a more complicated opinion about where everything was happening.

"I think what's happening here is more significant in the long run," she said. "The navigation architecture. People aren't paying attention to it yet."

He looked at her. "No," he said. "They're not."

She heard the thing underneath. "Does that frustrate you?"

He looked at his coffee. "I'm an engineer," he said. "I don't need attention. I need the work to be right."

"Is the work right?" she said.

A pause. The pause of someone deciding how honest to be with a journalist.

"The work is solid," he said. "The error accumulation model has some issues that haven't been addressed yet. I have a correction in progress." He paused. "Whether it gets into the record in a timely way depends on—" He stopped.

"On?" she said.

He looked at her. "Institutional factors," he said, carefully.

She nodded. She didn't push. She understood — from the brief, from the pattern of the past three months at JPL — that the Hartwell situation was a wound that was still active and that he was managing with the specific, quiet dignity of a person who had decided not to make it someone else's drama.

"Tell me about the error accumulation model," she said.

And he did. For an hour in the July shade of the JPL courtyard, he talked about positioning errors and the specific way that small inaccuracies in a navigation algorithm compounded over time and orbital distance, and how a correction at the foundational level could prevent errors that would otherwise be invisible until the system was under stress.

She listened.

She listened the way she had learned — in Paris, in Vienna, across fourteen assignments — to listen to a person talking about what they cared about with the full weight of their own intelligence brought to it. The specific quality of attention that let them feel the room they were in was the right size for what they were saying.

He talked for an hour.

When he finished, he looked at her with the expression of a person who

had said more than they'd planned to and was assessing whether that had been a mistake.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was probably more than you needed."

"No," she said. "That was exactly what I needed."

He looked at her for a moment.

"Thursday next week," he said. "I'll show you the actual model."

The City

She lived in Pasadena the way she'd lived in every assignment — fully, with her actual attention.

The city was not Paris and not Vienna and was not trying to be either. It was a very specific Southern California place: a walking city that nobody walked in, a beautiful city that wasn't trying to be beautiful, a serious intellectual community embedded in a sprawl of freeways and strip malls and strip malls with excellent Thai food and the particular contradiction of extreme physical beauty (the mountains, the light, the bougainvillea going up every wall in colors that seemed impractical) and extreme architectural indifference.

She drove the Toyota everywhere because that was how you moved in 1984 Los Angeles. The 210 east to the mountains. The 110 south to the older streets of central Pasadena, where the Arts and Crafts houses sat in the shade of their own trees. Colorado Boulevard. Lake Avenue. The Rose Bowl in the valley below the golf course, enormous and quiet between events.

She went to the used record store on Fair Oaks Avenue — the kind of place that 1984 contained abundantly and 2157 contained as museum: walls of vinyl in alphabetical order, a cat asleep on the jazz section, a proprietor who gave recommendations without being asked in the manner of someone who considered music a public health service.

She bought: Joni Mitchell's *Blue* and *Court and Spark*, because she'd been thinking about music that talked about loss without being defeated by it. She bought Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, which she had first heard on the recordings of Théo's sessions and which sounded different now, from the outside of what she carried. She bought a cassette tape of Tom Petty's *Full Moon Fever* because the cover looked like summer in a way that was accurate.

She played music in the apartment in the evenings and wrote and thought and looked at the San Gabriel Mountains going dark outside the window and felt, with a specificity she was getting better at holding, the particular

texture of this place and time.

She was not in Paris. She was not in Vienna. She was in Pasadena in July 1984, and Daniel Restrepo was three miles away working on a navigation model that he was about to give up on, and she was going to need to find a way to make sure he didn't.

What the Error Model Shows

By the fourth week she had seen the error model.

He had shown her the full technical documentation — not because the press credential required it, but because she'd asked the right questions and he'd concluded, across three Thursday sessions, that she understood what she was looking at. The documentation was comprehensive and the problem he'd identified was exactly what the Bureau brief had flagged: an accumulation error in the satellite positioning algorithm that was present in the foundational code and would compound invisibly over years and orbital cycles until a specific stress condition activated it.

She looked at the documentation for a long time.

"The correction," she said. "Where is it?"

He looked at his desk — at the stack of papers that occupied the corner with the specific organization of a project that had been alive and was in the process of being set aside. "Draft," he said. "About eighty percent complete."

"Why eighty?"

He was quiet for a moment. "Because finishing it and publishing it in a context where it goes into the record is—" He stopped. "There are political considerations."

"Hartwell," she said.

He looked at her sharply.

"I'm a science writer," she said. "I talked to people. It's not a secret."

He held her gaze for a moment. The internal calculation of a private person deciding whether the external information requires a response. "Yes," he said. "Hartwell presented my navigation algorithm as substantially his work. The lab's review board accepted that. He was promoted. I was given a

commendation." He said it flatly, without visible bitterness — the flatness of someone who had processed it to completion and was now just describing it. "If I publish the error correction now, it goes into the record under my name. Which creates a conversation about the relationship between the algorithm and the correction, and who developed what." He paused. "I'd rather not have that conversation. I'd rather leave."

"Where are you going?" she said.

A pause. "There's a position in Austin," he said. "Software firm. Good work, different field."

"And the correction?" she said.

"Someone else will find it eventually," he said. "The error is there. It'll be found."

She looked at him. She thought about C-7's note in the Vienna archive: *For whoever comes after. She is writing the best work produced in Vienna right now. Someone else will have to.*

She thought about the gap between *someone else will find it eventually* and *someone needs to find it now, correctly, in time.*

"What if it doesn't get found for thirty years?" she said.

He looked at her.

"What does that mean?" he said.

"Navigation systems compound," she said. "You know this better than I do. An error in the foundational architecture in 1984 doesn't stay small. It propagates. It gets built on. By 2015, 2020—" She stopped. Careful. "You don't know what the system looks like in thirty years. You don't know what's built on top of it."

He was quiet.

"If the correction is right," she said, "it needs to go into the record now. Not

when someone else finds it." She held his gaze. "You know that."

He looked at his desk. At the draft documentation in the corner.

"The political—"

"The political situation is real and it's also not your primary responsibility," she said. "Your primary responsibility is the work." She paused. "Who told you that leaving solved the Hartwell problem? Hartwell keeps the algorithm credit whether you're here or in Austin. The only thing that changes when you leave is that the correction doesn't get made."

He held her gaze for a long moment.

"You are a very uncomfortable person to argue with," he said.

"I've been told that," she said.

July Into August

The city in summer had a specific rhythm: the heat peaking by two PM and then the marine layer rolling in from the coast in the early evenings to drop the temperature twenty degrees, which felt like a gift every time even when you expected it. The San Gabriels in the late afternoon turned a particular shade of blue that was not the blue of any other mountain she had seen in fourteen assignments.

She and Daniel fell into the pattern of Thursday sessions at JPL and then the occasional evening that started as professional and became something else through the specific gravity of two people who found each other's company necessary and stopped finding ways to make it conditional.

He drove her to the mountains one Saturday — the Angeles Crest Highway, up into the San Gabriels where the air was clear and the city spread out below like something from the future. He had a truck that was older than the Toyota and considerably more used, and he drove it the way he worked: with casual competence that came from knowing exactly what he was doing.

They sat on the tailgate at a pull-out where you could see all the way to the coast on a clear day.

"How long have you been at JPL?" she asked.

"Six years," he said. "Since the Voyager stuff was wrapping up. I got there at the end of it." He looked at the city below. "Saturn flyby, 1980. The images they got—" He stopped. "I know it sounds—I know it's just engineering. But to send something that far and have it work and have it come back with those photographs—" He paused. "That's the thing. The basic thing about doing this work."

"What is?"

"That it's real," he said. "That it's not a model or a simulation. The spacecraft actually went there. The numbers actually describe the actual distance." He looked at the horizon. "It's the opposite of abstractions.

Everything is verified by reality."

She looked at the horizon too. The curve of the earth barely visible at the edge of the Pacific.

"The navigation algorithm," she said. "When you wrote it."

"Yeah."

"What did it feel like? The actual process."

He was quiet for a moment. "Like solving a very long sentence," he said. "One that had to be grammatically perfect in every language simultaneously, because the math has to work in different coordinate systems, different scales, different—" He stopped. "When it works, it works everywhere. It has to." He paused. "That's either incredibly beautiful or incredibly stressful, depending on the day."

"Which day was it when you finished it?"

He thought. "Both," he said. "Exactly both."

She looked at him. The tailgate of the truck, the mountains, the city below them, the July sky. The man who had spent six years making a thing work precisely and had had it taken from him and was deciding whether that was enough reason to stop.

"Don't go to Austin," she said.

He looked at her.

"I'm not asking about the assignment," she said. "I know the argument I made about the correction. That's real and I stand by it. But this is different." She held his gaze. "Don't go to Austin. The work you're doing is exactly the work you're supposed to be doing. Hartwell and the promotion — that's a real thing and it's a wrong thing and it's not a reason to stop."

He held her gaze for a long moment.

"That is very direct," he said.

"I've learned to be," she said.

He looked at the city.

"You've been here six weeks," he said. "You're a science writer."

"Yes," she said.

"And somehow you're the most certain person I've talked to about what I should do with my career."

"I've had a lot of practice," she said, which was true.

He turned and looked at her in the mountain light — the afternoon light that turned everything exact.

"Sera," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"I'm not going to Austin," he said. "I decided two weeks ago. I'm staying and finishing the correction." He paused. "I was waiting to see if you'd say something."

She looked at him. "You decided two weeks ago."

"Yes."

"And you've been—"

"Waiting," he said, "to see if you'd ask me to."

She looked at him for a long moment. The truck tailgate, the mountains, the city, the marine layer starting to come in at the horizon.

"That's an extremely annoying thing to have done," she said.

He smiled. Full, easy, real. The first full smile she'd seen from him and it was, she recognized immediately, going to be difficult to stop thinking about.

"I know," he said.

She was quiet for a moment. Then she started laughing, which happened before she decided to, which was, she was finding, the signature of all the things she didn't manage in time.

He laughed too.

They sat on the tailgate in the mountains as the marine layer came in off the Pacific and the city went blue and soft below them, and she thought: *fourteen assignments. All of them have been worth it. This one is going to be differently worth it.*

The Record Player

His apartment was in Pasadena's north, near the Caltech campus — three rooms above a Portuguese bakery, with a fire escape that overlooked an alley and a record player that was newer than everything else he owned by fifteen years.

She came over for dinner — he cooked, poorly, with an engineer's approach to recipes (treat them as specifications; follow exactly; accept that the results will be correct if not inspired). She brought wine and the Miles Davis record.

They ate at the table in the kitchen and talked about the error correction — he was deep into the final twenty percent, the part where the mathematical precision required was at its most exacting — and then they talked about other things. He had grown up in Los Angeles, in the Echo Park neighborhood before it was what it would later become. His mother was a teacher. His father worked at a manufacturing plant in Vernon. He was the first person in his family to go to college. He had wanted to build things since he was seven and had understood, around age twelve, that what he actually wanted to build were things that functioned at the scale of physics rather than of hands.

"Caltech," he said, "felt like finding out there was a language I'd been speaking incorrectly my whole life and suddenly someone was teaching it correctly."

"What did it feel like when you got in?" she asked.

He looked at the table. "Like a mistake," he said. "For about six months. I kept waiting for the letter that said they'd made an error." He paused. "My adviser — first year — sat me down in October and said: you're not a mistake. You're exactly what this place is for. Go back to work." He paused. "I went back to work."

She thought about Elise Hartmann, writing a symphony that gave the committee what they expected formally because she knew they'd be looking for reasons to dismiss her. About Friedrich, conducting the correct

performances for twelve years because the position required it. About Théo, with the Buenos Aires offer, standing at the edge of the place where his music came from and deciding whether he could survive without it.

All of them being told, in some form: *the place you are is wrong for you.*

All of them being wrong.

She looked at Daniel across the table.

"You were right the first time," she said. "Your adviser too."

He held her gaze. "Are you always this—" He paused.

"Certain?" she said.

"Sure," he said. "Of things. Of people."

She thought about this. "I read evidence carefully," she said. "When I'm sure of something it's because I've read all of it."

He looked at her. The readable face — the thinking visible. "And you've read all the evidence on me," he said.

"Enough of it," she said.

He reached across the table and turned up the record player. Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*, the opening of "So What" with its particular quality of arriving somewhere that had already been there.

They listened.

What 1984 Sounds Like

She is going to remember: the radio in the Toyota, which played things she'd only known from the historical archive and now knew from the inside. The record player in Daniel's apartment above the Portuguese bakery. The specific warmth of music in a room in summer, the windows open, the mountain air coming down in the evenings.

She will remember: driving the 210 at night, the freeway empty, the San Gabriels solid black against a lighter sky, Tom Petty on the cassette deck. *Even the losers get lucky sometimes.* The city below the mountains, lights out to the horizon, the scale of it — so many people, living their specific and irreplaceable lives.

She will remember: the Pasadena Civic Auditorium on a Tuesday night in August, a chamber music concert she'd found by checking the listings in the Pasadena Star-News. Not because the music required it but because she was in the habit of finding music wherever she was. Daniel had come with her, skeptical, and had sat in the uncomfortable civic auditorium seats and listened with the expression she recognized: the wrong-in-an-interesting-way face, except in this case the interesting way was that it was right. The music was doing the thing music did, even here, even in a civic auditorium in Pasadena in 1984, even to an aerospace engineer who worked in mathematics rather than sound.

She will remember: him driving home afterward and saying, almost to himself, "the cello line in the second movement was doing the same thing the error correction does. Holding a tension that can't resolve until the rest of the system is ready."

She had looked at him across the bench seat of the truck.

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what it is."

He glanced over at her.

"That's a thing you say," he said. "You say that."

"It's usually accurate," she said.

"It's the most satisfying thing to hear," he said. And then, carefully: "You are the most satisfying person to talk to."

She looked out the windshield at the 210, the mountains, the night.

"Thank you," she said.

"I'm not complimenting you," he said. "I'm just — stating a fact."

"I know," she said. "That's why it's a good thing to hear."

They drove in the mountain air and the radio played something she didn't recognize and the city was enormous and lit and alive in the way of cities that don't know what's coming and are simply, enormously present.

The Close of August

She had been in Pasadena six weeks when the evening stayed rather than ended.

They were in his apartment after a long Saturday at the Huntington Library and Gardens — she had wanted to see the archives, because she always wanted to see archives, and he had come with the patient willingness of someone who found her enthusiasms more interesting than he'd expected to find them. They had spent three hours in the botanical gardens because the rose garden was extraordinary and the Japanese garden was extraordinary and the desert garden was extraordinary and he had stopped pretending that he was only there for her and had started actually looking.

Back at the apartment, windows open, the mountain air, the record player. She was on the fire escape and he was in the kitchen doorway and they were talking through the open window, which was the kind of conversation that existed in the gap between two rooms and had a specific quality of proximity that was different from the same words said face to face.

"You're writing the correction," she said. "You said last Thursday—"

"I finished the draft on Friday," he said. "I'm reviewing it this week and then I'm going to submit it to the review journal."

She looked at the alley below the fire escape. "How does it feel?"

"Terrifying," he said. "And correct." A pause. "Both."

"The same as when you finished the algorithm," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly the same." A pause. "How did you know to say that?"

"Because it was true the first time," she said. "Some things are structurally the same no matter how far apart they are."

A silence. She heard him move — coming out to the fire escape, filling the

doorway behind her.

"Sera," he said.

She turned.

He was standing in the apartment doorway with the light behind him and the mountains behind her and August in between.

"I don't know what you're doing here," he said. "Not — the science writing. The other thing. Why you're actually here." He held her gaze. "I don't know and I've decided I don't need to know. But I want you to know that—" He stopped. "The last six weeks are the best six weeks I've had in a long time. That's a real thing. I want to say it."

She looked at him in the doorway light.

"Daniel," she said.

"Yes."

"Come outside," she said.

He came out to the fire escape. The mountain air, the alley, the city beyond it, the summer night.

She kissed him.

He kissed her back with the same quality as everything else he did: full attention, no wasted motion, the exact thing.

What She Tells Him

Three weeks later, in the kitchen at eight PM on a Wednesday with dinner on the table and the record player on low, she told him the truth.

She had been deciding since August. Since the fire escape and the summer night and the weeks after it, the specific weeks of a thing that was no longer theoretical. She had told Théo because he'd heard the space and asked directly. She had told Friedrich because he'd asked and because she owed him honesty. She told Daniel because she'd promised herself, after Paris, that she would not let the truth be the thing she withheld.

She told him. Two hours, the dinner going cold, the record ending and neither of them getting up to change it.

He listened without interrupting.

When she finished, the kitchen was quiet. The city outside. The mountains, dark.

He sat with it for a long time. She waited.

"The GPS error," he said. "That's why you're here."

"Yes," she said.

"And the correction I'm submitting—"

"Is the fix," she said. "The thread. The thing the timeline needs in the record by the end of 1984."

"And if I don't submit it," he said, "or I leave—"

"Then someone finds the error in 2019 under stress conditions," she said. "And the consequences are—" She paused. "I've read the full cascade. I won't describe it."

He was quiet. Then: "But I was going to submit it anyway. I decided

before—"

"Yes," she said. "You decided. I helped move the timeline on the decision but the decision was yours." She held his gaze. "That matters. I need you to know I'm not claiming credit for something you did."

"You told me not to go to Austin," he said.

"You'd already decided," she said.

He looked at her. "You know that for certain?"

"You told me," she said. "You said you decided two weeks earlier and were waiting to see if I'd ask."

A pause. He looked at the table. "Yeah," he said. "That's true."

They sat for a while.

"The extraction," he said. "When?"

"Six weeks," she said. "The last Sunday of my fourteenth week here."

"And you can't stay."

She thought about what Moss had told her. The protocol. The permanent return.

"There is a mechanism," she said, carefully. "I haven't decided."

He looked up at her.

"What mechanism?" he said.

She told him. The one-time option. The permanent placement. No extraction. Live in the era, as a resident, the timeline adjusted.

He held her gaze for a very long time.

"What would that mean?" he said. "For you."

"It would mean—" She stopped. "I don't know everything it would mean. I know I'd be here. 1984 would be here." She paused. "It would stop being an assignment. It would just be—a life."

"In 1984," he said.

"In Pasadena," she said. "Or wherever."

He sat with this.

"What would you lose?" he said. "By staying."

She thought about the Bureau. About Moss. About the fourteen assignments and what they'd protected and the things they'd cost. She thought about the thirteen letters in the archive and the way she'd felt reading them — the fullness of having been fully present in each place, the accumulation of it. The specific thing she'd been, across fourteen assignments, that she would not be if she stopped.

"I'd lose the work," she said. "The rest of the deviations. The other threads." She paused. "I'd lose being the person who does this."

"And who is that person?" he said.

She looked at him.

"Someone who finds the things that are about to be lost," she said. "And makes sure they survive."

He looked at his hands. "Théo's music," he said. "Elise's symphony. My error correction."

"Yes," she said.

"You've been doing this for four years," he said. "Fourteen assignments."

"Yes."

"And you've—" He stopped. "Paris. Vienna."

"Yes," she said.

"You loved them," he said. Not accusatory. Just asking.

"Yes," she said.

He was quiet for a moment. "And now."

"And now," she said, and stopped.

He looked at her with the readable face, the thinking visible. "I'm not asking you to stay," he said. "I want to be clear about that. I don't think it's my—" He stopped. "That's a decision that belongs to you." He paused. "But I want you to know that this—what's happened here—is something I have never—" He stopped again. "I am not good at talking about things that matter," he said. "I'm good at mathematical precision and I'm using it on the wrong problem."

"Daniel," she said.

He looked at her.

"Tell me," she said.

"I love you," he said. With the directness of a man who, having been unable to say the thing obliquely, had decided the direct route was the only one left. "I've known for three weeks. I haven't said it because I knew it was going to change the shape of the conversation and I wanted more time before the shape changed."

She held his gaze.

"I know," she said.

"Is that—" He stopped. "Is that all you're going to say?"

"No," she said. "I love you too. I've known since the mountains. I haven't

said it because—" She stopped. "Because it's the truth and the truth changes things and I was—"

"Being careful," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"You can stop now," he said.

She looked at him across the kitchen table with the cold dinner and the stopped record player and Pasadena outside in the September air.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

September

September in Pasadena was the same as August except for the quality of the light.

In August the light was direct and total — it left nothing in shadow that wasn't already in shadow. In September it began to move. The angle shifted; the afternoons came earlier into gold; the mountains in the evenings went a deeper blue. The city felt, in September, as if it was just starting to pay attention to the fact that summer was leaving and hadn't decided how to feel about it yet.

She was four weeks from the extraction window.

She was not, she acknowledged in the personal journal, deciding easily.

The personal journal said: *I understand now why C-7 became the director. The option of going back is harder than the option of going forward, because going back requires you to choose what to leave. Going forward means the choice has been made for you — extraction, recovery, the next brief. It is, in the strictest sense, not a choice at all.*

The personal journal also said: *Thirteen assignments before this one. Fourteen total. The work of the Bureau has been: Léa Fontaine hears the music. Elise Hartmann's symphony survives. The GPS correction enters the record. The cascade doesn't happen. I have been the person who made those things true. If I stop — someone else will make the next ones true. The Bureau is not a one-person operation. The threads will be held.*

And: *The question is not whether the threads will be held without me. The question is whether I can hold the rest of my life without this.*

She stopped writing.

She looked at the ceiling of the South Pasadena apartment. The water stain in the corner, which was not shaped like nothing — it was shaped like a mountain range seen from above.

She called Moss on the communication device.

"I need to ask you something," she said.

"I know what you're going to ask," Moss said.

"Then answer it," Sera said.

A pause. "Jean Fournier," Moss said. "I tracked him. After I retired from the field. He was alive until 1972 — he lived in Paris his whole life, went on painting, married, had children. Good life." She paused. "I made myself a promise that when I retired from the Bureau I would use the protocol. Go back. Find out." Another pause. "I've been director for nine years. I have not used the protocol."

"Why not?" Sera said.

"Because," Moss said, "I am afraid that I will go back and find that what was between us was specific to the frame. The assignment. The particular year. And that outside the frame—" She stopped. "I am afraid of finding out."

"What if you went back and it was real?" Sera said. "Without the frame."

Silence.

"Then I would have wasted nine years being afraid of it," Moss said.

Sera looked at the ceiling.

"Kira," she said. It was the first time she'd used Moss's name. "You know this is—"

"I know," Moss said. "I know." A pause. "You're going to use the protocol."

It was not a question.

Sera was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm deciding."

"Decide carefully," Moss said. "But—" A pause, long enough to be a thing. "Decide, Sera. Don't spend nine years deciding."

The Submission

The error correction paper was submitted to the *Journal of Navigation* on the fourteenth of October 1984.

Daniel submitted it under his own name, with an acknowledgment section that documented the derivation from his navigation algorithm and the relationship between the two — a careful, precise statement that put his work on the record without making the Hartwell situation a confrontation. It was, she thought, exactly the approach: the truth placed clearly in a room, without requiring anyone to fight about it.

The thread was secured.

She wrote in the field log: *Correction submitted. Record established. Thread closed. Extraction window: twelve days.*

She held the field log for a moment.

She put it down and picked up the personal journal.

She wrote: *I have been a Meridian operative for four years and fourteen assignments. I have protected: one musician's legacy, one woman's symphony, one navigation correction that will become the foundation of infrastructure that nine billion people will depend on. I have been, in Paris and Vienna and Pasadena, the person who finds what's about to be lost.*

She wrote: *I am also, right now, at a kitchen table in South Pasadena in October 1984 with the San Gabriel Mountains outside the window and Daniel Restrepo's truck in the parking lot and thirteen letters in an archive in 2157 that I have now read and understood.*

She wrote: *The question Moss has been living with for nine years is whether the thing that was real in the frame is real outside it. I know the answer. I knew it from the fire escape in August and I have been being careful about it for eight weeks.*

She wrote: *The answer is yes.*

She put the journal down and called Moss.

What She Decides

"I'm using it," she said.

A silence on the line.

"Pasadena," Moss said.

"Yes."

"Permanent."

"Yes."

Another silence. Not the kind that was calculating a response — the kind that was full. Moss's silences, she had learned across fourteen assignments, were the most legible thing about her.

"You're sure," Moss said.

"I read the letters," Sera said. "All of them. Théo's last letter says — he found the right life. He said I was in the music and that was not a small place to be. He was right." She paused. "Friedrich's letter says the work continued after I left and the habit of honesty I gave him went into it." She paused again. "The threads held without me. They always were going to. My being there was — it was real and it mattered and then I left and it still held."

"Yes," Moss said.

"The Bureau will find someone else for the next assignments," Sera said. "They always have."

"Yes," Moss said.

"And I am—" She stopped. Started over. "I have been in this work because I care about what survives. I care about Léa Fontaine hearing the music and Elise's symphony being in the archive and the GPS correction being in the

record. I care about it more than I've cared about most things." She paused. "But I am also a person and the person has a life and the life—" She stopped again. Found the word. "The life is here," she said. "Right now. In Pasadena."

Silence on the line.

"Kira," she said. "Go to Paris."

A long pause.

"I'll process the protocol," Moss said. "Your extraction window becomes a settlement window. Same date, same time. The timeline adjustment team will implement." A pause. "It will hold. The Bureau guarantees the causal adjustment."

"I know," Sera said.

"Sera." Moss's voice changed — the director's voice set aside. Something older and less managed. "I'm proud of you. The work. All fourteen." A pause. "I sent you to the right places."

"Yes," Sera said. "You did."

"Go tell him," Moss said.

The Last Two Weeks

She told him.

He was in his apartment when she came over — a Thursday, which was still the day they kept because patterns are how you remember what matters. He was at the kitchen table with papers, which was his natural state. He looked up when she came in.

She sat down across from him.

"The protocol," she said. "I'm using it."

He was very still.

"Pasadena," he said.

"Yes."

"Permanent," he said.

"Yes."

He held her gaze for a long moment.

"What does that mean?" he said. "For you. What you'd be giving up."

"I told you," she said. "The work."

"Tell me again," he said. "I want to make sure I understand what you're choosing."

She looked at him. The readable face, the thinking visible. He wasn't asking so he could argue — he was asking so that she couldn't tell him, in ten years, that she hadn't been clear-eyed.

"I'm giving up being the person who goes back and fixes the things that are about to be lost," she said. "Fourteen assignments. However many more

there would have been." She paused. "I'm giving up the particular quality of that work, which I have loved. I'm giving up the Bureau. I'm giving up 2157, which is the world I came from and which I will not see again." She paused. "And I'm keeping this."

He held her gaze.

"Is it enough?" he said.

"Daniel," she said. "You asked me if the work was right, the first Thursday. The correction. I said the wrong-in-an-interesting-way thing on your face was a reliable indicator of a person worth knowing." She held his gaze. "I know what's right. I know it the same way you know when the math is right — it works everywhere, in every coordinate system. It checks out." She paused. "This checks out."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Okay," he said. "Then yes." He reached across the table. "It's enough. More than."

She took his hand.

"I'm going to need a job," she said. "I have credentials for science writing. I'll need to figure out—"

"There's a communications position at JPL that's been open for three months," he said.

She looked at him. "You knew about this."

"I've been—" He stopped. "I've been thinking about contingencies," he said. "For a few weeks."

"Since the fire escape," she said.

"Since before the fire escape," he said.

She looked at him across the kitchen table. The record player was on,

Miles Davis again, something she hadn't heard before from the same album she'd brought on the first dinner. She looked at his face — readable, the thinking visible — and thought about everything it had cost to get here and found that the accounting came out clearly in one direction.

"Good," she said.

The Settlement

The settlement window opened at two AM on the last Sunday of the fourteenth week — the same time and coordinates as the extraction would have used, the same courtyard in South Pasadena where she'd arrived.

She stood in the courtyard alone. The October night, the mountain air, the city quiet.

She had the compact-mirror device. The field log, completed, ready to transmit in the settlement protocol. The personal journal, which she was keeping — it was hers; it had always been hers. The thirteen letters, which she had scanned with the device and which existed in the archive and also in her memory, which was where they actually lived.

She opened the device. The settlement protocol was simpler than the extraction: she confirmed, the Bureau's temporal adjustment team implemented the timeline change, her presence in 1984 was anchored, the displacement mechanism closed behind her like a door.

She confirmed.

She stood in the courtyard and waited.

There was no sensation. No subtraction, no absence. The courtyard was exactly as it had been. The mountain air. The October night.

She was simply — here.

Permanently.

She looked up at the San Gabriel Mountains, black against a slightly less-black sky.

She put the compact-mirror device in her pocket. It still worked — the archive access, the personal log — but it was no longer a Bureau instrument. It was just hers, a piece of technology from a future that she had been and was no longer going back to.

She walked home through the South Pasadena streets. The city quiet, the houses dark, the bougainvillea on every wall. The Toyota in the parking lot. The apartment upstairs.

She went in. She made tea. She sat at the kitchen table with the personal journal and wrote the last field entry — not for the Bureau, for herself:

October 1984. Pasadena, California. The settlement is complete. The timeline is anchored. The thread holds.

I am no longer an operative of the Temporal Continuity Bureau. I am a woman in a South Pasadena apartment in 1984 who knows things that will happen and some things that won't and who has, across fourteen assignments and two years, been fully present in enough places to know what it feels like.

Léa Fontaine will be born in 2050 and she will hear Théo's music at age seven and it will change her and she will change the world and I will not be there to see it. The Hartmann symphony will be found in 1927 and it will matter and it will be called extraordinary and I will not be there for that either. The GPS correction Daniel submitted last week will propagate through the system and hold and in 2019 a stress event will occur and the correction will absorb it and no one will know, and I will be seventy-seven years old and I will know.

I will know.

The work holds. It holds without me watching it. That is what the work was always for.

I am going to go wake Daniel up. I'm going to tell him the settlement is complete. And then I am going to stop writing field logs and start writing something else.

— S.C. Formerly Operative C-14, Temporal Continuity Bureau Currently: Pasadena, California. October 1984. Present.

Epilogue: What the Archive Holds (Final Entry)

In the Bureau archive, in New Geneva, in 2157, the record of Operative C-14 closes on a Sunday in October 1984.

The closing notation, filed by Director Moss, reads: *Operative Calloway, Sera. Settlement protocol executed successfully. Timeline adjustment confirmed by the temporal adjustment team. Causal chain stable. Fourteen assignments, all deviation threads secured. Operative has chosen permanent placement under Director's discretion protocol. Record closed.*

Below this, in a handwriting that is not the standard archive notation — smaller, more personal, in the particular hand of someone who has been keeping records for a long time and has decided this one merits a human note:

She was the best operative this Bureau has had. Not because she was the most efficient — she never was. Because she was the most present. Every place she went, she was there. The people she worked with knew they'd been seen. The threads she secured held not because they were technically correct but because they were human — because the solution in each case involved a person being genuinely, fully themselves in the presence of another person who was the same.

Rule Seven: a Meridian operative is not a tourist. She is not a participant. She is a correction.

Operative Calloway was all three. In that order. And the corrections held.

The letters have been delivered. All thirteen.

—Director K. Moss Retiring, effective this date Destination: Paris, 1925

Director Moss goes to Paris. The archive closes. The threads hold.